A STUDY OF MODERN HOME DECORATION IN THE UNITED STATES, BETWEEN 1925 AND 1939

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PREFACE

The art of home decoration has always been important in the lives of any civilized people. Its far reaching effect begins in the cradle and leaves its impress on the minds of young people who develop under its silent influence, an influence which is never entirely effaced by the years.

Each period in home decoration has been the reflection of the spirit of the times which produced it. With our modern skyscraper, architecture, new music and art, a new style of feminine dress, and innumerable chemical and mechanical inventions, a different style of home furnishings was inevitable and necessary.

Since the modern decorative art movement in America has been recent and is still in existence, many of the factors influencing its growth are not understood.

It is the purpose of this study to present a picture of modern decorative art of the home with an analysis of the circumstances which conditioned its development from 1925 to 1939. Two distinct periods are discussed, from 1925 to 1930, and from 1930 to 1939.

Information has been obtained from books on modern architecture, industrial art and interior decoration; illustrations and articles in magazines and trade journals devoted to home furnishings; and news articles, reports and pamphlets, on the effect of the new decorative art on trade and industry.

The discovery and analysis of the different trends in modern home decoration have been vitally interesting and instructive to the

writer and it is hoped that the information may be useful to others from historical, descriptive, and analytical viewpoints.

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PART I

1925 to 1930

A STUDY OF MODERN HOME DECORATION IN THE UNITED STATES, BETWEEN 1925 AND 1939

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL SURVEY

The modern industrial art movement had its important beginnings in several European countries, in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Munich, Vienna, and Paris were centers for the expression of the various tendencies.

The first important presentation of the new movement occurred at the International Exposition held in Paris in 1900, where, among other expressions, the novel Art Nouveau creations by Henry Van de Velde attracted universal attention. This movement did not live but it had a stimulating effect upon applied design. Its influence was particularly felt in Germany where new creations were developed in the field of commercial production and public undertakings. Austria developed an interpretation known as the Viennese style. France, after the war, became very active in modern decorative art through organizations of tradesmen and artists, and finally, as a culuminating recognition of a national attitude, organized and carried through the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art held in Paris, in 1925. This was the first international exposition to be limited to the field of applied art and also the first to be confined to works conceived in the modern spirit and not based on older recognized styles.

In this exposition, all the nations of the world were invited to participate. The four chief sites allotted to the national pavilions

were reserved for the four major allies of France in the World War, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, and the United States.

The invitation to the United States was declined on the grounds that American manufacturers and craftsmen had nothing to exhibit which was conceived in the modern manner and in harmony with the spirit of the official specifications.

The Secretary of Commerce appointed a commission which became known as the "Hoover Commission", and consisted of Charles R. Richards, Chairman, Henry Creange and Frank Graham Holmes. These men were to visit the exposition and make a report of such features and phases of the proceedings which might be of interest and value to the American manufacturers. This Commission, in turn, invited the various national trade associations touching the field of industrial art, to appoint delegates to visit the exposition and cooperate with the committee in developing a report. Ninety-two persons were nominated in this manner and forty-nine additional persons, prominent in the field of decoration and industrial art, were appointed by the committee as delegates-at-large. During the two weeks time set for the committee to meet in Paris, eighty-seven delegates were present.

A careful and serious study of the displays of the exposition was made and a report compiled and submitted to President Hoover.[1] The report stated that the movement as a whole was making a very important contribution to the arts of decoration as related to modern life; that it had been accepted by the French people, was taught in their schools, and would be a factor in design in the future; that

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[1]United States Department of Commerce, Report of Hoover Commission, pp. 5-60, 72-80.

while the French creations were too radical in form and color to be accepted by the American consumer, many suggestions were capable of being utilized, in modified forms, in the American market. It was the opinion of the committee that the modern movement was destined to play an important part, in the near future, in many important fields of production throughout the western world; and that the nation that most successfully rationalized the movement and brought its expression into terms acceptable and appropriate to modern living conditions and modern taste, would possess a distinct advantage, both as to its domestic and foreign trade. It was also stated that the committee believed that the movement would reach our shores in the near future and unless we were to be entirely dependent, in this juncture, upon foreign talent, manufacturers, designers, and school authorities should take careful note of its course abroad and endeavor to initiate a parallel effort of our own, on lines calculated to appeal to the American consumer. The commission gave warning that the problem of developing a new quality of industrial design in America, with its mass production, was very different from that in Europe, with its small output; but that the modern movement in industrial art, if approached intelligently and courageously by American manufacturers, might well be the means by which our country might achieve a larger measure of artistic independence. This report contained a very detailed plan, worked out by Henry Creange, on quantity production in art industries.

The members of the Hoover Commission were concerned chiefly over the effect of the Modern European Decorative Art Movement on American commerce and trade. Since this movement had been developing abroad

for thirty years or more, artists and designers there were familiar with it, while in this country there existed almost complete unfamiliarity with this form of design, with the exceptions of the architectural expressions of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Since America had shown little interest, up to now, in the new style, Europe, especially France, seemed to be in a fair position to capture the furniture market of the world, if there should be a sudden demand for this new type of industrial art. Carl N. Werntz, Director of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, said: "This exposition brings a crisis to the industry and commerce of the United States. There is a good chance that America, admittedly fond of everything modern and up to date, will catch the contagion. It must be recognized and studied by business men so that the United States may hold its markets."[2]

Partly through this economic dread and partly through a genuine interest, business men, industrialists, craftsmen, and artists made an attempt to bring the modern style of decorative art before the public. They were encouraged by leaders such as Charles R. Richards, Carl N. Werntz, and Paul Frankl. Interest was stimulated by displays of furniture, fabrics, and accessories, such as lighting fixtures, glassware, and ceramics. The Metropolitan Museum of Art held an exhibit of articles loaned to them by the Paris Exposition. The collection, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute, was later shown in several museums over the country. The Metropolitan Museum then bought a dozen pieces from the group, for a permanent exhibit.

Among commercial institutions, the Lord and Taylor Department

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[2]Carl N. Werntz, "Revolution in Decorative Styles", Literary Digest, LXXXV, (April 25, 1925), pp. 29-30.

Store, of New York City, was one of the first to hold an exhibit of the Modern Style. Examples were bought from some of the famous Paris designers and a department of modern furniture and furnishings was established. Following this, the large drapery firm of Schumacher, in New York City, held a display of modern furniture with fabrics from the French Exposition. Simultaneously, the pioneer silk manufacturers, Cheney Brothers, advertised and displayed the new designs in silk, arranging them in a manner entirely new and different and in keeping with the modern style. In the autumn of 1925, the Potters' Shop in New York City, displayed Henry Varnum Poor's modern ceramics. At about the same time R. H. Macy and Company, of New York City, held so popular an exhibit that they were forced to keep their store open evenings in order to accommodate the crowds. By the end of 1925, a few shops in New York were carrying only modern furnishings and practically all department stores were showing accessories in the modern manner.

Having thus presented foreign modern decorative art to this country's consuming public, the next step was to encourage American artists and craftsmen in producing an acceptable adaptation of the style. Professor Charles R. Richards made an appeal for cooperation of all persons interested in art and industry. He was instrumental in arranging for contests and lectures held by the Art Alliance and the Art in Trades Club. In the autumn of 1926, Paul Frankl gave a series of lectures on Modern Decorative Art, at the Metropolitan Museum, under the auspices of the New York University. This lecturer, an American who had studied in Europe, had been trying for several years to explain the modern decorative art movement to the public.

