

**Case Study I**

**Gilbert Rohde Vanity Table & Bench**

Gilbert Rohde's statement, "Furniture should not be the dominant physical characteristic of a space, but rather should serve the needs of people in that space,"<sup>125</sup> parallels the design concerns similar to that of Le Corbusier in 1925 when he said that, "To search for human scale, for human function, is to define human needs."<sup>126</sup> If women had a human need to apply make-up, and manufacturers had a need to survive, Gilbert Rohde was going to be the designer at the intersection of those needs. Modernity, whether interpreted by French or Americans was concerned with how modern needs were being met. Gilbert Rohde, however, was specifically considering the idea of needs from the perspective of manufacturer and consumer.

A specific example of American modern design is that of a vanity designed in 1933 for the Herman Miller Furniture Company (group 3323) currently in the Yale University Art Gallery Collection (1999.125.1.1-2) (**image 33**) Set as it is today in the gallery against a white wall, amongst the other "modern" designs one sees the simplicity and use of modern materials which exemplified the age. Yet, in that setting the starkness overrides whatever apparent "delicateness" which might have been derived from its light colored woods and curving lines. Upon first seeing the vanity I asked myself what could be feminine about it? A long rectangular mirror flanked by two wooden drums of holly with barely perceptible inlaid lines of orange peroba encircling the cylinders; each is perched upon a single chrome, stem-like shaft whose semi-circle base (repeating the circular theme of the drawers and the inlay) then straightens to create the stand for the

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<sup>125</sup> John R. Berry, *Herman Miller: Classic Furniture and System Designs for the Working Environment*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 46 (stating Rohde's belief).

<sup>126</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* (1925), trans. James I. Dunnet (London; The Architectural Press, 1987), 72.

**33) Gilbert Rohde Dressing Table, Yale University Art Gallery Collection  
(1999.125.1.1-2)**



mirror. The right facing wooden “drum” has two drawers, the right facing has one large drawer, each with a red, orb-shaped drawer pull. The sides each stand  $14\frac{7}{8}$ ” off the floor, and are  $14\frac{3}{4}$ ” wide in diameter. The mirror set between them is 2.25 inches off the ground, and 64” high, and 20” wide. The woman would sit only 17.5” off the floor on an ottoman of rose colored cotton with a 2” high, round wooden base. An interesting

feature of the ottoman is the two 2” wide bands vertically attached to the sides. The ottoman is seamed into three horizontal cylinders, and the band is attached to the lower two, but loose at the top band, allowing one to place a hand between the ottoman and the band to pull the ottoman forward, closer to the mirror, or further away.<sup>127</sup> Function was not far from form. In the Herman Miller 1934 catalog states of bedroom group 3323, “This group exemplifies the most advanced modern design. It is completely free from applied ornament yet is delicate and feminine in spirit.”<sup>128</sup> For all the principles of modernism, it is the spirit, not the adherence to these principles, which seemed to define it.

“Rohde had recognized that American lifestyles were shifting. As people moved from rural communities to cities... Families traded the family farmhouse for a small apartment and a more transient lifestyle. Rohde also noted a lack of appropriately scaled an highly flexible furniture for this new style of living.”<sup>129</sup> Aside from seeing furniture as a solution to modern living, Rohde was an artist. His training as an artist and illustrator, and eventually as an industrial designer, was furthered by his trip to Europe in 1927. There he saw the designs of Parisian and German designers– including the Bauhaus. He knew them well enough that there is anecdotal history that Rohde met Marcel Breuer upon his arrival in New York. Additionally, Rohde’s New York office gave him easy access to many of the exhibitions at the museums and department stores which were showing French and European designs at the time. Their use of new materials and simple forms fit into the new world as Rohde saw it. He had also ensconced himself in the

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<sup>127</sup> measured by author.

<sup>128</sup> “20<sup>th</sup> Century Modern Furniture,” Herman Miller Furniture Catalog (Zeeland, MI: Herman Miller Furniture Co., 1934) 10.

<sup>129</sup> Berry, *Herman Miller*, 50.

design community of New York, eventually having private commissions, working on exhibitions and being noted in publications.<sup>130</sup> By the time Rohde started working with the Herman Miller Company in Michigan in 1931, he was fully engaged as an American Modernist designer.

