

EX RADIOHEAD IS DESIGN KING

George R. Kravis 111



The philanthropist and art collector George R. Kravis II has recently made his ambitious collection of modern industrial design a promised gift to the Philbrook Museum of Art in Oklahoma. A former owner of KRAV radio stations, Kravis is known for his community leadership, arts patronage, and educational charities.

For the past decade, he has assembled one of the world's most personal collections of international industrial design that an educated taste and passion for cutting edge design. A trustee of the Philbrook Museum of Art, Kravis has already lent a new dimension to the visitor-experience by fund-

“THERE ISN'T A SINGLE DAY GOES BY WITHOUT READING, ACQUIRING, OR GETTING INVOLVED WITH MY COLLECTION. DESIGN PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN MY DAILY LIFE”



ing a 75,000 square-foot expansion that was first opened to the public in 1990 and transformed the Philbrook from a modest historic house into a modern museum.

The collection is personal rather than professionally-curated, international rather than local, and broad in its scope—featuring a wide array of consumer products, furniture, ceramics, metalwork, plastics, graphic design and other materials. It examines and illustrates such themes as American streamlining—the futuristic and glamorous style of sleek and speed that had swept 1920' and 1930s America, postwar American design, as well as early German modernism. In his recent visit to New York, in the midst of this winter's most severe snowstorm, I met with George Kravis to talk about design, aesthetic sensibility, collecting, and his lifelong passion for design and education. I was interested to learn what design means to him and how it affects his quality of life—the process of learning, connoisseurship and the experience of collecting industrial design.

DANIELLA OHAD SMITH: Industrial design is an unusual area for a collector and not a very rewarding one in many ways. For one thing, it was not until recently that collecting American industrial design became notable and recognizable. Now you can see Streamline design in permanent installations at art museums and has a presence in scholarship. How did you start collecting design?

GEORGE R. KRAVIS 111: There are objects in my collection that I grew up with, some that go all the way back to my childhood, objects from my parents' home. My parents appreciated design. They furnished the house with great furniture by such designers as T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings and Tommy



Wells Coates (1895–1958)
 Radio: Model No. AD65, Ekco
 Designed 1932–34
 Bakelite, chromium-plated metal

15 x 14 x 14 inches
 Produced by E. K. Cole, Southend, England

This is the first round radio form the architect Coates created for E. K. Cole. The concentric circles emphasize the form, and the semicircular dial lights up, creating a harmonious aesthetic effect.



Russel Wright (1904–1976)
Pitcher: American Modern
Designed c. 1937
Glazed earthenware
10 x 8 x 8 inches; 27 x 20.6 x 20.6 cm
Produced by the Steubenville Pottery, Steubenville, Ohio

Parzinger. At the breakfast table we ate on Russell Wright's dinnerware and I remember an entire set of his most well-known set, American Modern in Chartreuse. The kitchen cabinetry was made of steel cabinets by St. Charles, which combined raw steel with areas painted in dark green. To me, modern design became central due to my upbringing.

What was the first piece you acquired?

I believe that it was a record player by RCA. It was brand new and I was 13 years old. My passion for good design began very early, and has continuously grown.

Your parents' home then was very contemporary at the time, correct?

It was contemporary, but at the same time it was also traditional. We were living with lots of American and English antiques.

Most collectors of design live with their collections. Tell me about some pieces you live with.

I live with furniture designed by Paul Frankl and by Paul Lazlo; a recent addition to the collection is a chair by Ettore Sottsass, which is the last piece of furniture he had designed before he died a couple of years ago. It is as red as his iconic typewriter that he designed for Olivetti in the 1960s.

You made a career in radio stations. Collecting vintage radios has been one of your passions. Tell me about radios.

There are many collectors of vintage radios, but not all of them are interested in their design aspect. When it comes to collecting vintage always known. To build complete collections, collectors often try to acquire every color of a particular model that they like. The Patriot Radio, designed by Norman Bel Geddes, for example, was produced in red, blue, and white. I do not own a white example as good examples are difficult to find since white bekalite often changes its color and clarity overtime.

