

# Murray Moss: Design Impresario

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in History of Design and Curatorial Studies

MA Program in History of Design and Curatorial Studies  
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution;  
and Parsons The New School for Design  
2015

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Murray Moss and Franklin Getchell for their humor and honesty, but mostly for being so generous with their time during the researching and writing of this thesis. I am grateful to my advisor and first reader, Dr. Sarah Lichtman, for her focused advice and enthusiasm for this topic, and for keeping me on track to complete the work. I would like to thank Professor Ethan Robey for his time and input as a second reader, and all of my professors in this program, whose instruction and expertise continues to inspire my interest in the decorative arts and design.

In addition, I would like to recognize Greg Sages and my colleagues at The Glass House in New Canaan, CT who supported my academic endeavors with encouragement and understanding. I am grateful to Henry Urbach for introducing me to Murray Moss and providing me with such a wonderful opportunity to work with him on the Glass House Design Store project.

To all my friends in Rowayton, CT and those along with my nieces, mother and sister in Canada: thank you for helping me take care of my family while I worked on my master's degree. John Haffner Layden and Allan Cunningham—thank you both for your time and advice.

This work is dedicated to my family,  
Jeff, Caith and Myles.  
Thank you for your incredible support, patience and encouragement.

## Introduction

At a book launch held on May 12, 2014, entrepreneur, design impresario, and curatorial consultant Murray Moss shared a personal project representing a new stage in his career in visual culture. Two years previously, Moss had shuttered his influential, eponymous New York-based design gallery (1994-2012), before opening the consultancy Moss Bureau to undertake curatorial and writing projects on behalf of various clients.<sup>1</sup> On that spring night, Moss presented *Tertium Quid* (Latin for “the third thing”), a book accompanying a photography exhibition he curated for Hauser Wirth Gallery in New York City.<sup>2</sup> For material, Moss combed the Internet for months, collecting archival photographs from faltering American news publications.<sup>3</sup> He then paired images, mostly black-and-white prints dating from the mid-twentieth century, to create unusual, striking juxtapositions. He selected the pairings to prompt viewers to look beyond the news stories the images originally illustrated, and uncover something more—the “third thing” of Moss’s book title. (Figure 1) Some combinations drew attention to mood or theme; other pairings highlighted formal qualities—shape, line, form. In all cases, each print in a pair helped create a new context from which viewers could derive new meaning, provoking reactions from shock to de-

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<sup>1</sup> In 2013 Moss co-authored the first book on Baccarat titled *Baccarat: 250 Years of Craftsmanship and Creativity* with Laurence Benaim (Rizzoli). That same year Moss Bureau was contracted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to re-design the museum shop at the Philip Johnson Glass House in New Canaan CT. In 2014 he wrote the text for the book *Georg Jensen: Reflections* (Rizzoli).

<sup>2</sup> Murray Moss, *Tertium Quid* (New York: August Editions, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Moss focused on original gelatin press photos from the archives of the *Detroit News*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, among others. The prints he acquired and exhibited are mainly ones that remain after news organizations digitize their archives.

light. In the book, Moss argues that for the exhibition he designed an experience just as a photographer does by manipulating an image's framing, cropping, and other aspects to construct a story and shape viewers' reactions. In the introduction Moss writes:

Like a designer of a chair or a lamp or any industrial object created to fulfill a particular function, a press photographer, on occasion, will have such talent and imagination and ambition as to infuse that brief with additional content, or narrative, and on rare occasion, even with a kind of universality. ...The image is so much more poignant or more beautiful—more poetic, more striking—than the typical 'workhorse' photograph that it takes on a narrative of its own and with that, the ability to stand alone.<sup>4</sup>

This statement serves as an apt summary of Moss's contributions to design culture over the last two decades. In this thesis I will argue that his approach to, and impact on the display, dissemination and retail of design since the late 1990s earns him the distinction of being the pre-eminent design impresario in the United States of the last twenty-five years. Through his design gallery and present-day consultancy, Moss seeks out objects that embody a kind of universality, presenting and promoting them in innovative ways and spurring public discourse on design in the service of commerce and a richer visual culture. I will present his ideology as expressed to me over the course of six interviews and during a professional collaboration with Moss which occurred between March 2013 and February 2015.<sup>5</sup>

In the first chapter, I will explore Moss's early life and influences. I will argue that his theory surrounding the displacement of objects from their usual settings enveloping them in nar-

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Moss, "Introduction" in *Tertium Quid* (New York: August Editions, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> The author worked in tandem with Murray Moss and Moss Bureau on the 2013 redesign of the museum shop of the Philip Johnson Glass House in New Canaan CT. [www.designstore.theglasshouse.org](http://www.designstore.theglasshouse.org)



ratives that capture the cultural, commercial and aesthetic significance of things, was born out of a grassroots modernism that was embraced by his parents in suburban Chicago. Moss developed his theory of display and presentation further as he explored careers in theater and fashion. I learned about his early career during our conversations and while researching the archives of the *New York Times* and *Women's Wear Daily*. In the second chapter, I will demonstrate how Moss transitioned from careers in theater and fashion to one in design. The objects he favors are wide-ranging—household products and furnishings, decorative objects, limited editions and fine art—but all, to borrow Moss's observation, have the ability to “stand alone.” And they all benefit from Moss's signature theatrical presentation and rigorously controlled retail and exhibition environments, which is something I will explore in relation to Moss and his design gallery. In the third chapter, I will discuss how Moss came to position himself as a retailer in SoHo, New York's gallery district in the early 1990s. I will begin by discussing his design theory as it applies to the interior architecture of the store and the placement of merchandise. I will also demonstrate the impact his shop had on the neighborhood. In Chapter Four, I will discuss Moss's influences, including the exhibition design of the architects and curators Philip Johnson (1906-2005) and Emilio Ambasz (1943-). I will argue that Moss shares with Johnson the ability to elevate the status of humble materials and industrial objects in part, through artful display. He found great inspiration for his store displays in a reprint of the catalogue to Johnson's *Machine Art* exhibition (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1934). Moss revealed to me that the greatest influence on his appreciation and theories of display however came in 1972, after seeing another MoMA exhibition: *Italy the New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design* curated by Ambasz. I will discuss how Moss's exposure to Italian post modernism at that show

would prepare him for the work of the Dutch designers he would champion later in his career—students of the Design Academy Eindhoven who exhibited for the first time together under the umbrella of *Droog* in 1993. I will discuss in the fifth chapter how it is in this context that Moss makes one of his most important contributions to the field of design, by disseminating the work of the Dutch collective in the USA. In this capacity, I will assess Moss’s significance as a design impresario by comparing his methods and achievements in Chapter Six, to the work of the German collector and retailer Siegfried Bing (1838-1905), as well as other design merchants of the twentieth century. Bing was the first retailer of Japanese decorative arts and Tiffany glassworks in France, acting as both merchant and ambassador of these imports to his European clientele; Murray Moss fulfilled the same role for contemporary Dutch design in the USA.<sup>6</sup> Like Bing, Moss can be credited with deepening public appreciation of decorative arts and design, introducing New York audiences to contemporary global practitioners and contributing to blurring the line between gallery and museum.

In addition to conducting a series of interviews with Moss and his partner Franklin Getchell over the last two years, I interviewed former employees and customers of their store, for their insights into Moss’s display tactics, and how they were received by the public. I also accessed dozens of newspaper and magazine articles which covered events and exhibitions of the shop throughout its eighteen year run. To better understand Moss’s global contribution, particularly with reference to the success of Dutch designers in the US market, I spoke with Robert Kloos, the Director of Visual Arts, Architecture and Design at the Consulate General of the

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) was an American designer of decorative arts best known for his work in stained glass. He designed windows, lamps, ceramics and metal works.

Netherlands in New York. In my analysis of Moss's techniques of display, I referenced several works including Mary Anne Staniszewski's *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* and David Vernet's and Leontine de Wit's *Boutiques and Other Retail Spaces: The Architecture of Seduction*. The authors' research into the impact of exhibition design and retail space planning helped me to frame Moss's own approach in theoretical and historical context, particularly pertaining to how he was, and continues to be influenced by MoMA's department of architecture and design. My interviews with Murray Moss directed me to the catalogues accompanying the exhibitions *Italy the New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, and *Machine Art*; both the exhibition of the former and the catalogue of the latter served as inspiration and manuals for Moss in the launch of his career as a design retailer. Additionally, I found Jennifer Jane Marshall's analysis of Philip Johnson's exhibition, *Machine Art 1934*, to be most helpful in looking at specific techniques of exhibition design which would become familiar methods in Moss's own store and exhibition displays.

With this thesis I am introducing Murray Moss and his ideas into the scholarly discourse of design history as it pertains to the impact of his selection of objects, his display and exhibition techniques and how they contributed to a wider public perception of design as art. I am placing Moss in context by comparing his contributions to design with those of other renowned merchants including Siegfried Bing and Terence Conran (1931-). I am providing the first comprehensive record of Murray Moss and his career from his beginnings in fashion, through his transition to objects—industrial and decorative arts to high design. While it would be impossible to mention every exhibition and important sale he curated, this paper does provide the most thor-

ough investigation of Moss's theories of design and display, and provides insight into his motivations and selection process. My hope is that this introduction to Moss and his contribution to the field of design will provide a foundation for further study in the area of retail design and display theory, the decorative arts, industrial design and contemporary Dutch design—all of which were advanced by Moss's work as a design merchant, curator and promoter.

## **Chapter One: Staging a Career in Design: Murray Moss in Theater and Fashion**

Murray Moss is arguably best known for his design promotion through Moss, his pioneering SoHo design gallery, which helped accelerate design's passage into the realm of fine art. But before Moss built a career in design, he trained and worked as an actor, providing him with experiences that helped anchor his ideas about display and storytelling. His entrepreneurial start in fashion design production also set him on a professional path to retailing European and American housewares and decorative arts, which helped prepare Moss to serve in curatorial and tastemaker roles.<sup>7</sup> This chapter looks at Murray Moss's beginnings and early career, and provides context for his entrepreneurial, display, and design consulting contributions.

Born in Chicago on March 29, 1949, Murray Moss is one of five children raised by Merton and Ann Moss, first generation Americans of Romanian and Russian Jewish ancestry respectively. Ann Moss came from an affluent background; Merton Moss did not. The elder Moss studied electrical engineering and worked his way up at a company that manufactured X-ray equipment. He later bought the firm, at the time perhaps planting an entrepreneurial seed in the mind

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<sup>7</sup> Matt Tyrnauer, "The Taste-Maker," *Vanity Fair*, May 2007. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/05/moss200705> Tyrnauer refers to Moss as a taste-maker in the cited article.

of his son Murray. Merton Moss expanded the manufacturing business with the development of several patents. After selling the company in the mid nineteen-seventies, Moss explained how “we all became a bit wealthy.”<sup>8</sup>

Moss describes growing up in a house built around 1900 on Chicago’s north side, situated a couple of blocks from Lake Michigan. When he was ten years old, his parents relocated to the suburban neighborhood of Lincolnwood; a move which allowed the Moss children to attend better schools. Merton Moss’s business was prospering at the time, enabling him, in 1960, to build his dream house. Moss describes how the interior design of the family’s new home was entrusted to a man known as Robert M., who was hired as the family’s principal decorator. Moss explains that Robert M. approached the project by employing pattern liberally; he would select a fabric and use it on all surfaces and some objects in the room. Moss says individual pieces would disappear in a sea of identical pattern before a door would open and a person would walk in breaking the continuum. He likened it to a theater stage set where a built-in door in the scenery would open up allowing a stage hand to walk through.<sup>9</sup> Moss remembers other unique design choices his parents made for this house. His father, for example, thought it a waste of resources to pour water into glasses at the dinner table, so he had a commercial drinking fountain installed in the dining room. Moss says he loved the house, which represented his first experience with an intensely designed environment and gave him an opportunity to witness firsthand the effects of design and display on daily life. Moss’s father installed commercial hand dryers in the family bath-

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<sup>8</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author New York, NY, 24 May 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Murray Moss, “A Rose is a Rose is a Rose is,” [http://www.maharam.com/stories/moss\\_a-rose-is-a-rose-is-a-rose-is](http://www.maharam.com/stories/moss_a-rose-is-a-rose-is-a-rose-is)

rooms, but his mother insisted they be enameled in pink or blue to match the decor. Moss remarks, “That to me was modernism. It’s not packaged.”<sup>10</sup> He explains how his parents’ commitment to embracing convenience in the home by utilizing commercial applications seemed more “modern” than the ideologies preached by Modernism’s design leaders like Philip Johnson, or Charles and Ray Eames. His mother and father experimented with technology in their suburban home and juxtaposed industrial appliances with home furnishings. Their interpretation of modern conveniences might have provoked a similar reaction to one which Moss would later have upon experiencing the design of the Italian post modernists and contemporary Dutch designers—both topics I will discuss in chapters four and five of this paper.

