The Metropolitan Museum’s involvement with the decorative arts of this century is one of long standing. A decade of intense collecting began in 1922, when Edward C. Moore, Jr., donated a generous sum for the purchase of objects of the finest quality from America and Europe. Thanks to the discriminating eye of Joseph Breck, the Curator of Decorative Arts, the fund was used judiciously to buy examples of the now celebrated Art Deco style. Upon Breck’s death in 1933, the impetus for collecting temporarily lapsed, but a succession of exhibitions already underway continued as planned. Inspired by the 1925 Paris Exposition, Richard Bach, the Museum’s Director for Industrial Relations, organized a series of shows presenting innovative design. For “The Architect and the Industrial Arts,” which opened in February 1929, a committee of architects headed by Eliel Saarinen created room settings with specially manufactured furnishings.

The spectacularly popular exhibition drew an unprecedented attendance of 185,256, and was extended from six weeks to seven months. In 1934 architects were joined by the first generation of American industrial designers, as exhibits by Donald Deskey, Raymond Loewy, and Gilbert Rohde were featured. The program was discontinued during World War II.

Interest in the field of twentieth-century decorative arts was slow to regenerate after the war. It was not until 1966 that the Museum made another major acquisition with the purchase of an entire dining room—wood paneling, murals, and furniture—created for a Parisian townhouse between 1910 and 1914. The ensemble by the Symbolist painter Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer evokes an exotic garden, with carved wisteria overhanging the painted murals. The detail on the opposite page illustrates the room as it stood in Paris; now dismantled and in storage, it awaits reassembly in the Southwest Wing, still to be built in the final phase of the Museum’s master plan.

Modern art in all its aspects was given new focus at the Metropolitan in 1967 with the establishment of the Department of Contemporary Art, soon renamed Twentieth Century Art. At the instigation of Henry Geldzahler, who was head of the department until 1978, Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, Assistant Curator and author of this publication, brought out of storage Breck’s outstanding purchases of the 1920s and began again the systematic building of the collection, extending from Art Nouveau to contemporary Studio Craft.

The best of modern decorative arts is today sought by collectors and museums the world over. The support of the Friends of Twentieth-Century Decorative Arts, whose contributions have created the first purchase fund since the 1922 Moore gift, promises new vitality to the Metropolitan in the now highly competitive field it pioneered half a century ago.

PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO
Director
The decorative arts of the twentieth century cannot be considered without acknowledging that the creation of objects appealing to both hand and eye, for use and decoration, is a practice as old as civilization itself. A distance of centuries makes it easier to appreciate and evaluate these objects as art, for nostalgia tends to cloud our view in dealing with artifacts of eras we can remember. Where art is concerned, however, age or the lack of it should be subordinate to the central issue of quality. A work that is badly designed and shoddily made should not be sanctioned only because it has survived a hundred years or more; nor should one be dismissed because it cannot qualify as antique. The challenge of collecting twentieth-century decorative arts is to divorce oneself from the emotional bias of memory in order to judge each work in the perspective of its predecessors and for the degree to which it succeeds in fulfilling the aims of its creator. As a repository of works from past epochs and foreign cultures, The Metropolitan Museum of Art affords a unique vantage point from which to scan the accomplishments of this century.

The single most important factor setting our age apart from others has been industrialization. In the continuous dialogue concerning the decorative arts and the machine, there has been a constant dispute over the aesthetic and moral value of objects fashioned by skilled handwork as opposed to those made in quantity by mechanized processes. On the one hand, the traditionalists have sought to humanize the industrial age by embellishment. On the other, the modernists have espoused an ideology of puritanical socialism and Platonic idealism, inveighing against what they perceive to be the anachronistic traditions of those who create beautiful objects for the privileged few. Out of their various manifestos comes a common theme, that the aim of the decorative or applied arts should be to create perfect forms standardized to accommodate the needs of modern everyday life.

Although modernism appeared briefly in Vienna about 1900, it found its most effective spokesman during the 1920s in the great architect Le Corbusier. Modernist theory was given its most thorough application at the Bauhaus, founded by the architect Walter Gropius in 1919. This German institute was dedicated to the creation of prototypes for industrial production. In the fourteen years of its existence, the Bauhaus developed mechanistic designs featuring metal, glass, and other industrialized materials. It then became the dominant influence on a subsequent generation of architects and designers working in what was to be identified from the 1930s on as the International Style.

