

Figure 1: Tiffany Studios, American (active 1900-38), Tel el-Amarna Vase with Separate Foot (ca. 1900). Blown glass. 13 3/4 inches high by 9 5/8 inches in diameter. Sydney and Frances Lewis Art Nouveau Fund purchase. Photos published by permission of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

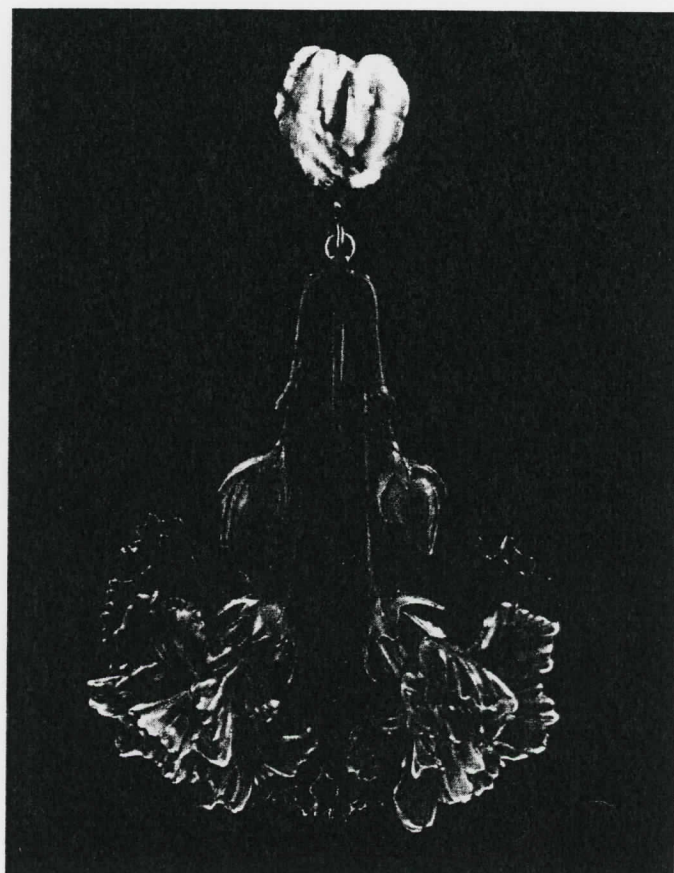


Figure 2: René Lalique, French (1860-1945). Brooch/Pendant (ca. 1897-98). Gold enamel, glass, and pearl. Dimensions: three and one-eighth inches by one and seven-eighths inches by one-half inch. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Sydney and Frances Lewis Foundation.

CROSSCURRENTS OF MODERNISM: Selections from the Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

A Review by
Mel Byars

"Modern" and "Modernism" are terms often used when more precise explanations are elusive. One of the more accurate definitions is that "fundamentally modernism refers to the tendency of twentieth-century art, literature and music to value innovation and reformulation over and above perceived cultural aesthetic traditions."¹ Indeed and unfortunately, it has also come to mean "contemporary," "up to date," and "now," all contributing to a general muddled understanding concerning Modernism as a movement and artistic statement.

The title *Crosscurrents of Modernism*—chosen for a venue of selections, covering the half century preceding

World War II, from the Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts—accomplished little toward making clear Modernism's meaning. Held from November 18, 1994, through February 26, 1995, the exhibition was organized by The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, a welcome addition to pedagogy and exhibition space in New York City, and sparingly documented objects by some of the best-known exponents of the Modern era, including Edgar Brandt, Pierre Chareau, Josef Hoffmann, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Richard Riemerschmid. If a definition of "Modern" is clear to you—that it covers a disparate

array of periods, movements, styles, and groups ranging from the Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, and the Glasgow School to De Stijl, Art Déco, the Vienna Sessession, and forms, like those of Frank Lloyd Wright, which escape classification—then the “crosscurrents” of the Bard exhibition is inclusive of all the aspects of the decorative arts from the late nineteenth century to the first third of the twentieth century, except industrial design, the Machine Age, and the Bauhaus.