Moss describes his public high school in Lincolnwood as a good school and says he himself was a good student. During this period of his life, Moss was obsessed with becoming an actor and focused much of his time and attention on his school’s theater program. The program mounted elaborately produced plays, and Moss participated in almost every one, closely observing how stories unfold and noting the ways set design, costume and lighting come together to create a total effect.<sup>11</sup> When it came time for Moss to apply to a university, his parents insisted he complete at least two years of general academic study which he did, at Columbia University, before transferring to a theater program. Moss completed his studies at New York University and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1971. He began performing with a number of fledgling theater troupes, including Tina Packer’s Shakespeare and Company (founded in 1972 and based

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<sup>10</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author, New York, NY, 14 January 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Murray Moss, interview by the author, New York, NY, 24 May 2014.

in Massachusetts) and then The Wooster Group's Performing Garage (founded in 1975 in New York City). He worked as an actor for almost a decade before changing careers.<sup>12</sup>

At twenty-seven, having inherited money from the sale of his father's business, Moss decided to invest in his own enterprise. He told me in one of our interviews that he chose fashion somewhat randomly, after meeting Ronaldus Shamask, a Dutch clothing designer around the time he came into the family money.<sup>13</sup> In 1978, the two men co-founded Moss Shamask Ltd. thereby launching the Shamask label. The dedication Moss brought to his first venture along with key aspects of his approach to business would form the basis of all of his future endeavors. Shamask represented Moss's first foray into design work and stands as evidence of his focus on extraordinary, unusual, decorative—even theatrical—forms of design. For its time, the Shamask clothing line was groundbreaking and acclaimed by fashion design journalists for its modern silhouettes and architectural lines.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute accessioned many Shamask pieces from early collections into its permanent collections, including a spiral jacket from the fall 1981 collection made from just two pieces of fabric that earned Shamask the moniker "architect of fashion" in the *New York Times*.<sup>15</sup> (Figure 2) The fact

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<sup>12</sup> In 1972 Moss met his life, and eventual business partner, Franklin Edward Getchell. They were both actors working in theater. While Moss left the theater to start a fashion enterprise, Getchell worked as a television producer in London and New York, developing programming for the Children's Television Network and Home Box Office (HBO), among others. He would join Moss as a retail partner in 1998. Franklin Getchell was born in 1947, grew up in Maine and holds degrees from Columbia University in New York and Harvard University in Cambridge, MA.

<sup>13</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author, New Canaan, CT, 22 April 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Horyn, "Ronaldus Shamask Returns," *New York Times*, September 16, 2011. [http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/ronaldus\\_shamask\\_returns/](http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/ronaldus_shamask_returns/)

<sup>15</sup> John Duka, "New Architects of Fashion," *New York Times*, August 16, 1981.

that Moss was attracted to this avant-garde style is an early indication of the direction of his later professional life. Design and construction mattered to Moss, particularly when applied to everyday objects, including clothing.

It was during his collaboration with Shamask that Moss grew interested in other kinds of design and began to explore alternative ways of presenting and marketing it. The duo launched its premier fashion collection, not in the garment district of Seventh Avenue in New York, but at the opening in spring 1979 of a storefront at 860 Madison Avenue—also called Moss. The inaugural show featured sixteen Shamask designed pieces to the accompaniment of a concert cellist. This first iteration of Moss the store set the tone for all the company's future retail stores. Ben Brantley, writing for *Women's Wear Daily* in 1981, described it as “a white minimalist environment” which included a few objets d’art such as a towering vase by Jean Dunand (1877-1942) in the entryway.<sup>16</sup> Moss and Shamask, who both worked the store, quickly discovered that the objects were unnecessary distractions to the clothing. Eventually the only things on display other than racks of clothing were framed blueprints of their design on the walls—ensuring the designer's process took center stage along with the design itself, an approach used throughout Moss's visual merchandizing career. Moss and Shamask shared a passion for good design in all media. Ronaldus Shamask remarked to a fashion editor from *Esquire* that the simpler the design was, the more pressure he felt to perfect it. Shamask noted that the man who would buy a Braun calculator would be the same man who would buy his clothes.<sup>17</sup> Though the company met with con-

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<sup>16</sup> Ben Brantley, “Shamask,” *Women's Wear Daily*, June 10, 1981. Jean Dunand was a Swiss born, French naturalized artist of the Art Deco period (circa 1920-40) who worked as a copper and lacquer artist, sculptor and interior designer in Europe.

<sup>17</sup> “Minimal Shamask,” *Esquire*, September 1987, 22.



siderable success (Shamask designs were featured regularly on the same pages as fashions from Bill Blass, Bob Mackie and other major fashion houses), Ronaldus Shamask resigned suddenly from the company in August of 1989. The move was a surprise to Murray Moss, who was sole owner of Moss Shamask Ltd., and it led to a legal battle over the name which ended up lasting almost as long as the business partnership itself.<sup>18</sup>

## **Chapter Two: From Clothing to Objects**

During the eight years Moss spent supervising production of the Shamask line in Italy, he was exposed to new and classic concepts in European design. “I saw household things that were not available in the United States—or if they were available, they were presented so categorically, like finding kettles in the ‘kettle’ section, that you couldn’t really see the design,” says Moss.<sup>19</sup> This discovery led him to devote the next quarter century to developing ways to highlight the philosophies and methods which had inspired the designers of the objects he championed. In this chapter, I will discuss how his theories of display evolved from fashion merchandising on Madison Avenue to teaching design history at his shop on Greene Street in SoHo.

I asked Moss if he could remember the first object that really captured his interest. He recalled, “When I left [home] for university in 1968, a fondue maker was the first thing my mother put me on the plane with from Chicago—the second thing was a Revere Ware kettle, which I still have. Its design is a combination of the industrial and the decorative, which is a fea-

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<sup>18</sup> Amy M. Spindler, “The Cut of One Seam Coiling,” *New York Times*, 12 August, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author, New Canaan, CT, 22 April 2014.

ture that I find compelling to this day.”<sup>20</sup> He revisited his fascination with the industrial arts after his career in fashion ended. For a period of about four years, he studied household objects manufactured in Italy and other European countries, and over time developed a facility for looking beyond an object’s overt function to discover traces of the designer’s intent. During this intensive period of self-initiated study, Moss came to regard the role of a designer as broader than that of merely *fulfilling* a product’s functional requirements. Observing design culture in places like Italy enabled Moss to see designers as feeling empowered to introduce aspects of their personality into designed objects. Accordingly, Moss saw the designer imparting personality and human qualities—even narratives—into objects. “I realized that once the agenda that the industrialists gave these designers was filled, they were on their own to do what they wanted—sometimes making political statements, sometimes sociological or economic ones, and sometimes creating things that seemed almost poems: they could use objects as canvases.”<sup>21</sup> Moss believed these stories represented essential aspects of an object’s design and felt the best way to communicate them was to take the object out of its usual context.

As Moss’s interest in industrial design grew, he sought avenues for promoting design commercially. His professional experience led him to see fashion retail venues as logical settings in which to display design objects. In 1990, Moss began approaching high end department stores such as Barneys New York, Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue with his idea to curate

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<sup>20</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author, New Canaan, CT, 22 April 2014. Revere Ware was the brand name of a whistling kettle, part of the Art Deco line, designed by William Welden and manufactured by the Revere Copper Plating company, of Canton, Ohio in the early 1940s. It is manufactured today Corning.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

and install collections of objects in their boutiques. He was unsuccessful until he met Jon Weiser, a partner in *Charivari*, a groundbreaking New York fashion retailer. *Charivari* had opened in 1965 on New York City's Upper West Side, then an unfashionable neighborhood. Weiser's mother, Selma (1924-1990), was his business partner, a woman admired for her daring instinct and confident eye. She launched her fashion business on a strip better known for dollar stores than stylish clothing. By the 1970s, Selma, her son Jon and daughter Barbara ran a successful five-store mini empire with a reputation for selling edgy and fashion-forward clothing. The boutique carried many previously unknown European labels such as Giorgio Armani and Dries van Noten, and was supported by a sophisticated clientele attracted to provocative design of all kinds.<sup>22</sup> The work Moss wanted to show seemed ideally suited to the *Charivari* clientele, and a symbiotic creative collaboration began between Moss and the Weisers. In 1992, Jon Weiser gave Moss *carte blanche* to open *Bar Oggetti*, a free standing café, boutique, and exhibition space on the second floor of *Charivari's* new Madison Avenue location. The objects on view reflected Moss's taste for the things he saw in Italy. Moss opened the boutique with an exhibition of glassware by Angelo Mangiarotti (1929-2012), an Italian architect, urban planner and industrial designer who designed a series of vessels for the Italian crystal manufacturer *Colle* in the late 1980s.<sup>23</sup> Moss bought almost every piece from the collection. Regarding the items for sale, Moss told Amy Spindler of the *New York Times*, "These are designer pieces not available in the U.S. with prices

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<sup>22</sup> "Obituary: Selma Weiser, Founder of Charivari," June 16, 2009. <http://www.mrketplace.com/2439/obituary-selma-weiser-founder-of-charivari/>

<sup>23</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author, New York NY, 22 February 2015. The Mangiarotti collection for *Colle* (now *ColleVilca*, a crystal manufactory in Tuscany) was called *Bibulo* and included stemware, decanters and pitchers, along with smaller items no longer in production. The organic forms of this line evoked the fluidity of the liquid the vessels were meant to hold.

as low as \$10, but with a *Charivari* level of design. Clothing customers are used to seeing collections in their entirety. They want to know, ‘Who are these designers, and what is the collection about?’”<sup>24</sup> Murray Moss himself answered these questions, working the floor of *Bar Oggetti* on his own. Moss was attracted to this collection of stemware because it mimicked the movement of the liquid it would hold. Called *Bibulo*, the form of the vessels appeared fluid. (Figure 3) To demonstrate the designer’s process, Moss wallpapered the walls of the shop within a shop with blueprints of Mangiarotti’s drawings. The evolution of the collection was further explained by museum quality labels which provided the name of the designer, the date and material, elevating the collection from mere merchandise for sale, to art. The exhibition and sale lasted only three months before *Charivari* closed. The recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s proved to be a challenging retail climate, and Weiser closed the Madison Avenue store a few years after it opened, calling the venture his worst business mistake.<sup>25</sup> For Moss however, *Bar Oggetti* was the foundation on which he began building his own retailing legacy.

### **Chapter 3: Choosing a Location and Opening Moss**

The closure of *Bar Oggetti* prompted Moss to turn his efforts to opening a stand alone venue in which to spotlight contemporary and classic design to new audiences in new ways. He explained to me that what he learned during his three months at *Charivari* was that he hated

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<sup>24</sup> Amy M. Spindler, “A Charivari ‘Thing’ Shop,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1993. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/20/news/patterns-337693>

<sup>25</sup> Lisa W. Foderaro, “Charivari: Boutique Blues on West 57th Street,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1997. [http://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/06/nyregion/charivari\\_boutique\\_blues\\_on\\_west-57th\\_street](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/06/nyregion/charivari_boutique_blues_on_west-57th_street).

working for someone else, and that people liked things as much as they liked clothing. Most importantly, he realized no one else was offering consumers the option to buy designer objects.<sup>26</sup> He also knew his fashion experience was completely relevant to this new product base. In 1994, after some months of intensive location-scouting and retail planning, Murray Moss opened his eponymous store, Moss, in the Manhattan neighborhood of SoHo. Moss chose SoHo for its cachet as a district revitalized by the artistic community, even though by the time Moss moved into the area, its commercial base was beginning to transition from galleries to more diverse retail offerings.