For collectors of French Art Deco, a good piece by Jaque-Emile Ruhlman or Pierre Chareau are particularly desirable, What are the blue chip objects for collectors of industrial design?

In American industrial design, on the top of the list I would put the Hobart streamliner meat slicer, designed by Egmont Arens and Theodore Brookhart. Most museums with design collections have it in their wish-list if they don't already own one. In that list I would also include the Air-King skyscraper radio and the Patriot radio as well as some pieces by Russell Wright, such as blue and cantaloupe examples of the American Modern dinnerware. Although original pieces of American Modern dinner service by Russell Wright are easy to come by, these particular colors came late into production and were not produced for long, thus examples in cantaloupe are so rare that I have only seen once.

A collector of American interwar design told me once that skyscraper bookcases designed by Paul Frank have become extremely desirable, rare, and expensive. They were made by Paul Frankl, an immigrant from Vienna and who founded a



Karl Emanuel Martin (K.E.M.) Weber (1889–1963)

Lounge Chair

Designed c. 1934

Chromium-plated steel, wood, leather upholstery

29 x 29 x 40 inches

Produced by Lloyd Manufacturing, Menominee, Michigan

This low-slung exemplifies the streamline style, with its elongated steel supports as teardrops, the shape of speed.



Henry Dreyfuss (1904–1972)

Pitcher and Tray: Thermos

Designed 1936

Enameled steel, aluminum, glass

Pitcher: 5 x 8 x 5¼ inches

Tray: 5 x 10 inches

Produced by The American Thermos Bottle Company, Norwich, Connecticut
The Thermos Company, seeking a design for a water jug that could be used in either office or home, commissioned Henry Dreyfuss, who used principles of aesthetics and ergonomics to create this sleek streamlined form.

furniture company called 'Skyscraper Furniture,' where he created Skyscraper bookcases and cabinets with stepped silhouettes echoing New York City's buildings, evoking the modern American metropolis. But at the time, in the 20s, they were produced in large numbers. Is rarity a factor in collecting industrial design?

Absolutely. I do not own a skyscraper bookcase, but do have a coffee table and dining table by Paul Frankl.

How has the marketplace changed since you started collecting design?

The auction houses can be credited for turning collecting design into an acceptable area, into something more recognizable when they started selling modern design. Particularly Richard Wright, Philips, and Sothebys have taken a serious approach to selling design. Museum too. When modern design began to appear in museum exhibitions and in per-

manent installations, the public has become more educated. I think that all of these came to shape the marketplace.

Why people collect art is a complex question that came to occupy scholars for years. There are several types of collectors. For some it is a hunger, a thirst; for others it is an addiction to put together important collections. Some are academic collectors, others are patrons. But all of them are passionate about collecting; it is an ongoing process of education that dominates many aspects of their lives. What type of collector are you, and how has collecting come to affect your own life?

I am addicted to the internet and I can spend hours surfing online, looking and often finding great additions to my collection. I have always had a good eye and thus can be walking around and talking to somebody and observing what around me. Design is everywhere, but some people see it and some don't. I just happen to see it.

If there is an object of design that you are craving for, how far will you go out of your way to get it?

There are examples of modern industrial design, which I want to add to my collection at any cost. When a rare example of the Air King radio, designed by Harold Van Doren in 1933 in the skyscraper sil-



Designer unknown
Television: TV-22
Designed 1948
Bakelite, glass
15 x 15½ x 16 inches
Produced by Bush, United Kingdom
This compact TV, with its curved corners and grooved speedlines at the base, is an example of late streamlining seen in England after the war.



Reuben Haley (1872–1933)
Decanter: Ruba Rombic
Designed c. 1928
Glass
9½ x 7½ x 7½ inches
Produced by Consolidated Lamp and Glass Company, Art Glassware Division, Coraopolis, Pennsylvania
Ruba Rombic was an innovative line of industrially produced housewares in blown glass. Haley's art deco designs are notable for their faceted forms in jewel-bright colors.



