

Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980



Ann-Mari Forsberg (Sweden, 1916–1992) for
Märta Måås-Fjetterström, *Red Crocus* hanging,
1945. Cooper Hewitt Design Museum

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Exhibition Overview

Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980, will be the first major international loan exhibition to examine the extensive design exchanges between the United States and the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) during the twentieth century. The exhibition will examine how both Nordic ideas about modern design and the objects themselves had an indelible impact on American culture and material life, as well as demonstrate America's influence on Scandinavian design.

Divided into the six thematic sections described herein, the exhibition will comprise exceptionally beautiful examples of furniture, glass, ceramics, architectural drawings, jewelry and metalwork, and graphic and product design. Through rich and varied accounts of Scandinavian designers who immigrated to America and Americans who studied or worked in Nordic countries; the ambitious campaigns to market and export Scandinavian design to American consumers via world's fairs, museum exhibitions, and retail outlets; and the American and Nordic figures who championed sustainable and accessible design practice, the exhibition will present a new international narrative about the history of design. Extensive didactic materials and integrated media components showing period photographs and advertisements will contextualize the objects and explicate their dual Scandinavian and American connections.

This exhibition aims to serve as a corrective to the dominant narrative that posits that central European émigrés largely shaped modern American design culture. It will make the case for the extensive influence of Scandinavian design in the United States and the central role that immigrant Scandinavian instructors played in shaping generations of American designers. This transformative exhibition will thus reframe the history of American design and reveal the important design exchanges and craft collaborations that resulted from nearly 100 years of cultural interactions. Finally, it will show how many of the issues considered in the exhibition, such as the value of immigrants to their adopted societies, the importance of international exchange, critical understanding of cultural myths, and concern over environmental sustainability and accessibility, remain relevant topics of contemporary discourse.



Lillian Holm (born Sweden, 1896–1979, active United States), *First Sight of New York*, ca. 1930. Flint Institute of Arts

EXHIBITION THEMES

I. Migration and Heritage

Beginning in the mid-19th century, Scandinavians arrived in the United States in increasing numbers to seek economic opportunities and religious freedom, and by the 1920s, as many as 2.3 million Scandinavian immigrants had reached America. Many were highly skilled artists and craftspeople who set up their own workshops or were employed by their American counterparts. Some immigrants adapted motifs and techniques learned in Scandinavia to American taste, while others created new forms for their new nation. By bringing together objects made of a wide range of materials and over a long span of time, the exhibition will demonstrate the varied and ongoing ways Scandinavian immigrants shaped American design.



TOP **Peter Berg** (born Norway, 1885–1959, active United States), designer (attributed); **Yngve Olsson** (born Denmark, 1896–1970, active United States), chaser; **Kalo Shop** (United States), firm, Candelabra, 1920–21. Art Institute of Chicago

LEFT **G. A. Olsson, Nils Olsson Hemslöjd,** and **Grannas A. Olssons Hemslöjd** (Sweden), Dala horses, ca. 1970s. Private collection

II. Selling the Scandinavian Dream

The presentation of Scandinavian design to American audiences, whether in retail shops, at world's fairs, or in advertising, contained both overt and subliminal messages that communicated idealized images of Scandinavia and resonated with the desires of the American public. In general, Scandinavian design was associated with organic forms and materials and was understood to be the work of individual craftspeople using time-honored techniques. Advertisements and ephemera in this section will demonstrate how Scandinavian and Scandinavian-inspired goods perpetuated these myths about the Nordic region to appeal to American consumers looking for alternatives to the vast array of mass-produced goods available.



TOP **Finn Juhl** (Denmark, 1912–1989),
Manufactured by **Baker Furniture, Inc.** (United
States), Armchair, model 400-½, 1951.
Milwaukee Art Museum

BOTTOM *House Beautiful*, July 1959. Elizabeth
Gordon, editor. Milwaukee Art Museum
Research Center



III. Design for Diplomacy

The third section, *Design for Diplomacy*, will examine how nations have used design to advance their political goals through both traditional diplomatic tactics and the “soft power” of cultural propaganda. Visitors will see many objects that were on view at world’s fairs and in touring exhibitions organized by the United States and the Nordic countries, as well as drawings and ephemera associated with these events. Design played an important role in the Cold War battles for influence, as the United States sought to demonstrate technical and cultural superiority in Europe, and the Nordic countries attempted to build trade relationships with the world’s largest economy. It will also examine how the United States and the Nordic countries used design in their official diplomatic efforts, including within the United Nations building complex in New York (1951), among other endeavors.



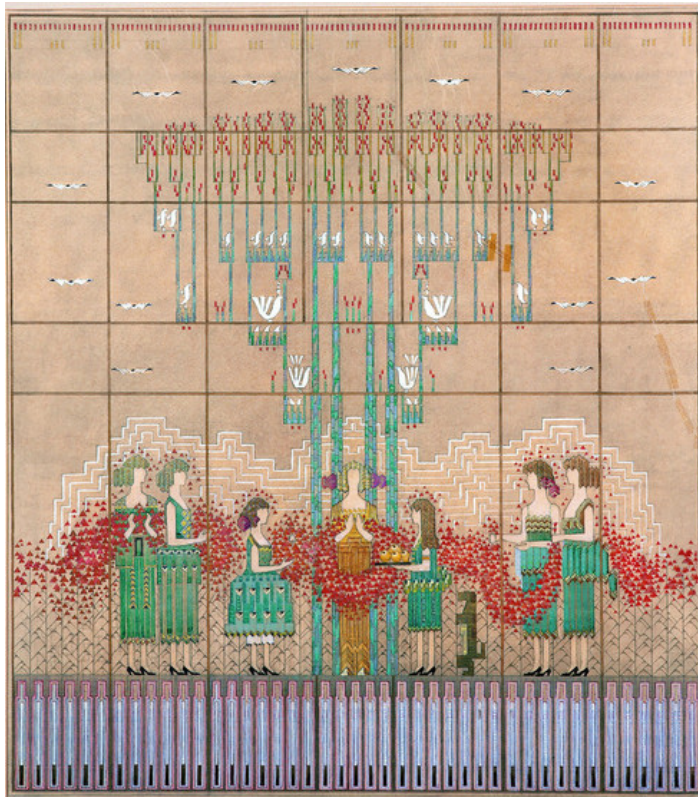
LEFT **Paulding Farnham** (United States, 1859–1927) for Tiffany & Co., *Viking* punch bowl, ca. 1893. Metropolitan Museum of Art

