



Davira S. Taragin

An interview with Davira S. Taragin

The David Owsley Museum of Art will be expanding in the coming year, and that expansion will more than double the exhibition space for the decorative arts and design holdings. In anticipation of its future reinstallation, the museum has engaged Davira S. Taragin to evaluate the decorative arts and design collection. Taragin is working with the museum staff to define the strengths and future growth of the decorative arts and design holdings.

Taragin graduated from Barnard College and holds a master's degree in Art History and Museum Studies from George Washington University. She's worked at the Detroit Institute of Art, the Toledo Museum of Art, and as Director of Exhibitions and Programs at the Racine Art (Wisconsin) Museum.

Here, Taragin answers a few questions about her experiences on the project.

First, talk a bit about the difference between “design” and “decorative arts.”

These terms have been evolving, and there have been differences over the centuries. From the eighteenth century to the nineteenth, for example, decorative arts, which was originally concerned with function, changed. When the great exhibitions like the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851 began, the works were no longer created for the tabletop or for functional purposes, but for exhibition purposes, to show the skill of the maker.

What started off as a concern with function became a concern with both function and display. Over the centuries, it expanded from usage in the home to usage in the office place; now we've moved it even further, into cyberspace.

How would you characterize the museum's collection of decorative arts?

It's not a cookie cutter collection. I can think of other really strong decorative arts collections in the country, and it's not following the formula of these other collections. It has a unique taste about it.

I saw a statement on the Internet that Indiana is a center for Modernism, and that very much applies here, because it is a very modern collection. While there are some good eighteenth century ceramics and metalwork, the core of the collection really starts at the latter part of the nineteenth century and goes forward. It's particularly strong in the 1920s through the end of the Modern Movement in 1960.

Can you offer any examples of outstanding finds from the collection?

The furniture from the 1930s to 1960, particularly American, is extremely strong. Many of the icons of mass-produced furniture design are represented.

There are very few museums in this country that have Eliel Saarinen furniture. I was going through the records and all of a sudden I noticed an Eliel Saarinen chair. Saarinen designed the A.C. Wermuth family home in Fort Wayne, and he and his wife Loja did the furnishings. The museum has one of the chairs that was in the

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living room of the Wermuth residence; it has the original fabric that Loja Saarinen designed and wove for them. Museums just don't have that kind of thing. Of course Cranbrook and the Metropolitan Museum in New York have Saarinen designs. In fact, the Met has the mate to this chair. It's just unbelievable.

Another great find is due to David Owsley. Kem Weber was an émigré designer who brought the Modernist movement to the US. I was going through the files and I noticed there is a Kem Weber chair, one of the tubular designs done by Lloyd Manufacturing. Most museums have his "airline" chair, which was a plywood and upholstered chair done the same year. But the most exciting thing is this chair was owned by Frank Ball. It was in the Ball vacation house in Michigan; David Owsley knew what it was and rescued it. That was a real find.

After finding all of these great works, do you have a sense of how you would like the collection to be installed in the new Decorative Arts galleries?

I thought about doing a chronological presentation. The museum is unveiling the collection and allowing its depth to be seen for the first time. Until now there have only been highlights brought out in one space, or selections integrated into the permanent collections galleries.

I thought this would be a great time to show the collection chronologically, particularly its masterpieces. I don't think people know what the museum has. But when I met with faculty, one of the professors suggested using the human body as the focal point, and that the decorative arts are created for either nourishment, shelter, or display. And that is something I'm thinking about. I still have to see more of the collection to determine if this will work, or to see if there is some way of combining both of those approaches to help people understand what decorative arts are and what design is.

How would you describe the experience of working on this project?

This is a dream project. It's a discovery process and a lot of detective work. The museum staff is fantastic, the collection is unbelievable, and it's very exciting to find a collection like this that has been growing and building.

All I have to do is bring the objects out and let the works talk to each other.



Armchair, 1943

Kem Weber

Manufactured by Lloyd Loom Products

Chrome-plated steel and leather

Lent by David T. Owsley