He had met with scant success in the past but suddenly found himself in a most advantageous situation. As the taste for things modern permeated society, he practically controlled the field. He designed and produced his own furniture in the Frankl galleries. His comment on the new art was, "I predict that American contemporary art in the home will, like the skyscraper, be the expression of the American spirit. It will not be bizarre like the Viennese, nor sophisticated like the French, nor will it have the dachshund characteristics of the German. It will be marked as a thing apart by its smart lines, its utter simplicity, its feeling of power, its beauty of color and design, combined with comfort and practicability. It will not startle the most conservative and it will in time introduce into the modern American home a type of furniture as characteristic of our present mode of living as is the motor car, the telephone or the radio. The straight line is the most important feature."[3]

At about the same time of the Frankl lectures the Art in Trades Club held its fifth annual exhibition of interior decorative art at the Waldorf-Astoria, in New York City. There, for the first time, two modern ensembles were displayed to the American public as the work of American designers and craftsmen. This was work turned out, not by individual designers, but by American industrial organizations. Among others W. and J. Sloane and Company displayed furniture designed in their shops and used fabrics by Cheney Brothers. Other exhibitors

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[3]Paul Frankl, "Furniture of the Fourth Dimension", House and Garden, LI, (February 1927), p. 76-78, 140.

included Sons-Cunningham, Reed and Ratton Company, Wilson Hungate of the firm of Schmeig, Hungate and Kotzian, Paul Zimmerman, and Oscar Bach, whose contribution was metal work. Schumacher fabrics were used by several of these exhibitors. All furniture showed a marked resemblance to the types designed by Sue et Mare and Maurice Dufrene of France.[4]

Observation showed that more than half the visitors to the exhibit indicated liking for one or both of the ensembles shown.[5]

Through 1927, department stores continued to display and exploit modern art. In the spring of 1928, R. H. Macy and Company held an International Exposition of Art in Industry, which told the story of industrial art design in five thousand exhibits. In this exposition were fifteen complete rooms decorated in the modern manner. Kem Weber designed the furniture for several of these. At the beginning of 1929, many stores were advertising complete departments of modern furniture and accessories. The public showed a keen interest in all these displays; the exhibits and openings were attended by thousands of people; it seemed that decorative art, which up to this time had been an incidental thing, had become at least something over which it was impossible to be apathetic.

Modern decorative art developed swiftly, from the sudden enthusiastic introduction of the foreign type, through a period when the market was flooded with furniture designed, not only by those who understood the movement and its underlying principles, but also by many who designed from the standpoint of creating something novel and exotic, to please a public which did not know what it wanted.

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[4]Edwin Avery Park, New Backgrounds for a New Age, p. 181.

[5]Eugene Clute, Treatment of Interiors, p. 62.

The confusion grew, even among decorators and designers, and much discussion was carried on in magazines, as to whether there was a modern decorative art style and if so whether it would survive. The House Beautiful Magazine made a survey, beginning in January 1929, and continuing through the March issue. It was published to help clear the atmosphere with its confused and conflicting cross currents. Some artists thought the style had passed through a testing period and had come through it by 1928. Some believed it was transitory, while others preferred to wait before committing themselves. Some magazines, such as the Ladies' Home Journal, accepted it as a style while some accepted it one month only to repudiate it the next.

The puzzled public, genuinely interested at first, finally almost rejected it by 1929. A survey, made in 1930, showed that only 9.4% of the total amount of furniture sold in America, in 1929, was modern.[6] This bore out Frankl's prophesy that the real danger to modern art lay in the overproduction and flooding of the country with "spurious, fake, badly imitated modernism", a fact all the more significant because the overproduction occurred in a prosperous period, 1926-1929.[7]

In 1929, the stock market collapse and successive business failures had a sobering effect on this extravagant overproduction and definitely ended an initial development in modern decorative art in America. This period has since been designated by many as the transitional.

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[6] Author unknown, "Bulletin Board", House and Garden, LVII, (June 1930), p. 57.

[7] Sheldon Cheney and Martha Chandler Cheney, Art and the Machine, p. 8.

CHAPTER II

MODERN DESIGNERS

In any transitional period but few workers have the vision to detect the true tendency of the times and interpret it in appropriate forms. From these leaders must be gleaned the aims, ideals and principles which motivated and characterized the new style of art.

American designers who showed a knowledge of the basic principles of modern design were those who worked in the new spirit. They alone, awake to the demands of a mode of living, radically different from that of any previous age, aided the integration of applied arts with the other modern phases of life. Among these designers may be included: Paul Frankl, Eugene Schoen, Kem Weber, Wolfgang Hoffman, Donald Deskey, William Lescaze, Winold Reiss, Ilonka Karasz, Walter von Nessen, H. Varnum Poor, and Oscar Bach.

Paul Frankl designed with a fine sense of proportion, an elegant handling of masses, heightened by the absence of ornament, an interest in the use of various materials and a functional simplicity which was a feature common to all the better designers. His principle contribution was furniture; he also designed hangings and ceramics.

Schoen, an architect, designed complete interiors and developed furniture along lines of refinement with an excellent taste in woods and a suavity of line. He was without a peer in matching beautiful grains and rare woods.

Allied with Schoen in a general way were Hoffman, Karasz, Reiss, and Weber. They had in common an allegiance to wood in the construction of furniture. Miss Karasz was perhaps the most individual and by far the boldest but her furniture was inclined to be overvigorous

and heavy. She achieved greater success as a designer of modern fabrics. Hoffman and Weber designed interiors and furniture with neat and logical restraint and their furniture was practical and sane in structure. Winold Reiss, famous as a painter, designed furniture with an individual touch, farthest removed from continental influence.

Most alert, ingenious, and stimulating were Donald Deskey and William Lescaze. They were perhaps foremost in the use of new materials in interior decoration. Their furniture was designed with felicity in wood, metal, and synthetic material and was usually incorporated into the architectural layout of the room. Deskey made some of the most outstanding contributions to the modern style in furniture. He had an extraordinary sense of proportion, a feeling for the right combination of materials, and courageously and successfully experimented with a large variety of substances. Many of his pieces were composed exclusively of standard industrial materials, used without a trace of mechanicalness, and with an artistry, so that they produced an effect unique in the history of furniture, completely released from tradition yet not eccentric.

The modern ceramics of Henry Varnum Poor were among the earliest contributions to the new style. They showed great originality of design and were carried out with a new process in glazing.

Walter von Nessen worked exclusively in metal, in which he was a master craftsman without equal in America. He was particularly interested in the designing of lighting fixtures.

Oscar Bach also worked in metal. His chief contributions were gates and grills, carried out in wrought iron in a manner suitable to be used with modern architecture.

The designs of all these artists possessed one or more features characteristic of the new style, and the best of them achieved the ideal combination that distinguished the true contemporary style.

In justifying the need for the new art, Frankl made the statement that America was crying aloud for an art genuinely expressive of itself, that modern art was the logical outcome of the main current of American culture, that the essence of modernity lay in comfort and livability as comfort and convenience were of prime importance in the home, and that we had a new mode of life and needed a fitting background.[8] Eugene Clute remarked that the new spirit, abroad in the land, must and would find expression in interior decoration and furnishings.[9] Lee Simonson, designer of the Theatre Guild Productions, spoke of a possible new and hitherto undiscovered beauty, the product of the machine age.[10]

Principles, set forth by the components of the new art were: simplicity of form, fitness to purpose, straightness of line, accentuation of structural necessity, elimination of unnecessary ornament with the decorative effect gained through the display of the innate beauty and excellence of each material used, and design of a character easily produced by the machine.

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[8] Paul Frankl, "Just What is this Modernist Movement?" Arts and Decoration, XXIX, (May 1928), pp. 56-58, 108.

[9] Eugene Clute, op. cit., p. 57.

[10] Richardson Wright, "The Modernist Taste", House and Garden, XLVIII, (October 1925), pp. 77-79, 110.

The general trend of decoration as expressed by the leaders was toward squares and angles, glistening surfaces, combinations of precious woods, stark simplicity of line, a discarding of unnecessary ornament, indirect lighting, an utter lack of formality, a direction toward compact efficiency, a lavish use of color and light, and a frank honest use of materials old and new. The effect was often severe to the point of austerity, and sharply contrasting colors were often cold and voluntarily designed to be displeasing.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECIFIC PHASES

From these general trends in the field of decoration it is now proposed to deal with certain phases specifically, namely: furniture; backgrounds; color; fabrics; and accessories.

