A Designed Life

1951-1954

Contemporary American Textiles

Contemporary American Wallpapers

Containers & Packaging

Travelling exhibitions between past and present: Dialogue with the curator of *A Designed Life*

Margaret Re, Federico Maria Giorgi

Keywords:
U.S. Traveling Exhibition Service; American Product Design; Exhibition Displays

ABSTRACT:

From the point of view of curators, architects, and designers, the challenges presented by travelling exhibitions are as unique as they are complex. As such, Peggy Re gives voice to her insights in this interview, gained from curating the exhibition *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-1954*, a historical retrospective of three exhibitions organized by the U.S. Traveling Exhibition Service between 1951 and 1954. We will explore how, throughout its historical evolution, the design of traveling exhibitions has consistently intersected with issues related to identity, soft power, technology, manufacturing, and the public.

Dal punto di vista dei curatori, degli architetti e dei designer, le sfide poste dalle mostre itineranti sono tanto uniche quanto complesse. In questa prospettiva, l'intervista a Peggy Re vuole dare voce alle sue intuizioni, acquisite durante la sua esperienza curatoriale con la mostra *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-1954*, non solo in relazione alla storia di tre mostre organizzate dall'U.S. Traveling Exhibition Service tra il 1951 e il 1954, ma anche rispetto ad una pratica di progettazione espositiva contemporanea. Verrà approfondito come, nel corso della sua evoluzione storica, la progettazione espositiva di mostre itineranti si sia sempre incrociata con tematiche legate all'identità, al soft-power, alle tecnologie e al rapporto con il pubblico.

Opening Picture:

Poster of the exposition *A Designed Life* at the Center for Art, Design & Visual Culture, UMBC.

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Margaret Re

Margaret Re is a professor of Graphic Design at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). She is also a practicing designer, researcher and consultant to academic, cultural, and non-profit institutions. Her work has been recognized by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), the American Association of Museums (AAM), and The Type Director's Club (TDC). Her research interests include typography, design history, and women and design.

For this fourth issue of MMD- Museum, Materials and Discussions, whose dossier is dedicated to topic of travelling exhibitions, we decided, for the section devoted to architecture and display, to give voice to the curatorial experience of the exhibition "A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers, and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54". Through the lens of this contemporary travelling exhibition, which retraces and recontextualizes the history of three travelling exhibitions from the 1950s, we aimed not only to highlight and compare the evolution of the opportunities and the challenges present in these showcase experiences, but also to underscore the possible synergies between design practice and historical archival research. As such we aim at showing how the threshold between museology and museography is a fertile ground for the development of experiences that highlight both the products and the processes of architecture, history and design.

Federico Maria Giorgi: During this project, you analysed the three exhibitions commissioned by the U.S. Traveling Exhibition Service and shown in Germany between 1951 and 1954: *Contemporary American Textiles,* designed by Florence Knoll; *Contemporary American Wallpapers,* designed by Tom Lee; and *Containers and Packaging,* designed by Will Burtin. Compared to regular exhibits, travelling exhibitions like these offer multiple specific challenges. They often need to find a balance between strict time constraints, tight economic budgets, object conservation, and curatorial objectives and the necessity of developing flexible displays. How did the curatorship experience of *A Designed Life*[1] help you look back at the history of the challenges faced by these three post-WWII travelling exhibitions?

Peggy Re: Like Knoll, Burtin, and Lee, I was challenged to identify and collect the materials to be presented. As a curator, I was fortunate to locate each exhibit's original catalog, which included product checklists and designer and manufacturer. I reviewed these lists, researched the manufacturers and designers, and considered each object's function, intended audience and price point, tasks that Knoll, Lee, and Burtin had to complete. To understand the intent — why an object was selected by the original curators — what made it "Contemporary" and "American" — I also examined each object and researched the background of each designer and manufacturer. I considered the product form language and the origin of that language.

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From a commercial perspective, I also had to consider what might be unique about each product or its designer or manufacturer so that I could interpret it for an audience. Knoll, Burtin, and Lee were charged with selling an idea of America as "Contemporary" or modern, so they, too, had to think about form language as the made their selections. They also had to consider innovative manufacturing techniques, many resulting from systems developed to support the war effort and ways to show the resulting products. The experience of curating and designing ADL made me understand the conceptual challenges Knoll, Burtin, and Lee faced in creating exhibits that would circulate through and be presented in unknown spaces. ADL would require as much adaptability as it could offer to accommodate a multiple of spaces while respecting the intent of the original designers.