George Nelson & Associates (active 1947–83)
Television and Hi-fi Cabinet: Model No. 4743
Designed 1946
Oak, lacquered wood, glass, plastic, linen, aluminum
38¼ x 92¼ x 19½ inches
Produced by Herman Miller Inc., Zeeland, Michigan
This cabinet is an example of modular furniture designed to be combined in a variety of arrangements—in this case, TV, hi-fi, and storage cabinets—on a four-legged bench.



Paul Schreckengost (1908–1983)

Teapot

Designed c. 1938

Glazed earthenware

7½ x 11½ x 4 inches

Produced by Gem Clay Forming Company, Sebring, Ohio

The strong streamlining of this ceramic pitcher is seen in its continuous handle and spout extending from its spherical form.

houette had been recently offered for sale at Bonhams, I was ready to pay anything to get it, and I did.

How much of your time do you typically spend on this passion, on collecting design?

There isn't a single day goes by without reading, acquiring, or getting involved with my collection. Design plays a central role in my daily life, and let me give you a great example. I have a collection of car. Personally, I drive Audi R8, a desirable model from a design point of view, which was first introduced in 2006, designed upon spaced frame principles, and was showcased in Design Miami. I went to the Detroit Auto show to listen to the designer who was involved in the design of the R8, and he had mentioned, among his sources of inspiration, streamline irons from the type I love collecting.

If a collector of design can go to only one fair annually, which one would you recommend?

Design Miami.

You also collect objects by living designers. Tell

me about your process of selecting contemporary design.

I collect what I like and what I think or feel that are examples of great design. For example, I collect design by Black and Blue, the London-based firm founded by Dan Black who also became a friend. I have a silver tea set, designed by Zaha Hadid for Alessi, and which has since become an icon. One of my most favorite designers is Jonathan Ive of Apple, and I have a great collection of early Apple computers. In contemporary industrial design, if I like an object, if I find it important, I would buy two examples, one to use and the other to store. It is important to always keep the box, as packaging is an important aspect of the documentation. If a great object comes out, it is important to buy it quickly. The toaster Michael Graves designed for Target, which I believe is one of his greatest designs, is no longer available.

Most great collections typically experience a turning point, that moment when collectors begin with a process of elimination. Have you experienced

such a moment?

I keep reminding myself that it is time to rethink my collection, but I am not there yet, and I am not sure how to do that. I know that not all objects in my collection are on the same level and some might be better off in a study collection.

You have recently made your collection a promised gift to the Philbrook Museum of Art in your hometown Tulsa, Oklahoma. Why?

The Philbrook Museum of Art is the local museum. It is where I grew up. But the Philbrook is also a surprise because you wouldn't expect such a wonderful museum in Tulsa. The building is an Italianette villa, set on twenty-three acres, the former house of White Philips who lived there for about eight years before handing the it to the city. In the Philbrook I feel at home. My collection is a promised gift, but much of it is already on display at the Museum while I live with the rest. I have given many objects to MOMA, as it is the MOMA, with its collections and exhibitions that came to shape my education in design.



Peter Behrens (1868–1940)
 Electric Kettle
 Designed 1909
 Nickel-plated brass, rattan
 90 x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
 Produced by Allgemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft (A.E.G.),
 Berlin, Germany
 Behrens, regarded as the first industrial designer,
 created this piece as part of an innovative
 line of electric kettles and other appliances for A.E.G.

For those seeking to get education in design, which museums do you recommend?

The London Design Museum and of course the Victoria and Albert Museum.

I see that you have in your collection the famous glass chair by Shiro Kuramata, Japan's most prominent designer, known there as the father of modern design. Why did you choose that piece? What does it contribute to the entire collection?

This glass chair is one of my most favorite pieces of design. It is refined, pristine, and architectural. The use of material is something I find fascinating.