The most serious interpreters of twentieth-century decorative arts have been historians of the International Style, who have treated only those aspects that can be construed as prefiguring or contributing to the style. A broader vision must apply in a museum of the Metropolitan’s encyclopedic scope, which imposes a pluralistic aesthetic on anyone exposed to works of art as diverse as Chinese Buddhas and Renaissance altarpieces. It is logical, then, that the Museum should attempt to acquire important works in every significant mode. In modern decorative arts the Metropolitan naturally tends toward those works that continue traditions represented in its historic collections, but the field has too long been dealt with as an afterthought and is just beginning to come into its own. The following pages illustrate examples from the Metropolitan’s collection, which cannot yet tell the full story of the decorative arts in this century. They do, nonetheless, bear witness to a sequence of styles, and to moments in the history of art that have not received their due. The works of Art Nouveau, Wiener Werkstätte, Art Deco, Moderne, Scandinavian Modern, and the Studio Craft Movement deserve attention as successive manners by which art has transformed the environment of our time.

Penelope Hunter-Stiebel

At the end of the nineteenth century, a desire for novelty infused the arts of Europe and America. This found expression in such outbursts of fantasy as Carlo Bugatti’s imaginative turn-of-the-century secretary, replete with Moorish arches and inlays of pseudo-calligraphy (see detail on the opposite page). Working in Milan, Bugatti (1855–1940) gained considerable notoriety for his exotic furniture. The animal sculptures of his younger son, Rembrandt, also won recognition, but it was the classic automobile of his older son, Ettore, that made the name Bugatti famous.

Vellum, walnut, copper, pewter, and mirror glass, h. 88 in. Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr. Gift, 69.69
Art Nouveau, the first decorative style of the twentieth century, emerged in the 1890s to challenge the historicism of revival styles that held sway at the time. Its advocates broke with the past and sought to engender a new art for the new century, drawing on the forms and forces of nature. Flowering vines, waves, a woman’s flowing hair, and even organic abstraction are described by an undulating line that is the hallmark of Art Nouveau.

The origins of the style can be traced, in part, to the writings of William Morris, who had focused attention on the need for a renewed energy in the decorative arts. But while Morris found his ideal in the European Middle Ages, the practitioners of Art Nouveau looked for aesthetic direction to Japan, opened to the West since the 1850s. Contrary to the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement initiated by Morris, commerce and the machine bore no stigma, and every attempt was made to tailor art production to current economics.

In Paris the new style was named, popularized, and discreetly molded by the art dealer Samuel Bing, already established in the field of Japanese art. In December 1895 he issued invitations to the public and press to the reopening of his gallery transformed into the “Salon de l’Art Nouveau.” Here he exhibited contemporary objects and furnishings alongside paintings and sculptures by Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, Mary Cassatt, Auguste Rodin, and others. His firm then expanded into the manufacture of applied arts designed by artists that he selected. Bing’s major triumph, and the triumph of the new style, came at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, where the “Art Nouveau Bing” pavilion contained entire rooms by the designers Edward Colonna (1862–1948) and Georges de Feure (1868–1928).

Restraint distinguished Bing’s approach, and the artists working for him avoided the more flamboyant aspects of Art Nouveau. Colonna devised curvilinear flourishes to enliven the corners of a basically conservative table, a model featured in Bing’s 1900 Exposition pavilion. Colonna’s addition of a swirling silver collar and attenuated handle transformed an unassuming ceramic by Alexandre Bigot into a precious object worthy of Bing’s showcases. On de Feure’s vase, below, the arch of a swan’s neck echoes the emphatic sweep of a flower stem, but the decoration is kept within strict limits. His use of negative space accords with Bing’s advocacy of the principles of Japanese art. In this vase, as in many examples of Art Nouveau, the strength of the design overcomes the indifference of its commercial execution.

Images of women pervade Art Nouveau, but the modish young lady on de Feure's fan is far from the typical siren. Her reverse transforms a city park into a hallucinatory vision in which everything, as in a distorting mirror, seems to turn in on itself: the city buildings reflected upside-down in a pond, an impossibly poised tree, and the twisting lilies that loom almost ominously in the foreground are all locked into a sinuous linear pattern. The theme is chosen with piquant symbolism for the decoration of a fan destined to relieve the atmosphere oppressing a lady of aesthetic bent.

