

**Milwaukee Art Museum to Present Major Traveling Exhibition Tracing  
20th-Century Transnational Design Exchanges Between U.S. and Scandinavia**

**Presentation Reconsiders the American Design Canon, Highlights Cultural Contributions of  
Immigrants and Importance of Environmentally Conscious and Accessible Design**



**Milwaukee, WI – November 17, 2022** – In spring 2023, the **Milwaukee Art Museum** will present *Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980*, the first exhibition to examine the extensive design exchanges between the United States and the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden during the 20th century. The exhibition proposes an alternative to the dominant narrative that cites Germany and central Europe as the primary influences of modern American design, presenting new scholarship on the crucial impact Scandinavia and the U.S. had on the other’s material culture, and investigates timely themes such as the contributions of immigrants to their adopted societies, the importance of international exchange, the role of cultural myths, and designing for sustainability and accessibility. Co-curated by Monica Obniski, former Demmer Curator of 20th- and 21st-Century Design at the Milwaukee Art Museum, now Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the High Museum of Art, and Bobby Tigerman, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross Curator, Decorative Arts and Design at LACMA, *Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980* will be on view from **March 24 through July 23, 2023**, in its final stop following an international tour.

Spanning from the arrival of Nordic immigrants to the U.S. in the late 19th century through the environmentally and socially conscious design projects of the 1960s and 1970s, the exhibition showcases more than 180 objects, including furniture, textiles, decorative arts, drawings, ceramics, jewelry, glass, and product designs that reflect the far-reaching effects of the Scandinavian and American cultural exchange. It also features books, magazines, and other print materials—mined from the Milwaukee Art Museum Research Center’s extensive holdings—that demonstrate the popularity of Scandinavian designs and aesthetic sensibilities in mainstream American culture. The presentation offers visitors a deep dive into the lasting impact of Scandinavian designers who immigrated to the U.S. and American designers who studied and worked in Nordic countries, the strategic marketing campaigns around Scandinavian products that targeted American consumers, and the American and Nordic figures who championed sustainable and accessible design.

“Through this exhibition, Bobby Tigerman and I aimed to expand upon the accepted canon of American design history and offer visitors a greater understanding of the design exchanges and craft collaborations between the U.S. and the Nordic countries and the ways these transnational interchanges impacted

American material life,” said **Monica Obniski**. “Our hope is that by engaging with the wide range of objects and accompanying research featured, viewers will gain new perspectives and insights on topics that remain central today, including the rich contributions of immigrants to American culture, the need to parse through the myths and stereotypes often embedded in advertising, and the critical importance of environmentally sustainable and universally accessible products.”

“The Milwaukee Art Museum is thrilled to have collaborated with LACMA to realize this comprehensive exhibition that charts the historical impact of a century of cross-cultural design exchange between the U.S. and Scandinavia,” said **Marcelle Polednik, Donna and Donald Baumgartner Director of the Milwaukee Art Museum**. “We are excited to bring this presentation to Milwaukee to engage with residents of the city and the region, whose own cultural heritage reflects the profound impact of Nordic creativity and innovation.”

*Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980* is co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Milwaukee Art Museum in collaboration with the Nationalmuseum Sweden and the Nasjonalmuseet in Norway.

### **Exhibition Organization**

*Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980* is divided into six thematic sections: Migration and Heritage, Selling the Scandinavian Dream, Design for Diplomacy, Teachers and Students, Travel Abroad, and Design for Social Change.

The first section, **Migration and Heritage**, explores how Scandinavian immigrants and their descendants made myriad impactful contributions to the artistic and cultural life of their adopted communities. For example, around 1930, Swedish-born artist Lillian Holm immigrated to Detroit, where she worked as a weaver and influential teacher at several Michigan art schools. Her *First Sight of New York* hanging (c. 1930) reflects her awe upon seeing the towering skyscrapers and dense crowds of the metropolis.

**Selling the Scandinavian Dream** examines the marketing strategy that applied a parallel of the “American dream” to Scandinavia to convince Americans that consumer capitalism leads to class mobility and a better quality of life and how this exploited stereotypes and myths about the Nordic region and people. This is exemplified by the colorful tableware produced by the company Dansk. For many Americans, Dansk’s enameled steel and carved teak products represent quintessential Scandinavian design; however, Dansk is an American company, founded by a New York entrepreneur in collaboration with Danish designer Jens H. Quistgaard. Through strategic marketing (Dansk translates to “Danish”), Dansk effectively capitalized on Americans’ admiration for Scandinavian design and aspiration for Scandinavian culture symbolized.