A. Furniture

Simplicity, the keynote of all modern decorative art, was carried out in the furniture forms. Straight lines, squares and angles, expressive of vigor and energy characterized the pieces. Curves, when used were either broad and sweeping or in the form of a half circle. The horizontal line, signifying speed in locomotion and repose and stability in architecture and connoting directness, honesty and solidity, was expressive of the style.

Standard heights and dimensions were discontinued and furniture was often designed in units which fitted together to create a uniform mass. In general, modern furniture was much lower than that of any previous period. The earliest pieces, usually patterned after the French modern, were bulky and heavy but all modern furniture became progressively smaller and lighter as it was adapted to the American mode of living. Accentuation of structural lines, carried out in a manner to enhance the material itself, demanded excellent craftsmanship since all parts of a piece of furniture might be visible.

The use of varied and novel materials characterized modern furniture from its earliest development in America. Many rare and beautiful woods were used, such as: rosewood, macassar ebony, tulipwood, kings'

wood, circassian and sap walnut, fiddle back mahogany, amaranth, palissandre, thuja, pear, cherry, partridge, and zebra-wood. Since these were expensive, veneering was developed to a greater extent than ever before in order to preserve large uninterrupted surfaces of the choice grain.[11]

Metals used in the construction or decoration of furniture were chromium, monel metal, aluminum, silver, copper, and steel. Metals were heralded as a modern media for furniture, answering the demands of durability, sanitation, malleability and resistance to fire, and capable of being beautifully designed if skillfully handled and mastered.

Other materials used in furniture included: glass, especially the heavy black glass known as vitrolite; cement, used mostly by Frankl; bakelite, which was fire, liquor, and waterproof; mirrors, which were used as table tops and shelves and in the complete construction of chests and bureaus; and crystal, which was used particularly for knobs and drawer pulls.

The modern style was interpreted in individual pieces of furniture in many ways but several types stand out as characteristic of the early period. Upholstered chairs, designed for the informal manners of the present century, stressed comfort and relaxation. Most of them rested low on the floor, with low seats of great depth, low sloping backs and loose seat cushions. Some of them were upholstered completely with no wood showing except the square flat feet. Others had the side arm structure made of one large plain piece of veneered wood which extended to the floor and served as a support. One type was built in the form of a

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[11] Martha Fischer, "The Exotic Woods of the Modernist", House Beautiful, LXVII, (April 1930), p. 457.

half circle, the back and arms being of the same height. The upholstery on all these modern chairs was plain, never tufted.

Two types of side chairs seemed to be most popular. One style had an upholstered, body-fitting back and seat with the straight front legs and outward curved back legs invariably square in construction. The second style was built with arms, legs, back, uprights, and stretchers all square and straight, except for the slight slope of the back. The seat was almost always upholstered, the back was either upholstered in a rectangular form, or was filled in with horizontal splats in varying widths. The lower stretchers of this chair often rested on the floor. The metal chair, so widely used in this period, was constructed entirely of metal tubing or strips and surmounted with loose cushions resting on a spring seat and back.

Tables were of varying heights, from the low fireside table, often only six inches from the floor to those of ordinary height. They were more often square and rectangular than round in this early period. Most large tables had heavy, thick, plain tops. Many types of bases and legs were used. A central pedestal was perhaps the most popular type of base and it often was fluted. Others were constructed with four flat, curved pieces of wood or metal extending from the four corners to a small central foot, often not more than sixteen inches square. If legs were used they were square, plain and bulky.

Many small tables were designed to fit specific spaces at the ends of couches, at the side of beds, or as parts of other units of furniture. Coffee tables and smoking stands were often built of metal tubing or strips, with moisture proof, scratch proof, and fire resistant tops of glass, cement, bakelite, cork, and other compositions.

Chests, bookcases, desks, and bureaus showed a more severe line than other pieces of furniture. Broad, flat surfaces were used whenever possible. These pieces usually had no legs, but rested flat on the floor. The set-back skyscraper motif, popularized by Frankl, was employed in the early part of the period. Desks often had drawers on one side only, the opposite side having a thick, plain piece of wood used as a support. The arrangement and spacing of drawers and shelves was carried out in an entirely new manner. These were designed for specific articles with the idea of saving space. Knobs and pulls were simplified or discarded altogether, and replaced by simple horizontal strips.

Beds and couches underwent a great revolution. Beds were low and flat on the floor, with broadly curved headboards, no footboards, and a base made of one continuous piece of wood. Couches followed the same type of construction and were upholstered completely, or had small portions of wood showing along the base, arms, and back.

The decoration was within the article itself, since stripping of unnecessary ornament was a principle of the modern style. The grain of wood was used as decoration, and was usually matched or contrasted, to gain a horizontal effect. Metal bands, employed in the early part of the period, were set flush with the surface. Edges of large thick pieces of wood were accented, by contrasting in color or shade, to emphasize the structural lines. Surface finish was kept light or natural in tone and was then rubbed to a glistening polish. This was in keeping with the ideal of honest, frank treatment of all medium, to bring out its innate beauty. Lacquer was used to some extent, especially by Frankl, in the early part of this period, black and

silver or black and red being the favorite color combinations.

Since the ideal, in modern decorative design, was lack or ornament, almost no motif was discernible, unless it was the gentle fluted pilaster or pedestal.[12]

B. Backgrounds

Backgrounds were shorn of all unnecessary projections, such as mouldings and cornices, and broad, plain wall surfaces were characteristic. Walls were kept low in key. In 1927, silver and grey was the popular combination. Later pastel shades, such as beige, peach, mauve, and turquoise were used with such success that, by 1928, even conservative decorators began to use them as backgrounds for period furnishings, while, in one of the leading magazines of the period, eighty per cent of the backgrounds used in all illustrations showed a quiet wall treatment. Wall papers, developed from those of geometric designs and vivid colors, to the more popular pastel floral treatments, both vertical and horizontal, although the geometric motif continued, to some extent, throughout this period. Wall papers were considered one of the most successful modern developments in decorative arts, and decorators, who refused to use modern art in all respects, chose these papers to use with other types of furnishings.

Many different kinds of materials were used on walls, such as wood paneling, in broad polished areas, cork, asbestos, steel, copper, and mirrors. The use of mirrors or polished metal was especially popular in the lining of alcoves or as a frame for groups of windows.

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[12] Sheldon Cheney and Martha Chandler Cheney, op. cit., p. 11.

Rugs developed from the typical, harsh color contrasts, in geometric designs, to the three dimensional effects of 1927 and 1928, colors being quieter and designs less bold in the last two years of this period.

C. Color

Color, in America has been subdued to shades or tints and strong notes of contrast had been avoided, but with the beginning of the modern movement, Americans began to overcome their color timidity and use pure strong color in decoration.[13] In modern decorative art two apparently opposing color tendencies were observed; one toward quiet simplicity and the other toward fantasy. Frankl said that although color contrasts between the cooler colors seemed impersonal and cold, the modern decorator had other means of introducing color, warmth, and personality in a room. His tendency was to paint a vivid, colorful picture with the moveable pieces of furniture against a restrained, low keyed background, which accented them. He added, that with our well heated houses, warm colors were not needed and that cool colors created a feeling of distance, always a desirable quality in small homes and apartments.[14] The need of light in modern towering buildings was given as one reason for the use of vivid colors, to atone for the absence of the sun, never seen in many rooms.[15]

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[13] W. Stuart Thompson, "Pure Color in Interior Decoration", House Beautiful, LX, (November 1926), pp. 602, 652.

[14] Paul Frankl, "Logic in Modernistic Decoration", Arts and Decoration, (July 1928), pp. 54-56, 82.

[15] Adeline de Voo, "The Rational in Modern Decoration", House Beautiful, LXIV, (November 1928), pp. 554-556, 600.

