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High Art and Industrial Design: MoMA and the Politics of Marketing the USA in France

Abstract

This archival investigation uses as a case study the Museum of Modern Art's *50 Years of American Art* (1955) to assess the role of MoMA and the US Government in promoting American industrial design items within France during the Cold War. The author asserts that these powerful institutions came to view such wares as a vital means of quelling growing fears of American cultural homogenisation within France. The paper investigates how through *50 Years of American Art* the exhibition organisers sought to build support for an American way of life enhanced by a merger between some of the nation's leading creative talents and its vast technological might. Fostering the development of a new identity and desire for such goods within France represented a parallel mission of these institutions.

Biography

Dr. Gay McDonald is a senior lecturer at the University of NSW, College of Fine Arts, within the School of Art Education. She has a doctoral degree in art history, a graduate diploma in art museum management and a bachelors degree in art education. After completing her doctoral studies she was awarded the inaugural Frost Post-Doctoral Fellowship, at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art for her doctoral research on the French involvement in the launching of American art in France during the Cold War.

Her current research assesses the role of MoMA (New York) and the US Government in promoting American mass-produced industrial design in Europe after the war. The study traces the various ways MoMA presented American industrial design to its new European audiences between 1950 and 1959: as a symbol of democracy, of progress and all-American know-how.

High Art and Industrial Design: MoMA and the Politics of Marketing the USA in France

In the spring of 1955 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) launched in Paris *50 Years of American Art* a mammoth exhibition surveying the full gamut of 20th century art from the high to the more popular. Included was an impressive survey of 20th century developments in American painting and sculpture as one might expect. The exhibition also featured solid representations of architecture, photography, printmaking, typography, film and mass-produced industrial design items. As such this was the largest and most aggressive statement to date about the vigour and originality of American cultural production ever to have been seen in Europe. While the exhibition made a triumphal tour throughout other parts of Europe, Paris was the only location to exhibit the contents in its entirety.

Subsequent art writers have identified *50 Years of American Art* as significant for two chief reasons, both of which relate to the generous quota of abstract expressionist works in the exhibition. First, as a crucial prelude to its much vaunted successor *The New American Painting*, an exhibition dedicated to abstract expressionism, and which reputedly secured abstract expressionism's international preeminence three years later.¹ And second, *50 Years of American Art* has been discussed as a tool of cultural diplomacy deployed by MoMA during the Cold War to promote a positive image of the U.S. in Europe.² Here I am referring to the well-known view that MoMA promoted the expressive freedom of abstract expressionism to distinguish American art from its socialist counterpart and to convince Europeans that the militarily and economically dominant US defended the same values as they did.³ These earlier studies have been crucial in encouraging a reconsideration of abstract expressionism's canonical status within and beyond the US. With this aspect of MoMA's exhibition history now well rehearsed in the literature, we are well placed to scrutinise more closely the significance of the other wares, and in particular the imposing array of manufactured industrial design items, shipped into Paris in the same container.

Using *50 Years of American Art* as a case study this paper interrogates the role of MoMA and the United States Information Service (USIS) in building support in France for such high technology and mass-produced consumables amidst French fears of American cultural homogenisation. I argue that these institutions viewed such wares as a vital means of quelling French fears of American cultural homogenisation and to build support for the American way of life.⁴ The merit of assessing the implications of MoMA's presentation of such content to French audiences at this time should not be underestimated. According to the historian Richard Kuisel, in the early 1950s French intellectuals on the right and left became concerned that the arrival of American consumerism and mass culture would dilute and weaken French identity.⁵

This was by no means the first time that MoMA had sent abroad exhibitions incorporating items of industrial design.⁶ Between 1951 and 1955 MoMA had prepared and circulated in Europe three exhibitions dedicated exclusively to American mass-produced and handmade design items: *Design for Use, U.S.A.* (1951-1952) *U.S. Selections for Berlin Trade Fair* (1952-1954) and *American Design for Home and Decorative Use* (1953-1955). While ostensibly selected by MoMA to promote awareness of American design in Europe, each had been the result of a collaboration between MoMA and one of a number of US government agencies among them the Department of State, the Mutual Security Agency and the United States Information Agency.

