

Celebrating Great Design from the Golden State: The California Design Exhibitions, 1954-1976

A new publication by Chronicle Books coauthored by Jo Lauria and Suzanne Baizerman charts the innovation and vitality of mid-to-late-century modern design and craft created by designers and craftsmen living in California. Titled California Design: The Legacy of West Coast Craft and Style, the book assesses the impact of the California Design exhibitions, a series comprised of twelve exhibitions spanning 21 years, held primarily at the Pasadena Art Museum.

This recent publication couples new essays with more than 300 original images from the exhibit catalogs to create a portrait of design in California during the 1950s to the 1970s. The period photographs are drawn from the Archives of California Design, part of the Paul Mills Art Library at the Oakland Museum of California, and this is the first time that they have been assembled in a compilation book.

The California Design exhibitions embraced varied ideologies as they adopted a visionary, inclusionary approach, showing crafted one-of-a-kind objects alongside industrial design prototypes and manufactured goods, all displayed in a non-hierarchical manner.

The public was treated to a daring kaleidoscope of design and craft, from hand thrown pottery, plastic dinner ware and manufactured fiberglass furniture to unconventional jewelry, holistic “environments,” a *Desert Rat* vehicle and a two-seater gyroplane.

The story begins with World War II and the major national migration of Americans westward, in search of jobs in wartime industries. Americans continued to pour in after the war, lured by employment and the mild climate.

This influx of people and industry led to a shift in the regional balance of the nation. The prime position of the East Coast in affecting American culture began to give way to influence from the West Coast.

The automobile gained importance, and highways proliferated. Residential architecture took advantage of the climate. Patios became additional living space, and floor to ceiling windows brought the outdoors inside.

In Southern California, new industries to furnish the new homes sprang up, including design firms and craft studios. The California Design exhibits were designed by the Pasadena Art Museum to showcase this new design work.

Innovations - some stimulated by wartime industries - were evident in the new materials used in furniture and accessories. California also came to mean individual expression, "doing your own thing," blurring the boundary between art, design and craft. It was a defiant, hybrid aesthetic.

The diversity of the work shown sprung from the diversity of backgrounds of those who found themselves in California, as seen in the rattan furniture designed by Chinese immigrant, Danny Ho Fong, co- founder of Tropical Company. California's counterculture and drug culture were referenced by objects like the ceramic Hookah made by Michael Frimkess.

The landscape was also an inspiration, as seen in a collection of objects in a catalog section entitled "California Design in Native Orange Color" that appeared in California Design Eight (1962).

[· Wes Williams et al.]

- Installation

The California Design exhibitions fell into two phases: The first 7 exhibitions, held annually from 1954-1961 showed new designs and new technology, stressing design for production. They were closely related to the "Good Design" exhibitions at New York's Museum of Modern Art held from 1950-1955, which also promoted modern design to middle class homeowners.

1962 was the turning point in the California Design exhibitions when a new director, Eudorah Moore, assumed leadership. Eudorah had a long association with the Pasadena Art Museum and had been president of its board of trustees. As leader of California Design, she expanded the vision, scope and scale of the exhibitions and became "catalyst, muse and talent scout."

(CD 11 Installation)

Eudorah recruited an army of volunteers and instituted a jury system to improve the quality of work. She traveled to New York City to solicit publicity in magazines, such as *House Beautiful*.

As the number of entries increased, it was necessary to hold the exhibitions every three years instead of annually, with 5 years separating the 11th and 12th exhibitions. They were much bigger exhibitions - one occupied 12,000 square feet and showed 750 objects.

Under Eudorah, the catalogs went from sparsely illustrated booklets to hard cover publications with color illustrations. Many were shot on location. These were disseminated nationally and beyond and assured a long life for the designed object presented.

(Photo shoot CD '76)

(Photo shoot with Eudorah)

Over the course of the exhibitions from 1962 to 1976 objects became increasingly unconventional and exuberant. Colors were brighter and there were more handcrafted objects. Since this was a period when more and more of those working in craft media were trained in art school, work became tied to contemporary art currents, such as abstract expressionism, as seen in the bold brushstrokes of ceramic pieces displayed, and in abstract geometric constructions, that were most evident in jewelry designs. (William C. Quirt ceramic plate and necklace by John Snidecor)

Social values of the day supported working with the hands as a way of counteracting the dehumanizing effect of modern life. This philosophy was actualized by designer-craftsmen in handcrafted organic environments such as “Arizona Inner Space” by weaver Barbara Shawcroft and Jack Rogers Hopkins “Womb Room.”

The California Design exhibits enjoyed the highest attendance figures seen at the Pasadena Art Museum. Nonetheless, by the late 60s the museum found itself in dire financial straits, exacerbated by the opening of a new building in 1969. Financier and art collector Norton Simon led a takeover of the museum, and the entire staff was fired.

Eudorah Moore and her crew created a non-profit organization that offered, among other projects, the last of the

California Design exhibitions. It was installed in the newly opened Pacific Design Center in 1976.

The California Design exhibitions came to an end in 1976 as the demands of finding appropriate venues and endless fundraising took their toll. Eudorah Moore headed to Washington to become Crafts Coordinator for the NEA. As she later acknowledged, the dialog between craft and industry that Moore had begun had changed by 1976 and the two didn't mesh as well.

Summing up, to quote Donald Albrecht in the introduction to our book: the California Design exhibitions "extended a regional ethos to a national agenda, making California both stage and symbol of that agenda."