

*Subject to Change: Art and Design in the 20th Century*, June 4, 2008-December 22, 2008

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Oscar Bluemner, American, 1867-1938  
*Rosy Light*, from the series, *Suns and Moons*, 1927  
Watercolor on paper  
Anonymous gift 1992.001.23

Bluemner was associated with Alfred Stieglitz's famed New York gallery, 291, where modern European and American art was championed. Bluemner developed a unique style of bold, simplified shapes in a high-key palette intended to intensify the feeling and mood of his subject. While much of his earlier work took the modern, industrial landscape as its theme, the "Suns and Moons" series reflects his emotional state during a period shortly after the death of his wife when he had moved to the outskirts of South Braintree, Massachusetts.



Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009  
*Shirley Looking Down Stairwell*, 1952  
Gelatin silver print  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2002.4

This picture was made the year that DeCarava became the first African-American photographer to win a prestigious fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. The award gave him the opportunity to intensively photograph the daily life of people he knew in Harlem. His richly poetic and deeply compassionate images so impressed Langston Hughes, that he wrote a text to accompany them. The resulting book, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955, was a huge success immediately, selling out the first edition of 25,000 copies. Never before had life in Harlem been portrayed with such depth and intimacy. There are many photographs of Shirley, although this poignant one of her waiting anxiously was not included in the book.



# RISD MUSEUM

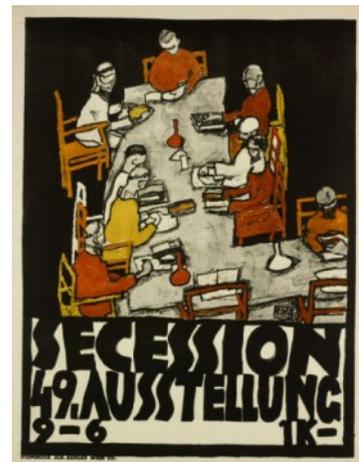
Alma Lavenson, American, 1897-1989  
*Eucalyptus Leaves*, 1933  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Susan Ehrens in honor of her mother Sylvia Mandell  
2003.145.1

Abstraction was a major path for American artists working in the 1920s and 1930s, following the examples of avant-garde European art that were increasingly visible in the U.S. Among painters and photographers there was a strong emphasis on reducing compositions to simplified, elemental shapes, as in this image by Lavenson. She was associated with fellow West Coast photographers such as Imogen Cunningham and Edward Weston who were a part of the influential *Group f64*. Their name was derived from the camera aperture setting which produced the greatest degree of sharpness over the greatest depth of field. Sharp focus was a characteristic of modernist photography.



Egon Schiele, Austrian, 1890-1918  
*49th Secession Exhibition Poster*, 1918  
Color lithograph on paper  
Anonymous gift 2005.142.1

The Vienna Secession organized several exhibitions of international avant-garde art each year. Schiele designed this poster to promote a show he organized in March 1918 featuring a retrospective of his own work in the main gallery, his colleagues' in the adjacent galleries. The image in the poster is based on his painting, *The Friends*, 1918, which has Schiele seated at the head of a table surrounded by fellow artists. Schiele's expressionistic style is evident in the vigorous handling of the imagery and hand lettering of the poster. The show was Schiele's first big success but, sadly, by October of that year both he and his pregnant wife succumbed to the influenza pandemic at the end of World War I.



# RISD MUSEUM

Kara Walker, American, b. 1969, (RISD MFA 1994, Printmaking)  
*Wait*, 1993

Photo-etching on paper

Phil Siebert Alumni Acquisition Fund 2006.47.1

Walker created this work while she was a graduate student at RISD, during the period when she began to consider her own identity in the context of history. Her research for these prints entailed looking back at early depictions of enslaved Africans who were usually portrayed as objects of sexual desire or victims of brutal humiliation. She transformed the images into near silhouettes, a style of working which would soon make her famous. By embedding this powerful imagery within the polite tradition of this 19th-century form, she discovers a way to discuss unspoken truths about racial and sexual taboos in increasingly provocative narratives.



Kara Walker, American, b. 1969, (RISD MFA 1994, Printmaking)  
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Phil Seibert Alumni Acquisition Fund 2006.47.2

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El Lissitzky, Russian, 1890-1941

Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, Russian, 1893-1930

R.S.F.S.R. State Publishing House, Russian

*For the Voice (Dlia golosa)*, 1923

Construction-paper cover, letterpress text, illustrations, and  
typographic designs

Mary B. Jackson Fund 2006.92.1

El Lissitzky met Malevich in 1919 while they were teaching at the State Art School in Vitebesk and was a convert to Malevich's revolutionary use of total abstraction to express the spirit of the new Soviet society. Lissitzky built on Malevich's flat, geometric shapes, placing them in illusionistic space in an attempt to bridge painting



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and architecture. *For the Voice* is a book of thirteen poems by Mayakovsky which Lissitzky set into a dynamic design that he hoped would provoke readers to recite aloud and spread the provocative content of the poems. Lissitzky liked to call himself an architect of the page and he created this design solely using the elements in the compositor's type-case: letters, rules, bars, bullets, etc. It is a tour-de-force of hand typesetting, done by a Berlin typesetter who did not know Russian.

