

Designing a New World: Modernism at the V&A

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The Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum's exhibition *Modernism 1914–1939: Designing a New World*, held from April to July 2006, was an exuberant reassessment of a much-used word but little-understood idea. Following in a series of recent major V&A shows reassessing the roots and impact of nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements in art and design including *Art Nouveau 1890–1914* (2000), *Art Deco 1910–1939* (2003), and *International Arts and Crafts* (2005); *Modernism 1914–1939* set itself the ambitious project of assessing and redefining the impetus behind, and manifestations of, modernism.

In the process, curator Christopher Wilk's show and accompanying catalogue swept aside a sea of stylistic "isms"—constructivism, suprematism, futurism, purism, dadaism, surrealism, etc.—so often adopted as a lazy shorthand in art and design histories to create artificial distinctions between closely related ideas. Asserting modernism as "a loose collection of ideas," not as a style, the exhibition succeeded in bringing together a rich grouping of objects to advance its thesis.

A central intention of the exhibition, according to Wilk, was to put the politics back into modernism. Reintroducing the complex patchwork of political and ideological alignments of designers, whose oeuvres too often in scholarship have been discussed purely in formal terms; their works instead were shown as a series of reactions principally to the horrors of World War I and to the inspiration of the Russian Revolution. By positing these moments as the central cause, the pre-1914 genesis of works termed "modernist" was not tackled in any detail within the exhibition. Although understandable in the context of the hugely complex and potentially contradictory body of material, with roots in a plethora of conditions and contexts, it raised a question that only partially was clarified with reference to Tim Benton's catalogue essay "Building Utopia," which discussed "modern" building programs in the context of longer architectural traditions.

Exhibiting items from Germany, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, and beyond side-by-side in the exhibition was useful—allowing for all sorts of fresh linkages to be made around issues such as the shared interest in the possibilities of spatial abstraction—but at times the show's lack of regional specificity became confusing. How did the circumstances of designers living under Mussolini differ from

Figure 1
Entrance to the exhibition, showing graphic
design by David Hillman of Pentagram.



their contemporaries living under Hitler or Stalin, or, indeed, governments that cannot be categorized as dictatorships, whose work also was displayed here? These distinctions were addressed by Christina Lodder's informative catalogue essay "Searching for Utopia," and by David Crowley's enlightening essay "National Modernisms." Both sought to draw contrasts, as well as parallels, within the geographies of modernism.

The show posited three phases of modernism that produced a structure for distribution across the three generous galleries that housed it. These phases, which broadly can be characterized as utopianism, application, and dispersal, brought together a delightful collection of items to explicate their modernism. Paintings, sculptures, architectural models, photographs, furniture, clothing, film, and music were shown in and out of each other, in what, at first, appeared to be an overwhelming rough-and-tumble. Le Corbusier's model of *Maison Citrohan II* (1922), for example, was shown beneath a quick-fire series of film excerpts illustrating the aesthetic of speed and mechanization; adjacent to the primary colors of Katarzyna Kobro's construction *Spatial Composition [4]* (1928), a comparison that produced striking visual parallels. Visitors were able to navigate through the exhibition's seemingly chaotic spaces with the help of the careful choreography of architect Eva Jiricna's sympathetic installation. This worked particularly well in the first gallery devoted to utopianism, where complex media, colors, and forms produced a heady feast for the senses that subtly mirrored the frantic exploration of ideals by its protagonists, helped by the striking graphics of David Hillman of Pentagram, which offered a direction in text and arrows through the show.

An ingenious integration of lighting, sound, and theatrical partitioning by Jiricna was achieved in the “Performing Modernism” section, with its black walls, red and white graphic arrows and text, and red stage lighting, contributed by DHA Design. Broadening our definition of “performance” to include not only film and theatre, but ideas of performativity more widely—described as central to “the modernist enterprise of creating a new world”—this represented a particularly enjoyable element of the displays, as well as tackling a subject largely overlooked in histories of modernism in design. It was further illuminated by Tag Gronberg’s catalogue essay on the same subject, which discussed how the performing arts began to be seen as a key vehicle for influencing contemporary society. The mesmeric appeal of Oskar Schlemmer’s diver and disc costumes for *The Triadic Ballet* (1922) were more fully understood by being shown, as here, juxtaposed beside a lithographic advertising poster for the ballet, Schlemmer’s sketched costume designs, and a film extract of the ballet being performed.