D. Fabrics

Fabric design and weaving underwent a radical change in the early period. This field of design was comparatively new for the American artist, reduced in the past to copying designs of former periods. The spirit of modernism brought a change in design, color, and texture. Influenced by the bold designs of Raoul Dufy and Paul Rodier of France, who were master craftsmen in the art of weaving, American craftsmen turned to the art of textile designing and weaving, and this industry assumed a new importance, unequalled in the past.

Modern fabrics, during the first part of this period, were bold in design and brilliant in color. Geometric and floral motifs were carried out either in large patterns, in pure color on a neutral background, or in black and white. Toward the latter part of the period, designs became smaller and colors more subdued and less startling. Motifs of every day life were popular, such as, "Smoke and Matches", a geometric design by Ilonka Karasz, "Brown Derby" and "Rice and Threads" by Edward Steechen. True to the aim of developing the innate beauty of all material, weaving itself was important. To Paul Rodier, more perhaps than to any other contemporary, the world is indebted for the most significant achievements in woven materials. The use of the geometric motif was continued but the texture of surface and of yarns, woven with extreme skill, became of supreme importance in fabrics. True characteristics of individual fibers were featured and new synthetic materials were handled according to their qualities.

E. Accessories

The designing of modern accessories such as lighting fixtures, lamps, silverware, chinaware, glassware, and pottery, was equal in importance, in form and decoration, to the development in textiles and backgrounds, until by the end of the period accessories of modern design were as numerous as those of period design.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY

It is necessary to evaluate modern decorative art in this early period to find: the influences which caused its type of development in the United States, the difficulties which had to be overcome, the results of certain tendencies, and the final outcome in 1930, so that its intrinsic worth may be discovered.

It is believed that the manner of introduction and early development of the style was detrimental to its natural, logical growth. The fear that the United States might lose its furniture markets led to a forced introduction, sponsored and encouraged by commercial interests. The style was received with eagerness and enthusiasm and accepted as a new fashion by a nation of people who were interested primarily in science, business, new inventions, new modes of transportation, and an expanding population but who, as yet, had no understanding of the underlying principles and aims of the new movement in decorative arts. The world of trade, not being content to develop the style gradually, rushed it at a terrific pace. Manufacturers encouraged factory designers who were toally unfamiliar with the style, to turn out individual creations for quick sale, and to copy foreign types of modern art both good and bad. Department stores used the same method in developing their own styles of so-called "Modernistic" art. This resulted in an early overplaying of the idea and introduced many extreme styles which adhered to no principle or aim.

The movement was severely criticized by many older successful artists and designers. In this group were such men as Frank Alva Parsons, Director of the New York School of Fine Art, who felt that

the new style was as comfortable to live with as forked lightning and splintered trees, that it lacked sanity, was grotesque and too heavy to be economically moveable.[16]

The leaders who understood modern art attempted to inform the public of its true meaning and ideals, warning them of the dangers which were developing. They stated that a knowledge of the principles and aims must be cultivated so that the true modern could be distinguished from the false. They also explained that, since the foreign interpretations were not suitable for the American mode of living, the movement here would have to pass through an experimental or "laboratory" period, with the usual vagaries and mistakes which accompanied any evolution. The public was also cautioned not to accept the art as a fad or fashion, since fashions were transitory and new ones must continually be created to take the place of the old, and such acceptance would be harmful to the successful development of a stable, logical style. The premature mass production, demanded because of the early popularity of the style, was also regarded as dangerous since it encouraged much that was not authentically modern.

All these opposing influences and the bewilderment of the consuming public, coupled with other factors such as the lack of understanding which existed between the artist and industry, and augmented by the difficulties which arose in production, led to utter confusion in 1927 and 1928.

Many artists still fought the movement; manufacturers and department stores continued to flood the market with poorly designed

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[16] Frank Alva Parsons, "An Analysis of Modernism", House and Garden, XLIX, (February 1926), pp. 72-74, 134.

modern creations, artists within the movement often failed to interpret the style successfully since it was in an experimental stage, and some designers took advantage of the fashionableness of the movement and produced much that was extreme and individualistic. In October 1927, Charles R. Richards made the statement that nine-tenths of the modern creations represented developments other than those which followed along the recognized principles of modern decorative art.[17] In May 1928, Paul Frankl's observation was that sensationalists and charletans who overstrained and went beyond modernism into futurism repelled an enduring interest with their "stunts" and that the public had become prejudiced against legitimate modernism because of fake moderns.[18]

In commenting on the situation of the designer in the United States, Matlack Price declared that the lack of understanding which existed here between the artist and industry made it impossible to be a designer and live. He contrasted the high standing accorded the European designer with the status of the designer in the United States. In Europe he was recognized and allowed to sign all his creations while here designs were anonymous; the designer was not trained and encouraged and was admitted to be a very small cog in any industrial organization.[19]

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[17] Charles R. Richards, "Is There a Modern Style in Decorative Art?", House Beautiful, LXII, (October 1927), pp. 375-377, 429.

[18] Paul Frankl, "Just What is This Modernist Movement?", Arts and Decoration, XXIX, (May 1928), pp. 56-58, 108.

[19] Matlack Price, "The New Art and the Designer", House and Garden, LIV, (October 1928), pp. 109, 140.

The technical difficulties which arose were numerous. The new materials, such as structural glass, new textile fibers, the new synthetic chemical compounds known as plastics and old materials, such as metal, cork, and asbestos used in a new manner were disturbing factors. Designers were unfamiliar with the materials or with the new method in handling them and in many instances the products were not successful.

Old methods of constructing furniture were found to be inadequate. Modern furniture, accentuating structural form, using broad surfaces of beautiful wood veneering and scrapping standard heights and sizes, caused consternation in the factories and resulted in various attempts at the solution of the problem, many of which were unsuccessful.

By 1929, the confusion amounted to chaos and a sharp decline in the popularity of modern decorative art was felt. Artists, craftsmen, decorators, and others interested in modern art became alarmed at the turn of events and conducted surveys and carried on much discussion in an attempt to understand and clarify the situation. No definite conclusions were reached by the group as a whole although many valuable facts were disclosed.

Some artists thought that the type of modern art which had been developed in America was distorted, angular, and so subtle that the moving of a chair threw the whole room into chaos; that it did away with standardized proportions and was often top-heavy, crude and labored; that it sometimes displayed a self-conscious striving for pictorial and startling effects; that it shocked and was too noisy, exciting, and vivid for the already stirring conditions of

modern life; that the use of pure color by the unsophisticated was not easy on the eyes; and that it was difficult to use a piece of modern furniture without creating a complete background for it. Others believed that it was a true expression of the age; that it was a free and flexible style that could be severe or less so under varying conditions; that it was honest in the use of materials both old and new; that it answered the need for space and labor saving qualities, being compact and easily cared for; that it was comfortable, informal and convenient; that it had rediscovered the value of texture and had found color again; that youth liked it and felt a kinship with it; that it was above all simple with its form conditioned by function; and that its dynamic qualities of verve, vigor and directness made the old art seem static.

It was found that practically all artists and decorators believed that there was a definite need for a modern decorative art movement in America, one that was in keeping with the times and the changed mode of living. Since modernity was seen elsewhere, in architecture, in advertising, in the scenic arts, in streamline construction, in shop windows, in the realm of style and dress, in high powered motors and in the general stripping for action, and since the trend in domestic architecture was away from a fixed state of human dwellings, and many people were being compelled to live in smaller quarters which did not allow for space and lavish care, it was felt that there was a great need for a type of home decoration that would solve the problem of time, space, and labor, and keep pace with other modern developments.

These discussions brought to light the fact that even the most conservative decorators were using modern accessories and backgrounds

with period furnishings. Such articles as rugs, textiles, wall papers, lamps, ceramics, silver, glassware, kitchen utensils, and other articles of every day use had developed steadily and progressively along modern art principles and were accepted generally by the public.

