



Elmer L. Astleford

Beauty & function Beauty & function combined.

In Nelson room nearly everything is built-in.

What is Modern?

Solid citizens of Detroit were acting as guinea pigs in an art-experiment last week and liking it. To the sprawling, city-owned Detroit Institute of Arts—to the building which they generally associate with stiff, cold statuary and somber painting and just as generally avoid—they now were flocking by the thousands. For there on display were understandable everyday objects like the egg beater, the radio, picnic basket, meat-slicing machine, typewriter and child's training seat—all exhibited with the same careful concern given any old master.

The looks of interest, respect, even awe on the visitors' faces produced quite a different expression on the face of mild, sandy-haired architect-designer Alexander Girard. He grinned wide and grinned again, wider; he was delighted.

Something to See. It was at a party a year ago last July that philanthropist James B. Webber Jr., of Detroit's J. L. Hudson department store, had asked what could be done to get people to the Institute, to become members and help swell its treasury. Offhandedly Girard had replied: "Give them something interesting to look at and they'll come in."

"Why not?" thought Webber. His store contributed money. And within a few weeks the amazed Girard found himself director of the "For Modern Living" exhibition. A passionate devotee of all things modern, well-known in art circles for his creative contribution to the field, Girard fortunately recognized that many people did not share his enthusiasm and, more to the point, didn't even know what "modern" was. Now, without talking down or up, but straightforwardly and with subtle showmanship, Girard has shown that modern is not what some people consider it: simply streamlining or monotonous uniformity. Neither is it anything long-haired or foreign.

Native Roots. Modern design is, first of all, inherently American. The first part of the exhibition depicts how it was born and grew. Here, for example, is an axe, a clumsy straight-handled one that the early settlers brought from Europe. Next to it is the axe they developed themselves. It is smaller and has a curved handle, intelligently altered to do a better job. Little did Americans realize that these axes, developed simply to meet their needs—or any of the multitude of other tools, machines and furniture similarly developed—were art or good form. Rather, they apologized for their lack of conformity to European tastes.

What happened was that in the early 1900's, Europeans began to intellectualize this practical American approach to de-



Reproduced by permission. Copr. 1946 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

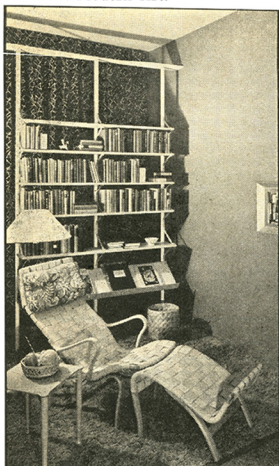
What use in decoration? Steinberg makes great fun of it.

snorts, pointing to a folding aluminum table that sells for \$12. "What else is cheap and good like this?" he asks. "A reproduction of an expensive table would be bad because it's trying to be something it isn't."

Some modern furniture, he admits, is still too high-priced, but that's due to limited production. When demand increases, he thinks, prices will drop. The decorated rooms that form the finale of the show should help boost that demand.

Up a richly carpeted ramp, viewers walk to a dining room done by Alvar Aalto; past two studies (by Bruno Mathsson and Jens Risom) and a bedroom and living-dining room representing a variety of designers; then up another level to a space furnished by Charles Eames; and finally to a small balcony overlooking George Nelson's living area. The quiet simplicity of the rooms and the gentle tones of symphonic music have people talking in whispers. Sighed one woman: "I'd like to live here."

Success. Girard, who worked two months installing the exhibit, was glad to get away—home to his Girard-designed modern house in Grosse Pointe, Mich., with his wife and two children. There he can relax, secure in the assurance that people still are streaming to the Institute. His fellow-designers, he says, think the exhibition is "the nuts." And the Institute directors don't want to take it down. They will, however, after Nov. 20. Then part of it is scheduled to go on to New York for display in two exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art.



Elmer L. Astleford

From Sweden. Chair and bookcase designed by Mathsson.