The energy and tension of the first gallery, dedicated to modernist dreams and aspirations, was lost a little at the start of the second section, dedicated to putting these ideas into practice, where the intensity of sound and light gave way to a high-ceilinged gallery space containing more widely dispersed objects. In addition, greater dependence on black-and-white photographs and architectural models in order to show the early utopian ideas’ translation

Figure 2
Photographs by Carlo Draisci,
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into a building and social program, was less visually arresting than that of the first. But the discussion nevertheless was illuminating and coherent. A star attraction of the exhibition appeared in this second section: designer Grete Lihotsky's *Frankfurt Kitchen* (1926–7), built into 10,000 flats by Frankfurt's Municipal Building Department. Saved and restored by the V&A for the exhibition, it was truly thrilling to peer through the doorway of this small, fitted kitchen to see the sleek innovation of compact storage drawers, built-in cupboards, and drop-down ironing board.

The third, and last, exhibition section was dedicated to the dissipation of these ideas in the 1930s both through designers' increased attention to nature as an influence in their work, and through the adoption of modernism outside of its historical center. It was only at this point that works from the U.S., Britain, and Scandinavia were brought into the frame. For example, Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto—who has become centrally positioned within popular histories of modernist design—was assimilated into the exhibition's story through a walk-through film of his Villa Mairea at Noormaarkku (1937–9), as it looks today, and his *Savoy* vase, designed for the 1937 Paris International Exhibition. Choosing five case studies to describe a sample of "National Modernisms," the exhibition demonstrated successfully within a restricted space that the reach of these ideals went far beyond the scope of a single exhibition. The tardy regard in Britain for things "modern" was summarized, for example, by a neat discussion that focused around Georgian-born Berthold Lubetkin and Tecton's work at Highpoint 1 (1933–5) and Highpoint 2 (1938–9) in London's Highgate, showing his cowskin, wood, and steel seat designed for the Penthouse, alongside building perspectives.

To literary critics in Britain and the U.S., modernism perhaps has become synonymous with the output of writers such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, whose work represents a formal avant-garde, while they themselves represent gradations of cultural conservatism. Similarly, recent histories of the decorative arts in Britain have discussed groupings such as the Omega Workshop and Bloomsbury Group within the frame of modernism (Christopher Reed's *Bloomsbury Rooms*, for example).¹ None of these were the focus of this exhibition, however, which consistently defined "modernism" as the series of ideas born out of a direct response to World War I and the Russian Revolution. For this reason, the U.S. played a marginal role in the earlier sections of the exhibition, except as an influence on production values via the export of the ideas of Frederick W. Taylor and Henry Ford. It was brought back into the story at its end, when modernism hit the mass market through its popular adoption into, for example, the "American Modern" tableware of Russel Wright and films choreographed by Busby Berkeley such as *Gold Diggers* (1933). The exhibition's final

1 Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2004).



Figure 3
Towers designed by Eva Jiricna in the exhibition's section dedicated to *Building Utopia*.

message was that, by the start of World War II in 1939, the world would continue to be shaped by the fragmented impact of these ideals and practices indeed well after 1945.

The exhibition's saturated color palette forced the viewer to discard any preconception of modernists as single-mindedly obsessed with perfecting the functional white cube. The passion and sensuality, for example, of Giacomo Balla's patchwork of colored woolen prisms, his *Futurist Suit* (c. 1920), intended to be worn in the buildings of Antonio Sant'Elia's Futurist landscapes (1914), took this far from being a collection of humorless austerity. The freneticism of visionary activity from 1914 to the mid-1920s was powerfully evoked by the ensemble, which allowed absurdity to be part of our understanding of modernism proper. Indeed, humor was tangible at several points in the exhibition. From the overt comic playfulness of Charlie Chaplin's parody of the madness of mechanization in an excerpt from *Modern Times* (1936), in which Chaplin is seen trapped on a conveyor belt and stuck in the cogs of a machine, to the unintended comedy of followers of Rudolf Laban experimenting with the contortions of his notation in the "Healthy Body Culture" Section, viewers were given pause to smile, even to laugh out loud, in reaction to the particularly energetic excesses of the pursuit of the modernist ideal. The exhibition used film and music well in this respect, controlling the mood of the exhibition by both lightening and, at times, darkening it, and providing an exceptionally powerful tool for creating uneasy juxtapositions. For example, from a brief film