The Herman Miller Furniture Company had previously been the Star Manufacturing Company and had focused on producing reproductions of European designs, period furniture. However, during the Depression the Herman Miller Furniture Company needed a way to survive. It was Gilbert Rohde's unadorned, hence easy to manufacture, designs, which were to save the company. "Rohde's design focused on meeting needs with a clean aesthetic and functional flexibility. The shapes were simple and unembellished."<sup>131</sup>

At the time that Rohde joined Herman Miller Furniture it had been well ensconced in the period furniture trade, and the Depression had left them in a financial bind. They needed an economic way out of it, and Rohde saw simplified design that could be manufactured easily as the way. But it had to be marketed successfully and that begged the question, "how do you live with modern?" Herman Miller's advertising reiterated the adage that, "every age has its modern,"<sup>132</sup> "Modern design reasserts a broken tradition. It is of our day and our spirit."<sup>133</sup> The catalog goes further to say that, "we are now using our new tool the machine in a 'natural 'way...the machine 'naturally' makes large plane surfaces. And long curves of regular radii. These shapes therefore,

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<sup>130</sup> Phylliss Ross, "Modular Meets Industry: Gilbert Rohdes' Designs for Unit Furniture" (master's thesis, Parsons School of Design, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum), 4-11.

<sup>131</sup> Berry, *Herman Miller*, 50.

<sup>132</sup> *Herman Miller Catalog*, 1.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

characterize modern design.”<sup>134</sup> Natural, human, needs - all the language of the modern man or woman. The idea of the machine had to be sold as much as the idea of the “spirit” of modernity. In an office document referencing a photographed staging of the bedroom suite (**image 34**) sent by Rohde he notes, “Considerably more metal is used on this suite than on any other commercial modern furniture. There is a popular notion that chromium plated metal is ‘hard and cold,’ but the colors and textures in the room and the delicate floral pattern in the wallpaper were chosen intentionally to counteract this feeling that metal must be cold. The entire result is decidedly one that is soft, warm and feminine.”<sup>135</sup>

MOOS Nos. 88 - 87 - 88 March, 1934

BEDROOM SUITE #3323

Manufactured by: Hansen Miller Furniture Co.  
Toledo, Mich.

Designed by: G. Rohde  
126 E. 57th St.  
New York City.

**Wood** White holly, inlaid with Red English Elm. Finished in a very light natural finish.

**Metal** Legs and other structural parts are of polished chromium and steel tube.

Considerably more metal is used on this suite than on any other commercial modern furniture. There is a popular notion that chromium plated metal is “hard and cold,” but the colors and textures in the room and the delicate floral pattern in the wall paper were chosen intentionally to counteract this feeling that metal must be cold. The entire result is decidedly one that is soft, warm and feminine.

Sketches 500-1/11

PLEASE RETURN IF NOT USED  
QUEST HOUSE  
126 E. 57th ST. NEW YORK

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### 34) Rohde Office Document

In *As Long as It's Pink*, design historian Penny Sparke states that historically, “The idea of physical comfort could be expressed, for instance, by cushioning, soft textures and surfaces, and soft blends of colors, by gentle curved forms and patterns rather than harsh

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>135</sup> Rohde Archives box E3A, March 1934

geometric ones, by visual references to the natural world rather than to the man-made world of technology.”<sup>136</sup> In this vanity Rohde is juxtaposing the traditional ideals of femininity against the contemporary concepts of modernity, creating his idea of the *spirit* of femininity, yet, consciously or unconsciously, still maintaining these traditional ideas. Just how modern is twentieth century modern, or is it the setting that has to be traditional to sell the spirit? Did Rohde believe that the “spirit” of modern femininity softened by the traditional settings and its markers (light colors, florals, natural tone woods) were necessary to lay the groundwork to eventually sell true American modern?