Richard Neutra, American, b. Austria, 1892-1970  
*Perspective view of the John Nicholas Brown "Windshield" House,*  
1936-1938

Diazo print with colored pencil, graphite, and gouache  
Gift of the Richard J. Neutra office 39.142.9



Richard Neutra's designs for Windshield House - a summer home on New York's Fishers Island - exemplify the International Style of Modernist architecture. Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus school, recognized Neutra as a "lonely pioneer" who designed American buildings using the new artistic approach, so he invited him to be a guest critic at the German school in 1928. In its purest form, a Modernist building was functional and unornamented. Neutra adheres to the style's technical precision, expression of structure, lightening of mass, and incorporation of brand-new products, such as aluminum windows, linoleum, and Buckminster Fuller's one-piece Dymaxion bathroom. Weeks after Neutra's house for the John Nicholas Brown family was completed in 1938, the house was severely damaged by a hurricane. Rebuilt and occupied by the Brown family until 1959, it was destroyed by fire in 1973.

Baron Adolph de Meyer, American, b. France, 1868-1949

*Flowers in a Vase, 1906*

Platinum print on original mount

Florence Koehler Collection 49.017.6

De Meyer's photographs exemplify the Pictorialist aesthetic. Pictorialists distinguished themselves from the broader public taking photographs with small, easy-to-use cameras by modeling their images after fine-art "pictures". They used soft-focus to suppress detail in favor of an expressive reading. Pictorialist photographs are closely aligned with the handcrafted objects of the Arts and Crafts movement, and were a reaction against the mass-produced objects of the modern industrial age. Even though the image was captured with a machine (camera), the prints themselves are often unique



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objects, as is this evocative platinum print mounted on a special paper with a hand-decorated border.

Wassily Kandinsky, French, 1866-1944  
*Orange*, 1923  
Color lithograph on paper  
Museum Works of Art Fund 51.164

This print was created while Kandinsky was teaching at the influential applied and fine art school, the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany. By this period, Kandinsky's abstraction shifted to the use of precise lines and geometric forms under the influence of Malevich's Suprematism (see the plate to your left). Kandinsky believed the basic elements of art had intrinsic expressive properties. In his prominent writings, he discussed the ways that color, line, form, and placement could impact the viewer physically and spiritually.



Lee Bontecou, American, b. 1931  
*Untitled*, 1966  
Graphite, soot, and erasure or scraping on paper  
The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art  
72.051

In the late 1950s, Lee Bontecou was working with a blow torch to create metal sculpture. She discovered that turning off the oxygen on her torch discharged a fine black dust that she could apply to paper to create a rich, dense surface. Drawing with this soot charted a new direction for her. Fascinated by space exploration, black holes began to appear in works on paper and related sculpture made of fabric stretched taut over metal armatures. In addition to a sense of wonder, many works convey an ominous feeling reflective of her growing fear over escalating militarization during the Cold War. By the mid 1960s when RISD's drawing was made, she had begun to incorporate stripes and grill-like imagery into work she referred to as "Prisons". Careful examination of the drawing reveals how she pulled her imagery out of the dark with erasure, scraping, and her fingers to create this eerie landscape reflective of both natural and industrial worlds.



# RISD MUSEUM

Brice Marden, American, b. 1938

*Untitled*, 1963

Charcoal on paper

Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 76.001

During Marden's formative years, he was most fascinated by the gesture and expressive quality of the Abstract Expressionists. He was also much inspired by the brushwork of earlier, more traditional painters such as Edouard Manet. And, he was considering the light in Mark Rothko's painting. All these influences are visible in this early drawing created the year he finished his graduate work at Yale. And, yet, the drawing also indicates the reductive, non-illusionistic, and emotional vocabulary that has occupied his work ever since.



Jasper Johns, American, b. 1930

Donn Horatio Steward, American, 1921-1986

Universal Limited Art Editions

*Flag, from the portfolio 1st Etchings, Second State*, 1967-1969

Etching and open-bite on paper

Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 76.047

Moving away from the personal and emotional content of the Abstract Expressionists, Johns's subjects are "things the mind already knows", as he famously stated. He reworks his familiar subjects over decades in a variety of sensuous materials and techniques, suggesting the endless choices available in art, and more broadly in life. Johns first used the American flag as a subject in painting in 1955. In this print, he drew on the etching plate with the loose gesture associated with Abstract Expressionism and calls attention to the technique by printing the image in reverse (the printmaking process reverses the image), rather than drawing it so that it will print in the correct orientation.



# RISD MUSEUM

Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,  
Photography)

*Chicago*, 1947

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.22

In the 1940s, Aaron Siskind moved away from the documentary photographic style to explore a more personal vision. He was searching for a metaphorical visual language to express the trauma of World War II. The urban environment became a primary source for his images, particularly walls that were showing signs of age or deterioration. Among the stains, peeling paint, rust, and random human markings, Siskind revealed figurative and landscape allusions that suggested profound emotions. The surface pictured here evokes the infinite space of the universe and with it a sense of exhilaration or perhaps fear of the incomprehensible.



David Smith, American, 1906-1965

*Untitled*, 1960

Ink and oil paint on paper

Mary B. Jackson Fund 78.049

Drawing was a critical activity for the sculptor David Smith throughout his life. His later drawings, such as this powerful work in RISD's collection, are generally related to his sculpture but they are not preparatory studies. In many of the drawings, Smith explored ideas that were not possible in sculpture. This drawing, for example, is a much more painterly representation of the forms he was exploring in sculpture at that time. It is interesting that during this year, Smith painted the majority of his sculptures for the first time.



Arthur Wesley Dow, American, 1857-1922

*Modern Art*, 1895

Color lithograph on paper

Gift of James Morris 96.037

Dow, like many artists of the late nineteenth century, looked to Japanese art for inspiration as he pursued a modern artistic language. He was quite influential as an artist, teacher, and author in disseminating Japanese compositional strategies to American artists. This poster, which advertises the journal *Modern Art*, includes a view of his homeland, Ipswich, Massachusetts, created with flat, simplified shapes inspired by Japanese prints. The lotus flower border, with its sinuous Art Nouveau design, is typical of Arts and Craft decoration.

