

***Scandinavian Design and the United States,  
1890–1980***

Milwaukee Art Museum

Curated by Bobbye Tigerman and Monica Obniski

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**F**or those who associate Scandinavian design with IKEA's flat-packed furniture, assembled at home with those dreaded Allen wrenches, or with the more recent craze for hygge, in which highly textured, light, and bright surfaces are accompanied by wood-burning stoves and steaming mugs of herbal tea, the Milwaukee Art Museum's exhibition *Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980* was a revelation. But even for those of us familiar with the "masterpieces" of Scandinavian design, the Aaltos, Jacobsens, Jensens, Risoms, Saariens, and Wegners that have long enjoyed blue-chip status in the market, this show offered plenty of new discoveries. Instead of reinforcing familiar narratives about these celebrated (male) designers, heroically importing their organic modernism to a US market

saturated with historical revivalism, *Scandinavian Design and the United States* took a more multidirectional approach, highlighting the cross-cultural exchanges, mutual influences, and shared interests that produced so many familiar elements of our designed environment. Arguably, the exhibition went so far as to suggest that "Scandinavian design" was produced as much by Americans as by Scandinavians. It demonstrated that designers, manufacturers, consumers, magazine editors, and politicians in the US worked to reinforce Scandinavian design's associations with nature and craft, abstraction and functionality, youth and progress. Objects such as California designer Sam Maloof's near copy of Hans Wegner's Cowhorn Chair or the "Swedish Modern" mixing bowls produced by the Anchor Hocking

Glass Corporation pointed not only to the limits of authenticity but also to the liminality of cultural concepts like “Scandinavian design” that exist somewhere between the desires and realities of historical actors operating across oceans and continents.

*Scandinavian Design and the United States* highlighted how cultural diplomacy and marketing, as well as migration, travel, and study abroad, shaped the production and American reception of design from Scandinavia, which was defined broadly to include Finland and Iceland as well as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. By considering nearly a century of cultural exchange before 1980, the exhibition provided a corrective history of the pre-IKEA era, reminding us that everyday items from Legos to Volvos are examples of Scandinavian design. The show began its recounting of this history in the late nineteenth century, when members of Scandinavian communities in the United States embraced practices such as handweaving and rosemaling as traditional arts that could reinforce their Scandinavian identity and further improve their status as model immigrants. By beginning with this era, the exhibition allowed for some pleasant surprises, such as attention to the Viking revival that influenced designs by Tiffany and Gorham, as well as

the work of Valborg “Mama” Gravander, whose homes in San Francisco and Mill Valley, California, were centers for handweaving, dancing, and festivals for Swedish immigrants, who flocked to California as well as the Midwest. Gravander’s work is represented with a plush rug whose field is dotted with abstract shapes and the floating letters of the word “Ekbacken,” the name of her Mill Valley homestead.

Textiles like this formed an impressive throughline throughout the exhibition. Since they are so often separated into specialized galleries or shows, it was exciting to see textiles so well integrated with the rest of this exhibition’s materials, as well as the wide range of textile types and styles. Long runs of fabrics designed by the Marimekko company and Marianne Strengell were hung vertically to complement fiber art pieces by Jack Lenor Larsen, Ed Rossbach, and Lenore Tawney. Wall hangings such as Lillian Holm’s *First Sight of New York* and Ingrid Dessau’s *Manhattan* highlight the grid of New York’s streets and skyscrapers through flat weaves. In contrast, Astrid Sampe’s Pine rug for the United Nations Library is a riot of plush loops of wool, its fuzzy texture reinforcing the depiction of pine needles radiating from the rug’s center in a hypnotic swirl.

Howard Smith, the only Black artist in the show, was represented by one of the popular silk wall hangings he designed for the Vallila company in Finland, the bold colors and graphic shapes of its red flowers, green leaves, and black vase contrasting with the thin, sinuous swirls of Smith's signature in the bottom-right corner. Eliel and Loja Saarinen's wall hangings for Cranbrook, including the *Festival of the May Queen* hangings designed for the Kingswood School for Girls and the so-called *Cranbrook Map Tapestry* were impressive highlights. But the real showstopper was Frida Hansen's *Sørover*, a monumental tapestry in which swans carry svelte Norse goddesses across an abstract fish-scale sea. Viewers rounding the corner from one gallery to the next were confronted with this truly impressive work, which speaks to both the eclecticism of Scandinavian design and its longstanding acclaim in the US. *Sørover* was exhibited at the Norse-American Centennial in Minnesota in 1925 and published in *House Beautiful* magazine four years later.

Hansen's tapestry was just one of many exciting visual moments in the show, which teemed with creative display strategies. Paavo Tynell's chandelier for Taito Oy was hung just high enough to be out of reach but low enough to

allow visitors to appreciate how its stylized flower shapes rhymed with the iconic *Unikko* textile designed by Maija Isola for Marimekko. The equally iconic Ericofon telephone was displayed with a small mirror beneath it so that viewers could see its keypad. A silver cocktail tray by Gorham was hung vertically in a display case like a mirror. Tapio Wirkkala's Leaf Tray for Soinne et Kni was similarly supported upright on a single thin rod behind the 1954 exhibition catalogue for *Design in Scandinavia* that features a stylized version of the item on its cover.

These kinds of contextualizing pairings were deployed deftly throughout the exhibition. A small ceramic bowl by Grete Prytz Kittelsen for J. Tostrup was displayed next to a photograph and quotation from the *House Beautiful* article that extolled its associations with Norwegian nature and sexuality. The Chair designed by Hans Wegner stood near a photo from the historic 1960 presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in which the candidates sat in Wegner chairs to convey their modernity. Nixon later blamed his poor performance in the debate on his discomfort with the unfamiliar chair, only reinforcing Kennedy's associations with youth and progress by

comparison. Alvar Aalto's Savoy vase sat behind his drawing for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair to showcase the similarity of the two works' undulating curves. In these ways, the exhibition invited not just close looking but also a practice of critical visual comparison, encouraging viewers to note relationships between works in disparate media or formats and lending cohesion to an exhibition of great color and variety.

*Scandinavian Design and the United States* built on curator Monica Obniski's previous blockbuster design exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM), *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America* (2018–19), which similarly expanded narratives of midcentury modernism's greatest hits to contextualize and enrich our understanding of familiar objects. While Obniski has since moved on to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, MAM remains a modern design powerhouse, with an excellent collection and a new curator, Shoshana Resnikoff, who has relocated from the Wolfsonian-FIU museum. It is unfortunate that the expense and logistical headaches of design

exhibitions makes them relatively rare, when—as *Scandinavian Design and the United States* so ably demonstrated—they offer visitors a highly accessible way to engage with the history of art and some of the most pressing debates in our discipline. As visitors marvel at a period BabyBjörn or recognize Olof Bäckström's scissors for Fiskars as a staple of their junk drawer, they are encouraged to ask where their everyday consumer goods come from not just geographically but culturally. The exhibition catalogue ably articulates these scholarly debates and their relevance to our designed environment.<sup>1</sup> An extensive series of thirty short essays by eighteen authors, including the exhibition's two cocurators, bring focused attention to the show's key contributions. Together, the exhibition and its catalogue showcase the museum as an engine of original scholarship and present design as a vehicle for disseminating art history.

<sup>1</sup> Bobbye Tigerman and Monica Obniski, eds., *Scandinavian Design & the United States, 1890–1980*, exh. cat. (New York: Prestel, 2020).