Those artists and designers most vitally interested in the modern movement believed that they had worked toward a common goal and that although many of their creations had not been successful, since a time of testing and experimentation had been necessary, most of the bad modernism had been the work of amateurs and designers who did not understand the principles of the movement. They believed that they had passed through a real transitional period, well understood by themselves but very obscure to the public in general because of the early commercialization and its resulting evils. They believed that modern decorative art had justified itself, was grown up, and was at the beginning of a mature settled period and that the future modern style in America would be evolved through the efforts of those who combined the technical knowledge, sympathy and understanding for the new materials and modern manufacturing possibilities with the ability to express the age in line, color, and form.[20] They were convinced that when the mark of oddness was removed those creations of modern art which adhered to the principles laid down, would suryive but that distortions, harshness, and exaggerations would not.

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[20] Kem Weber, "Manners and Modernism", House and Garden, LIII, (April 1928), pp. 116, 154.

Two things were felt to be most important for the successful future growth of the style. It was believed that the public should again be admonished that good taste and discernment must be developed so that it would be possible to distinguish the true modern from the false, by that means alone would false modernism be eliminated. It was also felt that a less expensive type of furniture must be produced, since, in 1929, eighty percent of the furniture sold to Park Avenue homes was modern while only nine and four-tenths of the total amount sold in the United States was of the modern type. Although cooperation between the artist and industry had begun in 1927,[21] a still better understanding was thought to be necessary to overcome this difficulty and make it possible, through the efforts of all concerned in the creation of a piece of furniture, to produce a livable inexpensive type. The economic conditions existing in 1929, made the production of all extravagant forms of modern home decoration unprofitable and set the course of the style along a more stable, normal development in the next decade.

The conclusions reached are: that the manner of introduction of modern decorative art to the United States was harmful to its normal development, in the period between 1925 and 1930; that the confusion, misunderstandings, and difficulties, resulting from the premature commercialization, overshadowed the real movement and made its experimental period difficult and chaotic; that a real need for a decorative art, expressive of the twentieth century, was felt and acknowledged, its fundamental principles having been accepted generally by 1930; that modern influence was seen in many

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[21] Sheldon Cheney and Martha Chandler Cheney, op. cit., pp. 6-8.

phases of home decoration, accessories and backgrounds being used frequently with period furnishings; but that due to many conflicting influences, the interpretations in the furniture field had been less acceptable on the whole; that while furniture had suffered most as a result of the early exploitation, those who worked in the new spirit had progressed through a period of experimentation and were ready for a mature development and integration of the style; that the economic conditions of the country, in 1930, ended the production of expensive, spurious modern decorative art and cleared the way for a more rational development in the early thirties.

PART II

1930 to 1939

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL SURVEY

The American public, intent on economic readjustment, expressed little interest in modern decorative art in the year following the depression, although the effect of simplification of interiors was noted in all forms of home decoration.

Several events which occurred at this time had a future influence on the movement. The Swedish exhibit, held in 1930, at Stockholm, was discussed favorably in American magazines. Sweden, winner of the first prize in the Paris Exposition of 1925, had made great strides in the development of a modern decorative art. The Stockholm Exhibit was modern throughout and featured: a lighter type of furniture of birch and ash, the use of pewter in interior decoration, glass, by Orrefors and machine made and hand woven textiles, in peasant patterns, of clear colors.

In the autumn of the same year the Third International Exhibit of Industrial Art, held in Boston and sponsored by the American Federation of Artists, contained work from eight foreign countries and emphasized metal work and fabrics.

At about the same time, the Annual of American Design was published by the American Union of Decorative Artists and Craftsmen, an organization which had been in existence for four years and was known as A.U.D.A.C. The Annual included works of eminent authorities in all fields in which contemporary design had been influenced by the machine, and stated that, although little was generally known in this country

about the growing strength of modern design, a powerful and conscious movement in American design existed and was one which could be compared favorably with the best done in Europe. For the first time, a complete survey of the active cooperation between creator and producer was presented to the public. Works by such men as Lescaze, Weber, Rohde, and Deskey were included.

The Annual was an initial effort, in a wide educational program planned and carried on by artists, to inform the public again of the aims and principles of the modern style of home decoration. The program was continued by showing new creations in exhibits on the stage and in the movies, and by promoting interest through illustrations and active discussions in periodicals.

Some of the first inexpensive modern furniture produced in quantity was placed on the market in 1931 by Heywood-Wakefield, large furniture manufacturers. Gilbert Rohde was the designer of the furniture which was light in weight, conservative, showing little contrast in woods, and simple in line, although not sharp and angular. A new bent wood construction was used to create the chairs which had upholstered seats and loose back cushions.

Interest was expressed in the modern movement by the announcement made in 1932, that the Chicago Century of Progress Fair would feature modernism, and discussions and illustrations of the style were again seen in magazines interested in home decoration. The comments were that the 1932 modern style was an entirely different thing from that of five years ago, that fantastic designing appeared to have reached its end, and that modern decorative art was assuming a saner, steadier stride.

The Century of Progress Fair did not, however, promote real

modern art to any great extent, in spite of that fact that Walter Dorwin Teague helped with the building plans and such men as Gilbert Rohde and Wolfgang Hoffman were called upon to design complete interiors for several houses exhibiting commercial products. Cheney made the statement that, although "there were doubtless nice bits here and there in the complex of modernistic structure . . . the exposition was a commercially inspired collection of echoes of surface modernism, and ill served a public that might have been shown an instructive example of large scale planning, in the spirit of industrial design."[22] The exposition did, however, place before the public many new materials used in all lines of modern decorative art.

"Classic modernism" made its appearance during the early part of the decade. This so-called style was a simplified interpretation of period styles, created in modern woods, and used with modern backgrounds. The trend was important in home decoration since it encouraged the use of combinations of period and modern furnishings, making it possible to use occasional pieces of modern furniture without creating a complete new setting.

An event which created much enthusiasm and interest in the modern movement was the opening of Radio City Music Hall, the largest theatre to be undertaken anywhere up to that time. Donald Deskey was responsible for the interiors, and a most extensive and ambitious scheme was carried out in the modern style of decoration. A striking feature was the use of many new materials or old materials used in a new manner. The furniture, made of aluminum, chromium, and beautiful woods, was sturdy and comfortable but not heavy. Among the materials

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[22] Sheldon and Martha Chandler Cheney, op. cit., p. 153.

used in the decorative scheme were bakelite, formica, colored structural glass, peach colored mirrors, white lacquer and patent leather, cork and aluminum wall papers, rough weave cottons and woolens, cellophane, sealskin, calfskin, and pigskin.

The development of the modern decorative art movement was aided by the Exposition of Contemporary Industrial Art opened, in 1934, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Groups for the exhibit were arranged by twenty architects and industrial designers. All objects were those used in home furnishing fields and were the work of no less than two hundred and thirty-seven manufacturers and designers. The objective of the exhibit was to demonstrate the feasibility of mass production in the field of industrial art. H. E. Winlock, Director of the Museum, wrote that in spite of the difficulties economically "the continuing public interest in contemporary design inspires a steadily increased number of firms to favor modern expressions for objects produced in large volume."[23] The entries were all of new design, shown for the first time, and were American designed and American made. Richard F. Bach, the Director of Industrial Relations of the Museum, made the comment that those who believed in modern art had until then contended that the so-called modern style had been a promising adolescent which had not excelled in either good sense or good manners, but which had pleaded its cause most convincingly, that we had lived through a transitional period, and that then (1934) the good sense, or the strength and reason of modernism in design had been fully demonstrated, that although the modern style might have its conservatives and radicals, the problem was no longer an enigma.[24]

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[23]Metropolitan Museum of Art, Contemporary American Industrial Art, 1934, p. 3.

[24]Ibid, p. 7-12.

