



Photo courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Sitzmaschine, Model 670, by Josef Hoffmann. Made by Jacob & Josef Kohn. Designed c. 1905, made c. 1908. Beech and metal. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The American Institute of Architects Houston Design Collection, museum purchase with funds provided by AIA and gift of friends of Martha Murphree.

The Art of Architecture

American Institute of Architects Design Collection
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Ongoing

Reviewed by Luisa Orto

In 2000, members of AIA Houston established a collaboration with the Modern and Contemporary Decorative Arts and Design Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. With the intention of highlighting design objects created by architects—and thereby demonstrating the creative spectrum of the architect's profession—the American Institute of Architects Design Collection at the MFAH was born. Parameters for the collection were broad to allow for the richest range of acquisitions possible, although the *de facto* emphasis has proven to be the modern and contemporary period, roughly the late 19th century to the present. In addition, each object had to be “architect designed,” an equally broad designation proffered to allow for few restrictions in developing the collection.

The initial bridge between the AIA and the MFAH was built by architect Ernesto L. Maldonado, then president of AIA Houston, and architect Carrie Glassman Shoemaker, who was closely involved with the MFAH as a member of the Decorative Arts Subcommittee, an

advisory group for museum acquisitions. With the support of AIA executive director Martha Murphree, Maldonado and Glassman Shoemaker brought their idea to MFAH design curator Cindi Strauss, and together, following nearly two years of discussions with the AIA board, the three established a unique collaboration of architect, museum liaison, and curator. Together, they pursued the notion that a greater awareness of the architect's *métier* could be demonstrated by highlighting works of design created by architects. Such works would also reflect the problem solving on a small scale that is often part of the process of an architect's large-scale involvement with a design idea.

The AIA collection's seed funds came from a charmingly appropriate source: the proceeds of the 2000 AIA sandcastle competition in Galveston. With \$5,000 in hand, AIA members voted on what to buy. And so, a silver flatware service for eight designed by Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen in the late 1920s and three aluminum vases designed by Italian architect/designer

Andrea Branzi in the 1990s established a collaboration that would serve to enrich Houston's cultural resources.

While the AIA sandcastle competition has funded subsequent acquisitions, this resource has been augmented by donations from AIA members to the AIA/MFAH Fund. Some AIA members have made monetary contributions in honor of longstanding clients, a colleague's birthday or benchmark achievement, or to recognize a firm's anniversary. Other AIA members have made direct donations of works. For example, in 2001 the collection was enriched with *Executive Desk Prototype*, designed by Sally Walsh and donated by Raymond Brochstein and Brochstein's, Inc., and *FOG Chair Prototype*, designed by Frank Gehry and donated by Knoll. These gifts sent a call to Houston's architectural community underlining the support for the AIA Design Collection. Other gifts have followed, including several metal and enamel brooches designed by associates of Memphis Design and donated by Jeffrey A. Shankman.

Beginning in 2004, AIA members settled on a process to bring new works into the collection while also honoring a Houston architect. Each year, curator Strauss identifies a number of design pieces that merit inclusion in the MFAH. These works are then considered by an AIA committee to determine which ones should be presented to the annual AIA honoree. The honoree makes the final choice of which piece enters the design collection in his or her honor. After the honoree has selected the piece to add, there is still opportunity for AIA members to raise funds to ensure that the other works that had been under consideration can also be made part of the collection.

The works comprising the AIA Design Collection are regularly included in MFAH design exhibitions. This past spring, visitors to the museum had a chance to admire a recent AIA acquisition: the beechwood and metal reclining *Sitzmaschine Chair* designed in the early 1900s by Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann. Donated in honor of former AIA Executive Director Martha Murphree, this addition seems particularly appropriate to the spirit of the AIA Design Collection in light of architect Hoffmann's embrace of the notion of the *gesamkustwerk*, or “total work of art,” which upheld the premise that architects should address the complete built environment, including design objects therein. Hoffmann's chair is a fine example by an architect involved in creating design objects that relate harmoniously to their surroundings.

In 2005, S.I. Morris was recognized for both his imprint on the Houston skyline and his collaborative spirit. To honor Morris, the AIA purchased two seminal works by Hungarian architect/designer

Marcel Breuer—a lounge chair and a stool made of tubular steel, upholstered in the original eisengarn fabric and designed while Breuer was at the Dessau Bauhaus leading experiments in standardized furniture. The 2006 addition to the collection was to be chosen in December by Anderson Todd, this year's AIA honoree. Given that among his other accomplishments Todd served as liaison to Mies van der Rohe in the realization of Cullinan Hall at the MFAH, a Mies designed work might serve as an appropriate *homage*.

So far, the collaboration has contributed more than 20 objects to the MFAH's collection. Works in metal abound, among them the Saarinen and Ponti flatware sets, the Branzi vases, a De Lucchi carafe, a Gehry chair, a Bel Geddes cocktail shaker, and a Louis Sullivan stair baluster. So too, do works in wood, including a Paul Frankl pine coffee table, a Borge Mogensen oak chair, and a Brazilian pinus wood *Favela Chair* designed by the Campana brothers.

European, Scandinavian, and American designers are well represented, but there is an absence of examples representing Asia. With the exception of Maarten van Severen's *Low Plastic Chair*, designed in 2002, there is a dearth of contemporary or conceptual pieces as well. This collection would be a greater public resource, and more inspiring to architecture and design students, if there were more contemporary design examples that embrace new materials and processes. Furthermore, although individual works in the AIA design collection are frequently cycled through exhibitions, this collection needs to be housed in a more permanent, more readily accessible venue. A “collection” that is diffused throughout a museum's storerooms is hard to access, so as the MFAH envisions another expansion, it would be a real step forward to allocate more space for a permanent display of modern and contemporary design.

Still, the AIA Design Collection represents a unique and successful collaboration between architects and a major cultural institution. In creating the AIA Design Collection, the city's architects have set an example: play well together and we will all reap rewards. In little more than half a decade, the collaboration between AIA Houston and the MFAH has managed to bring together disparate factions of the Houston art and architecture community, amass a collection of significant and didactic design items that reflects the wide-ranging practice of the architect and make them available to the public, and, according to several of its members, give senior and junior members of AIA Houston a common sense of purpose. The lack of a museum of architecture in Houston has, in part, begun to be addressed by Houston architects themselves. ■