About 1900. Printed silk, celluloid sticks with ivory, l. 8 in. Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr. Gift. 26.228.19
An early center of Art Nouveau developed at Nancy, in the French province of Lorraine, under the leadership of the glass and furniture designer Émile Gallé. Beginning in the 1880s, Gallé exhorted his colleagues to derive their ornament from the direct study of nature, citing the precedent of Japanese art. This naturalistic concern is evident in details of the Museum's dressing table-sink by Louis Majorelle (1859–1926), a prominent member of Gallé’s circle. The bronze pulls, cast in the form of leaves and berries, are typical of the École de Nancy. Majorelle, however, went beyond the surface application of floral ornament to a fundamental reinterpretation of structure along organic lines, and was, as a result, considered the eccentric of the group. In this unique work, commissioned by Eugène Corbin, a noted patron of the École de Nancy, Majorelle incorporated the technology of modern plumbing in a bold artistic statement, creating a structure that branches majestically outward like a lofty tree rising from a massive base. 1900–10. Honduras mahogany, Macassar ebony, gilt-bronze, mirror glass, with marble top, h. 86% in. Gift of The Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation, 1979.4.
Favrile glassware, patented in 1894, established Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933) as America’s leading exponent of Art Nouveau. The flowing contours and iridescent colors, as well as the floral imagery of these vases, make them exemplary expressions of the style, although many other products of Tiffany Studios bore no reference to it.

Under the aegis of Samuel Bing, Tiffany’s fame became international. The two met in 1893 when Bing was engaged in a survey of American decorative and industrial art for the French government. A close relationship developed in which Bing supplied oriental art to Tiffany, and, in turn, became Tiffany’s exclusive European distributor, feeding appropriate works into the mainstream of Art Nouveau.


In England, the career of Arthur Lasenby Liberty, founder of Liberty & Co. in London, paralleled that of Samuel Bing. Both began as dealers in oriental imports, progressed to marketing contemporary European wares, and finally engaged in the manufacture of designs conforming to their own tastes. In 1899 Liberty launched the Cymric line of silver exemplified by this spoon commemorating the coronation of Edward VII in 1902. The design was commissioned from Archibald Knox (1864–1933), who has recently emerged from anonymity as the principal author of the company’s style. Knox supplied designs to Liberty from 1893 to 1912, initially for textiles, then for metalwork that, like the spoon, was often embellished with champleve enamel. Deriving an endless variety of interlaced ornament from the Celtic antiquities of his native Isle of Man, Knox formulated an unmistakably English version of Art Nouveau.

The architect Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956) was in the forefront of the trend toward rectilinear modernism, far removed from French Art Nouveau, that appeared in Vienna at the turn of the century. This desk set, dating from 1905, the year Hoffmann received the commission to build his masterpiece, the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, embodies his architectural vision. It illustrates his doctrine that aesthetic principles should be applied equally to architecture and the decorative arts. Hoffmann insisted that an object, no matter its category or material, could attain the highest level through the quality of its design and workmanship.

Josef Hoffmann co-founded the Wiener Werkstätte in 1903 with the purpose of bringing together artists and craftsmen to raise the level of applied arts in Austria. In 1897 he had participated with other young artists, including Gustave Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, and Koloman Moser, in the Vienna Sezession, which broke with the conservative Academy and began to hold independent exhibitions, in part motivated by the desire to revitalize the disdained minor arts. After a trip to England, where they visited Charles Robert Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft, Hoffmann and Moser convinced the banker Fritz Warendorfer to back a comparable workshop in Vienna. Under Hoffmann’s direction, the Werkstätte made and marketed a wide range of products, from jewelry to wallpaper, until 1932.

The Wiener Werkstätte style followed an independent course, changing from the rigorous geometry of early works to a bizarre glamour that proved popular in the 1920s. The impetus toward baroque extravagance came from Dagobert Peche, (1887–1923) who joined the organization in 1915. His personal and stylistic influence was pervasive, and the work of his colleagues was immediately infused with the nervous brilliance that still radiates from the fawn improbably perched atop his jewel box (opposite). Hoffmann, himself affected by Peche’s decorative energy, abandoned the puritanical grids of his early work for shimmering surfaces, although this bowl (below) shows the master retaining his rational control of proportion. 

Art Déco, succeeding Art Nouveau in France, flourished from the close of World War I until the Depression. These years, termed "les années folles," witnessed a frenzied quest for the good things in life that had been jeopardized by the war. Redoubled in the 1920s was the craze for fabulous elegance that had been touched off by the sets and costumes of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which first performed in Paris in 1909. Although offshoots and imitations occurred elsewhere, Art Déco was quintessentially French, linked to the history of French decorative arts. Looking to the eighteenth century as the golden age, the 1920s style answered the postwar desire for luxury goods fashioned with consummate craftsmanship.