50 Years of American Art also featured industrial design. But it represented a different kind of cultural initiative to that of the aforementioned exhibitions. Where earlier exhibitions were typically displayed directly under the auspices of the sponsoring government agency, *50 Years of American Art* appeared in Paris at the Musée d'art moderne with the exclusive imprimatur of MoMA. The 1955 show also offered a surprising breadth of content. Futuristic designer chairs by, for example, Charles Eames, Harry Bertoia and Eero Saarinen appeared alongside cocktail shakers, shrimp-cleaners and plastic products by Tupperware giant Earl C. Tupper. The exhibition also included a retrospective of 20th century developments in American painting and sculpture and stills and screenings of 'historically significant' American films. Along with the more recent triumphs of American postwar architecture, the exhibition provided French viewers with tangible evidence of the American lifestyle, much of which had only been glimpsed at in Hollywood movies.

Despite MoMA's obvious efforts to impress, for some French observers of the exhibition, the breadth of the content was just too much. Of the show Pierre Descargues from *Les Lettres Françaises* wrote 'But there it is; they wanted to show us everything, from toys for children to paintings for grownups. Only a Cadillac, a jet plane and an H-bomb are lacking but will undoubtedly be included another time.'⁷ The inclusion of such a diverse array of non-high art goods precipitated a controversy not only amongst some sectors of the French press. Even an employee of the Musée d'art moderne, where *50 Years of American Art* opened, was quoted as being horrified by the inclusion of 'household articles in an art show'.⁸

As with most exhibitions, several stakeholders had input into the final form of the exhibition. And significantly, in light of the above comment, one of them was Jean Cassou, the director of the Musée d'art moderne. In 1952 Cassou had initiated what would become an informal relationship with MoMA to host that museum's most prestigious exhibitions across the course of the 1950s.⁹ Since then the Musée had presented to its various constituencies MoMA's *12 Modern American Painters and Sculptors* (1953) and *Contemporary Drawings in the USA* (1954). Now the French director pressed for something different. The type of show he envisioned would portray 'the twentieth century spirit of America'.¹⁰ While painting and sculpture might form the backbone of the exhibition Cassou requested that MoMA include architecture, film and interior design.¹¹

Cassou's request for such a show may be related to his belief that modern art could only be understood in relation to what he described as 'the social order, the decoration, literature, fashions [and] ideas' of the day.¹² This point he reiterated in the preface to the exhibition catalogue for *50 Years of American Art*: 'What better measure have we of the taste of an epoch' he wrote, 'what clearer index of the penetration of an aesthetic standard, than the style and beauty which are reflected by its chairs, its drinking glasses, even its tools.'¹³ According to Cassou the purpose of placing pieces of furniture, photos, and manuscripts amongst the painting and sculpture, was to convey as he put it 'that works of art are not isolated or arbitrary phenomena, but part of a whole, and that this whole is our own contemporary life'.¹⁴

That *50 Years of American Art* included architecture, industrial design and film, suggests that MoMA officials accommodated Cassou's requirements. The decision to do so could hardly have been difficult. After all, MoMA had a legitimate opportunity to showcase its unique conceptualisation of the modern museum. As an institution equally devoted to modern painting and sculpture as well as the less traditional arts of industrial design, architecture, photography and typography MoMA challenged the boundaries of art and of what should constitute the preserve of the modern museum.

From its inception in 1929, Alfred H. Barr Jr., then director, had conceived of MoMA as an institution embracing all the modern arts. By 1940 MoMA brought this plan to fruition with the establishment of departments devoted to these areas. And in 1954, the year of its twenty-fifth birthday, 'the museum was riding the crest of its popularity and influence...'.¹⁵ Thus to send to Paris an exhibition which showcased the breadth of MoMA's holdings served as a fitting way to celebrate that museum's

achievements to date. And as importantly it presented to international audiences a microcosmic model of MoMA's vision of the modern museum.

Such a scenario provides a clean account of events. But it fails to address the high stakes involved for the staff of MoMA and USIS who collaborated in the organisation of this exhibition. A month after USIS Paris formed the plan to mount a cultural festival within which *50 Years of American Art* would be presented, Lawrence Morris, from USIS Paris, arrived at the museum to speak to the International Council, newly appointed to oversee MoMA's international operations. In his address Morris made known that French resistance to the American way of life had reached a critical point. Of course, such matters were of prime concern to USIS Paris an organization in part responsible for securing French support for US foreign policy.

Since World War II, Morris noted, the US had been in a position economically, politically and industrially to decide France's future and to shape the world in which the French were to live. The bottom line was that the French did not like the American way of life. The French public, he maintained, believed that increased industrialisation in the United States had led to a far greater emphasis on collective thinking and on decision-making based on statistical analysis, rather than in terms of the needs of the individual. This line of thinking, he remarked, had been articulated in a popular book called *America the Menace* (1931), an ardent anti-modernist critique of American life by Georges Duhamel, a French writer.