Most of the objects in the Bard show were collected by Sydney and Frances Lewis, founders of Best Products (America’s largest catalogue-showroom merchandiser), as part of an extensive group of approximately six hundred objects or suites initially donated to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1985 with an ongoing-acquisition endowment. Frederick R. Brandt, curator of twentieth-century art at the museum, personally assisted the Lewises in their collection prior to the bequest. After the gift, the Lewises subsequently turned to avant-garde furniture and design, such as that by Peter Shire and the Memphis group. Best’s showrooms, which became known for their so-called De-architecture, were widely published from their first building, in 1970, by the SITE architecture group.²

The objects at The Bard Center, comprising the seventh exhibition since its opening in 1993, were selected by the Center’s director of exhibitions, Nina Strizler-Levine, and its dean, Derek Ostergard, and the specific examples on view reflected their biases and preferences, as those generally of the Lewises and Mr. Brandt, rather than a universal perspective on the Modern applied arts. There were objects in the exhibition which can be seen elsewhere in New York City, the *Table* (1927) of Eileen Gray, the glass work of the Tiffany Studios, and the plank-back *Side Chair* (1904) by Frank Lloyd Wright. And possibly some other examples may have been better substituted with other objects in the Lewis Collection, for example, C.F.A. Voysey’s *Mantel Clock* (1896), Jacques Gruber’s stained-glass *Lily Pad Window* (ca. 1900), the Greene brothers’ *Pratt House Living Room Table* (ca. 1909), and maybe some others. The work of Ruth Reeves, the American best known for her textiles for Radio City Music Hall, is rare; the inclusion of her *Bed* (ca. 1928) would have been a desirable addition.

Except for textiles which were noticeably absent, the exhibition included work in a wide range of other media—wood, metals, ceramics, enamel, ivory, paper, leather, and precious and semiprecious materials—and almost a dozen glass objects as part of more than the eighty items or suites on display. Except for Mackintosh, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Vicke Lindstrand, all other glass artists represented were French. Far too many examples from the Tiffany Studios in Corona, New York, were chosen for such a small exhibition: the *Pebble Shade*

Lamp (ca. 1900), *Squash Lamp* (ca. 1906), bronze and enamel *Mirror* (ca. 1900), blown-glass *Aquamarine Vase* (ca. 1911), Cicade Box (ca. 1900), and *Tel el-Amarna Vase with Separate Foot* (ca. 1900), (Figure 1). The latter in blown glass is purportedly based on a vase found in the Palace of Akhenaton, a site visited by Tiffany and an object revealing his academic interest in recreating artifacts. The vase was finished in his renowned *favrite* technique, developed in 1892, registered in 1894, and successfully shown at Siegfried Bing’s shop L’Art Nouveau in Paris in 1895 and the Salon of that year; the effect the process created was meant to imitate shards from ancient Troy, Mycenae, and Cyprus through vapor spraying the surface of a molten-glass object. Illustrating Tiffany’s sublime mastery of blown glass, his *Aquamarine Vase* features a group of tadpoles swimming in a “pond” (the heavy, solid, deep portion of the bottom of the vessel), while dragonflies hover overhead (on the outer shell).

Also chosen from the Lewis Collection, the small *pâte-de-verre* vase (ca. 1925), illustrating a landscape of towering trees, by brothers Auguste and Antonin Daum is not a distinguished example of the brothers’ work. Other glass work included the *Coupe* (ca. 1900), sold to the Lewis’s by Félix Marcilhac in Paris, which illustrates Emile Gallé’s mastery of glass’s plasticity and, due to its loose form and its marine and other motifs taken from nature, appears more geological than manufactured. Eugène Rousseau’s work was represented by a maroon thin-walled vase (ca. 1885), produced by the cased-glass process, and François-Émile Décorchemont’s by a mold-blown glass vase (ca. 1925). There were four examples of René Lalique’s celebrated jewelry (from ca. 1897-1900), singularly worthy of a glass aficionado’s attendance at the exhibition (Figure 2). Lalique, who began as a jeweler furnishing Cartier, Bucheron, and his former master Louis Aucoc, became better known for his semi-industrial functional glass, including the highly stable “demi-crystal,” one-off pieces by the *cire perdue* process, and even hundreds of glass panels in 1913 for the Coty Building at 712 Fifth Avenue in New York. His jewelry, influenced by Renaissance and Japanese art, has been the subject of recent in-depth study and of a significant exhibition organized by Yvonne Brunhammer as her last significant effort as chief conservator after almost four and one half decades at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.³

The thirteen and three-quarter inch (39.9cm), *Swimmers Vase* made in 1934 by Vicke Lindstrand, representing the decorative arts at the end of the Modern period covered, was donated by Lelia Blair Northrop, and clearly not the Lewis’s taste (Cover). It features engraved androgynously sexual, athletic bodies in