French designers and craftsmen updated an established repertory with pared-down geometric shapes and the judicious application of stylized ornament. They revived forgotten techniques and employed precious materials, yet their idiom was distinctly contemporary. This mirror and fan, for example, fulfill the qualifications of the traditional objet de luxe, but convey a strikingly modern chic.

The great 1925 Paris Exposition sponsored by the French government marked the apogee of Art Déco. Machinery and copies of earlier works were specifically excluded from this mammoth festival that focused world attention on current French luxury production. An abbreviation of its official title, "l'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes," was coined in the 1960s, when Art Déco was rediscovered by collectors. The success of the Exposition was overwhelming. Few were aware of the pioneering work of the Bauhaus between 1919 and 1933, which was to define the perimeters of modernism for several decades. To the public of the 1920s, modern meant French or French-inspired.

Formal elegance permeated Art Déco, down to the smallest item. The spontaneous convolutions of Art Nouveau were abandoned in favor of tightly organized patterns, such as the flower, volute, and raindrop configurations on these vases, confined within simple, often spherical or ovoid shapes. Geometry ruled throughout, but arcs and ovals yielded over a decade to angles. The influence of recent trends in painting was reflected in the gradual replacement of stylized flowers with cubist motifs. Small, unique objects, like these vases, executed in a wide variety of techniques, played an important role in the larger context of interior design. They were often used, with theatrical flair, as the focal points for entire ensembles by artistes décorateurs, the master designers and interior decorators who dominated Art Déco.

Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann (1879–1933) was generally acknowledged as the leader of the Art Deco style. The artiste décorateur par excellence, he showed furniture in the salons of the Société des Artistes Decorateurs from 1913 and undertook interior design with his own firm of Ruhlmann et Laurent after the war. His pavilion, tellingly titled "l'Hôtel d'un Riche Collectionneur," was the most popular exhibit at the 1925 Exposition. Ruhlmann used ebénisterie, the technique of veneered furniture perfected in eighteenth-century France, to execute designs distilled from earlier furniture forms. The Metropolitan's desk and file cabinet were commissioned by David David-Weill, president of the National Museums of France, for use in his own home, where they were surrounded by the eighteenth-century art of which David-Weill was a renowned collector.


Flawless quality was maintained in Ruhlmann's workshops, where the highest paid artisans in Paris were employed under his close supervision. The extravagant prices he asked were justified by the elegance of his concepts and their superb execution. Details of the work reveal the lengths to which Ruhlmann was willing to go to realize his exquisite designs. To further enhance the effect of luxury he contrasted ivory ornament against exotic wood veneers in seemingly simple designs that were extraordinarily difficult to execute, for example, the hairline ivory fillets on the drawers of the file cabinet and defining each facet of the torpedo-shaped leg of the desk (pp. 20–21).
Acquired in 1923, Ruhlmann’s fall-front desk (below) was the Metropolitan’s first important purchase of twentieth-century decorative art. Ruhlmann was called “the Riesener of the twentieth century” and the claim bears up in comparing his works with those of the favorite cabinetmaker of Marie Antoinette in the Museum’s collection. Convinced of Ruhlmann’s merit, the Metropolitan wanted to acquire a show-piece adorned with a marquetry basket of flowers featured in the 1925 Exposition. That cabinet, however, was sold to the French State, and only after considerable persuasion did the artist agree to repeat the model (opposite page) for the Museum.

Desk: Macassar ebony, ivory, and leather, h. 44¼ in. Chair: Macassar ebony and silvered bronze, h. 33½ in. Cabinet: Macassar ebony, rosewood, and ivory, h. 50¼ in. Purchase, Edward C. Moore, Jr. Gift, 23.174, 25, 231.3, 1
The oriental method of applying layer on layer of resins, which he had first used to decorate hammered metal vases, became his all-consuming craft. Dunand eventually had to employ up to one hundred Indo-Chinese assistants in his Paris workshop to help him complete orders for lacquer panels, screens, and furniture that flowed in from architects, artistes décorateurs, and private clients.

