



`Toledo Designs' another coup for the museum

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“The Alliance for Art and Industry: Toledo Designs for a Modern America,” the home-grown exhibition opening today at the Toledo Museum of Art, has precious little to show or tell about works of art. Instead, this innovative curatorial effort capping the museum's centennial celebration bursts with energy and information about the art of work.

The first major investigation of industrial design, local or otherwise, to be produced by the museum, it shines a spotlight on Toledo's 20th century industrial strength by revealing how influential this city was in both Midwestern and national design scenes.

But “Toledo Designs” is equally impressive - and even more surprising - as an aesthetic experience, daring to showcase mass-produced products as objects of visual beauty, dignity, and gravity.

And it's yet another coup for the museum, which is enthusiastically embracing unorthodox exhibitions as it enters its second century. Those who appreciated the “Star Wars” show in 2001 for its fresh subject matter will realize that the museum has outdone George Lucas Productions in every way.

“Toledo Designs” is original research marvelously presented. The show exudes an infectious optimism reminiscent of the spirit of a burgeoning America, a can-do mindset that fueled the work of the 38 designers featured here.

The overall effect is courtesy of contemporary designer Constantine Boym, who has transformed the usually reserved Canaday Galleries into a series of colorful, clever showcases. While the installation is quite contemporary, it takes its cues from earlier advertising styles shaped to whet America's appetite for the latest ideas and forms.

Arrayed in dashing fashion are some 180 objects - from a Champion Spark Plug Cleaner in its original box to a shiny green gasoline pump - almost all produced in multiples for the bustling marketplace, yet treated here as unique objects.

Immediately inside the Canaday entrance, a soaring metal tower in a T-shape - what else? - supports an overhead video monitor where old local infomercials flicker and draws both sides of the large gallery into one big and quite confounding impression.

Here are the show's three sexiest cars: a 1953 white Corvette convertible, a curvaceous 1937 Willys Coupe with patent leather finish, and a dashing acid green Willys-Knight Plaidside Roadster. Certainly they're the clearest examples of great industrial design.

But also here are other components: a gleaming white 10-foot, very sculptural confabulation of sinuous line known as the Toledo No. 6, a 1929 stamping machine of cast iron. For variety, there also are an 1897 Men's Safety Bicycle; a stamped and bent metal 1910 Side Chair chair from the Toledo Metal Furniture Co., and two tables of dramatically different styles made from Toledo's most famous product, glass.

Displays throughout are set against partial walls covered in assertive colors - often two contrasting shades - or huge graph paper. Partitions are topped with open metallic grids, echoing the graph motif. Boym, a Russian-born designer now practicing in New York City, created a contemporary rubric which suggests a work in progress, hinting at design studio process.

“People have been building the city of Toledo for over a century,” he said, “and this process continues. There is always a certain excitement about seeing a large construction site and I wanted to pass this feeling on to visitors.”

The objects - many now rare because of planned obsolescence - are treated delicately, encased in acrylic atop pedestals or enclosed in traditional showcases. Wall text and graphics are oversize, easy to read, and eye-catching.

Boym employed unorthodox methods to remind visitors of the multiplicity of production methods and to juxtapose their elegant lines against the practical tasks the objects were created to accomplish. A clear shelf high overhead, for example, presents dozens of the same clear Libbey drinking glasses, restaurant staples for decades. Set against a rich blue wall, they assume an undulating rhythm and appear quite beautiful.

An iron rests on a line drawing of a T-shirt on another center pedestal bursting with domestic helpers. In a playful “test kitchen,” visitors will be able to try out three Calphalon pots, each with a different handle, including one designed by Stan Fuller, a still-active Toledo designer.

Supporting materials - scale drawings, photographs, artists' renderings, and blueprints - help reveal the creative process, and also show how today's design is still influenced by mid-century ideas.

For example, watercolor visualizations of an ice cream parlor planned to incorporate Vitrolite, the colorful opaque glass tile created by Libbey-Owens-Ford Co., could be illustrations of a high-end eatery in a swank London district today. And those who think solar designs were born in the back-to-earth movement of the 1960s will be set straight by plans for solar homes created for L-O-F in the mid-1940s.

“Toledo Designs” will wind up with homage to two of the most innovative ideas born in this city: The Kitchen of Tomorrow, another L-O-F venture led by Creston Doner, and Toledo Tomorrow, the utopian vision of a city by the river designed by Norman Bel Geddes. Neither of these inventive designs survived, but images, some recreations, and documentation will provide a clear picture of what they once were.

As much as any work of art tells its own story of the times in which it was created, the products featured in this benchmark exhibition reveal much about the hopes and dreams of our immediate ancestors. The cars, scales, appliances, and toys tell a story of a time now past and remind us that, while we are gazing at the history we have inherited, we also are shaping history for tomorrow's citizens.

Davira Taragin, the brilliant curatorial spirit behind this amazing collaborative production, asks the key question: “Fifty years from now, what are they going to say about how we're living now?”

What objects in use today might be included in a show like “Toledo Designs” in 2052? It's a great mind game to play while exploring Toledo's rich and beautiful past.

“Toledo Designs” runs through June 16 at the Toledo Museum of Art, then moves to the Riffe Center in Columbus, and the San Francisco International Airport in 2003. Admission to the exhibition is \$5, with free admission Friday nights. A series of related programs is planned by the museum. For more information, visit www.toledomuseum.org or call 419-255-8000.

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