### **SoHo: a brief history of the neighborhood**

Many factors contributed to the growth of SoHo, and Moss arguably had a hand in transforming the area's economic base from galleries to boutiques. Over the previous two hundred years, the streets in SoHo had already undergone a series of economic evolutions. In the mid-1800s, it was a mixed-use residential area and home to wealthy merchant residents like John Astor as well as famous retail landmarks such as Haughwout's department store, Brooks Brothers clothiers and Tiffany and Company.<sup>27</sup> At the turn of the century however, an increasingly seedy nightlife developed and many of its residents moved north. Textile manufacturing became

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<sup>26</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview by the author, New York, NY, 22 February 2015.

<sup>27</sup> The E.V. Haughwout building is a five story commercial building at the corner of Broome and Broadway in SoHo. Built in 1857, the cast iron building was home to the Eder V. Haughwout's store which sold imported cut glass and silverware as well as domestic ceramics and chandeliers. Brooks Brothers is the United States' oldest clothiers, founded in 1818. Tiffany and Co. is an American jewelry and specialty store founded in 1837 as a stationery and fancy goods emporium.

the area's prominent industry and remained so until the 1960s. By then, industry was moving out of the city, enabling an artistic community to move into SoHo. Attracted to the now-empty loft spaces left behind by vacating manufacturers, and permitted to convert commercial buildings into residences, many artists chose SoHo as the place to establish studios. This shift coincided with an artistic trend to create large scale artworks; the high-ceilinged floors in SoHo's cast iron buildings featured ample windows that made for generously lit studios, which were well suited to these big canvases. In 1973, the city of New York declared SoHo and its landmark cast iron buildings to be a historic district.<sup>28</sup>

SoHo's legendary status, created by a narrative of rescue by a community of artists and civic-minded citizenry, continued to appeal to creative tenants, who flocked there throughout the 1980s. Independent art spaces like 112 Greene Street, founded by Jeffrey Lew, Alan Saret (1944-), and Gordon Matta-Clark, as well as more traditional galleries, such as Paula Cooper Gallery on Prince Street and Leo Castelli on West Broadway, helped establish the neighborhood as a nucle-

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<sup>28</sup> Alistair Barr, *SoHo, New York: Mixed Use, Density and the Power of Myth* (London: Greenwich University Press, 1999) <http://www.barrgazetas.com/papers/SoHo.pdf>  
Among the first artists to move to SoHo was Donald Judd (1928-1994) who purchased a building at 101 Spring Street in 1968. Paula Cooper Gallery opened the same year on Wooster Street. Other artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) and Laurie Anderson (1947-) followed, many displaced from Greenwich Village where rents had become too high. Judd and his wife Julie Finch, were co-founders of Artists Against the Expressway, a group that fought successfully alongside American-Canadian urban reformer Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) to block plans for the construction of the Lower Manhattan Expressway which would have linked the East and west sides of Manhattan. It was part of urban planner Robert Moses' (1888-1981) plan to build highways rather than public transit. Had it gone through, it would have dissected the neighborhood of SoHo, most certainly causing a blight. SoHo—an acronym coined in 1968 and standing for "south of Houston Street"—quickly became one of the country's most important creative centers. The naming of the district began a period of urban renewal and growth.

us for emerging artists.<sup>29</sup> With impressive spaces to exhibit and sell era-defining works, art dealers and buyers were soon investing in the district. However, what began as a grassroots neighborhood rejuvenation effort soon began to exhibit the typical patterns of gentrification that transforms a city as an economy recovers. Ironically, many of the artists who were credited in the Landmark Preservation Commission's designation report with helping to revive the area, would be priced out of SoHo by soaring rents within a decade.<sup>30</sup> The dream of balanced urban development for SoHo came to an end by the mid-1990s. By then, the area was home to established art galleries, but few retail shops. It was the art buying market that attracted Murray Moss to the neighborhood when he was looking for a place to set up shop on his own. He chose the Greene Street location because it was situated between two galleries, Pace Wildenstein—which represented blue chip artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenberg—and Metro Pictures,

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<sup>29</sup> Nicolai Ouroussof, "Timely Lessons from a Rebel, Who Often Created by Destroying," *New York Times*, 3 March 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/03/arts/design/03matt.html?page-wanted=all> 112 Greene Street was not a gallery but an independent art studio and workshop owned by Lew. The space offered visual artists, dancers and filmmakers a place to experiment in their mediums and exhibit work. Lew gave up the building in 1976. Gordon Matta Clark was an installation artist famous for site specific work, particularly his building cuts. His best-known works of the 1970s, included abandoned warehouses and empty suburban houses that he carved up with a power saw—a commentary on the decay of the American city. Because these works were temporary (the buildings were often demolished soon afterwards), Matta Clark attained somewhat of a cult status when he died young (at 35 years old) from pancreatic cancer.

<sup>30</sup> John V. Lindsay, Richard M. Clurman and Harmon Goldstone, *SoHo - Cast Iron Historic District Designation Report*, (City of New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1973), 8. [http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/SoHo\\_HD.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/SoHo_HD.pdf) When the City of New York declared SoHo and its landmark caustic iron buildings a historic district in August of 1973, artists were given much credit. A report titled *SoHo—Cast Iron Historic District Designation Report*, was released under the mayoralship of John V. Lindsay, Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs administrator Richard Clurman, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission's Harmon Goldstone.

which represented more contemporary artists like Cindy Sherman.<sup>31</sup> Murray Moss reflected on his decision to establish his gallery among SoHo art dealers by saying, “I intentionally located it in an art district because I didn’t want to get ghettoized in the housewares district where you’d never get a chance to get someone to see something in a new way. But people in SoHo already had the mindset of ‘let’s go look at things we don’t know anything about,’ so I thought that being in between Pace and Metro Pictures, I could put a garbage can [in the window display]. And for five seconds—before people saw the garbage can—they would see a shape, a color and maybe something else about it; that was the whole idea.”<sup>32</sup> In 2008, in an article written by Craig Kellogg for *Art and Auction*, he added that he hoped “in a moment of craziness, people would look at my fruit bowls and ashtrays as art.”<sup>33</sup> His partner, Franklin Getchell, says choosing the location for Moss was strategic, and allowed objects to be positioned—physically and metaphorically—against a backdrop of fine art, making them more arresting and desirable to consumers. Moss capitalized on the existing audience of art buyers coming to the neighborhood. He timed the store hours and changing of window displays to coordinate with the openings at the adjoining galleries, taking advantage of gallery shoppers. Getchell recalls that at the time, SoHo featured

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<sup>31</sup> Pace Wildenstein was a business merger between The Pace Gallery and Wildenstein and Co. which existed from 1993-2010. It now operates under The Pace Gallery and no longer has a SoHo location. Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) was an American painter, sculptor and graphic artist. Claes Oldenberg (born Sweden, 1929-) is an American sculptor known for large, soft sculptural works. Metro Pictures moved out of SoHo in 1995, part of the first wave of galleries to move to Chelsea. Cindy Sherman (1954-) is an American photographer and film director.

<sup>32</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview with the author, New Canaan, CT, 22 April 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Craig Kellogg, “Style Conscious or Style Conscience?,” *Art & Auction* 31, no.8 (April 2008): 136.



relatively few retail operations, and co-operative boards were hesitant to rent to retail clients.

Moss presented his concept as more of a gallery rather than a store, a characterization that helped foster Moss's acceptance in the neighborhood.<sup>34</sup> (Figure 4)

#### **Chapter 4: Moss, Influential Exhibitions**

Moss says his approach to attracting gallery customers was based on visual theater: "The first thing I did was design a stage in the window."<sup>35</sup> Moss did so with the help of Harry Allen, a young industrial designer whose austere, minimalist furniture he had seen in the windows of Barneys' downtown location in 1993. (At the time, Allen was producing a small line of furniture, which he had shown at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) and was subsequently purchased by Barneys.) Moss approached Allen with the idea of collaborating on the interiors of a provocatively staged retail gallery, and together they designed a window in which to exhibit pieces along with the rectilinear, white powder-coated steel-and-glass vitrines used to house the objects Moss planned to sell. (The interior design also included floor-mounted stanchions that kept visitors from getting too close to costly or rare items, a detail that further set Moss apart from other retail venues.) Allen said, "It was the idea of objects of desire that you couldn't touch."<sup>36</sup> (Figure 5)

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<sup>34</sup> Information in an email to the author, from Franklin Getchell, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, 27 November 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview with the author, New York, NY, 21 July 2014.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/at-offline-harry-allen-new-yor-119893>

Harry Allen (1964-) studied design at Pratt Institute. He produced a series of modular furniture for the ICCF show called *Living Systems*. Its modularity made it particularly suitable for corporate and commercial environments.

## Inspiration from the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Harry Allen said that when Moss expanded to the space next door (150 Greene Street) in 1999, he went to the Museum of Natural History and designed display cabinets for the new space that evoked the dioramas he saw there.<sup>37</sup> The presentation methods used by major cultural institutions inspired Moss and his designers. He felt that the only time he saw people really looking at things was when they were in a museum.<sup>38</sup> When he opened the original Moss store at 146 Greene Street, he revealed to me that he used the catalog of the *Machine Art* exhibition at the MoMA as his guide. The year Moss opened, MoMA held a retrospective of that ground-breaking design exhibition, curated sixty years earlier by its director of the department of architecture at that time, Philip Johnson (1906-2005).<sup>39</sup> Moss was not a fan of the architect's work, but when he and Getchell received an invitation to the retrospective, they went, and there Moss acquired a reprint of the original catalog.

Moss was inspired by the images in the catalog of the exhibit. Philip Johnson had hired a novice photographer, Ruth Bernhard (1905-2006), to take photographs of most of the objects in

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<sup>37</sup> The address of the original shop was 146 Greene Street, a space of about 1800 square feet in size. In 1999 Moss added 5000 square feet by taking over the space vacated by Metro Pictures next door. The design of the interior was a collaboration by Moss, Harry Allen and the graphic designer Ron Ryan.

<sup>38</sup> Edna Goldstaub Dainotto, "Murray Moss: Showcase for Commercial Creativity," *Graphis* 53, no. 311 (1997): 98.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Cortelyou Johnson is most famous for the design of his weekend retreat in New Canaan CT, The Glass House (1949), as well as for his collaboration with Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) on the Seagram Building (1956) and the Sony Plaza (formerly the AT&T Building, 1984), both in New York.

the exhibition.<sup>40</sup> She did so in a manner which would objectify the thingness of the subject, whether it was a faucet photographed not as part of a sink in a bathroom setting, but as a machine made apparatus for running water: no context nor branding. This objectivity became a stylistic expression of modernism and Bernhard came about this approach through her father, Lucian Bernhard (1883-1972), a German graphic designer who created *Plakatstil* (Poster-style) advertising in the early twentieth century. *Plakatstil* was simplified further into a style known as *Sachplakat* (literal translation: “thing” poster), illustrated in some of his most famous works—advertisements for brands such as *Manoli* cigarettes and *Kaffee Haag*.<sup>41</sup> (Figure 6) It was in this minimal, reductive manner that Ruth Bernhard would assemble and photograph the objects for the *Machine Art* catalog. In her book *Machine Art 1934*, the author Jennifer Jane Marshall describes the power of these images, stating that the photographs in *Machine Art*’s catalog were often more interesting than the objects they depicted.<sup>42</sup> (Figure 7) This was one of Bernhard’s first professional photography assignments, and she successfully captured Johnson’s goal of showcasing the beauty of a machine-made object, part or material. An example is an image of an outboard motor boat propeller; it is photographed against a plain white background, lit so as to create shadows which emphasize its form, and reflection which highlights its shiny steel surface. (Figure 8) The

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.photographywest.com/pages/bernhard\\_bio.html](http://www.photographywest.com/pages/bernhard_bio.html)

Ruth Bernhard was born in Berlin in 1905 and studied at the Berlin Academy of Art. She moved to New York in 1927. The photographs she took for the *Machine Art* catalog were among her first professional assignments. She is now best known for her nudes and her work can be found in museums around the world including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Jane Marshall, *Machine Art 1934* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 36. Lucian Bernhard was famous for object based commercial poster design in Germany.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

design of the catalog itself was spare—each page featured only one or two photographs surrounded by wide white margins. Moss told me in an interview that he has always been attracted to the New Objectivity, and it is in this manner that the objects are depicted.<sup>43</sup> He describes the photographs of the objects in the catalog as “mug shots” because they isolate the thing they represent, as a mug shot isolates the head of a perpetrator.<sup>44</sup> Johnson in his display, and Bernhard in her photography, had taken the subjects out of their usual contexts—whether it be a machine part, industrial cookware or laboratory beakers—and had placed them in isolation to be viewed as sculpture or as art. It was a display method Moss would use in his own shop.

