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Calendar of Events February 1935

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MACHINE ART

The beauty of machine art is in the past the abstract beauty of "straight lines and circles" made into actual tangible "surfaces and solids" by means of tools, "lathes and rulers and squares." In Plato's day the tools were simple handworker's implements but today, as a result of the perfection of modern materials and the precision of modern machinery, the modern machine-made object approaches far more closely and more frequently those pure shapes the contemplation of which Plato calls the first of the "pure pleasures."

Machines are, visually speaking, a practical application of geometry. Forces which act in straight lines are changed in direction and degree by machines which are themselves formed of straight lines and curves. The lever is geometrically a straight line resting on a point. The wheel and axle is composed of concentric circles and radiating straight lines. The watch spring is a spiral. Sphericity and circularity are the geometrical characteristics of a ball bearing. Screws, bearing springs and propellers are variously beautifully-applications of the helix and helicoid.

STATIC AND KINETIC RHYTHMS

The beauty of machine art depends often upon rhythmic as well as upon geometrical elements—upon repetition as well as upon shape. The teeth of a saw form a simple static rhythmic series; the keys and levers of the cash register make a more varied and complex series.

Motion is an essential function of many machines and sometimes increases their aesthetic interest, principally through the addition of temporal rhythms, both of movement and of sound. The pistons of a locomotive or the rising and falling frames of a mechanical loom illustrate the point. On the other hand a propeller, a governor, a rotary saw, a ball bearing are more beautiful as objects when they are still or, better, moving very slowly. Even the streamlined object is more frequently admired when at rest than when in motion. Fortunately for this exhibition machine proper are only a small part of machine art as a whole.

TECHNICAL AND MATERIAL BEAUTY

In addition to perfection of shape and rhythm, beauty of surface is an important aesthetic quality of machine art that is best. Perfect surface is, of course, made possible by the refinement of modern materials and the precision of machine manufacture. A watch spring is beautiful not only for its spiral shape but also for its bright steel surface and its delicately exact execution.

Consider function and the most forthcoming technical designer of microscopes will insist on a perfection of shape and finish which is proportioned and varnished.

Many of the finest objects in the exhibition such as the bearing spring or the depth gauge are produced quite without benefit of artist-designer. Their beauty is entirely unintentional—it is a by-product. Nevertheless they satisfy through their "integrity," "due proportion," and "clarity," the excellent theoretical definition of the beautiful as "that which is seen, pleasing."

Many other objects, the clock, the chair, the lamp are the result of conscious artistic intention. For in a great many useful objects function does not dictate form, it merely indicates form in a general way. The role of the artist in machine art is to choose, from a variety of possible forms each of which may be functionally adequate, that one form which is aesthetically most satisfactory. He does not embellish or elaborate, but refines, simplifies and perfects.

MACHINE FORMS AND NATURAL FORMS

The beauty of machine art in so far as it is a mere by-product of function and even a trivial kind of beauty, but this is not necessarily so. The beauty of all natural objects is also a by-product—the helix of a snail's shell (and a steel coil), the graduated feathering of a bird's wing (and the leaves of a lami­nated spring), the rabbit's footprints in the snow (and the track of non-skid tires), the elegance of fruit (and of incandescent bulbs).

"INDUSTRY AND CULTURE"

It is in part through the aesthetic appreciation of natural forms that man has carried on his spiritual conquest of nature's hostile chaos. Today man is lost in the far more treacherous wilderness of industrial and commercial civilization. On every hand machines liter­ally multiply our difficulties and point our doom. If, to use L. P. Jack's phrase, we are to "end the divorce" between our industry and our culture we must assimilate the machine aesthetically as well as economically. Not only must we bind Frankenstein—but we must make him beautiful.

The above paragraphs are reprinted from the Foreword by Mr. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to the Catalogue of the Machine Art Exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1934.}

MACHINE ART AND HANDICRAFT

The history of machine art is interwoven with that of handicraft; but in spirit machine art and handicraft are diametrically opposed. Handicraft implies irregularity, picturesque-ness, decorative value and uniqueness; fig­ured textiles, pottery wares, decorative friezes, hand­wrought metal work, hand-hammered silver bowls. The machine implies precision, simplicity, smoothness, reproducibility; plain textiles, vases as simple as labora­tory beakers, smooth polished metal work.

The difference between craft and the machine lies in spirit and convention as much as in actual method of manufacture. Tools and simple machines have always been used; the potter's wheel and the loom are machines. Modern equipment is merely more efficient and complex. But whether the designer sits at the loom and works up the pattern as he weaves or whether he uses a motor weaves and the designer sits in an office, the actual work is by machine. A man at a hand loom can weave a rug of machine-like simplicity. A glass blower can make laboratory beakers as well as picturesquely shaped vases. But the craft spirit does not fit an age geared to machine technique. Machine-made imitations of craft objects are parodies, and the real handicraft has lost its importance.

In the development of the design of machines and useful objects, the nineteenth century is an anomaly. In previous periods the normal tendency had been to utilize the best technical and mechanical devices known and to design for these devices. After the invention of the potter's wheel, vase designs were logically based on its use. But in the nineteenth century technical and design were divorced. Machines made bad designs while good designs continued to be executed by primitive methods.

The twentieth century is gradually rectifying this anomaly and is returning to the more reasonable principle of designing tools and useful objects with reference to the latest technique, out of the most durable materials, and as economically as possible. In the same way the modern study of architecture continues. Machine art, greenhouse plants of the future, is taking shape with the latest technique of building science.

[The above paragraphs are reprinted from History of Machine Art, by Mr. Philip Johnson, in the before-mentioned Catalogue.]