BELOW **Arnstein Arneberg** (Norway, 1882–1961), Drawing of United Nations Security Council Chamber, c. 1949. Nasjonalmuseet



IV. Teachers and Students

The *Teachers and Students* section will explore the ways that Scandinavian immigrant teachers shaped American design education and, ultimately, determined the course of American design history. The founders of several American arts institutions recruited Nordic instructors because of their famed reputations and specialized skills, which catalyzed a migration of artists and craftspeople. Highlighting the importance of immigrant contributions and international networks, this section will address how Nordic immigrants passed on their knowledge in formal and informal education environments, and the implications of this instruction for their American students.



ABOVE **Loja Saarinen** (born Finland, 1879–1968, active United States), **Eliel Saarinen** (born Finland, 1873–1950, active United States), Study for *Festival of the May Queen* tapestry, Kingswood School, 1932. Cranbrook Art Museum



RIGHT **Lenore Tawney** (United States, 1907–2007), *Reflections* hanging, 1959–60. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

EXHIBITION THEMES

V. Travel Abroad

Throughout the 20th century, American and Scandinavian designers studied with, taught, and exchanged knowledge with their international counterparts through formal academic programs, apprenticeships, travel fellowships, and independent work abroad. This section will show how these interactions fostered enduring artistic bonds and were particularly important to the American influence on Scandinavian design. For while there was certainly demand for American goods in the Nordic countries, tariffs protecting design industries largely deterred American imports. These transnational networks and personal relationships were therefore critical to the spread of ideas, collaboration, and the realization of many design developments.



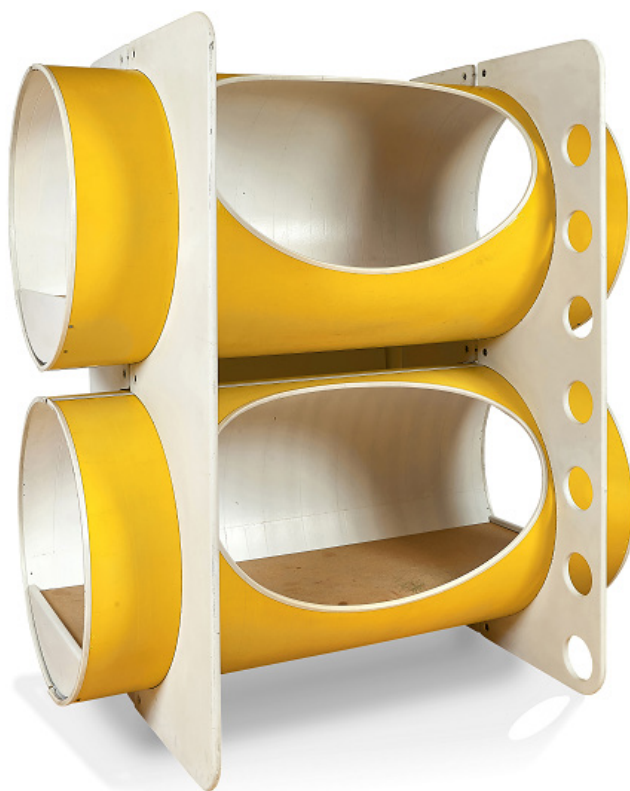
LEFT **Kaj Franck** (Finland, 1911–1989), Manufactured by **Nuutajärvi Glassworks** (Finland), *Goblets*, ca. 1970–71, designed 1968. LACMA, and partial gift of Marc Treib



RIGHT **Arline Fisch** (United States, born 1931), *Front & Back* body ornament, 1971. LACMA

VI. Design for Social Change

The exhibition concludes with the emergence of consumer and environmental critiques of design in the 1960s and '70s in both the United States and the Nordic countries. In concert with the 1960s protest movements for the rights of all people, many designers began to reconsider their role in society, urging that their work solve pressing global concerns and meet acute humanitarian needs. In many cases, Americans and Scandinavians partnered on design and advocacy projects to raise awareness and show how design could address these systemic problems, such as the planet's dwindling resources, overconsumption and excessive waste, and physical barriers to access.



ABOVE **Jim Hull** (United States, born 1942) and **Penny Hull** (United States, born 1943), *BIG TOOBS* beds, ca. 1972, designed 1972. Private collection

LEFT **Maria Benktzon** (Sweden, born 1946) and **Sven-Eric Juhlin** (Sweden, born 1940), *Ergonomi Design*, for **Gustavsberg**, Kitchen knife and cutting board, 1974, designed 1973. Nationalmuseum Stockholm