Your collection, although widely international, has a particular focus on American industrial design of the 1920s and 1930s, generally referred to as "American Art Deco." There are three remarkable private collections of American industrial design of that era that I am aware of. The John Exelrod collection is on display and promised gift to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the John Waddell Collection which is a promised gift to the MET. And of course the Eric Brill collection which he gave to the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts. Where do you place your own collection within this territory?

I have met John Waddell when his collection was

shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in a wonderful exhibition called American Modern: 1925–1940. My collection is different since mine is more personal and consists only of what I love, of what speaks to me. While David Hanks [the curator] helps me with research and some advice, the collection is the product of what I personally want.

When did you start working with David Hanks?

I have first met David four years ago through a personal introduction. When I came to meet him at his apartment, I meant to stay for half hour and I ended up staying for four hours. It was the most interesting afternoon I have ever had. And when I went back to Tulsa, I called the curators of the Philbrook Museum of Arts and told them, that they should consider showing David's exhibition, which at that time opened at the Montreal Museum of Art. Well, it is opening this month, four years later, his show "American Streamlined Design: the World of Tomorrow."

You are a lover of architecture. Tell me about the architecture of your own house in Tulsa.

I am a member of the board of Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, as well as a member of the board of the Price Tower Art Center [the Price tower is Frank Lloyd's Wright's only realized skyscraper], and yes, I do admire architecture. I have bought the land in

1984 and have closely worked with an architect on the design of the house. The house is modernist, and looks more European than American. It is set on two acres of land and its entire exterior is clad in travertine. Stylistically, it is related to the Kimbel Museum of Art [in Port Worth, Texas]. I admire, Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Bruce Goff, who during the 1940s was the chairman of the school of architecture at the University of Oklahoma. He designed many residences across the Midwest in a personal modernist style which was organic and also site-specific.

Is there a single object of design in your collection that is your favorite, or do you love them all?

Among my favorites are the chair designed by Kem Webber, the aluminum objects by Russell Wright, and I truly love the white tea pot and cups by Paul Schreckengost which he designed as a Christmas gift for the Gem Clay Forming Company in 1938. He was the less famous of the two brothers. His brother Victor Schreckengost did the Jazz Bowl. I admire the original Electrolux vacuum cleaner, designed by Lurelle Guild in 1937 of which I own several examples.

How do you distinguish between good design and mediocre design?

I can feel it. I can tell.

What is the best advice you can give a novice collector who wants to start an industrial design collection with a limited budget.

When you collect industrial design, you don't have to have millions of dollars. Go to Target and look around. Go to house-ware departments and look at the knives with rubber handles designed by Smart Design for OXO.

I have notice, after speaking to collectors that many of them perceive collecting design with an unusual sense of responsibility, as making pioneering contribution to scholarship, to the awareness of design. By giving your collection to the Philbrook Museum of Art, what has been your main goal?

I am interested in education for the general public and for the students at the local campus of the Oklahoma State University. I do hope that with this collection becoming visible and available for study, the architecture/engineering department would consider adding industrial design courses to its curriculum. The collection is presently on display at a new satellite building in downtown Tulsa, but will eventually be on display in a new wing of Museum, which will open in 2012. It is designed by the architect Richard Gluckman, known for his Dia Center for the Arts in New York. Education is goal. I come from a family of peoples interested in education and the arts. My sister-in-law Marie Josée Kravis is the President of the Board of MOMA. Art and education are two central aspects of our lives as we love art and believe that it is important. We visit museums, we support museums.

Having sold your radio stations. What do you do now?

I collect design.



Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988)

Radio Receiver: Radio Nurse

Designed c. 1937

Bakelite

$8\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Produced by Zenith Radio Corporation, Chicago, Illinois
Zenith produced this baby monitor to help families care for
children and invalids and commissioned the sculptor
Noguchi to create this receiver shaped like a head in a nurse's cap.