PAUL HOLLISTER SPEAKS TO BARD SEMINAR

FROM PROU TO PUIFORCAT: ART MODERNE AT SEA

A Review by
Malcolm Mac Neil

On February 16, 1995, an audience of two hundred had the pleasure of hearing Paul Hollister, NEAGC member and former *Bulletin* editor, present an informative slide-illustrated lecture. The fourth speaker in the series "Masters of Modernity," organized by The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, New York, in conjunction with the exhibition "Crosscurrents of Modernism: Selections from the Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts" (November 17, 1994 to February 26, 1995).

To regale the audience Paul Hollister evokes the era of the great liners through vivid descriptions. Here is the opening paragraph of his lecture:

Each sailing signals a new level of being. The passengers—once they have disentangled themselves from their visitors known and unknown who crowd their cabins: the heavy drinkers, the weepers, the jealous and the pedestrian fond; once all these have been shocked to reality by the advancing shiver of the gong and the solar plexus punch of the ship's whistle or its flatulent horn—then everything eases. The great endless liner looses its cables and its landlock and slips imperceptibly into its own life, enclosing the lives of the passengers. Cabin doors close, long corridors become empty, the great empty public rooms tremble slightly with the throb of the propellers, on the upper decks the paper streamers that bound the ship in color snap and fall away like dying fireworks. The great mass of the ship with its cargo of delights and thrills turns slowly toward its duty in the marble spray of the hard-as-steel sea.

Hollister, a renowned decorative-arts historian, author, and expert on glass paperweights, traced the stylistic developments and discussed the significant designers on six French luxury transatlantic ocean liners dating to the first half of this century. Having been a passenger aboard all six ships, he was well-qualified to lead his audience on a memorable voyage, highlighting the role of glass along the way.

From 1912 to 1935, the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique in conjunction with the French government launched the *France* (1912), the *Paris* (1921), the *Île-de-France*; (1927), the *Lafayette* (1930), the *Champlain* (1932), and the *Normandie* (1935). These floating palaces were intended to be dazzling showcases of France's achievements in the decorative arts. In 1921,

motion, on clear glass by Emile Goldman. As a designer at the Orrefors Glasbruck for a dozen years until 1940, Lindstrand produced a simple, undulating, seemingly deliquescent glass silhouette that supports Goldman's theme, a manifestation of the healthful and youthful new idealism of the first decade of the twentieth century. A pair of zinc and leaded- and mirrored-glass panels (ca. 1905), representing Mackintosh's work of two decades earlier than the Orrefors vase, illustrates his primary interest in glass. Also in the exhibition, the bow-back armchair (1904), Mackintosh designed for Hous'hill at Nitshill, Glasgow, the residence of Miss Catherine Cranston and her husband Major Cochrane, was one of the few pieces in the house to escape serious damage due to a fire circa 1930. Revealing glass as fundamental to Mackintosh's decorative language, the chair incorporates glass disks in the back slats.

During the two-month preparation for the exhibition, prior to its opening in New York in November 1994, Bard Center's students were able to inspect the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts installation in Richmond, wrote the label text for the exhibition, and selected peripheral materials on display, including photographs.

The exhibition was accompanied by a brochure check-list with careless attention paid to the life dates of some designers like Gray, Argy-Rousseau, de Feure, Goodwin, and Stickley. There was the absence of Jean Fouquet's death date—1984—and, as usual, of Clément Mère's, whose year of demise appears to be published nowhere. Mr. Brandt's catalogue, *Late 19th and Early 20th Century Decorative Arts*, documents the Lewis Collection up to ten years ago and as such does not include all the objects in The Bard Center exhibition.⁴□

Reference Notes:

1. *The Facts On File Encyclopedia of the 20th Century*. New York and Oxford: Facts On File, 1991, p. 627.
2. Restany, Pierre, et al. *Site: Architecture as Art*. New York: St. Martin's press, 1980.
3. Brunhammer, Yvonne, et al. *René Lalique: Bijoux Verre*. Paris: Union centrale des arts décoratifs, Reunion des Musées nationaux, 1991.
4. Brandt, Frederick R. *Late 19th and Early 20th Century Decorative Arts: The Sydney and Frances Lewis Collection in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*. Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1985. ■