

Images available upon request

Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America Opens at the Denver Art Museum in May 2019

Exhibition focused on creative interpretations of play features works from 40 groundbreaking designers, including Charles and Ray Eames, Paul Rand and Eva Zeisel

DENVER – April 9, 2019 – The Denver Art Museum (DAM) and Milwaukee Art Museum are pleased to announce *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America*, an exhibition presenting the concept of play in postwar American design as a catalyst for creativity and innovation. *Serious Play* explores how employing playfulness allowed designers to bring fresh ideas to the American home, children’s toys and play spaces and corporate identities. The exhibition opened Sept. 28, 2018, at the Milwaukee Art Museum before traveling to the Denver Art Museum where it will be on view starting May 5, 2019.

“While midcentury American design may be familiar to some audiences, this exhibition sheds light on work by many designers from the perspective that play can be a serious form of experimentation,” said co-curator Monica Obniski, Demmer Curator of 20th and 21st Century Design, Milwaukee Art Museum. “The spirit of play, and its importance to the cultural production of the period, is evidenced by the playful domesticity of Alexander Girard’s storage walls and table settings, as well as by the inventiveness of architects, such as Anne Tyng, who designed modular building toys to encourage creativity in children.”

Co-organized by the Denver Art Museum and the Milwaukee Art Museum, the exhibition includes over 200 works in various media, ranging from works on paper, models, textiles, furniture and ceramics to films, toys, playground equipment and product design. Organized around three themes—the American home, child’s play and corporate approaches to design—the exhibition encourages visitors to



consider how design connects to their daily lives. With iconic objects such as Irving Harper’s Ball Clock for Howard Miller Clock Company and Charles and Ray Eames’ Eames Storage Units (ESUs) for Herman Miller Furniture Company, the exhibition will feature works by designers who are well known to audiences as well as introduce less familiar names, such as Henry P. Glass and Estelle and Erwin Laverne.

“Today, we take the idea of fun as being a critical part of commerce for granted,” said co-curator Darrin Alfred, Curator of Architecture and Design, Denver Art Museum. “An airline’s whimsical identity or a corporation’s belief that creativity should be unrestrained and unburdened—these approaches don’t astonish us in the same way because companies like Alcoa, Braniff and Herman Miller challenged designers to surprise the world through imagination and delight.”



During the 1950s and '60s, a number of factors came together to make this bold design innovation possible. Diverse materials and manufacturing techniques opened up possibilities for new approaches to design and larger-scale production. Larger disposable income and leisure time of a growing middle class offered more possibilities for designers to help Americans discover a new way of living at home through thoughtfully designed objects. An emerging focus on child development prompted an interest in children's furniture and placed a fresh emphasis on the importance of smart toy design. Pervasive Cold War anxiety created a desire to bring positivity and escapism into everyday spaces. Architects and designers that took advantage of all these new opportunities thrived.

“Modern design is highly approachable for our visitors, especially today when people are surrounded by more thoughtfully designed experiences than ever before. This exhibition is an opportunity to not only highlight this pivotal moment in design history but also engage visitors in a new way,” said Marcelle Polednik, Ph.D., Donna and Donald Baumgartner Director, Milwaukee Art Museum. “Through the exhibition-related project Make a Card, Build a House, offered on-site, which has participants decorate Eames cards for a giant House of Cards installation, we are inviting diverse audiences from the community to interact with design and to see themselves as valuable contributors to their art museum.”

A full-color, hardcover exhibition catalogue has been published by the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press. Essays give voice to the exhibition's thematic threads and will reveal new scholarship on the topic of play in postwar American design. Authors include *Serious Play* co-curators as well as Pat Kirkham, Professor of Design History, Kingston University, United Kingdom, and Professor Emerita, Bard Graduate Center, New York; Amy Auscherman, Corporate Archivist at Herman Miller; Steven Heller, design journalist, critic, author and editor; and Alexandra Lange, architecture and design critic.

“The curators behind this incredible exhibition are contributing important scholarship that significantly enriches our understanding of the creative impulse behind midcentury design,” said Christoph Heinrich, Ph.D., Frederick and Jan Mayer Director of the Denver Art Museum. “Whether visitors appreciate the exhibition as a way to gain a deeper understanding of design innovation or as inspiration to bring some playfulness into their lives, we are excited to highlight this remarkable collection of works.”

Serious Play will be on view at the Denver Art Museum May 5 through Aug. 25, 2019. It debuted at the Milwaukee Art Museum Sept. 28, 2018, through Jan. 6, 2019.

EXHIBITION ORGANIZERS AND SPONSORS

Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America is co-organized by the Denver Art Museum and the Milwaukee Art Museum. It is generously funded by the Estate of Elizabeth Kirkpatrick, the Adolph Coors Exhibition Endowment Fund, Johnson Foundation of the Rockies, National Endowment for the Arts, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign and the citizens who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). Special thanks to Mod Livin'. Generous support for the Free Play Zone is provided by Herman Miller Cares. Promotional support is provided by *5280 Magazine*, CBS4, Comcast Spotlight and *The Denver Post*.

MEDIA RESOURCES

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ABOUT THE MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

Home to a rich collection of more than 30,000 works of art, the Milwaukee Art Museum is located on the shores of Lake Michigan. Its campus includes the Santiago Calatrava–designed Quadracci Pavilion, annually showcasing three feature exhibitions, and the Eero Saarinen–designed Milwaukee County War Memorial Center and David Kahler–designed addition. In 2016, after a yearlong renovation, the Museum reopened its Collection Galleries, debuting nearly 2,500 world-class works of art within dramatically transformed galleries and a new lakefront addition. This reimagined space also allows for the presentation of additional changing exhibitions. For more information, please visit mam.org.

THE DENVER ART MUSEUM

The Denver Art Museum is an educational, nonprofit resource that sparks creative thinking and expression through transformative experiences with art. Its holdings reflect the city and region—and provide invaluable ways for the community to learn about cultures from around the world. Metro citizens support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), a unique funding source serving hundreds of metro Denver arts, culture and scientific organizations. For museum information, call 720-865-5000 or visit www.denverartmuseum.org.

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Image Credit Lines:

Image 1: Henry P. Glass, *Swing-Line Toy Chest*, 1952. Lacquered Masonite and birch; 31-3/4 × 33 × 17-1/2 in. Manufactured by Fleetwood Furniture Company. Milwaukee Art Museum: Purchase with funds from the Demmer Charitable Trust, M2015.85a,b. Photograph by John R. Glembin.

Image 2: Ray Eames with the first prototype of The Toy, 1950. ©Eames Office LLC (eamesoffice.com)