Florence Knoll responded to this challenge of adaptability by exploring the idea of "small architecture" and designing a pavilion. "Contemporary American Textiles" was organized as a self-contained architectural space meant to be viewed and experienced as a whole: a twenty-four-by-sixteen-by-eight-foot self-lit aluminum-framed pavilion from which panels composed of individual textiles arranged and sewn into geometric shapes were hung by straps and braced by crosswire supports.[2] Fourteen tapestries were used in creating double-sided wall panels assembled from patterned and woven textiles stitched together into geometric compositions. Rather than a line of objects viewed at eye level, textiles floating within a grid were deployed as scrims to make a room within a room. Sight lines formed by shape and pattern afforded a continuously changing viewpoint that encouraged individuals to move through the exhibit. The lighting system mounted to the interior ceiling cast shadows of visitors that could be seen in and outside of the space, creating intrigue. This pavilion is important as a design artifact because, in addition to textile use, color, and texture, it documents Knoll exploring an open plan layout and circulation — how people interact and move through space. This awareness caused me to think about color and lighting and evaluate how people could be invited into and move through ADL. Because Knoll's pavilion was self-contained, it also made me aware that I could think about creating zones or areas for each part of the story I wanted to tell.

Will Burtin responded to the challenge of creating an exhibit that had to react to unknown spaces by designing three sets of shelves that he called "crate units."[3] Each crate unit, which was divided into 18 compartments on each side, was braced on its outside edges by opposing isosceles triangles. They could be arrayed from a center point, aligned head-to-toe, or set side-by-side. Burtin presented over 100 products, applicable at all stages of life, in the home and across industries, packaged using English in a limited, flexible space, evoking the idea of store and shadow box. To me, this raised a consideration of audience interpretation beyond language. While product names can be translated via labels, did Burtin select packages and containers based on their visual and emotional appeal as much as their innovative structure or content? Burtin made me aware that

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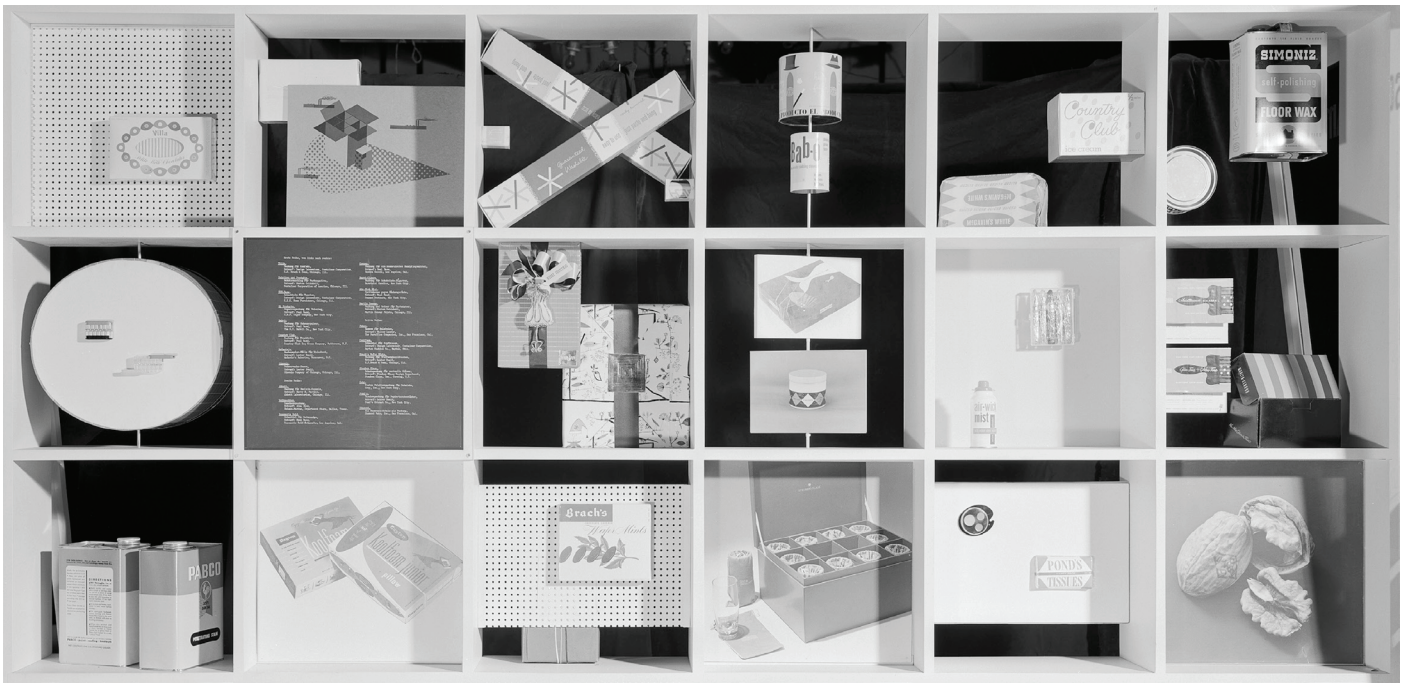