### **Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, Achievements and Problems of Italian Design**

While the *Machine Art* catalog served as an inspirational visual guide, Moss asserted to me in an interview that another show at MoMA had had a much greater impact on him. He said that what he saw at the 1972 exhibition *Italy: the New Domestic Landscape*, was like “a punch in the stomach.”<sup>45</sup> Curated by the Argentinian architect Emilio Ambasz (1943-), at that time head of MoMA’s department of architecture and design, the show shaped Moss’s ideas about the role of design in society. It also exposed him to the work of designers who were interested more in ideas

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<sup>43</sup> Rosemarie Haag Bletter, “Expressionism and the new objectivity,” *The Art Journal / College Art Association of America* 43, (1983): 108-120. The New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*, in German) is a term used to describe the characteristic attitude of public life in Weimar Germany (1919-1933) referring to a practicality, a directness and the representation of something as precisely what it is.

<sup>44</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, in an interview with the author, 12 January 2015, New York, NY.

<sup>45</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview with the author, New York, NY, 13 July 2014.

than function. He was struck by the interpretations of familiar objects presented by Ambasz, as well as the solutions Italian designers were suggesting for global problems, such as housing shortages caused by environmental disasters or conflict. This, for example, was addressed by Richard Sapper's (German, 1932-) and Marco Zanuso's (1916-2001) prototype of mobile shelter made from an aluminum shipping container (1972). Moss described the overall effect as "cool and sexy, shiny and futuristic."<sup>46</sup> The exhibition introduced Moss to the work of other Italian designers such as Gaetano Pesce (1939-), Angelo Mangiarotti and Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), names he would support professionally throughout his career. Sottsass's Valentine portable typewriter (1969 for Olivetti) hangs on the wall of Moss's apartment in Manhattan today, and Sapper's designs for Alessi housewares were featured in his shop in SoHo. Moss forged a friendship with Pesce during the years he researched industrial design in Italy after his collaboration with Shamask ended. Moss says the relationships he developed with these designers gave him the privilege of learning more about their process.<sup>47</sup> "I'm more interested in the people than the thing," he says.<sup>48</sup> Their stories help him sell their objects.

*Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* introduced Moss to the concept that design did not need to be solely motivated by function, instead it could interpret form based on something more visceral. An example at the exhibition was Pesce's (1939-) UP 5 Donna armchair (1969) and UP 6 hassock (footstool) connected by a chain and shaped like a reclining woman. It is a design that forces you to literally rest your head between a woman's bosom and be cradled, quite literally,

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<sup>46</sup> Murray Moss, interview with the author, New York, NY, 12 January 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Fred Bernstein, "Murray Moss," *Blueprint* 166 (1999): 11.

<sup>48</sup> Murray Moss, interview with the author, New York, NY, 12 January 2015.

between her legs. (Figure 9) The Italians also acknowledged that ultimately the user would determine the function of an object. Piero Gatti's (1940-) now iconic bean bag chair, the Sacco (1969) is an example of this type of appropriation. The exhibition was also democratic: it offered high scale design for a wide range of prices—as Moss would when he opened his first shop on Greene Street. Ambasz selected objects ranging from \$15 for the *Plia* aluminum and plastic folding and stacking chair (Giancarlo Piretti, 1969), to \$1500 for *Armadio-letto* (Alberto Salvati and Ambrogio Tresoldi, 1967), the all-in-one sofa, closet and nightstand. While the *Machine Art* catalog planted ideas about displaying design, Ambasz's exhibition at MoMA exposed Moss to ideas and philosophies of the designers themselves. It is this lesson that would influence his taste and choices as Moss developed from store to gallery, and ultimately to more of a museum.

### **Retail as Theater**

Moss theorizes that his imaginative window displays lured in his earliest clients: art buyers who were the first to patronize a kind of new, theatrical design experience. In this Moss produced theater, each object was a cast member with its own script and moment in the spotlight on stage. Moss's Greene Street window was the first act's stage, beckoning visitors. A 1959 wastepaper basket designed by Bruno Munari for *Danese Milano* was one of the first things featured in Moss's window—isolated and illuminated as a machine part would have been in *Machine Art*.<sup>49</sup> He understood that the window's role was to elicit consumer desire: "I purposefully had the store designed so that you cannot see any of the objects from the street. All of the cases

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<sup>49</sup> Bruno Munari (1907-1998) was an Italian artist, designer and inventor. *Danese* is an Italian industrial design manufacturer based in Milan.

are turned away from the street, so you can see only the one object that I put in the window.”<sup>50</sup> It is a merchandising technique that developed in retail centers such as New York over the course of the nineteenth century. L. Frank Baum (1856-1919) wrote and published a journal covering topics related to retail window display called *The Show Window* in 1897. In it he urged merchants to display objects in such a way as to arouse a longing to possess the goods in the observer. Techniques he suggested include isolating the object, deepening the display and adjusting the lighting—making them appear like actors on a stage.<sup>51</sup> Frederick Kiesler (1890-1965), the Austrian American stage designer and architect developed these ideas further three decades later with the window displays he designed for Saks Fifth Avenue’s flagship store in New York City in 1928. Kiesler, a member of *De Stijl*, arranged singular objects at random intervals in the window display against a common background.<sup>52</sup> Inside, he placed goods on constructions in the center of the space. Kiesler believed that helped establish a relationship of longing between the audience and the object. To transform the passerby into a customer, Kiesler theorized, one had to be a showman, merchandiser and psychologist.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Tyrnauer, “The Taste-Maker: Murray Moss takes his store-cum-museum to L.A.,” <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/05/moss20705>

<sup>51</sup> William E. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture*, (New York: Vintage E Books, 1993), 135-36. L. Frank Baum was a children’s book author and journalist with a background in theater production and performance.

<sup>52</sup> Kiesler was born in Austria and studied at the Technische Hochschule Wien from 1908-09. He became a member of *De Stijl* group in 1923. *De Stijl* is an artistic movement founded in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1917. Its supporters believed in design reduced to essentials of form and color; visual compositions used only horizontal and vertical directions and primary colors or black and white.

<sup>53</sup> Barnaby Haran, “Magic Windows: Frederick Kiesler’s displays for Saks Fifth Avenue, New York in 1928,” in *Sculpture and the Vitrine*, ed. John C. Weichman (Surrey UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2013), 83.

Moss approached the design of his store with all of these skills. As a stage director and psychologist, he attempted to control the behavior of the customer as soon as they entered the store. “Based on how the store is designed, it attempts to manipulate you from the moment you walk in,” he said in an interview with Edna Goldstaub Dainotto in 1997.<sup>54</sup> “When I collaborate with my display guys, we talk about narrative, text and moments. It’s the reason I locked things behind glass—it was to create a proscenium, to slow the experience down. If you see something you need to have, the case is unlocked. It doesn’t matter if it’s a unique thirty-four thousand dollar vase by Gaetano Pesce commissioned by me, or a three dollar bottle opener.”<sup>55</sup> Moss’s attempt to set the tone of the experience began at the front door. As shoppers approached the entrance to Moss, signage on the door warned food, drink, photography, pets and unsupervised children were not permitted in the gallery. Inside, a pristine, bright, all-white space greeted them. Moss turned down the heat in an effort to keep customers alert. “I don’t want it to be comfortable. I want you to be awake!” he said in an interview with Matt Tyrnauer of *Vanity Fair*.<sup>56</sup> Illuminated cases led visitors past a succession of objects—some luxury goods, some humble household items—that were spotlighted, and identified by museum quality labels, offering a brief history of the object and providing information on price and materials. (Figure 10) As visitors moved through the gallery-shop, the layout directed their attention to various tableaux of objects, offering a visual narrative designed to instill excitement and, above all, desire. As William Leach, the Columbia University professor and author writes in his book *Land of Desire: Mer-*

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<sup>54</sup> Goldstaub Dainotto, *Graphis*, 99.

<sup>55</sup> Tyrnauer, “The Taste-maker,” <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/05/moss20705>

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



*chants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture*, the retailer John Wanamaker realized that people buy not just the object, but rather the experience of visiting the store. For that reason, Wanamaker's decorators took a theme and used it everywhere in the store, irrespective of its focus—whether the theme was Parisian or horticultural, they knew the more it was repeated, the more it would resonate with their customers.<sup>57</sup> Moss did the same with his wish to recreate the museum environment. The illuminated custom display cases infused humble objects such as bottle openers from Italian housewares firm Alessi, or flatware from Finnish tabletop-goods company Iittala, with drama and allure. Staff members were dressed from head to toe in black, almost like theater stagehands, and meticulously cleaned the store each morning and throughout the day. (Chad Phillips, formerly a Moss employee, and today retail director of the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum's shop, recalls that Murray Moss could spot a mark on the wall, or a smudge on a case from across the room, where he was fixing or arranging objects on view.)<sup>58</sup>

Placing objects behind glass forced the customer to interact with staff, says Phillips, heightening the theatricality of the shopping experience. Customers could not handle objects and make their own observations; instead, they had to ask salespersons for assistance, whereupon they would be told the story of an object's place of origin, designer, and even manufacturing details. Phillips relates how Moss would prepare "scripts" for the sales staff to deliver: "We'd talk about something he [Murray Moss] had added to the store, and he'd give us a little backstory on

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<sup>57</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture*, 105.

<sup>58</sup> Chad Phillips, Retail Director, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum New York, interview with the author, New York, NY, 16 April 2014.

it.”<sup>59</sup> Scripts were designed to educate and excite shoppers about even the most everyday goods. Murray Moss can still recite details from his narratives, such as how the muslin glass of a Lobmeyr “Alpha” tumbler provides the thinnest possible barrier between your lips and the liquid it holds, or how holding a “Commodore” goblet designed by Oswald Haerdtl in the 1950s changes your behavior, compelling you to become more graceful, more elegant.<sup>60</sup> The reason for the change in behavior is the nature of the stemware—paper thin glass and crystal one feels compelled to handle with care. Daniel Basiletti, another long-time Moss employee, remembers how his employer even used theatrical terminology to describe gallery operations: the back office was referred to as “backstage”; the employees were “actors”; and the objects were the “stars”.<sup>61</sup> Phillips echoes Basiletti’s characterization of Moss as a drama-inspired environment, recalling that “Every day was a new play; we were doing a new show. We were all stagehands, and actors, and the production team, making it happen everyday.”<sup>62</sup>

“Rigor”—a word Murray Moss frequently cites as an attribute of his working process—is the apt adjective to describe the approach he used in orchestrating the Moss customer’s experience. His scrupulous efforts made Moss a memorable place. Phillips remembers first encountering the store in 1998, when, new to New York City and seeking a job, he was stunned by the

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<sup>59</sup> Chad Phillips, interview with the author, 16 April 2014.

<sup>60</sup> J. & L. Lobmeyr is a crystal and glassware company in Vienna, Austria. It was founded in 1823 by Josef Lobmeyr (1792-1855). Oswald Haerdtl (1899-1959) was an Austrian architect and designer who studied under Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956) at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* in Vienna (1917).

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Basiletti, Retail and Brand Director, Ameico, New Milford CT, interview by the author, New Milford, CT, 28 July 2014. Basiletti was employed at Moss from 1994 to 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Chad Phillips, interview with the author, 16 April 2014.

quality of display. “It was as if you were walking into a museum or gallery.”<sup>63</sup> Troyce Smith, a frequent Moss shopper, also vividly recalls the store: “Moss was beautiful, and it was a destination,” she says. “You would just be astounded; part of it was the presentation, but it was definitely an aspirational place, full of things that you had not seen in this country. It was just a ‘wow’ experience.”<sup>64</sup> (Figure 11) Moss’s display methods established the gallery’s own elite brand nestled within the branded neighborhood of SoHo. They also encouraged SoHo’s increasingly affluent visitors to regard the objects they saw as being on a par with the fine art found in the surrounding galleries. Moss’s initial offerings were functional artworks like Alvar Aalto’s “Savoy” vase, produced by Iittala and carried out of the gallery by consumers in Moss’s unmistakable clear plastic bag, evidence of one’s good taste and latest foray into SoHo. At Moss, customers were immersed in the museum experience and could spend under a \$100 to bring both leading edge design and the experience back into their homes. Part of the store’s early success came from selling souvenirs of SoHo: affordable design objects for individuals on the fringe of the art market.

