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Art Review | 'Modernism'

A Show Where Art, Design and Collectibles Blur

By **KEN JOHNSON**

"Modernism: A Century of Style and Design," a weekend gathering of 66 high-end dealers in 20th-century collectibles at the Park Avenue Armory, delivers on so many different levels that one pass through is not nearly enough.

Magen H Gallery XX Century Design
"Queen Anne, Queen Anne," from the Art et
Industrie movement.



On the first trip around, the most conspicuously odd and wonderful things jump out: the industrial window louvers designed by Jean Prouvé in the 1950's for buildings in Africa at Galerie Downtown, or at Mark McDonald, a fantastic wooden chair carved in the mid-60's by Jan de Swart that looks as if it appeared in a dream to Yves Tanguy. Another eye-catching chair, a curvy, early-20th-century specimen by the Art Nouveau visionary Antonio Gaudí, is at Barry Friedman.

Go through a second time, and innumerable objects of spellbinding refinement come to light. Jason Jacques has a beautiful and economical display of Art Nouveau pottery that includes iridescent and delightfully creepy vessels by Vilmos Zsolnay. And among

many gorgeous examples of early Viennese Modernism at Rita Bucheit is a hammered brass bowl by Josef Hoffmann that shines like the Holy Grail.

On subsequent trips you may explore shelves and display cabinets offering a seemingly inexhaustible collective inventory of jewelry, silver, glassware and other small luxury items. In a side alcove of the Two Zero C booth, a golden china cabinet holds a set of small Cubist-Deco teacups by Jean Luce. Each is glazed gold on the inside and deep orange on the outside and sits on a black, rectangular saucer with a celadon green underside. If your acquisitive desires are not aroused by this show, you are either a saint or a Puritan.

The fair can also be intellectually edifying. Twentieth-century design is not only an increasingly hot commodity for collectors and speculators - and this is a show for collectors and connoisseurs above all, which is why it is so good - but it is also seen by art historians, theorists and other scholars as a more and more revealing window into the mindscape of modernity. What tells you more about the 60's, for example, than the paper miniskirts imprinted with Campbell's soup labels, an Op Art pattern and a poem by [Allen Ginsberg](#) at Katy Kane, a dealer in vintage clothing?

It is not unusual to find works by historically eminent furniture designers exhibited in progressive art galleries these days, and some vintage furniture shops are looking more like art galleries than antiques stores. See, for example, Demish Danant's extraordinarily elegant installation of furniture from the late 60's and 70's featuring a low daybed by Maria Pergay that Donald Judd would surely have loved.

Magen H Gallery is showing works that deliberately blur the line between sculpture and furniture. Focusing on an American minimovement called Art et Industrie that flourished in the 70's, 80's and 90's, the installation presents a solar-powered electric chair with Gucci straps by James Hong, chairs made of spaghetti-like tangles of tubing by Forrest Myers and a partial merger of two Queen Anne chairs - one bright yellow and one bright red - by Main + Main that might make you think you are seeing double.

For some people it is all just visual culture, whether it's the archetypally Modernist geometric metal sculptures from the late 60's by James Prestini at Converso or a 30's-era grease gun from a Detroit auto factory that looks like a prop for a Buck Rogers movie at Mondo Cane. There is not much of what you'd call fine art per se in the show, but there is as much visual excitement and intellectual stimulation as you'll get from a day in the Chelsea art district.