American Modern, 1925-1940: Design for a New Age by Stewart J. Johnson

A Coffee Table Book--With Content!

In the years between the world wars, a pioneer group of designers, architects, and artists-including Norman Bel Geddes, Donald Deskey, Paul Frankl, Raymond Loewy, Gilbert Rohde, Eliel Saarinen, Walter Dorwin Teague, and Russel Wright-forged a new design aesthetic that was unmistakably American and undeniably modern. This book, the companion volume to an exhibition organized by the American Federation of Arts and opening at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, showcases more than 125 of the most influential works by these and other legendary designers. From chairs, dinnerware, and textiles to lamps, cocktail sets, and clocks, these strikingly innovative objects made stylish modern design accessible to a broad audience and are much sought after by collectors today. The introductory essay ranges from the role of museums and department stores in promoting modern design to the obsession with streamlining to the origins of planned obsolescence. This extraordinary book is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in American design. 170 illustrations, 140 in full color, 9 3/4 x 9 3/4

J. STEWART JOHNSON, the consultant for design and architecture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Modern Art, has curated exhibitions on Alvar Aalto, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Marcel Breuer, among many others. EXHIBITION SCHEDULE The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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My Personal Review:
This is a beautifully designed and printed book based on the exhibition `American Modern' at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The 172 illustrations (142 are large color photos mostly one to a page) focus on objects rather than the wider visual aspects of streamline design such as architecture, transport, engineering. I like the idea of everyday items being used, here you can study, for instance, Lurelle Guild's 1937 Electrolux vacuum cleaner, Norman Bel Geddes' 1940 Patriot radio, Russel Wright's 1937 American Modern dinnerware or the stunning candleholders Wilbert
Orme designed in 1938, there are four shown in four separate arrangements and I would really like to have a set!

Author Stewart Johnson explains, in an essay at the start of the book, how a small group of American designers, several of them emigres from Europe, abandoned the ornamentation of Art Deco in favor of simple clean lines, using new materials and manufacturing techniques. Furniture designer Paul Frankl was one of this group and he became an active promoter of the new style. He tied it all down to six characteristics

1. Simplicity.
2. Plain surfaces.
3. Unbroken lines.
4. Accentuation of structural necessity.
5. Dramatisation of the intrinsic beauty of materials.
6. Elimination of meaningless and distracting motives of the past.

Johnson adds one other point that Frankl would not have mentioned at the time: Streamlining. This was the idea that made the style American.

The back of the book has several pages of designer biographies, a useful glossary (Aluminum to Vitrolite and I now know what Monel Metal is) bibliography and index. Joe Coscia Jr, of the Metropolitan’s photo studio, should be congratulated on his wonderful photography of the exhibits, they leap right off the page.

As this book only covers objects you might want to read about other areas of Streamline design, have a look at `The Machine Age in America' by Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne Pilgrim and Dickran Tashjian. I think this can be considered the standard work on the subject. Another book that I like is Martin Greif’s `Depression Modern: Thirties Style in America’, it has some excellent architectural (especially interior) photos that I have not seen in other books. Want to know more? Scan over my Listmania: 'Streamline' books selection.

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