

Indianapolis Museum of Art

BY DAVE KIM

PHOTOS BY TIM KLEIN



The Solid C2 chair (2004) by Patrick Jouin in IMA's new design gallery. (OPPOSITE) IMA director Charles Venable and exhibition designer Lara Huchteman.

It may come as a surprise that the American museum set to open 10,000 square feet of gallery space dedicated to design is in Indianapolis, where car races can draw more crowds in a couple of weekends than art institutions do in a year. But to those who have paid attention to the Indianapolis Museum of Art in recent years, the unveiling of a \$1.2 million gallery renovation and some 430 design objects on the IMA's third floor this November is just one more step—albeit a big one—down a familiar path. Since 2007, the museum has expanded its decorative arts collections at breakneck speed (thanks in large part to design curator R. Craig Miller, who retired this past spring), and in 2009 it mounted a major show on European design. Now it's home to one of the largest displays of contemporary design in the U.S.

The new galleries pick up where the IMA's pre-1945 collection leaves off. Visitors make their way through a timeline of post-World War II design before postmodernism, and then enter a 9,000-square-foot main gallery for the collection's primary focus: design after 1980. Here, one finds a veritable candy store of the contemporary. Works by long-established icons like Frank Gehry and Alessandro Mendini share the spotlight with pieces by Hella Jongerius and Marcel Wanders, with newcomers like Maarten Baas also making the cut. The clever layout of the space recalls a nine-square grid; there are exceptions and outliers, but generally one can walk forward and backward through three different decades ('80s, '90s, and the aughts) and left and right through aesthetic schools (modernism, postmodernism, and expressionism).

"It's not a true industrial-design installation, where you see how design developed out of the manufacturing process," IMA director Charles Venable says. "From 1980 to today, I think the inverse really happened. You see an extraordinary burst of creativity in the late 20th, early 21st century, when designers were doing some things that were very related and other things that could not be more different."

The relatively open floor plan is a departure from traditional exhibition layouts that Venable calls "exceedingly linear"; it's meant to show how seemingly discrete design styles often overlap or occur simultaneously. One might be surprised to learn, for example, that Marc Newson's Embryo chair, resembling a sleek black squeaky toy on steel legs, shared the 1980s with Robert Venturi's Louis XVI chest, a jazzed-up tribute to neoclassicism. Or that Konstantin Grcic's neatly polygonal Chair One was produced in 2004, the same year that Patrick Jouin debuted his epoxy tangle of a side chair, the Solid C2. Unlikely intersections—and clashes—between the so-called schools abound. "It's a very rich, woven tapestry," Venable says of the collection.

In addition to showroom-design pieces and limited-edition objets d'art, consumer items like the Dyson vacuum and Apple computer, both of which have become de rigueur in American design exhibits, are also showcased on the low, cantilevered platforms of the galleries. "People will see things that they've seen before and probably used before," says Lara Huchteman, exhibition designer for the new galleries, "but never really considered all the ideas and thought behind them."

Domestic products, including tea sets and tableware by Michael Graves, are sure to meet nods of recognition—and maybe even stir up some hometown pride. (Graves, despite his claim to the New York Five, was born and raised in Indianapolis.) But for the global arena, the IMA's wide-ranging and continually growing collection, stocked with commercial products and rare aficionado-pleasers alike, primes the museum to compete head to head with—and perhaps outpace—some of America's most respected design destinations.

