

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Friday, May 7, 2004

A Modern Life: Art and Design in British Columbia, 1945-1960

May 15 to October 11, 2004



Image: **Murray Dunne**, *Table Lamp*, c.1949

Vancouver, BC – Opening at the Vancouver Art Gallery on May 15, *A Modern Life: Art and Design in British Columbia, 1945-1960* explores the evolution of art and design during a time when Vancouver and Victoria were nationally recognized as Canadian leaders for their interdisciplinary approaches to the fine and applied arts. The exhibition brings together the work of 46 artists, architects and designers and features over 100 objects—furniture, paintings and ceramics—all created in British Columbia during a period when modern ideas were entering all aspects of life.

During the immediate post-war period, Vancouver and Victoria supported the work of modern artists and designers as no other Canadian cities did at the time. The strong co-operative spirit between artists, architects, furniture and interior designers, landscape gardeners, potters and weavers working in the region generated a collaborative approach to the arts. This cross-pollination between disciplines occurred for two key reasons. First, it grew from a belief that modern design could make life better by providing new solutions to everyday living not offered by traditional design. Second, there was strong pride in the creative capacity of artisans working in British Columbia, a region that captured the imagination of Canadians as free from the burdens of history and filled with opportunity. It was a period of ambitious visions for the future.

“*A Modern Life* revisits modernist ideas and ideals and demonstrates how these ideas have a continued relevance in our understanding of the history of this community and the relationship of the urban environment to the extraordinary landscape of British Columbia”, said Kathleen Bartels, Director, Vancouver Art Gallery.

A Modern Life looks at modernism from two perspectives, geometric abstraction and organic form. Geometric abstraction was generally thought of as static and orderly with strong horizontal and vertical elements. Whereas organic form, which is characterized by fluidity and naturalism, intended to reflect natural life.

The exhibition features the designers Alice Bradbury, Robin Bush, Stanley Clarke, Peter Cotton, Reginald Dixon, Murray Dunne, Zoltan Kiss, Sasha Makokin, Rex Mason, Earle Morrison, Wayne Ngan, Leonard Osborne, Mary Osborne and Hilda Ross; and the artists Françoise André, Sybil Andrews, Peter Aspell, Alistair Macready Bell, B.C. Binning, Bruno Bobak, Molly Lamb Bobak, Stanley Brunst, Jean Clarke, Lilius Farley, Orville Fisher, Herbert Gilbert, Jack Hardman, Lawren Harris, E.J. Hughes, Robert Hume, Patricia K. Irwin, Don Jarvis, Thomas Kakinuma, Ann Kipling, Roy Kiyooka, John Koerner, William Koochin, George Kuthan, Beatrice Lennie, Eric Loewe, Jock Macdonald, Toni Onley, Frank Perry, Margaret Peterson, Llewellyn Petley-Jones, Joe Plaskett, Paul Rand, Jack Shadbolt, James Sidney, Herbert Siebner, Gordon Smith, Takao Tanabe, Ronald Thom, Lionel Thomas, William Percival Weston and Jim Willer.

One of the fundamental features of post-war modernism was the interaction between artistic communities. In Vancouver, for example, the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia hired Bertram Charles Binning—an artist. In turn, Binning and fellow artists Jack Shadbolt and Gordon Smith played a major role by commissioning important modernist architects to build their houses. The painter and member of the Group of Seven, Lawren Harris, gave a young architect, Arthur Erickson, one of his first jobs—a deck for Harris' house. Concurrently, prominent architects were also active artists and this exhibition includes ceramic works by architects Peter Cotton and Zoltan Kiss.

Equally, *A Modern Life* examines the use of new materials, such as moulded-plywood, and new methods of production that appeared in British Columbia at the time. The union of new materials and new production techniques enabled fresh visions to take shape in structure, form and function. The combination of fine art and applied arts in this exhibition reaffirms the visibility of British Columbia's dynamic art scene during the post-war period.

The exhibition also recreates elements from the exhibition, *Design for Living*, held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1949. *Design for Living* received an incredible response from the public and while there was some controversy in the press—claiming that these imaginary homes were the playthings of the rich—it set a new standard for art and design within Vancouver. The exhibition provided visitors with modern alternatives designed to suit the changing needs of the modern family, that included the work of local craftspeople, architects, designers and artists.

A Modern Life: Art and Design in British Columbia, 1945-1960 is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and co-curated by Ian Thom and Alan C. Elder. Ian Thom has been Senior Curator, Historical, at the Vancouver Art Gallery, since 1988. He has occupied senior curatorial positions at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, McMichael Canadian Art Collection and the Vancouver Art Gallery. He has organized over fifty exhibitions and is the author of numerous publications. Alan C. Elder is currently Curator of Craft and Design at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa where he is preparing a major exhibition on Canadian design in the 1960's and organized the exhibition *Designing a Modern Identity* for the Kelowna Art Gallery in 2001.

This exhibition will be accompanied by a new publication, *A Modern Life*, co-published with Arsenal Pulp Press in fall 2004, that explores the collaborative spirit of fine and applied arts in post-war British Columbia. The publication will include a reprint of Robert Hubbard's 1955 *Canadian Art* article "A Climate for the Arts," and newly commissioned essays by Rachelle Chinnery on ceramics, Scott Watson on fine arts, Alan Elder on collaboration, Allan Collier on wood and design, and Sherry McKay on architecture. The publication will also include short biographies of all the artists and designers and will be available at the Vancouver Art Gallery in October 2004.

A Modern Life: Art and Design in British Columbia, 1945-1960 closes on Monday October 11, 2004.

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- When:** May 15 to October 11, 2004
- Where:** Vancouver Art Gallery
750 Hornby Street
Vancouver BC V6Z 2H7
www.vanartgallery.bc.ca
- Hours:** Open every day
Monday to Sunday & Holidays 10am to 5.30pm
Open Thursdays 10am to 9pm
- Admission:** Adults \$15.00, Seniors \$11.00, Students \$10.00, Children (12 & under) Free
Family \$40 (2 adults, 2 children, 13 years +), Thursday evening suggested donation \$5.00
- Media contact:** Julie-Ann Backhouse
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- Images:** Digital images for professional media use only are available at the Vancouver Art Gallery's FTP site <ftp://ftp.vanartgallery.bc.ca>. Contact 604 662 4722 for password access.