### **The Art of Merchandising and Merchandise as Art: Alessi and Iittala**

Although much of the appeal of Moss’s offerings, regardless of their cost or craftsmanship, was manufactured through a strategy of dramatic display; novelty also played a role. When Moss opened in 1994, Murray Moss chose to display many pieces which were relatively new to

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<sup>63</sup>Chad Phillips, interview with the author, 16 April 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Troyce Smith, Group Tour Co-ordinator, The Glass House, New Canaan CT, interviewed by the author, New Canaan CT, 22 April 2014.

the American market. He hand selected small, mostly functional household objects, few of which cost more than a few hundred dollars. Among the European producers he represented, Moss had considerable success with Alessi. Founded in Italy in 1921 as a family workshop that produced metalworks in its foundry, Alessi established its reputation by producing well-designed and manufactured household items and tableware. In the late 1940s, it distinguished itself by hiring external designers and architects to work with and became famous for collaborations with Luigi Massoni (1929-), Carlo Mazzeri (1927-) and Anselmo Vitale (1929-). These three industrial designers created some of the classic designs for Alessi which remain top sellers today. Moss says Alessi-branded pieces outsold any other brand in his shop by a factor of twenty. “Over time, Moss became one of our biggest customers too, in terms of sales volume,” says Paolo Cravedi, managing director of Alessi USA.<sup>65</sup> When Cravedi first moved to the United States, he was amazed to discover the appeal and influence of the Moss brand. He acknowledges the appeal of Moss’s retail theater by pointing to the fact that even after Alessi opened its own flagship store, many Alessi customers still preferred to buy the Italian-designed products at Moss. The range on sale at Moss included many mid-priced pieces that casual design consumers could afford. The same was true for other European brands, such as Finnish tableware and cookware manufacturer Iittala, older than Alessi but of a similar philosophy. Iittala began as a glassworks, and in the 1940s, also collaborated with industrial designers and architects to create thoughtfully designed functional tablewares and housewares. Both Iittala and Alessi, because of these designer/architect associations, gave Moss the opportunity to choose objects which had a story related to their

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<sup>65</sup> Paolo Cravedi, Managing Director, Alessi USA, New York, interview by the author, New York, NY, 11 August 2014.

makers. It allowed him to educate the consumer. Moss acknowledges he was not selling things you could not buy at other stores: “You can buy it anywhere, but you can see it here,” he told Aric Chen from *I.D. Magazine* in 2001.<sup>66</sup> His goal, of course, was to make someone want to buy it from him. He was offering the customer more than just the product, he was offering an education through the narrative and the experience.<sup>67</sup>

## **Tupperware**

In 1997, Murray Moss took the concept of theatrical retail display to its most literal level yet by staging a show few thought they would ever see at Moss: SoHo’s first and only Tupperware party. For his contemporary interpretation of the popular midcentury direct-marketing endeavor, Moss brought in “actors” including, as he describes them, “The hosts: women from Queens. One wears a pink jump suit and pumps; another a heart-shaped pin that spells out the evening’s magic word in sequins: ‘Tupperware’”<sup>68</sup> The idea for the design-retail event was born when Moss met Morison Cousins, a Tupperware vice president of design who had been hired in 1990 to reinvigorate the brand first introduced to the American public in 1945. “I said to him ‘Morison, how come you discriminate against Manhattan? Don’t you think that we need to store our dried noodles?’” Moss recalls. He persuaded Cousins to design black lids, especially for New Yorkers, which Moss displayed in vitrines in a show he now describes as “dramatic.” Top Tup-

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<sup>66</sup> Aric Chen, “Talking Shop,” *I.D. Magazine*, May 2001, 54.

<sup>67</sup> Goldstaub Dainotto, “Murray Moss: Showcase for Commercial Creativity,” 96.

<sup>68</sup> Miriam Horn, “Tupperware Takes Manhattan,” *U.S. News and World Report* 122, no. 21(2 June 1997): 77.

perware sales agents circulated among invited members of the design press, cultural elite, and selected customers, demonstrating the clean-lined products while serving margaritas. The event was a resounding success, prompting a flurry of sales and press articles. “I had the editors of Vogue there,” explains Moss. “You know what the average sale was? Like \$2,000! Do you know how much Tupperware you have to buy to spend \$2,000?”<sup>69</sup> The event raised public appreciation in Manhattan for the ubiquitous suburban American product. For Moss, the Tupperware Party was another interpretation of MoMA-sanctioned design. Alison Clarke writes in her book *Tupperware, the Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, “In 1956, curators at the Museum of Modern Art New York chose a number of Tupperware kitchen containers and implements for a national exhibition of twentieth-century design.”<sup>70</sup> Like MoMA, Moss appreciated the aesthetic rather than the commercial value of the design. He also relished the irony of a man hosting a Tupperware party, not in a suburban neighborhood, but in a downtown urban environment. The event epitomized his presentation goal and strategy: objects and their perceived value are enhanced when put before the viewers in surprising combinations and in an unexpected venue. By hosting the Tupperware Party at his gallery-district store, Moss demonstrated his deft ability to juxtapose the “high” and “low” and the local and international in design and marketing. As Mark Pimlott writes in his essay “The Boutique and the Mass Market,” in the book *Boutiques and Other Retail Spaces: The Architecture of Seduction (Interior Architecture)*, Moss was a boutique that rendered

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<sup>69</sup> Janelle Zara, “‘There Can’t Be Nostalgia’: Murray Moss on Closing His SoHo Design Store and Opening a Garment District Hovel,” *BlouinArtInfo*, 27 January 2012. <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/757938/>

<sup>70</sup> Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware, the Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1999), 52.

everything inside it equal: “Its sampling of artifacts is eclectic, bound together by the fetishism of an unidentified ‘collector’ that is the store and its implied proprietor. The shop is an exhibition of good taste, captive of neither time nor ideology. This quality is passed onto the customer who is posited as a fellow aficionado or connoisseur.”<sup>71</sup> Former Moss staffer, Chad Phillips observes, “One of the things I learned at Moss was that the material doesn’t equal value; something made of plastic could cost more than something made of silver.”<sup>72</sup> Moss treated all of these objects, from Tupperware to ColleVilca crystal, with the same respect. As the sales at the Tupperware event proved, when Murray Moss deemed something—even something humble—good design, people listened. Moss was becoming a tastemaker in equal measure to his renown as a retail innovator.

## Chapter 5: Droog and the Dissemination of Dutch Design

In the year following the Tupperware event, Moss hosted another weekend of retail theater when he exhibited the work of *Droog*, a Dutch design collective founded in 1993 by Gijs Bakker and Renny Ramakers.<sup>73</sup> Bakker, a designer and teacher at the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, and Ramakers, an art historian and critic, pulled together a group of designers (mostly students) with the goal to better develop and market contemporary Dutch de-

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<sup>71</sup> Mark Pimlott, “The boutique and the mass market,” in *Boutiques and Other Retail Spaces: The Architecture of Seduction*, eds. David Vernet and Leontine de Wit (New York: Rutledge, 2007), 12, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Chad Phillips, Retail Director, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum New York, interview with the author, New York, NY, 16 April 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Paola Antonelli, “Nothing Cooler than Dry,” in *Droog Design: Spirit of the Nineties*, eds. Renny Ramakers and Gijs Bakker (Gent: 010 Publishers, 1998), 12. *Droog* is a Dutch word that means dry, as in dry humor.

sign.<sup>74</sup> The collective first showed their work together as part of a student exhibit at the *Salon del Mobile* in Milan in 1993. Moss visited the display and describes it as the second time a design exhibition made him feel like he had been “punched in the stomach—in a good way.”<sup>75</sup> What appealed to him was the strength of ideas over functionality which was common in the work, as well the unusual combination of materials, and the juxtaposition of craft and machine fabrication. An example of the work that was shown in Milan is the now famous chest of drawers by Tejo Remy (*You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, 1991) made by randomly strapping found drawers together. (Figure 12) Ramakers recalls the idea behind that design was difficult for critics to accept—the chest has no fixed form and it could be put together in any configuration.<sup>76</sup> It was precisely this kind of thought process that attracted Moss to the designers of *Droog*.

Moss embarked on a collecting tour of the Netherlands with Teake Bulstra, a Dutch industrial designer and project manager he had met in Milan in 1993, and together they amassed a collection of one-offs Moss would exhibit in his shop in New York.<sup>77</sup> Held over one weekend in May 1998, the show, which was the first solo exhibition of the group's work in the United States,

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<sup>74</sup> Mienke Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design: A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 147. The Design Academy Eindhoven was established in 1947 as an interdisciplinary educational institute for art architecture and design in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

<sup>75</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview with the author, New York, NY, 12 January 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Gijs Bakker and Renny Ramakers, “Droog Design,” *AA Files* 44 (Autumn 2001):51

<sup>77</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview with the author, New York, NY, 12 January 2015. Teake Bulstra is a Dutch inventor and project manager who was interested in producing some of the designs Droog exhibited at the Milan Furniture Fair. He would ultimately do that as CEO of DMD - Development Manufacturing Distribution, a company based at the time in Voorburg, the Netherlands. DMD was acquired by The Product Matters in Amsterdam in 2002.



was held concurrently with the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York. Moss called it *Eating Potatoes with a Silver Fork: Droog Design, Dutch Industrial Art, Post Sunflowers*, a title echoing his signature method of playfully juxtaposing high (silver) and low (potatoes). He transformed the store into an exhibition space for about fifty provocative designs, of which only ten percent was in production, with the rest being prototypes. Included in the show was an experimental design for shower and accompanying hardware. At the opening party, Moss dramatically spotlighted the shower by hiring a male model to bathe inside, fully nude, behind a transparent curtain.<sup>78</sup> The act conjoined, to arresting effect, *Droog's* often-ironic, witty approach to design with Murray Moss's dramatic, humor-laced methods of display. The sales potential of such an exhibition—especially one held during a design fair that brings thousands of style-conscious consumers to New York City—was not Moss's prime objective. Moss was introducing concepts and promoting young designers—he was fulfilling his role as an impresario.

The exhibition led to other collaborations with Dutch designers. In 2002, again at the *Salon del Mobile* in Milan, Moss was introduced to the work of another Eindhoven graduate, Maarten Baas. Baas had two pieces on display as part of his graduate thesis called *Smoke*—a charred wooden chandelier and a charred Victorian chair. Moss remembers being perplexed by Baas's choice of objects. He asked Baas to meet him to discuss the works, and inquired why he hadn't burned objects he cared about, choosing instead items that were so common, so ugly? Baas confessed to him that he was too scared to burn something meaningful. Moss convinced him he needed to burn important furniture: a Gaudi chair, an Eames chair, even a Rietveld chair

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<sup>78</sup> Franklin Getchell, Partner, Moss Bureau NY, interview with the author, New York, NY, March 2014.