Duhamel's publication, a bestseller in the inter-war period, had played a pivotal role in defining the French view of the US as a land of standardisation and materialism. And as Morris indicated, Duhamel's ideas had been taken up with renewed vigour by French observers of American life after the war. The challenge for the French at this time was how to attain the economic and social benefits of the American model without the perceived downsides of cultural and economic philistinism and social conformity.¹⁶ As Morris told members of the International Council 'There is this doubt whether the American world provides the individual with the right to think to be different from his neighbors and adopt a creative attitude towards his own life.'¹⁷ Morris urged the International Council to support MoMA's efforts to heighten French awareness about twentieth century American cultural achievements which he believed implicitly bespoke the individuality and freedom of thought so dear to the French.

French fears of being eventually swamped by the economic and cultural encroachment of the US were hardly unjustified. Having established a strong commercial base in Europe in the first two decades of the twentieth century, enterprising Americans began to shore up their investments in the inter-war years through the purchase of the most advanced industries, the establishment of partnerships with local firms, and by setting up factories.¹⁸ While these developments triggered increased anxiety over cultural homogenisation, the United States' economic and social impact on Europe was still relatively small during the inter-war period.¹⁹

However, the situation changed dramatically in the 1950s, when the US began to dominate the economies of Western Europe and Britain to an unprecedented extent.²⁰ France, in particular, felt the impact upon its economy. With incomes rising faster than the cost of living, French wage-earners experienced the benefits of a rapid increase in purchasing power. That coupled with more easily available credit led to a 40 percent increase in household consumption in France between 1950 and 1957.²¹ Spending patterns also changed. Between 1949 and 1957 the number of home appliances rose by 400 percent. And large sums of money were now spent on televisions, cars, radios, music, sports and photographic equipment; many of these products having been imported from the US. While French wage-earners were eager to adopt a more 'Americanised' lifestyle, their aspirations were not matched by French élites who grew increasingly alarmed about the implications of such changes for French culture. Morris had no difficulty securing the backing of the International Council. Shortly after, MoMA began the preparations for *50 Years of American Art*. This was the next major exhibition of American art MoMA sent to France. Given the situation mapped out by Morris, the inclusion of the very kind of cultural production that had precipitated such anxiety amongst French élites, might have struck some observers as odd or even unwise. On the contrary, an examination of the installation of this multimedia extravaganza and the accompanying catalogue worked to produce some persuasive stories about recent American cultural production. Two main narratives can be isolated. The more blatant of the two amounted to a bold assertion of postwar abstraction's astonishing individuality.

20th century American painting and sculpture dominated *50 Years of American Art*, filling almost the entire upper floor of the Musée d'art moderne. But abstract expressionism received top billing, its star status made evident via the movement's sheer dominance within the painting and sculpture section and its position within the galleries. MoMA director René d'Harnoncourt arranged the paintings in roughly

chronological order orchestrating a dramatic build-up from early modernism through to postwar abstraction, situating it as the peak of American cultural achievements.

Within his carefully crafted catalogue essay Holger Cahill further embroidered the point. Into his discussion Cahill wove the remarkable story of American cultural emancipation. This process involved the overthrow of academic doctrine in the nineteenth century, the ushering in of European modernism in the early twentieth century and finally liberation from foreign influence in the 1940s with the rise of the abstract expressionists. By diminishing the role of foreign influence, and by highlighting the revolutionary nature of the abstract expressionists' spatial innovations and freedom of expression, Cahill confidently asserted that abstract expressionism was the most original art form to have ever emerged in the U.S. While expressing uncertainty about the future path of American art, of one thing Cahill was certain. Any new direction would develop independently of Europe and the East, because the long tutelage of American artists was over.²²

A second less explicit but equally powerful narrative is also discernible within the exhibition: that of the US as a nation capable of transforming the more technical areas of cultural production into aesthetically significant art forms. Within the areas of architecture and industrial design this narrative emerges most emphatically.

The architecture of the postwar era literally opened the show. As one observer wrote; 'Entering through the architectural display, the spectator is plunged immediately into the very heart of American life.'²³ Giant photos 20 ft in height, scale models and plans offered viewers a range of interpretations of the skyscrapers, factories, and homes displayed. By means of stereoscopic slides, it was even possible to 'enter' into the interiors of some of the exhibited works. Most of the buildings included would now readily pass as icons of modernist architecture, among them *Lever House* by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the *Johnson Wax Company Building* by Frank Lloyd Wright, and domestic dwellings by Charles Eames, Philip Johnson and Richard Neutra.

