

THE SENSUOUS CURVE

SCANDINAVIAN MODERNISTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE
ON CONTEMPORARY CALIFORNIA DESIGN

MUSEUM OF CRAFT AND FOLK ART

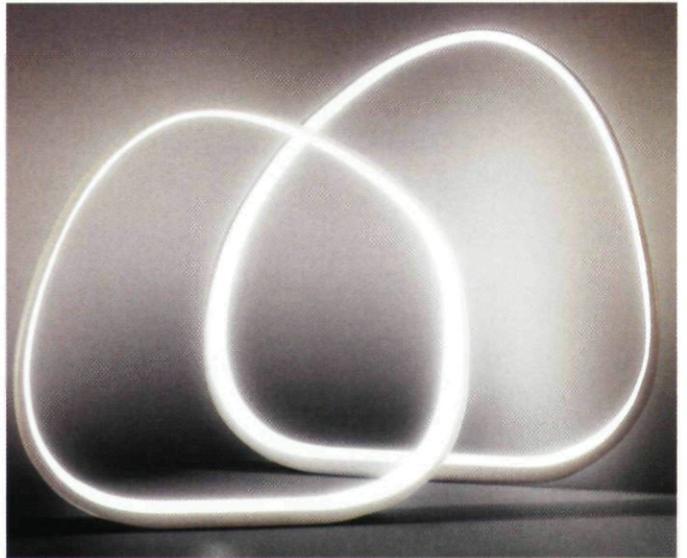
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Like a road sign that reads Slippery When Wet or Soft Shoulder, the title of this show catches our attention and imagination with a suggestive specificity. In its entirety, it implies not only that the work on display will have a satisfying physicality, but that the pieces by the current generation of California designers will in some way embody the ideas of Scandinavian modernism, a movement that continues to be influential more than 75 years after its inception. A glance around the exhibition suggested common ground in materials and forms. Examples of classic Nordic furniture filled the room: modest but handsome pieces—mostly chairs, made of bent or shaped wood—dating from the 1930s through the 60s. Scattered among them were several contemporary works, including both manufactured and exquisite one-of-a-kind pieces.

But to place classic and contemporary side by side invites comparison of more than organic curves or the adroit use of veneered plywood. As curator Kate Eilertson's statement accompanying the show acknowledges, the Nordic design revolution was also about social responsibility, about "functionality and aesthetics plus modesty and beauty." These products were meant to be affordable—not for the poor, but certainly for the middle class, who bought them because they were well-designed, functional and made to last. It isn't an accident that designers from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland focused on chairs. People need to sit down.

Eric Pfeiffer's prototype for a table/magazine rack achieves this kind of good looks and affordable functionality through a simple yet elegant manipulation of material. It is easy to imagine a similar piece in hundreds of houses. And though a stacking occasional chair designed by Brian Kane is made primarily from PET—a rigid fabric engineered out of recycled plastic bottles—it manages to embody a relaxed warmth characteristic of many Scandinavian midcentury bentwood designs. (Amazingly, the PET looks like felt.) Most of the other contemporary objects included here, however, do not embody these egalitarian qualities. Admittedly, this is in large part a consequence of the way manufacturing has changed, making even factory-made quality furniture much more of a serious financial commitment than it was 50 years ago. But





TOP TO BOTTOM: CHRISTOPHER WEISS AND MONIKA RESKALA—*BUTTERFLY*, 2006, MONTEREY CYPRESS, HOT-ROLLED STEEL/BLACK ACACIA *BUTTERFLY*, 29 BY 81 BY 31-38 INCHES; DONALD FORTESCUE—*WAFI*, 2006, LAMINATED WALNUT, MONOFILAMENT NYLON, 26 BY 72 BY 20 INCHES; BRIAN KANE—*PET LOUNGE*, 2004, POLYETHYLENE TEREPHTHALATE (PET), TUBULAR STEEL, 31 BY 27 BY 27, PHOTO/STEELCASE/TURNSTONE. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP TO BOTTOM: YVES BEHAR—*INNER LIGHT*, 2004, ALUMINUM, ELECTROLUMINESCENT FILM, FIBERGLASS RESIN, 54 BY 60 BY 9 INCHES (LEFT), 84 BY 80 BY 12 INCHES, PHOTO/MARCUS HANSCHEN; TAPIO WIRKKALA—*TABLE*, CA. 1957, WALNUT, MIXED WOOD LAMINATES, 15½ BY 24½ BY 23½, PHOTO/IRA SCHRANK; ERIC PFEIFFER—*SCANDO TABLE*, 2006, MOLDED PLYWOOD, 11 BY 45½ BY 28 INCHES, PHOTO/LAURIE FRANKEL.

Christopher Weiss and Monika Reskala's dining table *Butterfly*, 2006, is a labor-intensive, one-of-a-kind work made from Monterey cypress and hot-rolled steel. (Its design influence appears more Asian than Nordic.) Donald Fortescue's *Wafi*, 2006, uses monofilament wire strung on a frame of shaped walnut to conjure up a rocking "chaise." It is a truly wonderful object, but reclining or even perching on its narrow edge seems a doubtful prospect. And Yves Béhar's *Inner Light*, 2004—an immense Baroque loop of electroluminescent film on aluminum—is sculpture thinly disguised as a decorative lighting accessory (for a room bigger than most houses in the Bay Area).

"The Sensuous Curve" opened a dialogue between past and present, Scandinavian and Californian, which would be worth continuing in other exhibitions or publications. It was deeply satisfying to see handsome pieces by many Scandinavian designers, but a wider representation of contemporary work would have been more interesting. In addition, more could have been done through the design of the exhibition itself to enhance the relationships we were urged to see. The gallery resembled a retail showroom, with objects crowded together on a riser around the room's periphery, labels placed so discreetly that one had to crouch down to read them, and a tasteful sprinkling of decorative objects. Still, the opportunity to see nearly a dozen Hans Wegner chairs more than made up for such deficiencies.

In the end, a single piece sums up this show's achievements and failures. The Finnish designer Tapio Wirkkala's side table ca. 1957 is a simple, yet brilliantly conceived and executed object. An oval slice of a tree has been inlaid into the middle of the square tabletop, alluding not only to wood's rounded form before we mill it, but to the idea of home as our center, as the place where the heart (wood) is. This modest piece represents all that Scandinavian design aspired to be: well-made objects that were not just beautiful, but useful and affordable as well.

—MARIA PORGES

A sculptor and writer in Oakland, Maria Porges teaches at the California College of the Arts, San Francisco.

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