—the most iconic piece of Dutch design. (Figure 13) Moss purchased twenty-five chairs for the exhibition which Baas burned and finished with a transparent epoxy—and that became the 2004 exhibition at Moss called *Where there's Smoke*. In a sense Moss says, Baas had to burn his education so he could “get on with it” and move on to the next project.<sup>79</sup> By doing so, Baas has changed the chair—transforming it from a functional piece of furniture to a piece of art. The collaboration expressed Moss’s vision: design metamorphosed into art. *Where There's Smoke* was also a commercial success for Baas; just a few years out of design school, the hotelier Ian Schrager commissioned 200 chairs from the *Where There's Smoke* series. Schrager remarked in an interview in 2007, “What was so important about Moss was the exposure he gave to all these talented people from around the world; without him, this whole phenomenon—this new wave of design consciousness in America—might not have happened.”<sup>80</sup>

Moss maintains that two things contribute to a successful exhibition: curation and timing.<sup>81</sup> The success he helped achieve for contemporary Dutch designers in the United States, and to an extent abroad, benefitted from perfect timing. *Droog* design was conceived of during a time of generous government subsidies for the arts in the Netherlands. As early as the 1980s the Dutch government had started to recognize design as a cultural asset. They began offering grants so that students of design did not have to hold down jobs while they were studying and could

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<sup>79</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau, New York, interview with the author, New York NY, 12 January 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Milena Damjanov, “Aspiring to the Throne: A growing number of small stores are challenging Murray Moss’s supremacy as the arbiter of design in America,” *New York Times*, 10 May 2007, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Murray Moss, Partner, Moss Bureau New York, interview with the author, New York NY, 21 July 2014.

spend more time developing ideas instead.<sup>82</sup> But Robert Kloos, Director of Visual Arts, Architecture and Design at the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York, credits Moss with being able to recognize talent and promote it successfully. “I think he was also able to take the talent that he thought was going to be able to really fit into a commercial arena such as he envisioned.”<sup>83</sup> Baas’s collaboration with Moss coincided with a good economy. A mini recession that began in 2001 ended quickly, and the United States experienced wage and salary growth through 2007. The economic climate supported a robust art market, in which Moss’s influence was increasingly acknowledged. In 2005 Moss participated as a dealer on the international stage when he exhibited at Art Basel Miami Beach. He highlighted and displayed the work of several contemporary Dutch designers, among them Tord Boontje (1968-), Claudy Jongstra (1963-), and Baas to good effect. Using the platform of Moss and the publicity his ideas could generate, Moss proved himself a powerful promoter. Kloos says in this role Moss was more powerful than many major cultural institutions because he had the ability to take something he had seen at the furniture fair in Milan and could mount an exhibition a month later. Museums would take much longer.<sup>84</sup> Kloos says Moss is the most important American ambassador for Dutch contemporary design, “Without him, the position of Dutch design in the United States would not have been where it is today.”<sup>85</sup> Today, more than a decade after Moss’s show, Dutch design continues to make news in New York. In March 2014, the first American branch of the Dutch hotel chain Cit-

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<sup>82</sup> Mienke Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design: A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 207.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Kloos, Director of Visual Arts, Architecture and Design, Consulate General of the Netherlands New York, interview with the author, New York NY, 4 March 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

izenM opened in Times Square, and *Moooi* (“beautiful” in Dutch, with an extra ‘o’), the design company founded by Marcel Wanders (1963-) opened its first American showroom in 2015. Of these developments Moss says, “I love that work, I was the first to look at it, now it’s going on to a new generation.”<sup>86</sup>

## **Chapter 6: Siegfried Bing, Terence Conran and Selling Design Before Moss**

Moss contributed to the development of the boutique as an immersive activity. The store provided goods for sale, a design education and visual theater—a complete shopping experience. A century earlier, a German merchant named Siegfried Bing (1838-1905) aimed to offer the same thing in a shop in Paris called *L’Art Nouveau*. Bing opened his boutique at 22 *rue de Provence* in December 1895. (Figure 14) He made it his mission to promote the decorative arts displaying them and selling them in a manner that would elevate them to the status of fine art. Bing did this by introducing the Parisian shopper to goods from Japan and China, including simple everyday objects such as hair combs and other grooming tools, which were showcased in his shop in a way that would heighten their significance and appeal. They were displayed under glass, slightly removed from the customer by the use of a combination of vitrines and rails that kept people at a distance. (Figure 15) The objects were not sold as utilitarian objects, but as decorative work worthy of admiration. Bing was one of the first retailers in Paris to install electric lights, which he used to create dramatic displays. He set scenes in his shop to demonstrate new furniture styles in room settings—another means to educate the customer on the aesthetic

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<sup>86</sup> Julie Lasky, “The Dutch are Back in Town,” *New York Times*, 10 September 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/garden/the-dutch-are-back-in-town>

value of decoration. Bing felt that the use of the electric lights and the model rooms were ways of ensuring a lasting impression was made on the visitor. The design of *L'Art Nouveau* became as much of an attraction as the objects displayed within.<sup>87</sup>

As Moss would decades later, Bing blurred the lines between art and decoration, the utilitarian and the decorative, by displaying disparate objects together. He created tableaux where he displayed the mundane alongside the exquisite. For example, Bing positioned the grooming tools alongside Tiffany vases. These juxtapositions earned him praise as well as criticism. Some critics thought that while Bing was successful in raising the status of the decorative arts, he created confusing displays by mixing the work of too many designers. The critic Arsène Alexandre (1859-1937) ridiculed almost every aspect of Bing's installations shortly after the shop opened. His critique was published on the front page of *Le Figaro* on December 28, 1895, and described the effect of the display as "confused" and "incoherent," among other, harsher disparagements.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, a century later, Moss's display of unrelated objects in his shop (Alessi salt and pepper shakers alongside a Memphis Group table light, for example) prompted this reaction from a journalist: "What he accomplished in this juxtaposition was an abridged exploration of the mate-

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<sup>87</sup> Gabriel Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900* (New York: Abrams, 1986), 60.

<sup>88</sup> Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 26.

rial [wood] through color, grain, translucency and production, all communicated from the authority of a glass case.”<sup>89</sup>

Gabriel Weisberg, a Bing scholar, writes in his book *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900*, “Bing’s *L’Art Nouveau* demonstrated that a shop could be a place where informed consumerism flourished... He knew how to reach the public while at the same time gaining support from the museum professionals around the world.”<sup>90</sup> Ellen Lupton, the curator of contemporary design at the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian National Design Museum in New York, similarly credits Moss with elevating the activity of shopping to “a major cultural undertaking.”<sup>91</sup> Both merchants fulfilled roles not just as business owners, but as curators and educators. Bing is credited with disseminating, even naming a movement by showcasing the new decorative style of the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde’s (1863-1957) furnishings and objects in his shop, thereby giving the movement a name (Art Nouveau). Bing is also responsible for introducing Japanese decorative objects and Tiffany glass to a European audience. Moss, as discussed in the previous chapter, did the same for contemporary Dutch design in the United States.

Promoting design as a fine art was a role the Museum of Modern Art in New York took on as part of its programming in the 1930s. Philip Johnson’s 1934 exhibition *Machine Art* not only showcased the form and materials of machine made objects, but promoted them in the ac-

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<sup>89</sup> Chen, “Talking Shop,” 54. Chen was describing a display case at Moss in which were featured colorful, unrelated objects made of wood. The Memphis Group was an Italian design and architecture collective based in Milan and founded by Ettore Sottsass. They designed furniture textiles, ceramics, glass and metalwork between 1981 and 1987. None of it was mass produced, most of it incorporated bright colors and cheaper production materials such as plastic and laminated wood.

<sup>90</sup> Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Milena Damjanov, “Aspiring to the Throne”, *New York Times*, 10 May, 2007, 6.

companying catalogue as things that were not only made in the United States, but could be bought in the United States; manufacturers and designers names, even prices were included in the installation if available.<sup>92</sup> It was MoMA's first exhibition directed at the consumer; visitors could handle the objects, form opinions about them and then find out where to buy them if they were appropriately seduced by the presentation. What followed at the MoMA were a series of so called *Useful Objects* shows, staged annually between 1938 and 1950. The objects were moderately priced machine made goods that were displayed in vitrines or arranged in installations. The result of these shows were increased demand, for once endorsed by a cultural institution, everyday objects became covetable. The lines between commerce and culture were blurred further when in the 1950s MoMA held a series of competitions collaborating with the Chicago Merchandise Mart.<sup>93</sup> Edgar Kaufman Jr. (1910-1989) who was director of the industrial design department of the museum after 1946, along with two other jurors, selected the best designs from the wholesale merchandising center and literally gave them MoMA's stamp of approval.<sup>94</sup> Exhibits were designed by architects such as the German emigré Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), and American designers Paul Rudolph (1918-1997) and architectural lighting pioneer Richard Kelly (1910-1977).

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<sup>92</sup> Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>93</sup> The Chicago Merchandise Mart was constructed in the North end of Chicago, Illinois between 1928 and 1930. Upon completion it was the largest building in the world, realized as a single wholesale center for the United States. Today it operates both wholesale and retail showrooms and is used for trade shows.

<sup>94</sup> Department stores could order promotional materials from the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Chicago Merchandise Mart which would include the orange and black *Good Design* logo, indicating the product had qualified for inclusion the MoMA exhibitions.

At the same time the Museum of Modern Art was promoting good design based on the modernist principles of functionalism and truth to materials in the U.S., Terence Conran (1931-) was a young designer getting his start in the field in Britain. Conran was a student in the 1940s and shared the belief that good design should offer simple, useful solutions to problems through affordable, good looking products. He started his career designing furniture and went on to become a retailer and restaurateur. His shop Habitat opened in 1964 as a vehicle to sell his own line of furnishings, and grew to become a chain of stores selling household items that included kitchen tools, bath accessories and other functional objects. Conran designed the flagship Habitat store on Fulham Road in London's Chelsea neighborhood to attract attention to the goods and furnishings he sold. Walls and ceilings were painted white and spotlights dramatically illuminated the wares.<sup>95</sup> While MoMA and Conran contributed to the promotion and sale of objects by emphasizing good design, Bing and Moss contributed more to the idea of selling objects by highlighting their artistic and ideological value—they sold ideas and philosophies as well as things. For Moss, who can be considered more of a post modernist than modernist in this approach, the further away a designer moved from functionality, the more interesting the designed object became. While he launched his shop with a selection of functional European housewares and continued to sell them throughout his retail venture, Moss spent the majority of his time on Greene Street curating provocative exhibitions of objects and furnishings that would be more collectible than truly useful.

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<sup>95</sup> Terence Conran, "Introduction," in *Designers on Design*, eds. Terence Conran and Max Fraser (London: Conrad Octopus Ltd., 2004).



## Chapter 7: More Moss, at Home and Abroad

Despite the fact that Moss the gallery was becoming an ambassador of international design and arbiter of taste, Moss the impresario, with his theatrical stunts, was seeming to say that engaging with the world of design didn't mean taking it too seriously or valuing only functional designs in fine materials. Murray Moss spent his eighteen years in retail on Greene Street making people think twice about both retail and design. He framed ordinary things in high-art ways—on pedestals, under glass—and staged low-brow events—parties featuring nudity or Tupperware—all the time enabling Americans to see cutting-edge European design or see things they no longer even noticed, anew.

Just five years after setting up shop, success enabled Murray Moss to expand his gallery in 1999, letting him explore methods of display more deeply and open public dialogue on design through his exhibitions. By moving into an adjoining space, which he called More, Moss added 5,000 square feet to his store, tripling his original space. The expansion allowed Moss to show larger works, install sizable pivoting display cases, as well as a platform, a bigger “stage” that Moss referred to as a “runway.” Instead of fashion models, objects such as oversized vases, sofas and dining tables paraded down the catwalk. (Figure 16) More lived up to its name by providing an even more dramatic backdrop for Moss's theater of objects, which now included furniture and larger lighting designs. Moss's focus grew to include works of art and sculpture in addition to well-designed functional household items. It was during this next incarnation of the store that Moss further developed his skills as a curator and champion of new designers. For Moss, the more thought-provoking an installation was, the better, and over the next ten years, Moss (the name More was dropped as it became too confusing) evolved into a venture that resembled more

of a museum than a shop. Changing exhibitions became a regular feature. Customers came to expect to see something that was not just unusual, beautiful and sometimes functional, but was truly astonishing. Recalling this time, former Moss employee Chad Phillips remembers, “People came to see the crazy things and wanted to have the crazy things, but then they’d say, ‘Well I can afford to upgrade my life with these other things.’ They might not be able to afford that \$40,000 coffee table, but they can get \$300 worth of glasses or plates or something to have for the rest of their life, so, why not?”<sup>96</sup> In this middle period of Moss’s development, the gallery sold a lot of sofas, a lot of lighting, and what Phillips calls the “smalls”—lower price point items, which were still a good part of their business.