This pair of screens, titled Battle of the Angels: Crescendo and Pianissimo, was commissioned for the music room of Mr. and Mrs. Solomon R. Guggenheim's Long
Island home. Golden airborne figures designed by Seraphin Soudobine (1870–1944), a favorite student of Rodin, charge through clouds interpreted by Dunand in shattered eggshell pressed into a damp layer of lacquer. Dunand was so lavish in his use of gold for angels that he was obliged to write requesting an additional 500 dollars to cover his expenditure. The heroic figural aspect of Art Déco never received great emphasis in France, but it was quickly adopted for architectural ornament in the United States, notably at Rockefeller Center.

1925–26. Lacquered wood, h. 98 in. Gift of Mrs. Solomon R. Guggenheim, 50.102.3.4
Maurice Marinot (1882–1960) was the first artist of the modern period to master the arduous skill of glassblowing. Originally a Fauvist painter, who participated in the 1913 Armory Show, he became fascinated with the molten medium in 1911 on a visit to a glass factory owned by friends at Bar-sur-Seine. With these facilities put at his disposal he first worked on the decoration of finished pieces while apprenticing himself to the glass-blowers, or gaffers. It was not until 1922 that he felt he could exhibit glass he had blown himself. His interpretations of the life of the material, recording in the finished piece its transmutation from liquid to solid, earned him great esteem. Within simple shapes that relate to Art Deco, he captured galaxies of changeable light and substance, surfaces exploding one within the other. Upon the closing of the Bar-sur-Seine factory in 1937, Marinot’s work in glass ceased. It would be another 25 years, and then in the United States, before glassmaking would become available to the independent artist.

The couturier Jacques Doucet was an extraordinary patron of the arts. In 1912 he sold his collection of French eighteenth-century art at an auction that broke all records, and used the profits to acquire avant-garde works. He later constructed a studio in the Paris suburb of Neuilly specifically to house his paintings by Picasso (from whom he purchased the Demoiselles d'Avignon), Douanier Rousseau, Braque, Picabia, and Matisse, as well as his African art.

This stool and table formed part of the furnishings of the studio, completed only months before Doucet's death in 1929. While the shape of the stool by Pierre Legrain (1889–1929) was certainly inspired by an African chieftain's throne, its crisp carving is French stylization. The table is by an unsung master of Art Déco, Clément Rousseau (b. 1872), whose signature was discovered concealed in the structure by a Museum conservator. A religious medal secreted under the tabletop was also uncovered and restored in place. For all their obvious preciousness, the table's materials are practical, since sharkskin is impervious to handprints and the rings left by wet drinking glasses. The design is also functional, in that the hairpin legs, which also serve as handles, make this luxury piece both portable and sturdy.

Stool. 1922–29. Rosewood, h. 12 in.
Table. 1924. Ebony, sharkskin, and ivory. h. 29½ in. Fletcher Fund, 1972. 283.1, 2
This Art Déco mural of 1934 was one of four covering the corners of the largest public room ever constructed on a ship, the Grand Salon of the liner Normandie. Jean Dupas (1882–1964), an illustrator and fashionable muralist, chose the history of navigation as his nominal subject, but the profusion of quasi-historical vessels and miscellaneous mythical creatures was clearly not meant to tell a story but to create an overwhelming effect. Passengers on the Normandie paid not so much for transportation as for atmosphere, and the first-class lounge was a temple of glamour.

The mirrorlike brilliance of the mural was achieved by an unusual technique of glass decoration. Segments of the scene were painted on the reverse of panels of plate glass. Gold and silver leaf were then laid on and a canvas backing affixed. Only lighting fixtures interrupted the vast expanse of the juxtaposed glass panels (the top rank of which could not be accommodated in the Museum gallery where the mural has been installed since 1978). Each panel measures approximately four by two and one-half feet and weighs between fifty-five and fifty-seven pounds.

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Irwin R. Berman, 1976.414.3
The Normandie was the last great expression of French Art Déco. Government subsidies made it possible for the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique to begin in 1932 the building of a ship that was to be the largest, fastest, and most beautiful afloat. Such extravagance in the middle of the Depression was justified by the purpose the Normandie was intended to serve. Just as the 1925 Paris Exposition had wooed the world with French luxury products, so the Normandie was to lure Americans to the shores of France, by bringing to their doorstep the food, wine, furnishings, and decor for which France was famed.