According to the curator Arthur Drexler all the buildings had been chosen for their exemplary aesthetic value and because they exemplified the most significant directions in American architecture in recent years.²⁴ Hitchcock launched off by asserting the international preeminence of American architecture from the mid 20th century. This situation he attributed to a buoyant economy and to the influence of American as well as European talents, chief among them Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, key exponents of the International Style. Along with Frank Lloyd Wright he argued that the work of these towering figures of modern architecture offered a variety of directions now pursued by younger architects preventing modern architecture from becoming monolithic as 'some have hoped and others feared'.²⁵

Hitchcock also constructed a key role for big business in fostering the creation of what he described as the recent emergence of luxurious American architecture. Business, he claimed had moved against the trend adopted by architects of recent decades who 'prated only of economy'.²⁶ Aware of the advertising advantages of striking architecture these powerful corporations, he claimed, had willingly assumed the mantle of architectural patrons. Likening them to the Roman statesman and literary patron of Virgil and Horace, Hitchcock remarked that these 'more conspicuous American Maecenas', among them Lever Brothers in New York, General Motors in Detroit, the Johnson Wax Company in Racine had 'backed their architects in putting quality before economy'.²⁷ Why? Because, as Hitchcock concluded 'Architecture is not merely an aspect of the practical side of civilization'.²⁸ Thus within the new Rome, Hitchcock proposed that a productive partnership between industry and the leading architects of the US had stimulated the flowering of aesthetically significant even "beautiful" architecture.

A similar story about the capacity of the US to imbue technical areas of cultural production with considerable aesthetic merit was taken up equally forcefully in the industrial design component, with a slight variation: Here the emphasis was upon demonstrating how techniques of mass production had been employed in the US by creative designers and manufacturers to produce timeless, aesthetically pleasing industrial design items. Greta Daniel, the curator, argued the case in various ways. No longer, she wrote, was aesthetic merit dependent upon cost nor was it linked only to the hand productions of the artist.²⁹ Low cost mass-produced items now offered a viable alternative having been determined not only by the means of production and technique but also by contemporary aesthetics. And there were alternatives from which to choose. Daniel noted that the American housewife who did all the housework, despite enjoying a higher standard of living than her European counterparts, made for a discerning judge. In deciding upon the selection of domestic and utilitarian objects, she applied the same aesthetics standards as she would in the choice of home décor.³⁰

So well conceived were these American ‘productions of industry’, that Daniel proclaimed them ‘the decorative arts of the 20th century’.³¹ And MoMA, she put forward as the institution blessed with the taste to identify the artfulness of these unorthodox objects. ‘In putting together a permanent collection,’ Daniel wrote, ‘MoMA is no less rigorous in the choice of these works than for its strictly artistic collections.’³² Thus although these objects weren’t ‘strictly’ art they came close, having received the official sanctification of that acclaimed cultural taste-maker MoMA. And with the addition of soft spotlighting, and a tasteful distance between each item these humble objects were presented to French audiences as classics of American design.

These intertwining narratives embedded within *50 Years of American Art* generated a complex message about the United States at mid-century, not only about the existence of American culture but of its vigour and dynamism in all facets of American life. This message was certainly powerfully asserted through MoMA’s presentation of abstract expressionism. More crucially perhaps, given the prevailing concerns of French élites, the exhibition also put a positive gloss on daily life in the United States, of the type of buildings Americans lived in and worked in and the type of modern tools, appliances and household accessories they used. As the foregoing discussion also attests, the exhibition forcefully championed the view that the United States, far from being controlled by its industrial might, as Duhamel argued, had established creative ways of harnessing that power to enhance the everyday life of its citizenry. And within that scheme, MoMA as the principal gatekeeper, constructed a leading role for itself as an arbiter and educator of taste. While more work needs to be done on the specific nature of the earlier exhibitions sent abroad by MoMA, the findings of this paper indicate the need to broaden the terms of the debate surrounding MoMA’s postwar activities.

¹ According to Hayden Herrera, for example, both shows were important, but it was *The New American Painting* that finally “opened European eyes to Abstract Expressionism.” Hayden Herrera, “Postwar American Art in Holland,” in Rudi Fuchs and Adam D. Weinberg, *Views from Abroad: European Perspectives on American Art I*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995, 34-35.