Rohde’s concern for true modernism is expressed in a column he wrote for *Furniture Manufacturer* in September 1933. It was the building and exhibition of model homes in the Chicago 1933 World’s Fair Century of Progress which drew his ire (and later participation)<sup>137</sup> and led him to clarify that there are two types of modern being espoused, which he characterized as: “Classic Modern” and “Technical Modern.” Classic Modern is a transitional style allowing for the decorative aspects of modern design to be promoted, hence not really modern at all. And technical modern is concerned primarily with function, fabrication, and material. They are diametrically opposed and unrelated.<sup>138</sup> Yet, technical modern has lost its standing in the manufacturing world, most likely it’s simplicity being mistaken for a lack of quality. Rohde saw this oversight most blatantly in the model homes, where the only house he could promote as not being “classic modern” was the Florida House. **(image 35)** According to the promotional materials it simply “modernized Victorian,” because, “One is always comfortable with

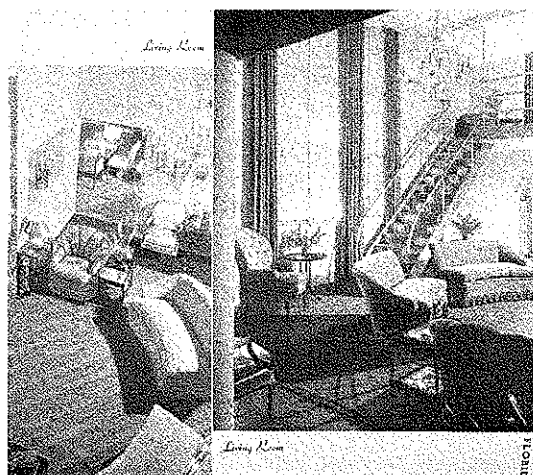
<sup>136</sup> Penny Sparke, *As Long As It’s Pink*, (London: Pandora, 1995), 27.

<sup>137</sup> The houses were built for the 1933 start and re-outfitted in 1934, according to their 20<sup>th</sup> century modern catalog of 1934 2 bedroom sets were shown in 1933, “Design for Living,” and all the living room and bedroom furniture in the House of Tomorrow and Universal House were new in 1934.

<sup>138</sup> Gilbert Rohde in “World’s Fair Furniture Designers Discuss Modern Movement,” in *Furniture Manufacturers*, (September 1933), Cooper Hewitt Rohde Archives Box A4.

familiar things. This furniture is quaint and gracious...and combined with clear straightforward color, becomes definitely modern.”<sup>139</sup> In the Florida Home the designers clearly knew what they were about and defined it as such. This is in great contrast to the Brick House (another model home) which in 1933 “the interior walls were obviously brick, either polished or painted. This year, [1934], the interior has been plastered, and the walls have been papered throughout...This change gives the interior a home atmosphere without diminishing the impression of great structural strength, characteristic of this modern method of construction.” It is further noted that the “spring steel furniture” and “labor saving electrical equipment” is the “last word in modernism” and the “latest in Twentieth Century Type”<sup>140</sup> respectively.

### 35) Florida House, *Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings*



It is significant that in 1934 that Rohde was able to participate in the Century of Progress “House of Tomorrow” furnishing it with bedroom group 3323 in a completely modern setting. **(image 36)** Here decorator Mabel Schamberg makes a sharp turn from the 1933

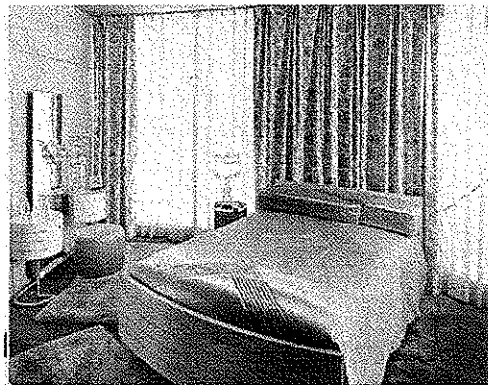
<sup>139</sup> Marjorie Thorsch, “The Florida Tropical Home,” *A Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings*, ed. Dorothy Raley (M.A. Ring, Chicago, 1934), 52.

<sup>140</sup> Agnes Heisler Barton, “The Brick House” in *A Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings*, ed. Dorothy Raley (M.A. Ring, Chicago, 1934), 28. Including the previous quote regarding the Brick House.



interior of glass, in fact she “decided that the skeleton structure needed to be garbed in as restful as mode as possible. In accordance with this idea, I used ‘grays’ in order to soften and subtilize the structural steel beams.”<sup>141</sup> **(image 37)** In fact it was for this reason that she worked with the Herman Miller set Rohde had designed for them. “Silver and gray combined with beige and white issued in the attractive bedroom with which breathes comfort and charm. Ordinarily gray and silver appear somewhat cold-shivery! But here, they give, with the assistance of the smart white furniture, a most dignified and restful result.”<sup>142</sup> Yet, in the image, one sees the bed is against floral drapes, the floor is laid with texturized area rugs, and the bed is made with silky fabrics. All are traditional feminine devices used to “soften” the room. No line or color is harsh, or too geometric in its simplicity, nor is it devoid of decoration. The vanity does not stand alone in its design, marketing, or use.