Evidence of the new standing of the artist-designer, developing in this period, and of a continued interest in the modern movement, was seen in the establishment of two schools, one in New York and the other in Chicago. In the fall of 1935, Gilbert Rohde became chairman of a new school of industrial design in New York, which was instigated and backed, for a year or so, by the Art Service Project of the Works Progress Administration of New York City, and was organized to give an opportunity to young people who had artistic and technical abilities, being planned to give complete training in modern interior design as a branch of industrial design. It was felt to be a means by which confusion in the modern movement in industrial design could be eliminated and drawn into clean focus. The school in Chicago, The New Bauhaus, established in 1937, was patterned after the famous original Bauhaus founded by Walter Gropius in Germany in 1919. Director of the school was Professor Moholy-Nagy, a former associate of Gropius in Germany. The objective was to give students practical and theoretical training as designers for hand and machine products.

Inexpensive types of modern furniture appeared in many stores by 1934 and well designed pieces and sets could be had from mail order houses. The National Furniture Manufacturers' Association reported that all but a few of their members were turning out modern furniture; that in their July exhibit of 1934, twenty-four percent of the furniture was modern, and that most major department stores were selling it at prices comparable with those asked for period furniture. In August 1934, R. H. Macy Company ordered forty thousand dollars worth of a good middle priced line of furniture called "American Modern", designed by Russel Wright, and by mid-September had ordered

half as much again. Reports showed that sales of modern furniture had increased over the former year; thirty-five to forty percent in Philadelphia, fifty percent in Chicago, a hundred percent in Baltimore and in Des Moines. Milwaukee sales of modern furniture ran between thirty-three and forty percent of total furniture sales, and for Denver the percentage stood at fifty.[25]

In the same year, the five hundred members of the American Institute of Decorators invited Donald Deskey to hold up his end of a discussion on modern versus traditional interiors. This, in itself, was thought to be the first official recognition of the modern movement by decorators as a whole.

An impetus was given to inexpensive modern home decoration by the activities of the different Resettlement Administration projects. When plans were drawn up for houses, to be built in the different locations, the designer and interior decorator cooperated with the architect in building the houses from the inside out. The needs of specific families were considered and the furniture planned. Then the house, other furnishings, and interior decoration were designed to fit. The sample furniture, built by the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration was a simple, functional, durable, type which called forth praise and admiration. Economical manufacture was necessary but the ideal was toward a warm, livable, simple, though not harsh, style of decoration. The Resettlement Administration believed that its work was on the way to becoming a definite contribution to the problem of low cost furniture of a style suitable for modern life.[26]

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[25]Author unknown, "What D'You Mean Modern", Fortune, XII (November 1935), p. 97.

[26]Author unknown, "Low Cost Furniture", House Beautiful, LXXIX, (April 1937), pp. 131-133.

During the last two years of this period modern decorative art grew in popularity and use. Few discussions of the status of the style appeared in periodicals, and modern interiors and furnishings were illustrated and featured as a matter of course. Practically all stores offering home furnishings displayed them in their regular departments, as a period style.

The most recent interpretation of the modern style in home decoration was the light, graceful and slightly traditional American adaptation of Swedish modern furnishings, which has been perhaps the most acceptable type of modern decoration to be developed in the United States, up to this time.

The influence of the two fairs to be opened in 1939, the New York World's Fair and the Golden Gate Exposition, will without doubt have an effect on modern decorative art. The plan of the New York World's Fair, featuring "The World of Tomorrow", is to be completely modern throughout from the ground plan to the exhibits, many of which will predict a modern style of home decoration of several years hence.

CHAPTER II

MODERN DESIGNERS

Because of the ideal toward an architectonic unity rather than toward decoration alone, the new designer of interiors became known as an interior architect and was considered an industrial designer working as a specialist. Some workers arrived at interior design through industry, others through the architectural field. Almost all of them designed complete furnishings, including accessories and appliances.

All of the pioneer artists which were mentioned in Part I of this study continued in the development of the modern movement. Among those prominent artists entering the field in the late twenties or early thirties were Gilbert Rohde, Russel Wright, Eleanor Lemaire, Walter Dorwin Teague, and Ruth Reeves.

Of all interior designers, Donald Deskey was perhaps the most distinguished single figure of the group. He designed numerous architectural interiors, including Radio City Music Hall and rooms in the New York home of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. He was the typical artist who did most to bridge the distance between interior design and broad design for factory machines. He made mass production design, carried on original experiments in uses of new material, acted as industrial design consultant, and was able to present advanced ideas in a completely acceptable form.

Kem Weber practiced in California during this period and was a member of a small group specializing in the design of modern furniture, a group of which Gilbert Rohde and Russel Wright were representative in New York. He was responsible for mass produced furniture of sound

proportions, simple finish, and structural integrity, and was one of the pioneers in experimenting with bent and laminated wood.

Paul Frankl continued to design and produce his own furniture in the Frankl Galleries in New York City, and wrote several books on modern decorative art.

The architects, Lescaze and Schoen, designed complete interiors. Lescaze became a master of color composition and lighting. Among other things he designed metal tubing chairs suitable for machine multiplication at low cost.

Gilbert Rohde was a pioneer in reconsidering the engineering aspects of furniture. He contributed new types of bent wood chairs and designed unit furniture which could be elastically yet harmoniously used. He was one of the first to use the height line of several units in a manner to accentuate horizontal planning. He believed that modern design should be a logical production in terms of our own times, yet in line with the best creative design of the past.

Russel Wright, who formerly designed for the theatre, also believed in the value of traditional influence. His "American Modern" furniture was marketed throughout the country. He also originated scores of service accessories, particularly of spun aluminum.

A most noted specialist in color in interior architecture was Eleanor Lemaire who was one of the first designers to use color as a weight, in balancing rooms proportionately. She expressed dimensional form and depth, in interiors, by this means.

Walter Dorwin Teague was a prolific designer in all branches of industrial art and was also recognized for his work in interiors.

Ruth Reeves was an outstanding figure in the field of textile designing. She was sent to Guatamala, in 1934, by the Carnegie Institute as a research artist in primitive American design, and returned with a wealth of material, much of which went into her own interpretations on fabrics which were launched by several manufacturers in the following year. Other motifs used by her and carried out in a bold free style were scenes and articles of every day contemporary life.

The fundamental principles which were set forth by the early leaders of the modern movement remained practically the same but the manner of interpretation was different in that the blatent, stark, angularity, rigid austerity, and extreme exaggerations were abandoned. More emphasis was put on the unification of the complete interior, and modern art for the home came to mean: simplicity; clean cut but suave lines; a tendency toward assymmetrical balance; the restfulness of fresh simple surfaces, with broad sweeping fields of one color or material, used to create the feeling of space; striking effects and balance gained through the use of color; new materials, beautifully textured, used with skill and imagination; furniture of natural woods with plain surfaces expertly finished; double duty furniture in unit or sectional pieces; structural glass walls; corner windows; and a scientific effective use of light. Masses became lighter than those of the former period, patterns were less odd and weird, and colors less insistent. The general atmosphere of interiors was one of light and space with a sense of sweep and freedom, with no cluttering of things that did not belong.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECIFIC PHASES

A. Furniture

During the period of 1930-1939, simplicity continued to be the keynote of all furniture forms. Lines were clean, straight, and unbroken, though soft; rectangular shapes being modified with curved edges and corners. Surfaces were kept broad and flat. Curves were used more frequently than in the early period and were still broad and sweeping or in the form of a half circle. Structural lines were accented, though not with strong contrast in color or tone as formerly. The excellence and beauty of material was featured and furniture became unusually well constructed. The horizontal line applied to furniture was carried out in the complete designing of the interior, creating a new unity between the two. Modern furniture, while having a distinct style and harmonious feeling, was interpreted in many ways to fit certain specific conditions and tastes, some developments being very severe, others less so. Furniture came to have greater possibilities of varied arrangement and use, in the creation of double duty unit furniture, which could be placed along a wall, grouped in a corner, or used to mark divisions of rooms, and was designed as a compact mass of similar height and size, which could be separated for rearrangement. During the latter part of the period this type of furniture gradually became less obtrusive and was sometimes made to appear as an integral part of the room construction. Less severe styles were produced, such as the Swedish modern furniture which had a traditional feeling, resembling somewhat eighteenth century furniture

which had been translated into a much simplified, modernized product.