New York, which welcomed the Normandie with wild enthusiasm after her maiden crossing in 1935, was also to be the scene of her demise. Seized by the United States in World War II, the liner was being stripped for use as a troop carrier when sparks from an acetylene torch started a blaze in the Grand Salon. Firefighting efforts caused her to capsize on February 10, 1942, at Manhattan’s Pier 88, where she remained more than a year before she was righted and towed away for scrap. Fortunately, the murals had been removed before the fire. (Above) Rendering of the Grand Salon of the Normandie. (Below) The Normandie in New York Harbor, about 1935-39
I continue to believe that the circle, which explains the world in its entirety is the ideal figure, and the curve, which relates to it, is more noble than the straight line," wrote Jean Puiforcat (1897-1945) in a letter of 1933. Considered the last of the great French silversmiths, Puiforcat used his medium to search for a Platonic ideal of form through mathematical harmony. He learned the craft from his father and began showing his own works in 1922. They were fine examples of Art Déco objects, often incorporating semiprecious stones, but he came to look back on them as merely chic. In the 1930s he turned to austere exercises in pure volume and shape in which the only contrasts are, for instance, the spheres of clear glass that punctuate the base of the beaker (above) or the gilded areas on the covered bowl (opposite page). Although his work was sometimes criticized as mechanical, he rejected the machine as soulless, and realized seamless geometric forms through his consummate exploitation of the silversmith’s skills. His purism and craftsmanship made him acceptable both to Le Corbusier, the firebrand spokesman of the International Style in France, and to the conservative upholders of French tradition.

The impact of the 1925 Paris Exposition was strongly felt in America. French imports were followed by imitations and adaptations, but the Depression stanch any development along the lines of luxury craftsmanship. Designers of the 1930s, following the Bauhaus example, turned in the direction of industry and were welcomed for the marketing advantage their treatment of a product might gain.

An entirely new style resulted that is more properly entitled Moderne, sleekly formulated to evoke French chic, but as American as Art Déco was French. Moderne was the look shared by Hollywood sets and electric toasters, by Raymond Loewy’s locomotives and Donald Deskey’s furniture for the Radio City Music Hall. Streamlined forms with glossy surfaces were assembled out of polished metal, glass, and Bakelite on factory assembly lines. The result depended on the skill of a new artistic profession, that of the industrial designer.

Participating in the enthusiasm for what was sometimes called “beautility,” the Chase Brass & Copper Co. of Waterbury, Connecticut, made ornamental objects, like the candlesticks and bud vase (opposite page), from standard elements of pipe and sheet metal that comprised the mainstay of its business. This decorative dalliance, begun in 1931, terminated with war production. Gilbert Rohde, working for the Herman Miller Furniture Co. in Zeeland, Michigan, also from 1931, introduced the Moderne line with designs such as this electric clock. The consequences were lasting. Rohde’s innovative furniture was so well received at the 1933–34 Chicago Century of Progress fair that Miller phased out traditional models and continues to this day as a leading manufacturer of progressive designs.

The Moderne style found its most complete expression in vehicles. The 1930s were the years of the classic automobile, the luxury train, the first commercial passenger airplane. An iconography grew up around speed. Streamlining reduces air resistance in a meaningful way only at extremely high speeds, but it became a device symbolic of the modern age. With the additional emphasis of wrap-around banding it was applied to everything from cameras to building façades.

This aesthetic is reflected in aspects of the interior decor of Rockefeller Center, the most ambitious architectural accomplishment of the decade. Immediately after the Wall Street crash, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., undertook this New York real-estate venture as a personal investment in the future. Between 1930 and 1939 a city within a city was erected on a plot bounded by 48th and 51st streets and Fifth and Sixth avenues. In this complex, the building facing Saint Patrick’s Cathedral was designated the “International Building,” symbolizing Rockefeller’s interest in a world community. Officially opened on May 1, 1935, it houses consulates, international firms, and the U.S. Passport Agency.

In 1978, when Rockefeller Center Inc. began the installation of 28 high-speed automatic elevators to serve the 38-story tower of the International Building, one of the original cabs was carefully dismantled for the Metropolitan by the Westinghouse Elevator Company.