The booming economy of the early 2000s enabled Moss to move into another realm. By then, contemporary European design was no longer a rarity in downtown Manhattan; stores like *Mxyplyzyk* carried small European housewares and Alessi had opened its own flagship store down the street. In response to both his evolving interest in craft and an unoccupied niche in the market, Moss staged an exhibition of eighteenth-century porcelain. His show, titled *White Gold: a Fragile Eccentricity*, opened in May 2000 to coincide with New York’s International Contemporary Furniture Fair. Moss set a table in the store with plates from the Nymphenburg Porcelain Factory along with sixty hand-painted antique figurines on the table. The juxtaposition of hundreds of pieces of Bavarian porcelain in Moss’s temple of contemporary design, made a big impact. Two hundred design fans attended the opening. Julie Iovine of the *New York Times* called the pairing of eighteenth-century porcelain and Moss “provocative.” “Mr. Moss, the high priest of modernist retailing, dressed as always to code in solid black and white (“I haven’t worn a pat-

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<sup>96</sup> Chad Phillips, interview with the author, 16 April 2014.

tern in years and years!”), and those exquisitely high-priced rococo knickknacks favored by German aristocrats for 250 years.”<sup>97</sup> Once again, Moss changed course just as other retailers seemed to be catching up.

Moss’s partner, Franklin Getchell (who remains the financial head of all things Moss related) reports annual sales in 2007 peaked at twenty million dollars.<sup>98</sup> The objects had become art, and the customers, by definition, collectors. That same year, Moss sold a Meissen porcelain rooster (*Paduaner Hahn*, designed by Johann Joachim Kändler, circa 1734) for \$16,000, and opened a west coast outlet of the store on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles.<sup>99</sup> In a district that combines fashion and design, Moss opened with an exhibition in August called *Glitter and Smoke*, which featured Swarovski crystal chandeliers and Baas’s charred grand piano, part of the ongoing collaboration *Where there’s Smoke*. The venture was short-lived. By the time they were opening the LA outpost, Moss was drawn more to the idea of museum display than interaction with customers. Although the tongue in cheek store motto was “Please do not touch,” as the proprietor was heading into his third decade in retail, Moss really meant it. Moss did not see the value in running a free museum, so it was becoming clear that his formula had stopped working. The combination of the U.S. economic crisis that hit shortly after the opening, and an audience

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<sup>97</sup> Julie V. Iovine, “18th-Century Rococo a Rave in Techno-Today,” *New York Times*, 25 May 2000.

<sup>98</sup> Information in an email to the author, from Franklin Getchell, Partner, Moss Bureau NY, 21 February, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Matt Tyrnauer, “The Taste-Maker: Murray Moss takes his store-cum-museum to L.A.” *Vanity Fair*, May 2007. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/05/moss20705>

who did not “get it,” as Getchell put it, Moss Los Angeles closed in March 2009 after just eighteen months in business.<sup>100</sup>

Between 2009 and 2012, Moss continued his transition from retail store merchant and curator, to gallerist and design consultant. He staged more than a dozen exhibitions at the Greene Street location, including works by the designers Peter Marigold, Campana Brothers, Michele de Lucchi and others, in a collaborative show called *Poetic License* (2010), and continued to promote the work of contemporary Dutch designers such as Studio Job, in a retrospective in 2011 (*Studio Job 2006-2008*).<sup>101</sup> Additionally, Moss flexed his curatorial muscle beyond New York City by exhibiting at Design Miami again in 2009 and 2011 and by curating *Industrial Revolution 2.0*, a special installation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011 in collaboration with Materialise, a 3-D printing company based in Belgium. In it Moss juxtaposed familiar functional objects created using 3-D printing technology with the iconic objects of Western Culture on display at the V&A. The collaboration represented Moss’s increasing curiosity around new design technologies. Moss is fascinated with the idea that digital design helps level the playing field. He unveiled an example of this at Design Miami in 2011 where he presented the work of Dr. Haresh Lalvani at a show he called *Mass Customization of Divergent Designs*. Lalvani is a math-

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<sup>100</sup> Information in an email to the author, from Franklin Getchell, 26 March, 2015. National Bureau of Economic Research <http://www.nber.org/cycles/main.html> Now called the Great Recession, a general economic decline observed in world markets but related to the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States, began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Marigold is a British designer. Moss featured furniture designed by Marigold as part of the Palindrome series which featured pieces where half was made of wood and the other half a cast made out of acrylic gypsum. Joined the two opposites come together to make a whole. The Campana brothers are two siblings, Fernando and Humberto, from Brazil who make furniture out of ordinary, unrelated materials. Studio Job is workshop of design duo Nynke Tynagel and Job Smeets, both graduates of the Design Academy Eindhoven, founded in 2000, now based in Antwerp and the Netherlands.

ematician, architect and sculptor. He developed an algorithm whereby he could produce one thousand variations of a single fruit platter (Moss claims more are possible). Moss brought one hundred of these steel platters to his booth to prove that digital technology has advanced to the point that unique items now are no longer luxury items. He pointed out: “these fruit bowls cost the factory no more money to make all different, than to make all the same, which is an enormous change.”<sup>102</sup> That means a one of a kind pattern is no longer worth more than one that is mass produced. Moss called it a “real” project, not an art project. True to his style however, he presented this design dilemma in his usual theatrical way: with a stage, the stars (one hundred fruit platters), and technical support in the form of a DVD animation showing all one thousand pattern possibilities.

## **Chapter 8: Closing Shop, Opening a Bureau**

By 2012, Moss and Getchell knew they needed to change course. The decision to close Moss’s SoHo location came in an email from Getchell to members of the press in early 2012. The subject heading was Moss Metamorphoses 2012. It announced that the store on Greene Street would close in February—just a month later. Moss and Getchell said they were tired of running a “free museum,” and the shop was not making money anymore. “It used to support itself very well financially, but people stopped buying things. Our customers, based on empirical

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<sup>102</sup> Haresh Lalvani at Design Miami 2011, produced by Vernissage TV, <http://blip.tv/file/get/Henrichy0205blip-HareshLalvaniAtDesignMiami2011339.m4v>

evidence, were people who worked in the financial industries, so they just stopped buying.”<sup>103</sup>

The situation was not sustainable, and Moss and Getchell decided it was time to abandon bricks and mortar in favor for a more flexible arrangement. Some months later, in October, the partners liquidated even more assets when Moss curated an auction of some works from their collection for Phillips de Pury and Company. Titled, *Moss the Auction: Dialogues between Art and Design*, the top lots included works by Giò Ponti (1891-1979), Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) and Maarten Baas.<sup>104</sup> The sale was an opportunity for the partners to experiment and promote ideas and display tactics that would form the basis of the work they would take on in the next years. Their reputation was solid; for eighteen years Moss had been a destination to return to again and again to discover something new or underexposed in the field of decorative arts and design. For Murray Moss, closing the store wasn’t nostalgic, he said he would find other ways to share his excitement with design, and educate people as to why it was important.

Moss embodied the best of the institutional aspects of a Museum with those of a commercial enterprise, a link that had not been made since the Museum of Modern Art staged exhibitions featuring industrial design beginning in the late 1930s. Beginning with the Useful Objects shows and culminating in Good Design’s collaboration with the Chicago Merchandise Mart, MoMA helped launch new products when they undertook a project with department stores who were looking for talented designers. Eliot Noyes (1910-1977), a Harvard architecture school

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<sup>103</sup> Janelle Zara, “‘There Can’t Be Nostalgia’: Murray Moss on Closing His SoHo Design Store, and Opening a Garment District Hovel,” *BlouinArtInfo*, January 27, 2012. <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/757938/>

<sup>104</sup> Giò Ponti was an Italian architect, industrial designer and furniture designer. Alberto Giacometti was a Swiss sculptor painter and draughtsman.

graduate and the first head of the industrial design department, held a competition featuring furniture, lighting and textile design and called *Organic Design in Home Furnishings* (1941). The winners received production and sales support from participating stores, including Bloomingdales.<sup>105</sup> This is an example of the commercial sector looking for publicity and validation from the museum world. Moss distinguished himself by becoming the merchant museum curators would turn to if they were looking for an authority in the field of design and design art.

Now, under the umbrella of Moss Bureau, Moss uses his expertise to elevate cultural brands. The Bureau (established February 2012) provides services to manufacturers, designers, architectural firms and museums. In 2013 Moss co-wrote a book with Laurence Benaïm called *Baccarat: Two hundred and fifty years*.<sup>106</sup> Published by Rizzoli, it celebrates the brand's history and documents in one volume some of the crystal manufacturer's most important creations. The same year Moss Bureau was hired by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to redesign the museum shop at one of its sites, the Philip Johnson Glass House, to better reflect the architect's work as a curator and designer. In addition to the collection of photography previously discussed and published under the title *Tertium Quid*, Moss has also written a book about the Danish silversmith Georg Jensen, called *Reflections* which was published by Rizzoli in 2014. The transition from storefront to consultancy is ongoing—recently Moss bureau's e-commerce site [www.mosspop.com](http://www.mosspop.com) offered shelving from the short lived Los Angeles location for sale, and remaining merchandise and store fixtures were offered at deep discounts at a warehouse sale at the Brook-

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>106</sup> Laurence Benaïm is a French journalist specializing in the field of fashion. She is best known for her biography of Yves Saint Laurent, published in 2002.

lyn Navy Yards in Brooklyn, New York. With Moss's greater commitment to writing and speaking about design, and what seems to be a not so subtle liquidation of remaining store assets, it seems Moss and Getchell are moving further away from the merchant arena.

## Conclusion

Moss will be remembered most for its remarkable displays: the stark white interiors, the intimidating vitrines with their diorama like collections, and exhibitions that became theatrical events. Of his shop's closing, Moss told a reporter, "I wanted it to be live theater where you had to go or you missed it. And when the show ends, it's passed on through narrative."<sup>107</sup> Customers share their Moss stories, in between lamentations of lost credit on the social review site *Yelp*, with many remembering the impact of a visit and mourning the loss of denied future visits: "What a crying shame. There was no other store like this. It was a shrine to all objects that are beautiful."<sup>108</sup> Chad Phillips, former employee and now the retail director of the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, credits working for Moss as being similar to receiving a graduate-level education, "We learned taste. It's kind of a hard thing to quantify. I know how it's supposed to look and how it feels."<sup>109</sup> And Robert Kloos, director of Visual Arts, Architecture and Design at the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York admits everyone there was a bit "wor-

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<sup>107</sup> Zara, "There Can't Be Nostalgia," <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/757938/>

<sup>108</sup> Review, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/moss-new-york-2> Yelp is an online referral service which crowd sources unsolicited reviews for local businesses and services. It was established in 2004 in San Francisco CA.

<sup>109</sup> Chad Phillips, interview, 16 April 2014.



ried” when Moss closed.<sup>110</sup> He credits Moss with being one of greatest promoters of contemporary Dutch design abroad.

This thesis demonstrates why I believe Murray Moss to be the most important merchant/curator of design in the United States in the twenty-first century. He established himself as an artful retailer—incorporating museum worthy display techniques combined with theatrical exhibitions—and was adept at building and sustaining a profitable business for almost two decades. He has no equal in this regard. These techniques helped establish his retail emporium as a shopping destination in Manhattan’s premier gallery district during the last half of the 1990s. He was just as responsible as other, more traditional dealers, in confirming SoHo’s importance as a center for global art. His customers ranged from browsers to collectors. Moss provided all with an education in objects and material culture. His mission was to convey the “hidden agenda of the designer”—to be able to effectively tell the story of an object.<sup>111</sup>

To date, no evaluation of Moss’s importance has been published. In this paper, I have tried to highlight Moss’s critical role as a powerful and influential promoter of design and designers. This thesis provides an overview of Moss’s career and how it shaped his approach to marketing design. Theater, fashion and design experience merge to form a singular vision of display and visual storytelling. It is unique to Murray Moss and the reason his merchandising techniques resonate years after the shop closed its doors. It also provides the first historical overview of the store known as Moss at 146-150 Greene Street in SoHo New York. It was compiled using anecdotes and remembrances from former employees, customers and most importantly Murray

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Kloos, interview, 4 March 2015.

<sup>111</sup> Jordan Kurshins, “Murray’s Law,” *Dwell* (October 2010), 142.