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these exhibits were meant to connect with real consumers and their emotions as it invited them to consider their wants and desires.

Lee created a flexible exhibit consisting of sixty framed and papered panels mounted to wooden supports that could be arranged in various ways: rectangles, hexagons, or any shape needed to suit the available space. The panels could also be separate from their supports and wall mounted. The State Department in Germany extensively reworked Lee's exhibit, making me aware of the importance of editing. Lee, an interior and exhibit designer, who had extensive experience with designing theatre set and costumes and packaging and trade displays for the beauty other industries created what he called "spectaculars." I wanted "spectacular."

This experience gave me a deeper understanding of logistics. The three designers had to design exhibits that could travel, i.e., be shipped efficiently — by boat, train, and car. The exhibits had to be lightweight and easy for a small, unskilled workforce to understand and install. The United States Department of State presented these exhibits via the Amerika Haus program, a US government-funded system of information centers tasked with acting as agents and interpreters of American culture through the facilitation of free discussion and the presentation of public programming intended to increase cultural and political prestige on the part of the United States. The Amerika Haus libraries, which were cultural centers *and* libraries, were typically housed in prominent spaces often associated with the previous government. The US State Department also planned to present the exhibits in German museums and to the German public through other events like fairs and trade shows. While Knoll, Burtin, and Lee understood this, they did not know where the State Department would actually present their work and how these environments were organized and experienced by the people who used them.

Fig. 01:
Front of the panel of *Purchase Appeal & Grabbing Attention*.

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UMBC's Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture[4] planned to travel ADL to university and college museums and galleries so the logistics of packing, shipping containers, weight and travel costs were logistics to be considered. I didn't know what universities and colleges ADL might travel to and what these gallery spaces might offer when I was designing ADL. I was very much aware that university and college museums and galleries are teaching labs where exhibits are often prepared and installed by students under the guidance of a more experienced preparator or curator. We also planned to travel ADL to free-access venues, like the Center for Architecture in Sarasota, Florida, and the Chicago Design Museum, which values design as a tool to create and connect communities. So, like Knoll, Burtin, and Lee, I was aware that a light weight and simple installation was essential. Could the installation be done in under a week in very different spaces by a crew of interns and students learning their craft under the direction of a more experienced preparator? What happened if ADL's presentation needed to be split between two spaces? This happened at the Chicago Museum with Burtin's exhibit presented in a secondary space across the street from the main gallery.

This experience also made me aware of the "behind the scenes" complexities involved in curating an exhibition, such as securing permissions and insurance, licensing and copyright law and fair use, and an appreciation of open-access materials. While Knoll, Burtin, and Lee weren't challenged with these responsibilities — most if not all the products they displayed were donated commercial products created as multiples — the charge to create these three exhibits was born from the aftermath of the State Department's experience with the 1946 "Advancing American Art" exhibition that featured works created by a culturally diverse group of emerging American artists. The State Department developed "Advancing American Art" to present the con-

Fig. 02:
Back of the panel of *Mass Production & Design Issues*.

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cepts of freedom of expression and individualism as fundamental democratic values enjoyed by American artists and therefore all Americans. To do this, the State Department, which was tired of the challenges created by borrowing artwork from museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions, which imposed permission requirements, fees, time limits, and insurance requirements on the State Department, purchased seventy-nine oil paintings and seventy-three watercolors. I have a deep appreciation for the complexities of this work.

Federico Maria Giorgi: The way in which these displays tried to overcome and anticipate the unforeseeable logistical challenges of travelling exhibitions, is certainly one of the most interesting aspects of their designs. However detailed pieces of information about temporary exhibitions of all kinds, even today in our digital age, are easily lost to time and are often difficult to reconstruct. The Birth of *A Designed Life* is directly linked with the analysis and exploration of different historical records. The exposition itself could be interpreted as a tool capable of adding new materials and providing new meanings to forgotten archives: a way of extending their life. How did the relationship with different archives and the use of various types of sources (written documents, photographs, journal articles, technical drawings) influence the exhibition's creation and its life cycle?

