

**News Release
Public Information
Department**

April 2001

Vital Forms: American Art in the Atomic Age, 1940–1960 to Begin National Tour at the Brooklyn Museum of Art on October 12, 2001

Press Preview Thursday, October 11, 10 a.m. until 1. p.m.

From the automobile and Tupperware to paintings by Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko, *Vital Forms: American Art in the Atomic Age, 1940–1960* an exhibition of some 200 objects, will explore how the use of organic forms crossed the boundaries between fine art and popular culture and was used by leading painters and sculptors of the day as well as by designers of industrial products. A decade in the planning, the exhibition was organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where it will be on view October 12, 2001 through January 6, 2002.

This presentation is the third in a Brooklyn Museum of Art series that has included *The American Renaissance, 1876–1917* (1979) and *The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941* (1986). *Vital Forms* has been organized by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, and Kevin L. Stayton, Chair and Curator of Decorative Arts, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Consulting curators are Martin Filler, and Mildred Friedman. Dr. Paul Boyer served as the project's cultural historian. A full-color catalogue published by the BMA in association with Abrams will accompany the exhibition.

This is the first exhibition to include all of the visual arts that made use of organic forms in the 1940s and 1950s and to examine their relationship to the period in which they were created. Among the historical events that influenced the art and design of these two decades were World War II, the Holocaust, the immigration from Europe of an extraordinary number of artists and designers, the dropping of

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the atomic bomb, followed by the Korean war, McCarthyism, and the prosperity and conformity of the 1950s. Much of this uniformity was the result of the creation of the interstate highway system, the spread of suburbia, the proliferation of the automobile, and the growing popularity of television, all of which helped break down regional barriers and begin the process of homogenizing American design.

The war years had produced not only atomic energy, with its positive and negative potentials, but also new technologies such as plastics that were ideally suited for the expression of organic forms. *Vital Forms* will examine how the visual arts reflected the ambivalence between anxiety and optimism during these decades; how the use of organic form evolved from the purely functional into a style; and how the new technologies played a role in art and design.

The creations of industrial designers provided some of the most memorable applications inspired by organic form, among them a Hobie surfboard (1958), Raymond Loewy's ubiquitous boomerang design for Formica (before 1954), Tupperware, and Philco television's Predicta model (1959).

In addition to de Kooning's large-scale Back-drop for *Labyrinth* (1946), created as a backdrop for a Marie Marchowsky modern dance performance and Rothko's *Entombment#1/The Entombment* the exhibition includes paintings by Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner, William Baziotas, Leon Golub, and Gordon Onslow Ford. Photography in the exhibition ranges from a U.S. Army Air Forces gelatin silver print of *Nagasaki Under Atomic Bomb Attack* (1945) to Berenice Abbott's photographs *Soap Bubbles* (1946) and *Penicillin Mold* (1946).

Among the objects representing the application of biomorphic design to the architecture of the era will be photographs of Miami Beach's Fontainebleau Hotel, designed by Morris Lapidus (1954), Levittown in Nassau County, New York (1947), and Trans World Airlines Terminal (1956–62); and a cement, wire mesh, and Plexiglas model of Frederick J. Kiesler's *Endless House* (1959).

A number of important ceramics will also be on view, among them pieces by Russel Wright, Eva Zeisel, and Toshiko Takaezu. The impact of organic design on clothing will be represented by items ranging from examples of Rudi Gernreich's now-famous bathing suits (1954-55); a spectacular Charles James *Four-Leaf Clover* ball gown (1953); an assortment of Sally Victor hats; and a U.S. Navy camouflage poncho. Among the variety of textiles included are examples by Jack Lenor Larsen and Ruth Adler Schnee. A wide range of furniture will also be included, among them several pieces by Charles and Ray Eames, including a folding screen and molded plywood chair based on wartime technology developed to create wood stretchers and leg splints, and examples of Isamu Noguchi's sculptural furniture.

The impact of organic form on graphic design will be seen through magazine and science-fiction paperback book covers, a U.S. Army package of K Rations, brochures, and advertising posters. Also included in *Vital Forms* is a wide assortment of jewelry, ranging from a necklace and bracelets designed by Alexander Calder to several pendants and a brooch created by Margaret De Patta. Among the sculptures on view are Calder's mobile *Red Lily Pads*, (1956), Louise Bourgeois's *Sleeping Figure II* (1959), and Isamu Noguchi's *Figure* (1945).

The works in *Vital Forms* come from a variety of public and private collections, primarily in the United States. Approximately one quarter of the material has been drawn from the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

The exhibition was made possible, in part, by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support was provided by the Mary Jean and Frank P. Smeal Foundation, the Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation, and the Gramercy Park Foundation. Support for the catalogue was provided through the generosity of Furthermore, the Publication Program of The J. M. Kaplan Fund.

In addition to the Brooklyn Museum of Art presentation, Vital Forms will travel to the Walker Art Center, Milwaukee (Spring 2002); the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville (summer 2002); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Fall 2002/Winter 2003); and to the Phoenix Art Museum (Winter/Spring 2003).

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Contacts: Sally Williams, ext. 330
James Gordon, ext. 334
Reggie Cameron, ext. 354
Adam Husted, ext. 331

GENERAL INFORMATION

Museum Hours:

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.;
First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11
p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.;
Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving,
Christmas, and New Year's Day. Museum Café
open until 4 p.m. Wednesday through Friday
and 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday,
and holidays. Museum Libraries and Archives
are open by appointment. Museum shops are
open 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; till 6 p.m. on
Saturdays and Sundays.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to
Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop. Bu
B71, B41, B69, B48. On-site parking availabl