² Eva Cockcroft likewise singles out “Modern Art in the U.S.A” but she identifies “The New American Painting” as the linchpin in this endeavor. MoMA renamed “50 Years of American Art” “Modern Art in the United States: A Selection from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art”, after the show left Paris for its European tour. See Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” reprinted in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, eds., Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris, New York: Phaidon, 1992.

³ Serge Guilbaut, “Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick,” *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal, 1945-1964* ed., Serge Guilbaut ,London and Cambridge: MIT, 1990, 33.

⁴ The paper maintains a French focus. Even though the exhibition toured Europe after its debut, MoMA assembled “50 Years of American Art” specifically for Paris. The exhibition formed part of “Salute to France” a grandiose arts festival initiated by the cultural relations section of USIS Paris and co-hosted by the American private sector, according to official reports, as a tribute to French civilisation. As such MoMA constructed the exhibition with a primarily French audience in mind.

⁵ Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization*, University of California Press, 1993, 113. As Kuisel notes the debate in the 1950s was heavily marked by ideology. Most of these observers were convinced that America was no “consumer paradise” and tried to reveal that fact to their readers.

⁶ In the first three decades of its operations, MoMA staff used the term “industrial design” interchangeably with terms like “applied art”, “design objects”, “modern design” and “objects of use”. These labels typically referred to useful manufactured domestic artifacts like furniture, kitchen utensils, glassware, as distinct from the more traditional arts of painting and sculpture. I use the term ‘industrial design’ in this sense. For useful discussion of MoMA’s changing attitudes towards industrial design see Felicity Scott, “From Industrial Art to Design: the Purchase of Domesticity at MoMA, 1929-1959”, *Lotus International*, 1998, pp 106-143.

⁷ Pierre Descargues, “50 ans d’art aux états-unis”, *Les Lettres Françaises*, 7 April 1955.

⁸ C. Lake, “Display Designed to Show Salient Features of U.S. Art”, *Christian Science Monitor*, April 16, 1955 in MoMA Archives, NY: International Council/International Program Exhibition Records. *Modern Art in the United States*. (ICE-F-24-54; Paris): box 21.1.

⁹ Gay McDonald, “The Launching of American Art in Postwar France: Jean Cassou and the Musée National d’Art Moderne,” *American Art*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring 1999, 47-50.

¹⁰ L. Morris to R. d’Harnoncourt, 5 November 1954, MoMA Archives, NY: ICE-F-24-54 (Paris): unprocessed.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jean Cassou, “Art Museums and Social Life,” *Museum* 2, no. 3 (1949): 158.

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- ¹³ Jean Cassou, “Preface,” *50 Ans d’art aux états-unis: collections du Museum of Modern Art de New York*, Musée National d’Art Moderne, 1955, 8.
- ¹⁴ Jean Cassou, “The Musée d’Art Moderne,” *Museum* 1, no. 1 (1948): 51.
- ¹⁵ Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art*. (New York: Atheneum, 1973): 354.
- ¹⁶ R. Kuisel, *Seducing the French*, 3.
- ¹⁷ L. Morris to R. d’Harnoncourt, 5 November 1954, MoMA Archives, NY: ICE-F-54 (Paris): unprocessed.
- ¹⁸ Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*. (New York: Basic Books, 1997): 10.
- ¹⁹ Pells, *Not Like Us*, 12.
- ²⁰ Pells, *Not Like Us*, 154-55.
- ²¹ Kuisel, *Seducing the French*, 105.
- ²² Holger Cahill, “American Painting and Sculpture,” *Modern Art in the United States: A Selection from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1956): 28.
- ²³ J. Albert-Cartier, *Combat*, in MoMA Archives, NY: IC/IP Exh. Records ICE-F-24-54; (Paris): box 21.1.
- ²⁴ MoMA Archives, NY: ICE-F-24-54: press release. The architectural component was based on the exhibition “Built in the USA: Post-War Architecture” organized by Henry Russell-Hitchcock and Arthur Drexler at MoMA in 1953.
- ²⁵ Henry Russell-Hitchcock, “L’Architecture,” *50 Ans d’Art aux États-Unis: Collections du Museum of Modern Art de New York*. (Paris: Musée National d’Art Moderne, 1955): 63.
- ²⁶ Russell-Hitchcock, “L’Architecture,” 65.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Greta Daniel, “Les Arts Appliqués,” *50 Ans d’Art aux États-Unis: Collections du Museum of Modern Art de New York*. (Paris: Musée National d’Art Moderne, 1955): 75.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Daniel, “Les Arts Appliqués,’76.
- ³² Ibid.