Peggy Re: Your statement about reconstruction is so true. I continually found myself considering the purpose of the archive and the appraisal process conducted within it—who decides what gets collected and preserved, why, and who is this content for?

The different archives of the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and other parts of the federal government were willing to connect with each other in support of this project. Much of the history behind A Designed Life is their history. The various archivists and librarians were interested in learning about their predecessors and the decisions they made. On several occasions, archivists knew of materials that had not been cataloged, or used in some time and were willing to retrieve materials such as Amerik Haus posters stored in the Library of Congress. The archivist in charge of these posters generously allowed them to be photographed and reproduced in ADL and its accompanying catalog. I am thrilled that they are now cataloged on the Library of Congress website so that others can use them. I was also privileged to travel to Germany to use the Bauhaus library. While I didn't uncover direct reference to these three exhibits, I found information about Knoll and design professionals featured in the textile, packaging, and wallpaper exhibits. A visit to a library in Dessau connected me to an archive in Cologne containing useful information related to the Amerika Haus program and Felix Muller and Karl Oskar Blasé, two German designers who supported this program.

The various types of sources forced me to consider how I could take these findings and make a cohesive

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Fig. 03:
Display of *Contemporary American Textiles* during the exposition *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54*, as presented at UMBC's CADVC.

whole. While I located the catalogs for each exhibit, each exhibit was documented differently. Knoll's exhibit was documented through drawings, plans, textual descriptions, and minimal photography. Burtin's exhibit was extensively documented by American architectural photographer Ezra Stoller, with whom Burtin worked throughout his career. Stoller's photographs were of such high quality that they were scanned and enlarged to create a full-size digital trompe l'oeil recreation of Burtin's original design, which was important as there was no way I could have located all the products listed in the catalog. Select examples of the wallpapers presented in Lee's exhibition were printed and displayed through the generosity of Cooper Hewitt, in part because outside of the catalog, I could only find textual descriptions. While I wanted to find drawings, plans, or photographs, I was okay with this because Lee's exhibition was extensively reworked once it arrived in Germany. It was the most flexible of the three exhibits. Newspaper articles revealed that the wallpaper panels could be hung on the wall, displayed freestanding, or joined to create groupings. Lee's exhibit was also the only exhibit opening that was documented via a newspaper article sharing remarks made by the State Department officer opening the exhibit.

I became very interested in the process behind making and presenting each exhibit as separate activities. Plumbing the materials in the various archives revealed the differing agendas of the people involved in creating, traveling, and displaying these exhibits. These agendas ranged from overtly propagandistic ones, prioritizing nationalism over all else (both American and German), to personal agendas that were willing to set aside the TES project

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charge in favor of creating an abstract artistic experience (Knoll), to agendas that were as much as about the promotion of individual design firms as anything else (Knoll and Burtin). Exploring the archives also provided me with insight into how the exhibitions were received by the various audiences that saw them. Evidence suggests the reception differed significantly from the intention.

I also became very interested in the correspondence (memos) related to the exhibits. Through them, I began understanding different people's roles and their importance or relevance to the individual exhibits and the exhibit program. I also got a sense of individual personalities and learned about their life stories and what these individuals valued. TES Director Pope compared the Cranbrook-educated Knoll's exhibition to a Mondrian painting. Her American-born, Princeton-educated State Department counterpart Richard Brecker, a WWII veteran, dismissed Pope's concern with aesthetics. He wanted to stay on message. Brecker found Knoll's exhibit ridiculously inflexible, requiring a presentation space at least five wider on all sides. Memos between the TES and State Department officers in Germany document a story of want and need related to Burtin's exhibit. Packages were continually stolen for their contents. The State Department replaced the stolen packages with empty packages which were also stolen. Herwin Schaeffer, a State Department official and German émigré who returned to Germany after WWII to find his American-born mother, felt the need to interpret Lee's wallpaper exhibit because some of the presented papers were so abstract and, like the Knoll textile exhibit, were displayed abstractly without context. German audiences are on record as finding the American color palette, as expressed through the wallpaper selections, unappealing.