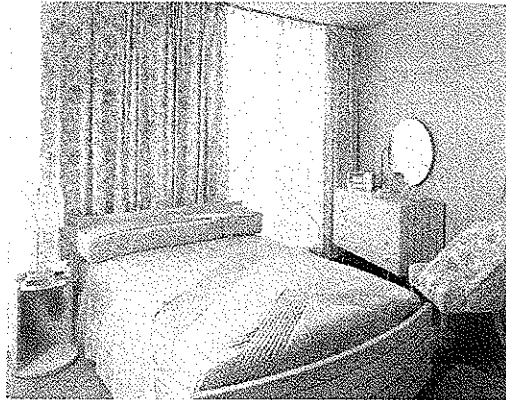
**36) Group 3323 in the “House of Tomorrow,” *Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings***



<sup>141</sup> Mabel Schamberg, “The House of Tomorrow” in *A Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings*, ed. Dorothy Raley (M.A. Ring, Chicago, 1934), 72.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

**36) House of Tomorrow Bedroom setting, *Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings*.**



Rohde he was quite clear in his philosophy of design, use and marketing. Prior to placement of Bedroom group 3323 in the House of Tomorrow it was being promoted in contemporary decorating magazines. In the November 1933 issue of *House and Garden*, Rohde, “one of the foremost modern designers...[gave] a convincing demonstration that modern furniture and decoration can produce a livable house of real charm...[through the design of ] interiors of a small house entirely contemporary in spirit and appointments.”<sup>143</sup> By this time the dressing table was clearly part of the consumer idea of the bedroom suite. Both the spirit and reality of a woman’s life required a space for her to perform her “femininity.” In this instance Gilbert Rohde was correct in his ideas of modern living, regardless of his consciousness of a woman’s concerns. “The utilitarian

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<sup>143</sup> “Model Rooms From a Modern House,” *House & Garden*, November 1933, 8. Cooper-Hewitt Library, Rohde Archives, Box B 90.

nature of a bedroom was in stark contrast to the boudoir characteristics more typical of previous bedroom setting by Herman Miller and other furniture makers of the time.”<sup>144</sup>

Rohde not only saw modern design for its utility, and function but for how it reflected how people lived. Women still needed that private space, just not in the historicist manner of the past. Their lives were busier, yet with the glamorization of daily life via Hollywood, and more public lives, modern life required even greater notice of one’s appearance. All of this was bolstered by the growth of the cosmetics industry, Yet, from a furniture and architecture perspective, space was becoming smaller. Rohde, as seen in this vanity, was able to guide American modernism in the direction of a new femininity, not in a harsh or abrupt fashion, but slowly moving it toward a more modern world.

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<sup>144</sup> Berry, *Herman Miller*, 54.

**CASE STUDY II**

**“Osborn” Dressing Table and Bench**

In the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum collection there is an example of a dressing table option of the time. An unusual dressing table and bench (1969-97-7-a,b) (**image 38a**) made of red lacquered wood with metal accents, and leather on the bench. It is believed to be an interpretative hybrid of designs by French designer, Léon Jallot customized for the original owner Marie-Louise Montgomery Osborn at a New York retail store. With an overall width of 40 3/4 inches and 31.25 inches high it has a traditional form of a top supported by two pedestal legs with three drawers each, except that the sides are triangular, angling up and outward and each drawer narrows from top to bottom. The center surface of the dressing table at 21.75 inches wide is flat, but the sides formed by the pedestals angle upward and open up, revealing storage space within. (**image 38b**) Each drawer pull is vertically placed, a flat semi-circle of chrome-plated metal, excluding the center drawer pull which follows the drawer form and is rectangular with rounded edges. The coordinating bench had solid legs that turn slightly under and a slight central pendant ornament on the apron. The seat is currently covered in a black, faux leather material. Aside from the seat and drawer pulls, it is made entirely of wood, painted in a high gloss, orange-red lacquer paint. It has both Cubist and Asian design motifs, not unusual for its manufacturing date of circa 1929.

