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DESIGN ARCHITECTURE DECORATIVE ARTS

The High Museum
opens one of
the first permanent
galleries in the
country devoted
to twenty-first-
century design



The High Road

By Eleanor H. Gustafson



When we first tried to track her down to find out more about the gallery of twenty-first-century design she's installing at Atlanta's High Museum of Art, Sarah Schleuning was at the automobile show in Detroit. Wow, we thought, was she looking for a sleek car to include in the gallery? "That would have been fun," Schleuning says, but, no, she was doing research for an exhibition about "concept cars" that she's planning for 2014. Concept cars are an enticing prospect, but the new gallery is more than enough to give you an idea of what makes Schleuning, who came to the High from the Wolfsonian-FIU Museum less than a year ago, tick.

When it comes to design, she takes the long view. As the Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, she has the care of the museum's exceptional holdings

of American decorative arts from the eighteenth century forward. "With that depth of design, I wanted to explore the idea that while enormous technological and even philosophical advances have revolutionized ideas about such things as furniture and ceramics, it's been about evolution, too," she says. "We want visitors to consider what is happening now—to see and engage in the possibilities of the moment—but also to see the similarities and differences with the past."

Take the four chairs she has grouped near each other in the new gallery, only one of which—Front Design's Roundback chair from the Sketch Furniture series—much resembles a traditional chair with four legs. And it's made by rapid prototyping from thermoplastic powder! But all the chairs draw from

the past in some way: Mathias Bengtsson's Slice chair speaks to the laminated furniture made by John Henry Belter in the nineteenth century, and nendo's Visible Structures armchair seems descended from Koloman Moser's cube-shaped armchair of 1903. As for Marcel

Facing page: Sarah Schleuning, the High Museum of Art's new Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, is herself adorned with design—wearing an Anni Albers 1941 necklace self-assembled from a kit of bobby pins and a simple ball chain.

One of the most recent additions to the collection is the 2006 prototype of Marcel Wanders's Crochet chair, constructed from individual hand-crocheted rosettes pieced together to form a fabric, then dipped in epoxy resin and hardened over a mold.

This page: The new gallery is located on the top floor of the museum's 1983 building by Richard Meier, in the space behind the small square windows.

Right: The all-female Swedish design collective Front often questions the conventional role of the product designer. For the 2005 Sketch Furniture series—to which this chair belongs—they used computer-aided design (CAD) to capture the dynamic quality of freehand drawing: the design is sketched in the air, the gestures recorded by cameras and then mapped as a 3-D digital model. Using rapid prototyping, the data is sent to a 3-D printer, building the form layer by layer until a full-scale work is realized from the sketch.



Below: The Visible Structures armchair by nendo, 2011, represents the Tokyo design collective's innovative use of fragile and lightweight Polystyrene foam overlaid with industrial strength graphite tape to create beautiful, functional objects—thus proving that high-end design need not be made of rare or expensive materials and that it can be environmentally conscious. The chair was specially commissioned for inclusion in the High Museum's 2011 exhibition *Modern by Design*.



Left: Mathias Bengtsson makes the most of both technology and craft in his plywood Slice chair designed in 1999 and made in 2011. In its use of laminated layers it relates both to the John Henry Belter sofa of 1855-1860 and the Marcel Breuer chaise longue of 1936 in the High's collection.



Wanders's Crochet chair: when it was under consideration for acquisition, a lot of people wondered if Schleuning had made it herself. Chuckling, she notes that what was most important was that Wanders's chair was being appreciated for its link to traditional needlework. "Even a lot of the people who are working in newer materials and with technologically advanced methods are still hand-finishing—it isn't lost," she says. "And some are working entirely in traditional mediums, but have taken them to new heights: North Carolina ceramist Mark Hewitt's *That's What I'm Talking About!* is a glazed stoneware

vase that stands more than four feet tall.

Installed in a light-filled gallery at the top of the High's Richard Meier building, the objects Schleuning has selected are also intended to spark exploration and discussion of processes and materials. What exactly is rapid prototyping, anyway—and thermoplastic powder? Is the Crochet chair actually weight-bearing? How is that possible? What other materials are represented in these objects, and what does it all mean for the design of everything else—today and tomorrow?