**Design for Diplomacy** considers how nations have long used design and architecture to advance their political goals through the “soft power” of cultural propaganda, such as national pavilions at world’s fairs, internationally traveling museum exhibitions, and the construction of diplomatic architecture like embassies. One example of Scandinavian “soft power” through design came during the Cold War, when the Scandinavian countries sought to align themselves with the democratic, capitalist side of the Cold War divide by appealing to American tastes and associating their products with values of freedom, democracy, and openness. Another example is perhaps the most significant manifestation of international diplomacy in the post-World War II era: the United Nations headquarters (1946–52), built in New York City as a place for nations to gather peacefully, for which Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were invited to design the three largest meeting halls. Swedish designer Marianne Richter’s vibrant tapestry curtain (c. 1951)

provided the focal point for Sweden's contribution, the Economic and Social Affairs Council Chamber. It enlivened the otherwise neutrally toned, modernist space, adding a touch of warmth to support the diplomatic and humanitarian mission of the Council.

**Teachers and Students** traces the ways in which Scandinavian designers and craftspeople who taught in American schools ultimately shaped the course of American design. One center of influence was the Cranbrook Academy of Art near Detroit, Michigan, where Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen was hired to design both the physical campus and pedagogical structure. Saarinen, father to Finnish architect Eero Saarinen, who designed the Modern civic masterpiece the War Memorial Center on the Milwaukee Art Museum campus, conceived the Academy's plan and major buildings as depicted in his "Cranbrook Map" hanging (1935). He also hired as faculty leading Nordic artists, including ceramist Maija Grotell, sculptor Carl Milles, and weaver Marianne Strengell—work by all of whom is also featured in this section of the exhibition—who in turn attracted to the institution promising American design and architecture students, including Charles and Ray Eames, Florence Knoll, Ed Rossbach, and Toshiko Takaezu.

**Travel Abroad** illustrates how cultural exchange between the Nordic countries and the United States was sustained through travel fellowships, formal academic programs, and apprenticeships. This cross-cultural exchange is exemplified by the printed textile (c. 1978) by Howard Smith, an African American artist who moved to Finland to escape systemic racism and lack of professional opportunities in the U.S. Created for the Finnish firm Vallila, Smith's textile attained widespread popularity as a home decoration and was exported back to the United States.

The final section, **Design for Social Change**, investigates how the turbulent social and political conditions of the late 1960s prompted some designers to think critically about their work, envisioning a new role for design within society and considering how design could address systemic problems including the planet's dwindling resources, overconsumption and excessive waste, safety, and physical barriers to access. Swedish designers such as Maria Benktzon and Sven-Eric Juhlin created household products based on ergonomic research, while American designer Niels Diffrient worked with a team at the industrial design firm Henry Dreyfuss Associates to publish *Humanscale* (1974), an ergonomic design guide that accounted for a range of body types, including wheelchair users, rather than focusing narrowly on able-bodied and average-size users. Contemporary designers' concern for addressing urgent global needs and solving endemic problems reflects and continues the legacy of the design critique that emerged from the United States and Nordic countries.

### **Publication**

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue edited by Monica Obniski and Bobbye Tigerman, designed by Lorraine Wild and Xiaoqing Wang of Green Dragon Studio. Wild is an alumna of the Cranbrook Academy of Art and her educational experiences there informed the design of the book. Contributors include Glenn Adamson, Arndís Árnadóttir, Charlotte Ashby, Graham C. Boettcher, Danielle Charlap, Kjetil Fallan, Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, Denise Hagströmer, Helena Kåberg, Alexandra Lange, Cara McCarty, Monica Penick, Hannah Pivo, Rosanne Somerson, and Erica Warren.

### **Sponsorship**

This exhibition is co-organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in collaboration with the Nationalmuseum in Sweden and the Nasjonalmuseet in Norway.