clip showing the seemingly innocent exuberance of Laban's disciples, pursuing their physical communion with nature, we were suddenly confronted with the altogether more sinister, less palatable mass-choreography of Leni Riefenstahl's films. Her account of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, *Olympia* (1938) was shown alongside footage of the *10th All-Sokol Gymnastics Festival* in Prague (1938), depicting tens of thousands of gymnasts performing sequences at the moment when Hitler was threatening to invade Czechoslovakia.

The show's catalogue is a particularly indispensable addition to the literature on modernism in art, design, and architecture; carrying, as it does, eleven essays accompanied by well-researched and detailed entries cataloguing each of the exhibition's exhibits.² In adopting a thematic approach through its essays, which followed the exhibition's sections but contextualized them in some detail, the catalogue differed from predecessors such as *Art Deco 1910–1939* (2003).³ Edited by Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, and Ghislaine Wood, *Art Deco* set up the stylistic basis of art deco in European craft traditions, as well as from Ancient Egypt and Meso-America, for example, before tracing its impact and dispersal. This made it more difficult for its essays to move away from stylistic analysis to wider, contextual issues.

Modernism 1914–1939's merchandisers managed to stock the shops with an appealing assortment of products that are now the familiar accompaniment to blockbuster shows in major museums, including t-shirts sporting the logo "Modernist," towels carrying reproductions of Antonin Kybal's textile prints, and branded stationery, along with the ubiquitous stuff of European design museums—miniature versions of Aalto's iconic chairs, for example. These nestled beside academic books touching on a range of subjects relevant to visitors keen to further their detailed knowledge. Similarly, the show's extensive Website succeeded in treading a difficult line, being both informative and entertaining.⁴ It offered a bibliography, a preview of exhibition objects and text panels, and a timeline showing the activities of designers at various points during the exhibition's chronology, as well as offering appealing prizes from the fashionable home design store (and exhibition sponsor) Habitat.

Aside from the exhibition's significant intellectual achievement in forcing a reevaluation of this much-referenced, but scantily analyzed, area of design; *Modernism 1914–1939: Designing a New World* achieved something rare for an exhibition of British design and decorative arts. It sparked a furious debate in the national press about whether or not modernism had been "a good thing." The antis, led by columnist Simon Jenkins, with his high-pitched assertion in *The Guardian* that "[*Modernism 1914–1939*] is the most terrifying exhibition I have seen, because it is politics disguised as art," were soon answered by the pros, who sought to demonstrate the continued

2 *Modernism 1914–1939: Designing a New World*, Christopher Wilk, ed. (London: V&A, 2006).

3 *Art Deco 1910–1939*, Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, and Ghislaine Wood, eds. (London: V&A, 2003).

4 The exhibition Website is still accessible at: www.vam.ac.uk/modernism.

5 Simon Jenkins, "For a Real Exhibition of Modernism, Skip the V&A and Go to Manchester," *The Guardian* (April 7, 2006).

importance of the modernist inheritance in key examples of today's design and architecture.⁵ Bizarrely reminiscent of the polarized reception of modernism in Britain before and after the Second World War, it was a fascinating reminder that politics and design remain an unpalatable mix to Britain's establishment.

Modernism 1914–1939: Designing a New World was at the V&A, London from April 6 to July 23, 2006, and then at MARTa Herford, Herford, Germany until January 2007. It then went to The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, March to July 2007. The exhibition's catalogue is available online from the V&A at: www.vandabooks.com.