Moss and Franklin Getchell, partners in life and in the retail business. My research and interviews lead me to conclude that Moss was a destination at which personal desire intersected with theater, material culture, design studies—all of which culminated in a longer term commercial success. It is difficult to imagine another retail emporium achieving this scope of influence.

I have also demonstrated Moss's role in the promotion and development of designers and design movements. In this capacity he earns a place in design history alongside significant merchants such as Siegfried Bing while surpassing those who stay true to the idea of form follows function. His curatorial eye led him to discover new ideas in design; such as the work of Droog in the late 1990s. Moss's collaboration with some of its designers resulted in critical and commercial successes. It is for this contribution to the promotion of a European design movement that Moss earns the moniker of impresario.

It is my hope to have provided future scholars with a chronological overview of Moss's career and eponymous shop, from which they might further study his impact in the areas of design theory, retail display and curatorial studies. It is my belief that Moss will be remembered, like Baum, Kiesler and Johnson before him—as a master of display—a showman who can elevate the simplest object to the status of art using the tools of placement, light and context. Further study will demonstrate that what distinguishes Moss from ordinary merchants begins at selection of the object—often determined by an understanding and curiosity surrounding its conception. Now called upon to author histories of centuries-old European manufacturers, this self-educated American design expert has achieved a global reputation as a respected curator, trend spotter and educator—an impresario of design.

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Figure 1. Pages 1 and 2 of *Tertium Quid*. On the left: Bill Frakes, Miami Herald, “Twins.” 1975, On the right: Weaver Tripp, “Food labelling.” 1968. From: Murray Moss. *Tertium Quid*. New York: August Editions, 2014.



Figure 2. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ronaldus Shamask, Spiral Coat*. 1981. From: [http://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination\\_notes\\_on\\_a/2012/10/ronaldus-shamask-04philadelphia.html](http://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination_notes_on_a/2012/10/ronaldus-shamask-04philadelphia.html) (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 3. Angelo Mangiarotti for Colle, *Bibulo Decanter*. 1991, crystal. From: The Glass House Design Store, <http://designstore.theglasshouse.org/bibulo-decanter-p132.aspx> (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 4. Exterior Moss at 146 Greene Street in SoHo, New York. From: <http://therealdeal.com/blog/2012/01/26/trendy-design-store-to-shutter-in-soho-after-18-years-in-biz/> (accessed April 5, 2015).





Figure 5. Interior of Moss, 146-150 Greene Street, SoHo New York, showing vitrines, railings, paths to control customer access. From: <http://www.grandlifelifehotels.com/listing/moss-nyc-store/> (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 6. Lucian Bernhard, *Kaffee Hag*. 1911, Lithograph, 27.1 x 37.4" From: [http://www.mpu.rs/english/temporary/izlozbe\\_2013/01\\_bernhard/bernhard.html](http://www.mpu.rs/english/temporary/izlozbe_2013/01_bernhard/bernhard.html) (accessed April 5, 2015).

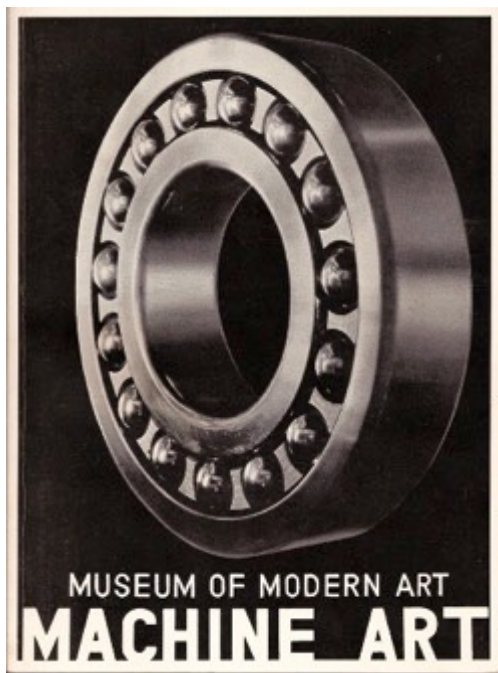


Figure 7. Cover of 60th anniversary edition of *Machine Art* catalog, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994. From: [http://www.cinemagebooks.com/?page=shop/flypage&product\\_id=8649](http://www.cinemagebooks.com/?page=shop/flypage&product_id=8649) (accessed April 5, 2015)

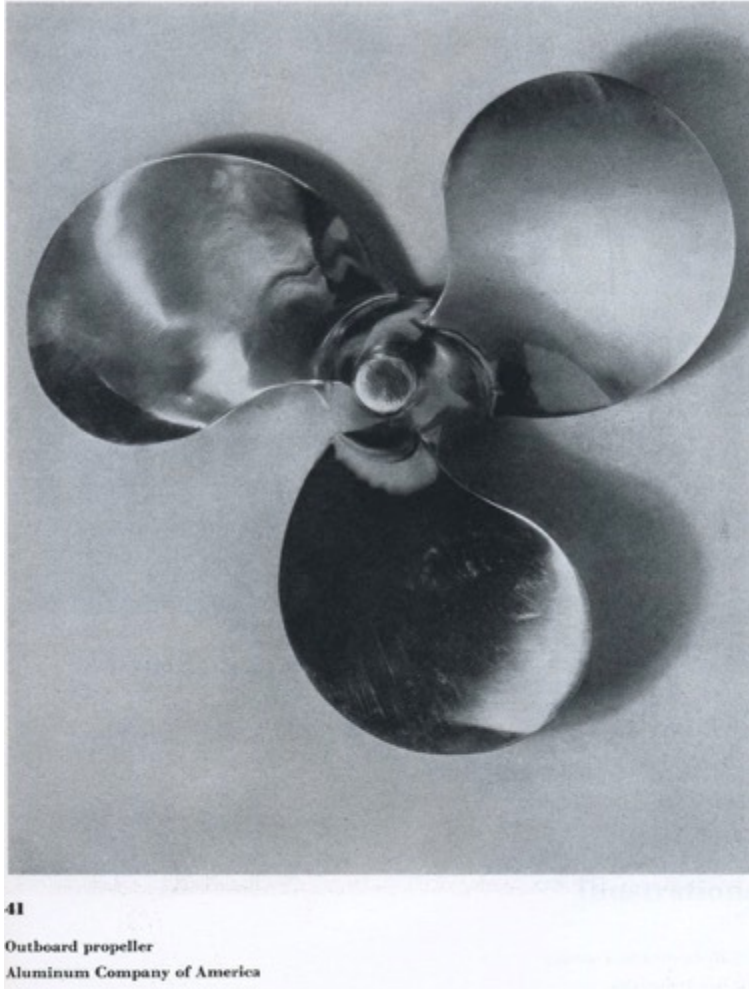


Figure 8. Ruth Bernhard, Catalog illustration of exhibit #41, *Outboard Propeller*; Aluminum Company of America. 1931. From: <https://natchill.wordpress.com/2008/02/28/> (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 9. Gaetano Pesce. *UP 5 Donna* armchair with *UP 6 hassock* connected by chain. 1969. Polyurethane covered in stretch fabric. From: <https://lamodern.com/featured-artists/gaetano-pesce/> (accessed April 5, 2015).



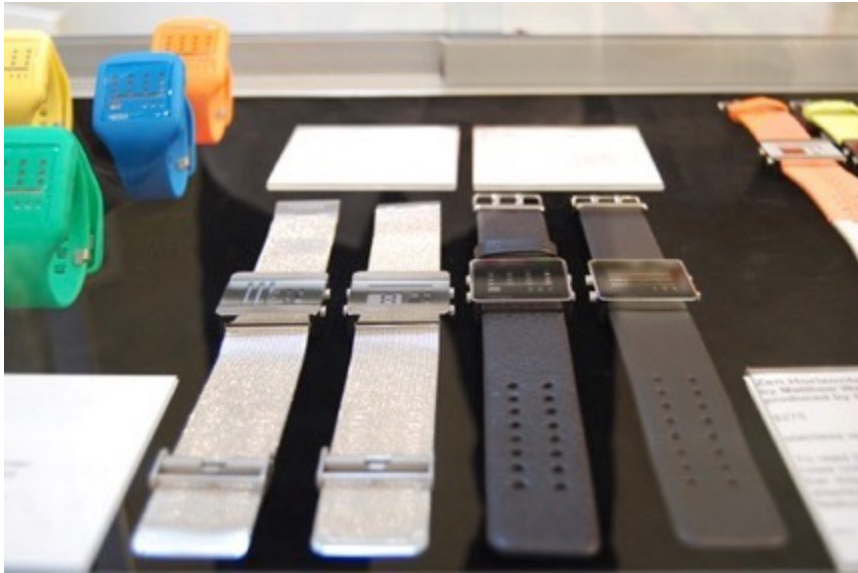


Figure 10. Nooka watches on display alongside museum quality labels at Moss, 146-150 Greene Street, SoHo, New York. From: <http://www.nooka.com/retail-spotlight-moss-in-nyc-wb-3984.html> (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 11. Moss Interior, 150 Greene Street, SoHo, New York. From: <http://observer.com/2012/01/moss-design-emporium-will-close-after-18-years-01272012/> (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 12. Tejo Remy (Droog Design), *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* chest of drawers. 1991, strap and drawers of mixed materials. From: [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=3578](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=3578) (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 13. Maarten Baas, *Where there's Smoke* exhibition at Moss, 150 Greene Street, SoHo, New York, 2004 From: <http://www.dezeen.com/2014/01/24/maarten-baas-interview-career-smoke-furniture-clay-real-time-clocks/> (accessed April 5, 2015).



Figure 14. Exterior of L'Art Nouveau Paris, c. 1895. From: [http://libresavoir.org/index.php?title=Siegfried\\_«\\_Samuel\\_»\\_Bing](http://libresavoir.org/index.php?title=Siegfried_«_Samuel_»_Bing) (accessed April 5, 2015).

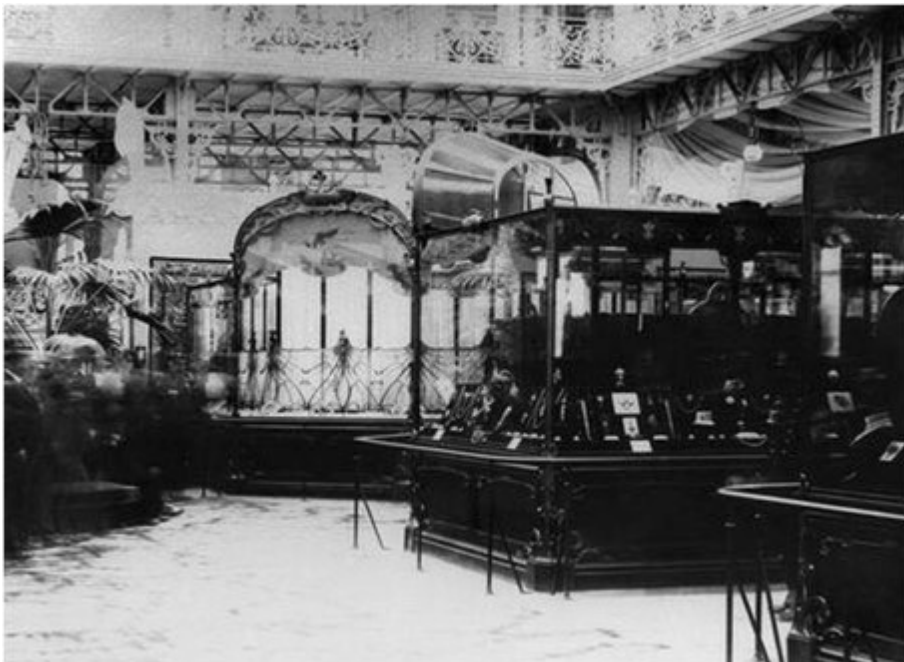


Figure 15. L'Art Nouveau interior, Paris, c. 1895. From: <http://glenn-galea.tumblr.com/post/101639121913/art-nouveau> (accessed April 5, 2015).





Figure 16. Moss Interior showing “runway” featuring work from Studio Job’s *Robber Baron* line. 150 Greene Street, SoHo, New York. From: [http://www.moss.coresense.com/gallery-exec/display/current\\_200805\\_exhibit](http://www.moss.coresense.com/gallery-exec/display/current_200805_exhibit) (accessed April 5, 2015).