The elevators benefited from the same attention Rockefeller’s team of architects lavished on all public areas of the complex. The design of the cab visually alluded to the mechanical advances that allowed the elevator to travel at record speed. By a process patented as Methylwood, thin sheets of Spanish elm were applied directly to the steel sections that bolted together to form the cab. The veneer, laid on so that the grain ran horizontally, was divided into registers by strips of metal (a copper, zinc, and nickel alloy known as German silver), polished to a satin finish. The back corners of the cab were rounded off to make a continuous wrap. An innovative ventilation system was integrated into the design. In the same spirit as the wall banding, concentric circles of metal delineated a ceiling fan that has come to be standard. Ventilation grilles at floor and ceiling were designed as borders for the wraparound walls. The elevator, exhibited in the Museum, stands as the visual symbol of technological advance, epitomizing the Moderne ideal.
Denmark entered the world market in the 1950s with furniture developed in conscious reaction to the clinical quality of Bauhaus design. During the German occupation, architects and designers for want of larger projects directed their energy toward work with furniture craftsmen. Giving attention to comfort and practicality, they developed clean forms that emphasized the sensuous appeal of the natural materials used. Later, as a result of the international success of the style known as Danish Modern, models that had originated in small workshops were adapted to larger-scale production.

Hans Wegner (b. 1914) was trained as a cabinetmaker and went on to design a series of chairs that have become classics as much for their comfort as for their appearance. His method of using refinements of joinery as ornament can be seen in the Museum’s 1952 chair (opposite page), where the contrasting bars at the center of the back are actually mahogany joints that secure two pieces of walnut into a continuous crest rail. 

Finn Juhl (b. 1912) and Arne Jacobsen (1902–71) are both architects who have applied themselves to all aspects of design. The moulded shells of Jacobsen’s 1958 Egg chair and Juhl’s 1948 settee seem to float on supports constructed to give the illusion of defying gravity. These hovering shapes suggest an imagery appropriate to the inaugural years of the space age.

In 1951 the industrial art of Finland gained sudden international acclaim when it swept the prizes of the Milan Triennale, the prestigious exposition of modern design. The outstanding designers were Tapio Wirkkala (b. 1915) and Timo Sarpaneva (b. 1926) who became best known for ornamental glassware, an industry that in Finland dates back to the seventeenth century. Unlike the unique objects of Marinot and today’s Studio Craft artists, conceived and executed by the artists themselves. Wirkkala’s and Sarpaneva’s works are designs turned over to skilled workmen for multiple production. The distance between the graphic expression of the artist’s concept and the meticulous repetition of the final product imbues these works with a cool perfection.

Sarpaneva vase: 1953. Designed for Karhula-Iittala. H. 10\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. Gift of Aarne Simonen, Minister of Commerce and Industry of Finland. 56.31.1.3
Certain trends in American culture since the 1940s have led to the rise of today’s Studio Craft Movement. Its exponents have effectively eliminated the division of labor between designer and craftsman and challenged the prejudicial distinction between the fine and decorative arts. Their activities have been centered at institutions of higher learning, which have legitimized the choice to pursue craft disciplines rather than painting or sculpture and provided a place for the new breed of artist-craftsmen to study, work, and teach. Instead of the workshop or factory, the new milieu is the studio, where expressions of a personal vision, in terms of both functional and nonfunctional objects, can be realized in the traditional materials of ceramics, wood, glass, metal, and fiber.

The upheavals of World War II helped create a matrix of American college campuses from which the movement grew to nationwide proportions from the isolated accomplishments of artists using craft techniques. Part of the impetus came from members of the Bauhaus who had been forced to flee Europe in the dark days of the 1930s. They brought to American academia rigorously moral and intellectual theories of design. The Bauhaus concept of the primacy of architecture, unifying all design, had the effect of raising the status of media relegated to the so-called minor arts. The shoddiness of the industrial environment soon became an important issue to a discontented postwar generation. Their search for aesthetic enrichment led to an exploration of every branch of the arts, including preindustrial traditions, and eventually to the Studio Craft Movement’s rejection of the more rigid, intellectualized aspects of the Bauhaus approach.

James Prestini (b. 1908) was one of the early American practitioners and teachers of Bauhaus principles, to which he gave individual direction through his own fascination with the qualities of wood. In 1939 he became woodworking instructor at the Chicago Institute of Design, founded two years earlier by László Moholy-Nagy as the “New Bauhaus.” Prestini continued teaching the fundamentals of pure form through four decades at Chicago and the University of California at Berkeley. These objects (left) are from a series of variants, ranging from flat trays to hollowed-out bowls, that evolved from Bauhaus exercises in the manipulation of materials. Employing lathe-turning, a basic carpentry technique, Prestini has created intellectual essays in which minimal form is used to focus the eye on the beauty of grain and color inherent in the wood.