How this dressing table came to be (as best as is known) reveals the unique relationship of the retail and design world of the 1920s and 1930s. It was a period of cross-pollenization between the worlds of design, industry, museums and retail. The Metropolitan Museum of Art had been promoting design through exhibitions since 1917, using the museum's collections for inspiration in collaboration with American

**38) A. Dressing Table and Bench, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum  
(1969-97-7-a,b) Gift of James. M. Osborn**



**38) b. Dressing table opened up**



manufacturers.<sup>145</sup> When World War I ended the museum was able to resume its purchasing and exhibition of European designs, but this did not cease its exhibition of American designed goods. In fact by 1924 manufacturers wares in the exhibition no longer had to be inspired by the collection, but had to be new and in stock.<sup>146</sup> A representative of the museum attended the 1925 Paris exhibition and purchased items (not necessarily from the Paris Exposition) including pieces by Ruhlmann, Stie et Mare and a bronze and marble dressing table by Armand Albert Rateau, (**image 39**) representing Egyptian influence from the discovery of Tutankahmen's tomb. These pieces were later displayed with those from the touring exhibition from the 1925 Paris exposition.<sup>147</sup> In 1929 the Metropolitan Museum staged its eleventh industrial arts exhibition, "The Architect and the Industrial Arts," making major leaps forward: all pieces must be modern and American manufactured, it was also architect-based, giving the designer the foreground, and exhibited as rooms much like the touring exhibition of the Paris exposition. The question then was how the public would purchase these designs for their homes.

In 1927 R. H. Macy & Co. began what was to be a series of exhibitions featuring modern design in its store with the *Exposition of Art in Trade*. Robert W. DeForest, the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was chairman of the advisory committee. Macy's gave the museum a mass audience, and the museum gave Macy's artistic

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<sup>145</sup> Christine Wallace Laidlaw, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Modern Design: 1927-1929" *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Art*, 8, (Spring 1988):83.

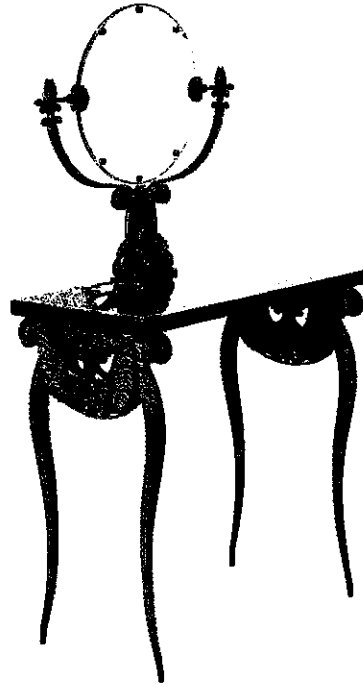
<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. This did not necessarily mean the pieces were "modern" but still could be period, revivalist and historicist, but new.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 101. Joseph Breck, Curator of Decorative Arts, purchased pieces not necessarily at the exposition, and not necessarily avant-garde.

credibility.<sup>148</sup> Industrial art was about the development of good taste in the design of useful objects.<sup>149</sup>

### 39) Rateau Table,

*The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*



Macy's was not the only store to create a connection between art, design and the home. John Wanamaker's of New York featured modern design rooms, followed by Abraham & Straus, Lord & Taylor's, and even smaller department stores such as Frederick Loeser & Co. in Brooklyn,<sup>150</sup> and in Cleveland, Ohio the Halle Brothers department store.<sup>151</sup> Displays were arranged as rooms by individual designers and, varying by show and store, featured both European and American designers. "Lord & Taylor's could not keep up with orders following [their "An Exposition on Modern French Decorative Art," 1928] this event, although an original suite could cost up to

<sup>148</sup> Marilyn Friedman, *Selling Good Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 2003), 6-7.

<sup>149</sup> Karen Davies, *At Home in Manhattan* (New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, 1983), 86.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>151</sup> R. L. Leonard and C.A. Glasgold, eds., *American Design*, (New York, Acanthus Press, 1992), xviii.