The exhibition and international tour are made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art. Major support is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Generous support is provided by Nordic Culture Point. Additional support comes from the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, Travel Wisconsin, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

*Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980* was originally scheduled to debut at the Milwaukee Art Museum in May 2020. In Milwaukee, supporting sponsorship is provided by Milwaukee Art Museum's Collectors' Corner, The Segal Family Foundation, and The Anders and Birgit Segerdahl Family. Contributing sponsorship is provided by John Stewig and Dick Bradley in Memory of Dick's Mother, Karine. Media sponsorship is provided by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Exhibitions originally scheduled for 2020 at the Milwaukee Art Museum are made possible by the 2020 Visionaries: Donna and Donald Baumgartner, John and Murph Burke, Sheldon and Marianne Lubar, Joel and Caran Quadracci, Sue and Bud Selig, and Jeff Yabuki and the Yabuki Family Foundation.

### **Programming**

#### **President's Circle Preview Celebration**

Wednesday, March 22, 5:30 – 8 p.m.

Lecture: 6:15 p.m.

Get an Insider's first look at the exhibition, and welcome our special guests, the exhibition curators Monica Obniski, curator of decorative arts and design at the High Museum of Art and former curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum, and Bobbye Tigerman, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross Curator, Decorative Arts and Design at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

#### **Member Preview Day + Celebration**

Thursday, March 23, 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Reception: 5 p.m.

Opening Lecture: 6:15 p.m.

See the exhibition before it opens to the public and join us for a lecture with the exhibition curator Monica Obniski, curator of decorative arts and design at the High Museum of Art and former curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

#### **Gallery Talks**

Thursday, March 30 and April 27, noon – 1 p.m.

With Shoshana Resnikoff, Demmer Curator of 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Design

#### **Performance: Present Music's "Northern Lights"**

Thursday, April 6, 7:30 p.m.

Extend your experience of the exhibition and its celebration of Scandinavian culture with a northern lights-inspired concert by Present Music in Windhover Hall. Enjoy the world premiere of *Midden Find* by the composer Dan Trueman, featuring the star Irish fiddler, Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh, and the premiere of a new work by the Brazilian American singer, composer, and pianist Clarice Assad.

Event tickets are required.

### **Image Captions**

Gorham Manufacturing Company, Durgin Division, *Viking Boat Centerpiece*, model D 900, designed c. 1905, collection of the Art Fund, Inc. at the Birmingham Museum of Art; purchase with funds provided by Guy R. Kreuzsch, photo © Birmingham Museum of Art, by Sean Pathasema; Finn Juhl for Baker Furniture, Inc., Armchair, model 400-1/2, designed 1951, Milwaukee Art Museum, bequest of Dr. Lucille Cohn, photo © Milwaukee Art Museum, by John R. Glembin; Kaj Franck for Nuutajärvi Glassworks, Goblets, model KF 486, designed 1968, these examples c. 1970–71, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Decorative Arts and Design Council Fund and partial gift of Marc Treib, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; Howard Smith for Vallila, Textile, designed c. 1978, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Kenneth Erwin, © Erik J. Smith & Erna Aaltonen, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

### **About the Milwaukee Art Museum**

The Milwaukee Art Museum welcomes people from throughout the community and the world to find themselves and lose themselves in art, creativity, and culture. At any one time, visitors can experience over 2,500 works on view within the Museum's collection galleries and three ever-changing exhibition spaces; participate in engaging programming; and explore the one-of-a-kind spaces across the 24-acre lakefront campus. The iconic architecture brings together structures designed by Eero Saarinen, David Kahler, and Santiago Calatrava. Famous for its moving Burke Brise Soleil, the Museum serves as a symbol for Milwaukee pride and connects the shores of Lake Michigan to the city's bustling downtown. For more information, visit [mam.org](http://mam.org).

###

### **Media Contacts**

For more information or to request images, please contact:

#### **National media:**

Kathryn Hanlon-Hall / Sarah McNaughton  
Resnicow and Associates  
[khanlon-hall@resnicow.com](mailto:khanlon-hall@resnicow.com) / [smcnaughton@resnicow.com](mailto:smcnaughton@resnicow.com)  
212-671-5179 / 212-671-5161

#### **Local media:**

Cortney Heimerl  
Milwaukee Art Museum  
[cortney.heimerl@mam.org](mailto:cortney.heimerl@mam.org)  
414-940-0490