Materials used for modern furniture were varied and more numerous than ever before. Woods, exquisitely finished, were left natural in tone or were dyed or bleached to gain the desired hue. Darker woods were popular in the early part of the period, but lighter, "blonde" woods were more generally used in 1937 and 1938. Among the woods used, other than those mentioned earlier, were maple, white holly, sycamore, redwood, harewood, primavera, macawood oak, and hickory.

Chromium continued to be the favorite metal although much brass and copper were used, either dull finished or burnished. A new form of aluminum was aluminite, an extremely hard light material capable of taking any color of dye, and another metal introduced was metallon, a non-tarnishable nickle silver.

The effectiveness of glass in furniture was seen in all glass pieces or in combinations of glass with chromium, stainless steel and other metals. Heavy plate glass was used for table and bureau tops, and for shelves.

New forms of transparent plastics, known as plexi-glass and lucite, were used in combination with metals and wood, and were acclaimed as having great possibilities in furniture construction.

Bamboo, rattan, and reed were handled in a modern manner. Leather also made its appearance in new guises, being quilted, padded, lacquered, and dyed in all shades and used often over entire pieces of furniture. Cowhide was seen frequently as a covering for tables, bureaus, and desks.

Comfortableness was considered an essential quality in upholstered chairs, and the proportions were based on the natural curves

of the human body. The completely upholstered chair was low, sturdy, with or without arms, and rested on square flat feet or runners of wood. The seats were not so close to the floor as formerly and if arms were used they were wide and low and usually set back from the front. In another type, the structure was of bentwood, in which were suspended loose cushions for seat and back. A lighter weight upholstered chair, introduced with the Swedish modern style, had a gracefully curved, form-fitting body, completely upholstered, which rested on slender, square, or round and tapering legs, which were either straight or slightly curved. An entirely new type of upholstered chair, developed in 1937, was designed to be a part of a unit which could be made into a love seat or couch. These chairs were low and deep, and formed so that they fitted together along the wall, which might be straight or curved. Some chairs used in this manner had arms on one side only and were used separately, in twos, or at the ends, in a couch group. Swedish modern chairs of this type were much lighter in construction.

Some side chairs followed the general style of those designed in the early period. Others were made of bentwood, with lightly upholstered bodies or with seat and back of plywood, lucite, other synthetic material, or metal. The Swedish type of side chairs were constructed with an upholstered body fitting back and seat resting on the typical slender legs. In this chair, arms were small, low continuations of the curved upholstered back.

Chairs of metal, usually of the cantilever type, were constructed of tubing with upholstered seats and backs.

Large tables varied in form. Some were of simple straight line

construction, with heavy tops, and either square straight legs or plain flat wooden end supports. Others were the same general top construction, in either metal or wood, rested on end support made of wide flat metal strips in a U-shape. The simple round fluted base was used often for heavy square or round tables, while those lighter in weight usually had slender tapering legs. Smaller tables, built for specific purposes, followed these same general lines of construction. The all glass table was first designed in this period, and was square, round, or rectangular with many individual types of bases. The tops of some of these were made of heavy crystal glass, etched in large conventionalized patterns and rested free on a glass base or were set in a wooden under-structure.

Cabinets, chests, desks, and bureaus retained the typical broad flat surface treatment but took on a suavity of line not seen in the early period. Lines were straight, but the edges and corners of the pieces were curved and softened. Such articles of this type which were to be used as parts of a group, showed great development in design; commercially produced pieces were made in unit and sectional forms which could be used in different rooms, for a variety of purposes, and fitted with chairs, bookcases, and couches to form a compact mass. In these, compartments, shelves, and drawers were expertly arranged for specific uses and to save space. Some dressing tables and desks were formed by placing large sheets of glass or plastic material across small chests.

During the early part of the period couches were designed which fitted along the wall as part of a group or extended out into the

room, with rows of bookshelves at the back and tables at each end, but with the beginning of 1937, the sectional couch was more generally used and was formed with separate chairs as was discussed in the paragraph on upholstered chairs, in Part II.

Beds were simple and low, usually with low headboards and no footboards, but in some cases were only springs and mattresses on a frame. They were often fitted into the architectural structure of the room by being placed in a particular alcove or unit, designed with special tables or chests and convenient lighting facilities.

The principle lack of ornament or decoration was adhered to more strictly in this period than in the earlier development. Less contrast in woods, and less accentuation of structure by sharp contrasts, was noted, and the effect became extremely simple and refined. Finish was considered very important, and was carried out in a manner to emphasize and enhance the beauty of the material.

B. Backgrounds

Broad spacious effects were achieved in the treatment of walls by the use of different materials. Mirrors, covering large areas were placed over the fireplace end of a room, between window groups, back of units of furniture or at some other point to gain the feeling of distance. Simple draw curtains, usually of plain material, hanging from ceiling to floor, over windows and the surrounding wall space, was another means of creating a sense of breadth. The horizontal feeling, often an architectural structure, was repeated and emphasized by grouping of furniture and by tying in the wall finish with some unit of furniture, such as continuing plain wood paneling, surrounding the fireplace, to form the back of a couch or bookcase constructed of

of the same wood.

Among various materials, other than wood, used on walls were linoleum, cork, asbestos, leather, rubber, bakelite, tile, glass, prestwoods, paint, and wallpaper. Whole walls or sections of a wall were sometimes composed of glass blocks which were also used in sliding doors to form room partitions.

The treatment of walls with color or light to balance rooms by making certain portions prominent and others inconspicuous was observed, in 1937 and 1938, and was thought to be an important factor in modern interior design and one which was in its infancy.

A lighter tone was noted in wall papers in the early years of the period. White and beige were popular. Metallic finishes were used to increase the apparent size of the room, as an aid in indirect lighting, and as a fitting contrast for colors. Darker papers used later were combined with white, ivory, or grey. A new simplicity of design was seen in patterned papers. Giant leaves and floral prints were carried out in two or three colors. Later, soft pastel colors, in off shades, were popular, especially with the Swedish modern type of decoration.

Photo murals and hand painted murals were executed in the modern manner, being highly conventionalized and stylized.

Texture in rugs and carpets became more important than pattern. Sculptured, pebbled and tufted effects, in plain or monotone color schemes or hand woven effects, were designed to carry out the restful, spacious feeling. Rugs of this type were used on polished floors of wood, linoleum, cork, tile, and marbelized rubber.

C. Colors

Two different sets of ideals in color harmonies had been typical of the modern style since its beginning, one daring and dramatic and the other a closely keyed mode, wherein colors might be gently interrelated, and were often variations of one color.

White, with accents of vivid strong colors, or black, was used much with the return of the modern style to popularity but with the increased interest in texture, color, and color contrasts, became subdued, and toward the latter part of the period soft, clean, pastel colors predominated, although striking vivid accents were still used to some extent, especially with the strictly functional type of modern home decoration.

Color was handled much more creatively and subtly than ever before, and with a new perception, using color almost as a structural medium. Cheney related that behind the low valued simple colors of the new interior lay a long train of investigation in which both physical science and aesthetics had been profounding involved, that "along the line of this development we may confidently look for one of the greatest surface changes in both exterior and interior architecture and that homes and furnishings would be brought to a degree of richness and to a shading of sensitive coloring undreamed of in the past."[27]

D. Fabrics

A new type of fabric design was noted, at the beginning of the period, which was due partly to experiments carried on by several large textile firms, and partly to the better standing accorded artists, as the day of individual design, in printed things for the home, dawned.

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[27] Sheldon and Martha Chandler Cheney, op. cit., p. 199.

