

*CROSSCURRENTS OF MODERNISM: SELECTIONS FROM THE SYDNEY AND FRANCES LEWIS COLLECTION OF THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS*

November 18, 1994 – February 26, 1995

Photographs and slides available

More than eighty masterpieces of late nineteenth and early twentieth century decorative arts from the Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts will be on exhibition at The Bard Graduate Center from November 18, 1994 through February 26, 1995. Furniture, ceramics, silver, glass, book bindings, and jewelry by such distinguished architects and designers of the period as Emile Gallé, Eileen Gray, Louis Comfort Tiffany, Josef Hoffmann, Hector Guimard, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Frank Lloyd Wright will be featured.

The objects in the exhibition are critical documents of modernism by some of the most significant figures of the era who broke with convention and helped to define the complex and shifting parameters of the avant garde in the decorative arts. These individuals introduced a wide array of aesthetic expressions, some of which were based on indigenous concepts and historical precedents. Others generated ideas based on models borrowed from other cultures, often alien to their own. The use of new materials, technologies, and production methods also had a liberating effect on many modernists who rebelled against the dull uniformity of taste that characterized products of the Industrial Revolution.

Ultimately over the course of decades, a wide array of modernist expressions emerged throughout Europe and the United States, and many of these are represented in *Crosscurrents of Modernism*. From the rectilinear forms of Arts and Crafts work produced in England and the United States, to the undulant lines of continental Art Nouveau pieces, the diversity of pre-World War I modernism is revealed by objects in this exhibition. The luxurious elegance of French Art Moderne pieces of the 1920s contrasts with the abstract designs of Suprematist artists working in

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Russia. Rarely seen work by such noted figures as Peter Behrens (1868–1940) and Richard Riemerschmid (1868–1957) of Germany, Gerald Summers (1899–1967) of Great Britain, and Jean–Michel Frank (1895–1941) of France will also be included to reflect the wide range of designs produced in this period and included in this remarkable collection.

Work produced in England and America under the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement includes a 1904 armchair by the Scottish architect/designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928) made for *Hous'hill*, the home of his most important patron, Miss Cranston; Archibald Knox (1864–1933) is represented in this exhibition by a masterful silver and enamel mirror for Liberty and Company; and Frank Lloyd Wright's (1867–1959) side chair of 1904 from his own residence reflects his concern for structural clarity and the intimate relationship between his furnishings and his rigorous interiors.

Other highlights of the exhibition include a selection of masterpieces from the group of architect/designers working in Vienna at the turn of the century. Otto Wagner (1841–1918), Koloman Moser (1868–1918), and Joseph Maria Olbrich (1867–1908) are richly represented in this show, which also includes a selection of silver by Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956) as well as one of his bentwood chairs from the Pürkersdorf Sanatorium.

A particular strength of the collection is its holdings in French *Art Deco* furnishings, which were called *Art Moderne* in the 1920s. Masterpieces of the *ensembliers'* art are represented in the luxurious works of individuals such as Clément Mère (born 1870), whose armchair executed from Macassar ebony, ivory, and tooled leather reveals aspects of the 18th–century sources utilized for many early *Art Moderne* pieces; a neo–classical desk with *trompe l'oeil* textile motifs executed in ivory and ebony by Emile–Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933); and a magnificent ebony cabinet with abalone, mother–of–pearl, and silver marquetry designed by the architect Louis Süe (1875–1968) and

the painter André Mare (1887–1932) for the St. Cloud villa of the famous French actress, Jane Renouardt. From the same period is a massive pair of wrought iron gates by Edgar Brandt (1880–1960). Jean Puiforcat (1897–1945), the foremost designer of French silver between the world wars, is represented by a streamlined tea service in wood and silver.

Masterpieces of *Art Nouveau* and *Art Moderne* jewelry reveal the stunning contribution that modernism made to the world of the consumer of luxury goods. René Lalique (1860–1945) is represented by his early virtuosic jewelry, exquisitely crafted from precious and nonprecious materials. The brilliance of Parisian jewelry of the twenties is shown through masterpieces executed by the House of Cartier, Gérard Sandoz (born 1902), Jean Fouquet (born 1899), and Raymond Templier (1891–1968).

Most of the objects in the exhibition were collected by Sydney and Frances Lewis, founders of Best Products Company, based in Richmond, Virginia. Frederick R. Brandt, Curator of Twentieth-Century Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, was their private curator in the assembly of this collection, which was donated to the museum in 1985 with an endowment that has enabled the museum to continue to add to its holdings in this area. The collection is recognized as one of the most important of its kind in the United States.

Students of The Bard Graduate Center will participate in the assembly of this special exhibition. During their two years of intensive training at the Center, the students receive considerable professional training in museum practices and procedures. Many of these critical issues are covered in semester-long courses such as *The Installation of an Exhibition*, taught by Martha Deese, Senior Assistant for Exhibitions, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; *Methods of Object Interpretation* taught by Jennifer Anderson-Lawrence, Curator of the Abigail Adams Smith Museum; and *Museology: Principles and Practices*, taught by Albina De Meio, Administrator for Exhibitions and Registration,

The New-York Historical Society. Utilizing many of the fundamentals acquired in these classes, and working with members of The Bard Graduate Center staff, the students will devise the intellectual themes of the exhibition and participate in aspects of its installation. *Crosscurrents of Modernism: Selections from The Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts* has been organized by Derek E. Ostergard, Dean of The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, in conjunction with his M.A. level course, *A Return to National Origins: Progressive Design, 1851-1929*.

The Bard Graduate Center's Public Programs Department is sponsoring two twelve-week survey courses in conjunction with the exhibition: *Progressive Design in Western Decorative Arts Since 1800* and *Fashion and Femininity in the 20th Century*. In addition, Frederick R. Brandt will give a lecture at The Bard Graduate Center on The Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection in early 1995; details to be announced.

The Gallery at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, located at 18 West 86th Street in Manhattan, is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, 11:00 AM - 5:00 PM; Thursday, 11:00 AM - 8:30 PM; closed Monday. Admission is \$2.00 for adults, \$1.00 for seniors; children under 12 are admitted at no charge.

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