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The Brooklyn Museum Explores Inclusive Narratives in the Decorative Arts

The remodeled decorative arts galleries' inaugural exhibition—which was curated by Aric Chen—opens tomorrow

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One work that makes excellent use of found pieces, thereby tying into Chen's longstanding interest in sustainability within design. Tejo Remy, designer. Droog Design, Design Cooperative, manufacturer. Chest of Drawers, "You Can't Lay Down Your Memories," designed 1991, made 2005. Photo: Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum

“Like many people, I have always been such a fan of the Brooklyn Museum,” [Aric Chen](#) says to AD PRO. And while Chen is normally focused on his work as the curatorial director of Design Miami/, the independent curator’s sights have recently been set on the Eastern Parkway institution, thanks to his efforts to reinvigorate its decorative arts galleries with a remodeled space and inaugural exhibition—“[Design: 1880 to Now](#).”

“I’d known Anne for quite a while, in fact,” Chen continues, referring to [museum](#) director Anne Pasternak. Chen and Pasternak first met when he was working as a journalist and she was at [Creative Time](#). In 2018, Pasternak invited Chen to take part in a curatorial fellowship that became the basis for this project. “One of the things she asked me to do was to revisit the collection... [and to see] how we could freshen it up a little bit,” Chen says.

The galleries had barely been touched since they were first installed during the 1970s by curator J. Stewart Johnson. (Chen later interned for Johnson while he was at the Met, but that’s another story.) Over the past two years, Chen aimed “to use this incredible collection to remind us of the stories we know, and introduce people to the stories that they might not know,” as he explains it. That meant delving into Japan’s relationship with European designers such as Alvar Aalto, using four objects the museum happened to possess. It also meant deciding to draw attention to Tiffany Favrile vases (“which who doesn’t love?” Chen rhetorically asks), with an emphasis on the history of the workers who made them. And while some notable new pieces—such as a recently acquired [Roberto Lugo](#) vase—are likely to turn heads, the object selection process was more about “dusting off some really great designs from the collection,” Chen explains.



Roberto Lugo. *Brooklyn Century Vase*, 2019.

Photo: © Roberto Lugo / Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum

The selection process, which aimed to transcend classic Eurocentric narratives, hinged on reframing the museum's holdings. "I'm hoping [visitors] see some familiar friends among the works, but also some new ones as well. We were thinking of ways of revisiting design history...but I think it's important not to throw out the baby with the bathwater," Chen says. A minute later, he stresses, "I want people who know the existing narratives to know that those have not been invalidated."

And of course, it should come as no huge surprise that Chen views these efforts as ongoing. Initially, Chen worked with Barry R. Harwood, the museum's longtime curator of decorative arts on the project. Harwood has sadly since passed, but the installation will honor his memory. Chen was aided too by curatorial assistant Shea Spiller, and is quick to note that since he began, the museum has hired two new members for the curatorial department. Museum architect Kenneth Kurtz worked on the renovation.

Unfortunately, thanks to COVID-19, the Shanghai-based Chen has not been able to visit the Brooklyn institution to view the completed space, which officially opens tomorrow. But it's clear that he can't wait to see it. "The museum has a progressivism that reaches deep into its bones," Chen reflects further at one point. "And that's starting to transform design and decorative arts there as well."