\$8000. The store also reproduced (without permission from the original designers) many of the furnishing from the exhibition.”<sup>152</sup> This is an interesting approach to sales for in the April 1928 issue of *Good Furniture Magazine* the editor, Waldon Fawcett dedicated an entire column to the issue of design patents and the furniture trade, noting, “Indeed, the progress which France has made, through the centuries, as a producer of cabinetwork and fine furniture, has been attributed in no small degree to the safe guards with which the government has surrounded original designs.” He continues that, “A premium is, by this plan, to be placed upon creative effort in design through reservation to the design owner of a more complete monopoly of reproduction than has heretofore been possible in the United States.” And, “If the ideal of design protection had been realized in America a century ago, the history of the furniture industry on this side of the Atlantic would have been less a record of the reproduction of fine European examples.”<sup>153</sup>

Whether or not patent laws would have truly impacted the direction of American design it cannot be said, but Lord & Taylor’s (as well as other stores) did find a way around patent and design issues. “Many department stores [and small shops] opened their own departments of modern design, where they would ‘make up any sort of modernistic furniture you desire from sketches.’ Occasionally a client’s own designs were followed but for the most part the custom order departments of these stores reproduced designs already existing elsewhere, often without the permission of the original designer.”<sup>154</sup>

Indeed, Mrs. Osborn’s dressing table seems to be a hybrid of two pieces designed by Léon Jallot, a dressing table and bench, ca. 1928 and a writing table and bench, ca. 1930.

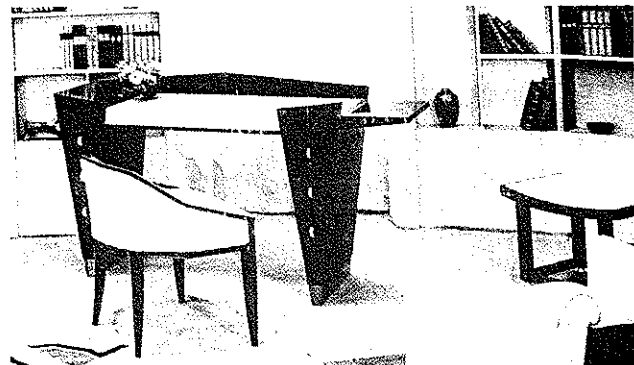
<sup>152</sup> Isabelle Croce to author, conversation, 18, January 1983 as quoted in Davies, *At Home*, 86.

<sup>153</sup> Waldon Fawcett, “Reward Promised for Originality in Furniture Design,” *Good Furniture Magazine*, April, 1928, 172. All quotes pertaining to this article.

<sup>154</sup> Gordon Eliot Sands, “The Osborn Furniture: Modern Decorative Arts and the Department Store,” *The Decorative Arts Society Newsletter*, vol. IX, no. 3 (Sept. 1983):2-3 (quote 11).

<sup>155</sup>(image 40 a,b) The sharp angularity of the dressing table pedestal legs with the opening of the writing table top becomes paired with a completely different bench bearing no resemblance to Jallot's designs. If anything the table has the clean, geometric linear aesthetic, with "art deco" color we commonly identify with the period today. The metal pulls were the called for nod to technology of modern design. The high-gloss lacquer recalled the then popular metal work and use of reflective surfaces, and the color would add a shock of color to the "shaded gray walls-with salmon curtains, blue screen and speckled rug."<sup>156</sup>

**39) a, b. Jallot Designs: Dressing table & bench, *Good Furniture Magazine*, December 1928**



**Writing Table, *Decorative Art Society Newsletter*, 9, no. 3**

Owner Marie-Louise Montgomery became engaged to James Marshall Osborn in July 1929. While at her parents' home in Vermont she ordered furniture catalogues from

<sup>155</sup> Sands, "Osborn Furniture," 3.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

New York. In the fall she ordered furniture from Macy's, Lord and Taylor, and the Park Avenue Galleries, as well as looking further at small workshops such as the Campbell Shops.<sup>157</sup> It is fairly likely that in the period both preceding her engagement and her marriage Ms. Montgomery had attended any one of the numerous expositions being shown both at the New York department stores and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She wrote to her fiancé with furniture arrangements, sketches and estimated budgets. It was important to her that she maintained her individuality in her home decorating. While their first apartment together in Bronxville would have "an elaborate Gothic façade, the apartment itself had unornamented walls with simple moldings at cornice and baseboard, and round arched doorways without surrounds."<sup>158</sup> It would suit her modern sensibilities, indeed she would be following a trend in purchasing semi-unfinished, or semi-designed (as is the case) furniture. "This urge to express latent creative and artistic aspirations must assuredly explain much of the popularity of unfinished furniture. The other decided reason for its favor is the customer's wish to have individual furniture of a different appearance from that which anyone else will have." For young married couples the advantage was that it could also meet their "need of fresh and attractive furniture which, however, could be discarded in a few years without great loss if so desired."<sup>159</sup> Aside from a wonderful opportunity to sell more furniture it was in line with the modern spirit of design according to Paul Frankl who stated, "The tradition of building for posterity, of leaving heirlooms of no intrinsic value, will have disappeared. So in the creation of furniture and interiors there will be no attempt to build for the next generation. We will

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.,1. All preceding information is from this page.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.,1.