Each piece is given sufficient space to be considered on its own as well as

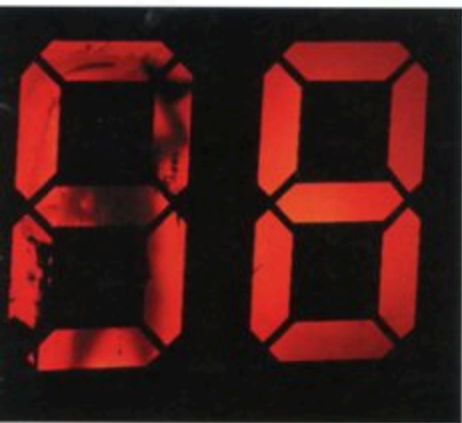
within the context of the other objects.

"You need space just to understand what you're looking at with Joris Laarman Lab's Ivy climbing system," Schleuning says. From a photograph it's even harder, but, it is, she explains, "simultaneously elegant architectural decor and a functional, adventurous mode of transport!"

Laarman is a designer of particular interest to Schleuning, and so she appreciates that the High, which made the decision to keep its holdings current to the present back in the 1980s (when it acquired Ettore Sottsass's Carlton room divider), does not insist on an encyclo-



Tejo Remy, one of the earliest members of the Dutch group Droog, designed his first chest of recycled drawers in 1991. In 2008 the High sent out a statewide call for drawers from any type of furniture, and Remy traveled to Atlanta to assemble them into this chest before a live audience. It is called *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* to emphasize his belief in the memories objects hold for their owners.



Left: Maarten Baas created his remarkable Analog Digital clock in 2009, combining theater, art, film, and design into a twelve-hour-long movie in which a performer replicates a digital clock by painting over and wiping clean panels on a glass screen in real time. It runs on a loop and can be played on any monitor, even a cell phone.

Right: The Ivy climbing system of 2004 by the Dutch Joris Laarman Lab exemplifies the designer's desire to alter traditional perspectives on functionalism: "I want to demonstrate that modernistic functionality and postmodernistic effusiveness do not have to exclude each other," he says.



Left: At 53 inches tall, *That's What I'm Talking About!* of 2007 represents the monumental glazed stoneware of British-born North Carolina potter Mark Hewitt, who writes: "The potters who made the pots I so admire synthesized many cultures in the same way that Southern musicians meld many musical genres together. The materials are Southern, the shape is an Asian-African fusion, the decoration on the shoulder—with its horizontal lines punctuated by bursts of blue, is a complex Glass-ian score, the glaze is swamp green. Out of complexity comes clarity. When this giant of a pot emerged from the kiln I felt like an athlete who'd executed a play to perfection."



Left: This silver coffee and tea service by world-renowned London-based architect and designer Zaha Hadid for Alessi mirrors her signature design in its fluid, revolutionary form. "Designing products is of great importance to us," she says. "The pieces are experimental, quicker to execute than the architecture projects and inspire creativity. We see it as part of a continuous process of design investigation." The coffeepot is the central sleek tower and is nested underneath the teapot, a flat organically-shaped piece. The two smaller pieces hold milk and sugar.

pedic collection. This policy "lets us pick designers we think are interesting—that have 'something'—and lets us take the journey with them. We would rather buy multiple examples of one person's work than single pieces by several different designers." In addition to Ivy, the museum has one of Laarman's Bone chairs and a Leaf table. And last summer his Digital Matter installation—a robot that repeatedly assembled an eighteenth-century rococo style table from tiny three-dimensional pixels, or voxels—mesmerized viewers. If you missed it, another twenty-first-century creation, YouTube, allows

you to watch the installation in action, and to contemplate its ramifications.

American architect and designer Johanna Grawunder is another favorite of Schleuning's, and the High was the first American museum to collect her work seriously. "We have her *Specchio d'Italia* mirror, which represents her visionary work in lighting, as well as the Splits bench from her *I'm Bringing Sexy Back* collection," Schleuning says, "but I'd like to acquire some of her glasswork too, because, again, the multiplicity of mediums lets you show the flexibility of these designers." Grawunder is one of the few contemporary American designers rep-

resented in the collection, but having worked extensively with Sottsass in Milan she forms a natural bridge between the High's American holdings and the international nature of design today.

If you're in Atlanta, a visit to the gallery will surely make you think about design—past, present, and future. Even if you're not, Schleuning points out, you can download one of her favorite examples of contemporary design right onto your phone—Martin Baas's Analog Digital clock. "It's the ultimate in democratic design—you can have this great piece that's in a museum right there on your phone for 99 cents!" ■