American textile designers began to sign their own patterns at this time. The new fabrics showed a different technique that gave flat surfaces to the designs, which were fresh and beautifully colored, in few shades. Many of the floral prints were seen in a large bold type of design, and the primitive patterns, so popular in wall papers, were created also for fabrics. Patterned fabrics were gradually replaced by those of interesting texture, in plain colors. The modern designer used textured areas of few colors to gain the effects which were formerly attained by the use of pattern, placing different textures, one against the other to relieve monotony. A new feeling of restfulness and space was achieved and pattern, if used, was reserved for accent notes.

New materials were used in fabrics, such as rayons of a new type, cellophane, and glass cloth; and different methods of weaving and combining fibers produced novel effects.

E. Accessories

Modern interiors called for few accessories. Those used were simple, bold and often primitive in design, and were placed to gain a striking uncluttered effect. Sculptured articles, carried out in the modern manner, were of pottery, especially stoneware, glass, metal, and porcelain. Growing plants, particularly the succulents, in plain, colored pottery containers, formed a simple effective decoration.

CHAPTER IV

CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY

The production of all articles relating to home decoration was placed on an entirely new basis in the years immediately following the stock market crashes and resulting financial difficulties in 1929. Any expensive extravagant types of furnishings, which still remained, were unmarketable. This, with the fact that prejudice against the modern movement had been built up in the early period, limited the scope of the future work of the modern designer making the first problem a definite one, that of overcoming the prejudice and producing articles which would be inexpensive, of good quality, and acceptable.

The leaders of the modern movement, after a short period of readjustment, set out to overcome the prejudice and make the modern decorative art an acceptable style by doing the very thing that had been attempted in the early period, by carrying out a definite educational program to inform the public of the principles, aims, and real meaning of the style. A noticeable difference in the procedure was the fact that, from 1930 on, the program was a concerted effort, carried on by groups rather than by individuals, as had been the case in the previous period. The program was presented by illustrations and discussions in periodicals, by creations shown on the stage, and in moving pictures.

Many things contributed to the success of this effort. As a result of the economic conditions the home had again become the center of social life and more attention was given to home decoration. Then, too, a need for all possible aids in saving labor and space was felt, since many more people than ever before, due to financial pressure, found it necessary economically to live in smaller quarters and

dispense with servants.

In a short time prejudice was overcome to a great extent by a program of education which made modern decorative art familiar, and due to the definite needs felt for such a style of home decoration, the design efforts of the leaders of the modern movement met with approval. As early as 1931 an inexpensive product in the furniture field was accepted and became popular. New products in other fields of home decoration were created, and because of the favorable conditions existing for the development of a modern decorative art, examples of the style were numerous by 1933.

The logical, sane, steady growth of the movement which took place from that time on was largely due to the fact that the leaders, unhampered by unscrupulous and amateur designers of freak modernism, and guided by their own past mistakes and experiences, were free to solve problems which they knew existed, and to create a true type of modern home decoration, suitable for the American mode of living.

The solution of two outstanding and related problems had been thought necessary, in the previous period, before a successful development of the modern style could take place. The first, the production of an inexpensive type of modern decoration, had been partially solved, by a few manufacturers, early in this period and the success of the venture seemed sure in the near future, especially since conditions were favorable for the solution of the second problem, that of improving the relationship between the artist and industry. Realization that much of the failures in the early period had been caused either by the artist, who designed unacceptable creations, or

by the manufacturer, who could not successfully handle the new designs and materials, led to an attempt to continue the early efforts toward cooperation which had begun in 1927. Partly because of economic pressure, partly because of a sincere effort on the part of both artists and industry, and because the effort took place at an auspicious time in the field of mechanical developments, the solution of the problem, although in its early stages, seemed likely to succeed beyond the dreams of either artists or industry, and resulted in great benefits to both.

The artist found himself in demand in all branches of industry, and became a recognized part of the industrial program. In working with the manufacturers, the designer became familiar with certain machine limitations and was able to suit his designs to easy machine production, in turn aiding industry in solving a difficult problem.

The growing solution of these two factors which had been handicaps in the development of the modern style, resulted in a more successful type of production of all articles relating to home decoration. Because of the fine cooperation along this line the artist who was formerly known as an interior decorator became in reality an interior architect, being given the opportunity to create rather than assemble the furnishings for a home, and a new profession of artist-technician was born. In commenting on the situation, Cheney wrote that interior architecture was a sub-division of the industrial design field, in which the earliest approach had been made to a working understanding between the artist and the manufacturer, and that in furniture production particularly, a considerable number of

designers and industrialists had come to the new conception at about the same time, and that it had been the oldest of industries historically concerned with appearance values, which welcomed first the new generation of artists.[28]

The improvement in the status of the artist and the need for designers with technical knowledge led to the establishment of new schools of industrial design and were responsible for the inclusion in colleges and universities of departments which offered training along different lines of industrial art. The Federal Government also aided in developing the new profession by giving such training to many young people, in connection with the different projects carried on in all parts of the country.

When interior architects, under the improved conditions just discussed, were given a chance, and were even urged and encouraged to create all articles of home decoration, the result was the development of more unified interiors and the production of many types of modern decorative art. By 1938 modern furnishings could be obtained which were made of different materials in any of the desired finishes. They varied from the severely functional to the slightly traditional and from the striking to the subdued and were expensive or less so, custom made or mass produced, movable or built in.

Many designers felt in 1939 that the modern movement was still in its beginning, that eventually and perhaps soon it would be the prevailing style of home decoration, although it might not be the style as we know it; but that whatever it might be, it would adhere

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[28]Cheney, Sheldon and Martha Chandler, op. cit., pp. 213-216.

to the basic principles expressed in the beginning of the movement and would be a true answer to the needs of existing conditions.

Lee Simonson made a prediction that, since with each succeeding generation, we are prepared to leave more and more behind, eventually it is probable that the only movable pieces of furniture will be our chairs.[29]

Conclusions reached are: that the development of home decoration, in this period, adhered to the principles and aims set forth by the leaders in the early years of the movement; that the best interpretations by modern artists who understood the style, continued to live; that the depression put an end to the fantastic exaggerations; that the leaders in the second period carried on in a progressive manner, work which had been started earlier. In developing a sane, inexpensive type of modern mass produced furnishings to meet the demands of changed conditions, they were aided by the new importance of the home in social life, by the extraordinary new cooperation developed between the artist and industry, by the establishment of schools of industrial design, and by the interest shown in the modern movement by the Federal Government. The beneficial conditions and factors resulted in a style of modern decorative art which fulfilled the requirements of existing conditions, and allowed for the free future development of the movement. The interpretations of the style in the second period showed: an emphasis on unified interiors, greater simplicity, horizontalism, accentuation of the beauty of each material with much attention being paid to the scientific use of light and color, most of which were perhaps due to the broadening of the field of the interior designer who worked in the modern spirit.

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[29]Lee Simonson, "Furniture into Walls", House Beautiful, 78, (November 1936), pp. 48-51, 90.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In summarizing the analyses of the two periods, one concludes: that modern decorative art, due to its manner of introduction and early development in the United States, passed through a transitional period so difficult and confused that the real meaning of the movement was obscured to the general public who repudiated it in 1929; but that due to a real need for a suitable style of modern home decoration, and aided by the solution of the problems which hampered its growth in the early period, the modern movement progressed through a second period of successful, logical, development and can now be considered a period style, with great possibilities in the future, because of its flexibility, the wealth of new materials being discovered and invented, and the improved methods in mechanical production. It is also believed that the modern style has influenced all other period styles; that homes now represent everyday living at a higher level than ever before experienced; that the fact that interior design, an art steeped in tradition, has been brought up to the level with new fields of mechanical development where no precedent existed, is remarkable and interesting. Since the new style is still in the process of development, its real significance may not be fully realized today, for styles in home decoration usually take years to develop and generations to congeal.

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