An even more direct link between the Bauhaus and the Studio Craft Movement is provided by Anni Albers (b. 1899), who, through her work, writing, and teaching, has been largely responsible for the acceptance of weaving as a contemporary art form. Weaving was the specialization she chose during her student years at the Bauhaus. When the institute was closed by the Nazis in 1933, she and her husband, the painter Josef Albers, settled in North Carolina to teach at Black Mountain College. This wall hanging, a detail of which is shown below, was designed in Germany in the 1920s and rewoven for exhibition in the United States thirty years later. It transfers to the tactile medium of fiber the purist aesthetic of modern abstract painting.

hough he refused to teach, Wharton Esherick (1887–1970) is recognized as a pioneer of the Studio Craft Movement, and his studio, now a museum, is a point of pilgrimage. Originally a painter, he became completely immersed in woodworking early in his career. In 1913 he established his retreat on a hillside near Paoli, a suburb of Philadelphia, and soon began to carve every aspect of his surroundings, from staircase to serving spoons, while producing furniture for friends who became his clients. His 1962 cherrywood music stand demonstrates the freedom of Esherick’s work, taking as its point of departure the conformation of the wood itself.

H. 43 in. Gift of Dr. Irwin R. Berman, in memory of his father, Allan Lake Berman. 1979.320
Glass has become a major medium of the Studio Craft Movement since 1962, when a seminar held at the Toledo Museum of Art opened up the possibilities of glassblowing to the studio artist, ending its dependence on industry. The seminar was led by the ceramic artist and educator Harvey Littleton (b. 1922), who has been the driving force in the development of what is virtually a new profession, in which artists choose glass as their exclusive medium and master the gruelling skills of the gaffer. Now retired from his post at the University of Wisconsin, Littleton continues to produce powerful abstract works, such as his 1976 Amber Crested Form, a giant folded tube of blown glass crowned with a second heavy gather. A second generation of glass artists is represented by Tom Patti (b. 1943) whose novel method, used in Banded Flair of 1977, involves stacked plate glass, heated to the point that it can be blown into vessels in which vestiges of the initial structure become decoration.

No movement has had more than a handful of outstanding artists who give character to a style and direction to the production of others. Wendell Castle (b. 1932) has assumed this role since his graduation with a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from the University of Kansas in 1961. He has experimented with furniture as a form of sculpture, freed from structural convention. The laminated cherrywood blocks of his 1973 two-seater are built up to a solid structure and then carved away and polished to an effect of visual and tactile flow. Finlike pedestals support angled bucket seats that accommodate two people in conversational proximity, an arrangement that led John Russell to write in The New York Times: "Togetherness takes on a new dimension as we contemplate it. Not since the 'indiscretion sofa' was perfected in the France of Napoleon III has there been a piece of furniture that eggs us on so subtly to a joint and vertiginous well-being."

W. 60½ in. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Irwin R. Berman. 1977.225
A scientist, Dominick Labino (b. 1910), supplied formulas that would allow glass to melt at lower temperatures in small furnaces to the 1962 Toledo seminar that inaugurated studio glass. Labino was so drawn to the aesthetic potential of the material that in 1965 he gave up his position as a research executive in the glass industry to become a full-time artist. Applying his knowledge of chemistry, he creates magical effects, such as the color changes of the dichroic veils suspended in the 1977 Emergence in Polychrome (right).

One of the most influential glass artists working today is Dale Chihuly (b. 1941), chairman of the glass department at the Rhode Island School of Design. On these three blown cylinders (below) Chihuly has fused patterns, inspired by Navajo blankets, by rolling the cylinders while they were still hot over colored glass rods. The intimate connection of these artists with their work, from conception through execution, is typical of and fundamental to the Studio Craft Movement. Broadly based across the United States, the movement has come of age, and the outlines of a style can be drawn to encompass the assertive individuality of its practitioners. Studio Craft artists submit themselves to age-old disciplines in which mechanized tools can afford only marginal assistance. The struggle to give physical realization to an idea through the actual working of the materials imparts a residual dynamism to the object. In this process the established vocabulary of shapes is eschewed in favor of developing forms along lines indicated by the materials and techniques themselves. Occasionally, the resulting work takes on an organic form reminiscent of Art Nouveau, but a closer point of reference is the more recent phenomenon of Abstract Expressionism.

Entering the final decades of the twentieth century, with the decorative arts as vital as they were in 1900, we can look back on a succession of vigorous styles and inspired individual works that can match the record of any earlier age.