<sup>159</sup> Athena Robbins, "Constructive Merchandising," *Good Furniture Magazine*,31(November 1928): 252-253. From "this urge..." referenced in the Sands article.

no more dream of handing down undesired heirlooms than we would think of handing down a pair of outworn shoes.”<sup>160</sup>

It cannot be said if future heirlooms were part of the buying decision the newness of design and price were of concern to the newlyweds, but Marie-Louise was most concerned with her personal expression, “I want to get something that is really unusual and somehow expresses my personality,” she wrote her mother in October, 1929. To her fiancé James she wrote in early August that she was ‘bound to have our apartment different from all the usual ones of our married friends.’ In fact, what originally appealed to her about the unfinished furniture was “that they finish it to suit you.”<sup>161</sup> Ultimately, even this seem to be too common for her, and “Mr. Osborn recalled in 1969 that Miss Montgomery had the vanity copied at Lord and Taylor from a sketch she brought to the store. The Osborns’ eldest son, James Marshall, Jr., suggests a different scenario, that his mother had seen the vanity at one store but found it too expensive, so had had another store photograph and reproduce it. This concurs with a statement in one of Miss Montgomery’s letters to her mother that Modern Age [ a shop] was copying furniture for her that she had seen at the Park Avenue Galleries.”<sup>162</sup> Whichever scenario is the correct one, Ms. Montgomery was an astute “modern” consumer. An educated, young woman about to set up her own home, she wanted it to be unique and stylish, yet affordable.

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<sup>160</sup> Paul T. Frankl, “The Home of Yesterday, To-day and To-morrow,” *Modern American Design*. (New York, Ives Washburn, 1930), 26-27.

<sup>161</sup> James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven. All personal correspondence quoted between Marie-Louise and her mother and fiancé, James were in the Osborn collection, but per the reference librarian, all personal correspondence had been ‘dumped’ by a previous curator. All correspondence quotes are taken from the Sands article.

<sup>162</sup> Sands, *Osborn Furniture*, 3.

In 1934 in the "It's News to me!" column of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine readers were advised to "Watch for the simple Chinese in modern design furniture. It's very new! There is a small lacquered bed table with top curving up at the ends like eaves of a Chinese pagoda."<sup>163</sup> Mary Louise Osborn was several years ahead the average *Better Homes and Garden* reader with her red lacquered, Asian and French inspired dressing table and bench ornamented with metal hardware. She took advantage of a variety of shopping choices: department stores' custom made departments, the large and small gallery stores, shopping both by mail-order and in person, and ultimately decided on a unique design that reflected the spirit of the times. With the help of the inter-relationship between museums and retail stores the public was being exposed to a greater variety of styles. Being modern and American in between the wars meant taking parts of the various styles that were making their way into the design vernacular and creating a personal style that reflected the personality of the owner, especially with a piece as intimate as the dressing table. As a young woman of the interwar period Marie-Louise Montgomery Osborn's choice of a dressing table and how she came to the decision was evocative of her time-bold, innovative, and thoroughly modern.

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<sup>163</sup> Christine Holbrook, "It's News to Me!" *Better Homes and Gardens*, May 1934,12.

## **Conclusion**

Discussions of modernity and modernism are often contentious and confusing – the contradictions and variations inherent in trying to define them in a simple way leave interpretation open. But the role of women in modernity and modernism should not be one of confusion, nor should it be ignored. As new definitions of design and designers are being discussed, it is important to place the feminist discourse in the historical context of modernism. An appropriate place to do this is where women spent their most private time, at the dressing table. It has both a history as a piece of furniture and a historic role in “feminine” spaces, because of these dual identities it is an important, yet to date, under-researched, object to analyze. The opportunity to address the dressing table as a focal point of change in the period of 1927-1937 arises as both private spaces and private lives changed, and modernism came to the design forefront. It is not only where women created their public image, but created order of their intimate belongings. By prioritizing its function and aesthetics they designed the space, becoming the designers. Whatever choices may have been provided for them by manufacturers, or glamorized by Hollywood, it was through their everyday actions that women designed their individual idea of femininity.