MACHINE ART

Machine art, devoid as it should be of surface ornament, must depend upon the sensuous beauty of porcelain, enamel, celluloid, glass of all colors, copper, aluminum, brass and steel. The circles and spheres of a ball bearing are greatly enhanced by the contrasting surfaces of brushed steel races, shining polished steel balls, and brass carriers.

VISUAL COMPLEXITY

The beauty in machine art as in all art varies in relation but not in proportion to its complexity. A watch crystal, perfect though it may be, is too simple a form to hold our visual interest for long. A printing press, on the other hand, is too complicated an arrangement of shapes for the human eye to enjoy aesthetically. Moderately simple machine compositions such as the door of a wall safe, or the microscope, or our classical example, the ball bearing prove more satisfactory.

FUNCTION

A knowledge of function may be of considerable importance in the visual enjoyment of machine art, though Plato might have considered such knowledge an impurity, Mechnical function and utilitarian function—"how it works" and "what it does"—are distinct problems, the former requiring in many cases a certain unhandicraft, but in spirit machine art and handicraft are diametrically opposed. Whoever understands the dynamics of pitch in propeller blades or the distribution of forces in a ball bearing so that he can participateimaginatively in the action of mechanical functions is likely to find that this knowledge enhances the beauty of the objects. In the same way, using or understanding the use of the calipers, the retort, or the rotary floor polisher is likely to increase their aesthetic value.

Fortunately the functional beauty of most of the objects is not obscure and in any case, so far as this exhibition is concerned, appreciation of their beauty in the platonic sense is more important.

MACHINE ART AND THE DESIGNER

The previous paragraphs have considered the aesthetic enjoyment of machines and machine-made objects without mentioning their designers. The designers are of two kinds, technical and artistic. Often one man will combine both roles. For even the most "impractical and fantastic "styler" of "modernistic" plumbing fixtures (not included in the exhibition) must...
EXHIBITIONS OUTSIDE OF PROVIDENCE

Gallery of Fine Arts, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

Lyman Allyn Museum, New London, Conn.


The Guild of Boston Artists, 162 Newbury Street, Boston, Mass.


The Museum of Modern Art, New York City

EXHIBITIONS IN PROVIDENCE

Feuance House Art Gallery, Brown University

John Hay Library, Brown University

Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design

School Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design

Providence Art Club

Tilden-Thurber Gallery

Theatrical and Artistic Events

Sunday, February 3

Sunday Gallery Talk, "Corot at the Museum" by Miss Dorothea Belling, Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 3:30 P.M.

Monday, February 4

*Benefit Concert under the auspices of the Federal Hill House School of Music. Plantations Auditorium, 8:15 P.M.

Sunday, February 10

Sunday Gallery Talk, "Modern Machine Art" by Royal B. Farnum, Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 3:30 P.M.

Thursday, February 14

*Concert by the University Glee Club, Verna Osborne, mezzo-soprano, assisting artist. Memorial Hall, 8:15 P.M.

Sunday, February 17

Sunday Gallery Talk, "Japanese Prints" by Miss Miriam Banks, Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 3:30 P.M.

Tuesday, February 19

*Concert by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitsky, conductor, Myra Hess, pianist, assisting artist. Metropolitan Theater, 8:15 P.M.

Wednesday, February 20

*Sock and Buskin present "The Two Orphans." Faunce House Theater, Brown University, 8:30 P.M.

Thursday, February 21

*Federation Day Concert sponsored by the Charmaine Club, Edward Austin Kane, tenor, recitalist. Plantations Auditorium, 3:15 P.M.

*Sock and Buskin present "The Two Orphans." Faunce House Theater, Brown University, 8:30 P.M.

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Feuance House Art Gallery, Brown University

John Hay Library, Brown University

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Tilden-Thurber Gallery

Theatrical and Artistic Events

Friday, February 22

*Sock and Buskin present "The Two Orphans." Faunce House Theater, Brown University, 8:30 P.M.

Saturday, February 23

*Sock and Buskin present "The Two Orphans." Faunce House Theater, Brown University, 8:30 P.M.

Sunday, February 24

Oratorio Society concert, Mendelssohn's " Elijah," Elmwood Congregational Church, 3:00 P.M.

Sunday Gallery Talk, " Why Silver is Industry," by Sidney Rollings, Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 3:30 P.M.

Tuesday, February 26

Bach program by Gertrude Proksch Kuruath, dancer, and Arthur B. Hitchcock, pianist and organist, assisted by the students of the Federal Hill House School of Music. Alumnae Hall, 8:30 P.M.

*Admission charged.

CALENDAR

(All events listed are open to the public)

Sunday, February 3

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Sunday, February 10

Sunday Gallery Talk, "Modern Machine Art" by Royal B. Farnum, Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 3:30 P.M.

Poetry reading by Susanna V. Mitchell, Faunce House Theater, Brown University, 4:00 P.M.

Thursday, February 14

*Concert by Pro Arte String Quartet under the auspices of the Department of Music, Brown University. Alumnae Hall, 8:30 P.M.

Friday, February 15

*Concert by the University Glee Club, Verna Osborne, mezzo-soprano, assisting artist. Memorial Hall, 8:15 P.M.

Sunday, February 17

Sunday Gallery Talk, "Japanese Prints" by Miss Miriam Banks, Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, 3:30 P.M.

Lecture on the program of the Boston Symphony Orchestra by Dr. W. Louis Chapman under the auspices of the Monday Morning Musical Club. Providence Public Library, 4:00 P.M.

Drama Tea, Paravent Playhouse, 4:00-6:00 P.M.

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