



BGC

The Bard Graduate Center
for Studies in the Decorative Arts Design, and Culture

UTOPIA & REALITY:
Modernity in Sweden, 1900–1960

On view from March 14 through June 16, 2002

UTOPIA & REALITY:

Defining Swedish Modernism

Is modernism a distinctive movement or a continual reevaluation? An allegiance to functionalism or a tool for the affluent? A celebration of aesthetic vision or a commitment to social ideals?

From the turn of the century to the late 1950s in Sweden, artists and designers working in all media sought to define the concept of modernism while adapting new utopian ideologies to everyday realities. The exhibition *Utopia & Reality: Modernity in Sweden, 1900–1960* displays 200 classic works—including architectural drawings, furnishings, industrial products, paintings, graphic arts, and photographs—that illustrate the range and reveal the complexity of Swedish modernism.

Introducing Functionalism

Influenced by the International Style that had emerged in Europe during the 1920s and the contemporaneous Russian and German avant-garde theories, architects and designers in Sweden sought to create a visual idiom that was appropriate for modern industrial society. The Swedish variant of modern design that gained exposure at the pivotal Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 became known as “Funkis,” or Functionalism. While simple and naturalistic in form and construction, the so-called “Swedish Grace” of many of the buildings and objects produced still referred to the classicism and elitism of Sweden’s aesthetic past.

Creating an Everyday Utopia

Influential Swedish reformist intellectuals Ellen Key (1849–1926), who espoused “beauty for all,” and Gregor Paulsson (1889–1977), who called for “more beautiful objects for everyday use,” promoted a utopian vision of an applied modernism in the belief that good design should be readily available to all classes and would improve standards of living. Organizations such as the Swedish Society of Crafts and Industrial Design encouraged industrial manufacturers to engage skilled artists to create high-quality, attractive, inexpensive, utilitarian furnishings. Advances in technology were seen as a means of improving life for the masses and thereby fostering the burgeoning political and economic agenda of social democracy.



Modernity in Sweden, 1900–1960

Depicting Modernity

During the first quarter of the 20th century, modern Swedish photographers began to embrace a more realistic photographic style, without painterly overtones and posed shots. Suited to conveying images of the new artistic-industrial products, photographs were used in marketing campaigns to promote modernism among a wider population. Photography also was employed by newspapers documenting world events, in particular, sporting activities that reinforced the theme of healthful living that was touted by social reformers.



Designing the “Good Home”

The conviction that comfort should be available to all levels of society, countered by the post–World War II reality of many Swedish citizens crowded into unhygienic city apartments, stimulated government-sponsored loan and welfare programs. Designers responded with architectural planning that maximized space and affordable products that met hygienic concerns. The “Good Home” exposition at the 1939 New York World’s Fair encouraged the acceptance of the concept of “Swedish Modern,” which with its light palate, soft forms, natural materials, and simple aesthetic, was intended to provide a “democratic beauty” for a humane modern society.

Evaluating Swedish Modernism

By the 1940s and 1950s, Swedish modernism had become more ideologically and stylistically expansive. While the early 20th-century vision of designing an ideal world may not have been realized, Swedish artists and manufacturers successfully created well-conceived products that received

an enthusiastic response throughout Swedish society and the international design community.

The modern movement in Sweden became part of the vital heritage and continuing influence and identity of this nation on the world of contemporary design.



Location

18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue

Admission

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| General | \$3 |
| Seniors (65 and over) | \$2 |
| Students (with valid ID) | \$2 |

Hours

Tuesday through Sunday:
11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Thursday: 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Transportation

The BGC is easily accessible by public transportation.

Bus M86 crosstown
M10 on Central Park West
M7 or M11 on
Columbus Avenue

Subway B or C train to
86th Street station

Exhibition Tours

Group tours of the exhibition may be scheduled Tuesday through Friday between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and Thursday evening until 7:00 p.m. Advance reservations are required for all groups.

Payment must be made in advance via check or credit card. The fees for admission and guide(s) are:

| | |
|------------------------------|-------|
| 1–20 visitors (single guide) | \$ 75 |
| 21–40 visitors (two guides) | \$100 |

Special Needs

The BGC complies with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act by making its buildings accessible to those with special needs. To discuss arrangements, please call prior to visiting.

Public Programs

An array of lectures, panels, study days, films, and other offerings is presented in conjunction with this exhibition. Special events are held for youth and senior audiences.

Catalogue

A scholarly publication accompanying the exhibition contains 11 essays by prominent scholars on such topics as aspects of modernism in early 20th-century Swedish culture, functionalistic architecture, and the growth of the industrial design profession in Sweden.

Exhibition Schedule

Hungarian Ceramics from the Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853–2001
July 17–October 13, 2002

Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier: Architectural Studies, Interiors, Painting, and Photography, 1907–1922
Fall 2002

Website

For up-to-date exhibition-related information, please visit the BGC website at www.bgc.bard.edu.

Information

For further information, please call the BGC Gallery at 212-501-3023 or TTY 212-501-3012 or e-mail gallery_assistant@bgc.bard.edu.



Images

Cover

Terrazzo textile, Josef Frank for Svenskt Tenn, printed linen, 1943–1944 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm)

Focus Special cutlery, Folke Arström for Gense, stainless steel and nylon, 1955–1956 (private collection)

Inside

Spherical ball bearing, Sven Winquist for SKF, chromed steel, reproduction of 1907 design (SKF Collection, Stockholm)

Work chair, Bruno Mathsson for Firma Karl Mathsson, bent beech and hemp saddle girth, 1934 (Collection of Bruno Mathsson International)

The Hurdler Moreau at the Stockholm Stadium, Karl Sandels, gelatin silver print, 1934 (Moderna Museets Fotografisamling, Stockholm)

Household Assistant food processor, Alvar Lenning for Electrolux, stainless and lacquered steel, 1940 (Torbjörn Lenskog 20th Century Design Collection)



The project *Utopia & Reality: Modernity in Sweden, 1900–1960* is supported by **IKEA**®, The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, and the Kjell and Märta Beijers Foundation.

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