The impact of modernity with its rapid development of technology and social change has been exemplified through the consumer marketplace and the home, two places where women have traditionally been studied. As a gendered object, the dressing table moved through history as the last remnant of a historically gendered space, the boudoir. With its feminine history, visualized through draped tables laden with trinkets, the dressing table becomes an obvious focal point where one aspect of modernity that of ornament versus function is contested. Keeping with the traditional premise that to be

feminine is to ornament, modernists did not ignore the dressing table as a form—they simply did not keep to its traditional form. While it may have been used for a traditional and feminine act of ornamentation, they were claiming its shape for the time. By asking who or what were the forces shaping the tastes of women and what role the dressing table played in the development of the image of femininity, historians are able to look at the dressing table not only as a piece of furniture, but as a reflection of contemporary views of femininity. Movies, magazines and decorating manuals provided the moral compass; designers and manufacturers created the outlets, but the economics of having to live a more public life were reinforcing the need for the private space of the dressing table. In the time period of 1927-1937 the dressing table had not yet become a shrine to an idea of femininity, make-up was the new realm of women's fashion and it needed its space to function. Modernity forced modernism not to ignore women, but to work with them, creating a new way of looking at what femininity could be.

If something as coded as the dressing table can be the setting for drama both on the "silver screen" and in everyday life, it should be acknowledged for its importance. It is, and has always been, part of an intimate setting. While steeped in tradition, it did have to make its way through technological and social change. Indeed, the rise in the use of make-up made the function of the dressing table even more vital to a woman's life. What a woman chose to wear, and how she chose to apply make-up was directly linked to *where* she chose to apply it. As that became a more important process through the 1920s and 1930s, the dressing table became a focal point. Purchasing her household furniture, specifically the dressing table, was an equally thoughtful process. Choices were abundant and as decorators were making quite clear, identified who she was to the world.



The eighteenth-century boudoir is the historical home of the dressing table.

While its beginnings were of a private space, it soon became eroticized and infantilized, the butt of jokes of a patriarchal society. Eventually the economics of life meant that the boudoir was a luxury of the wealthy, but the dressing table remained. It was at the dressing table that middle-class American women could capture the privacy and intimacy needed in the increasingly public world of the twentieth-century. Again, however, patriarchal design movement, modernism, was only willing to acknowledge it by stripping it to its purist of forms. In doing so creating a moral statement of femininity, who or what a modern woman was. However, in the period of 1927-1937 this idea was in constant struggle with other design movements and tradition. Women, as consumers, were sent conflicting messages of being “good” and “bad,” from both the design world, and socio-cultural world. A modern woman was good, pure of form, true to the spirit of the time; not overly ornamented, much like her dressing table. A “bad” woman wore too much make-up, was not true to herself, trying to buy a history, or a look. The fine line of femininity was being drawn at the dressing table. To be too modern was dangerous, and to be too traditional not forward thinking enough. For the modern woman, modernism, while principled, was not an easy path to follow in the changing world.

Through this research, the dressing table, often occupying the backdrop of both social and history of the decorative art, has been brought to the foreground. In the process several aspects of women’s lives during a tumultuous period of American social history have been highlighted as well. This link between objects, identity, and design is neither coincidental, nor minor. It is relevant to how as historians and as a society, we choose to

reflect upon our values. Not for the objects alone, but why we choose to prize or ignore them.

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**APPENDIX**



**1938 Dressing Table, private collection.**

This dressing table I found in the back of a make-up store. The owner had it partially refinished and all labels had been removed, but I did find a date of 1938 on the inside of the center drawer base. Having discovered this after the bulk of my research was done I believe this is an excellent example of a “modern” dressing table made for the middle-class market. While not extremely glamorous it has the clean lines and pared down form in keeping with the principles of modernism. This is one of the few examples I have seen of this style. Whereas the flea-markets and antique stores frequently have the “depression-era” style of the late 1920s to early 1930s, furniture of this style is rarely seen on the market.