Stories like these made me want to add an audio component to ADL so that people could get a sense of these individuals and their conversations with each other. I was very fortunate that a colleague, an experienced voice actor, was willing to lend her expertise in helping create scripts based on these memos and the audio files themselves. Other colleagues were willing to "audition" and serve as character actors. A colleague who recorded these audio stories selected and dubbed in background music to set the tone and further an emotional connection. I also felt it was important to bring in the biographies of select designers whose work was featured in these exhibitions and who I also researched while studying Knoll, Burtin, and Lee's work. Many of these individuals had fascinating personal and professional histories. They were European émigrés themselves or had studied art and design with European émigrés. Three 32 x 24" monitors showcased a rotating display of panels containing didactic text supported by images.

The didactic panel accompanying Contemporary American Textiles presented textile designer and colorist Eszter Haratszky, who worked for Knoll. Haratszky, who, after she left Knoll, focused on "needle painting," her own expressive style of detailed embroidery rooted in the handicrafts that she learned as a child in Hungary, advised her fellow

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artists and designers in one of her two books on embroidering flower design that "… you don't necessarily have to do exactly what I say, or do as I do but do. It is the only way that you will learn how good you are." Meanwhile, the Contemporary American Wallpapers didactic panel gave the life and work history of industrial designer Ray Komai, one of two design professionals of Asian descent associated with these three exhibits. Komai, who in 1942 was incarcerated at Manzanar, an internment camp for Japanese and Japanese Americans, designed figurative and abstract wallpaper and textiles for Laverne International that show the influence of abstract and Cubist artists. Komai worked with the United States Information Agency from 1963 to 1976, designing exhibitions and publications for U.S. expositions sent overseas to promote American values and democracy during the Cold War. Komai's colleague and friend Alan Carter shared a memory in Komai's USIA obituary about interviewing Komai. When Carter asked Komai about his early WWII years, Komai's paraphrased response was, "Well, I was raised to believe I was American. I played baseball, I did well in school, and I did all those things typical American kids did. Then, one day, in my later teens, I was told in effect that I was not American— that I was to be sent to a relocation camp along with my family and other Japanese Americans." When Carter asked Komai why he would want to join the very government that treated him so horribly, Komai softly replied, "Because no one could ever again doubt that I am American." Finally, the Containers & Packaging didactic panel showcased Morton and Millie Goldsholl. The Goldsholls explored commercial design to create playful and modern product packages, corporate identities, and animations. Morton designed packaging for the Container Corporation of America, where he met Millie, an accountant and aspiring artist. Morton took evening classes at the Institute of Design under Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes. He suggested to Millie that she enroll in this new school. The couple established Goldsholl Design & Film Associates in 1955 while raising a family — making them even cooler than the Eames, in my opinion.

Curating and designing ADL using what initially felt like incomplete sources, opened me up to thinking about other ways to tell its story and give context. For example, I was able to incorporate the European Recovery Plan (ERP) posters from the Virginia Military Institute that I originally consulted to learn about form language. How could I introduce an audience to this language? Show the posters! And, when I couldn't find the textiles originally used in Knoll's exhibit, I decided to use projections of select textiles and re-editioned textiles available today.

Interpretative devices enhancing the viewer experience were also crucial to the ADL life cycle as where outreach events. They helped other venues and audiences find value. It was essential to find ways for audience participants to connect with the individual displays and ADL. For Knoll's exhibit, audience members were invited to touch and closely examine samples of each displayed textile. Booklets containing panel diagrams were also available for audience members to

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consult as they walked through and around the exhibit. A worksheet mimicking a shopping list invited individuals to consider what was needed then and now to live comfortably was available to viewers as they explored Burtin's exhibit. Lee's wallpaper exhibit was supported by coloring pages showing a variety of modern interior spaces. Individuals were invited to design and color these pages based on what they found appealing in ADL. The Architecture Center at Sarasota hosted a speakers' series that attracted community members to ADL. The Chicago Design Museum (CDM) and I worked on programming and creating a Facebook/Instagram campaign featuring objects and designers who contributed to Knoll, Lee, and Burtin's exhibits or a related reading or question to consider. The campaign took place weekly between May and mid-September of 2021. CDM also did an excellent job organizing and hosting outreach events supporting ADL.

Federico Maria Giorgi: Realising an exhibition is often a precious occasion to collaborate with a wide variety of professionals from different scientific fields and career paths. In this case, looking back at the complex behind scene of these exhibition, is also an opportunity to reflect on their multidisciplinary nature and their ability to overlap aesthetics and languages between decorative art, design, and art and architecture. What possibilities did this multidisciplinary approach offer to developing travelling exhibitions in the 1950s and today?

Peggy Re: ADL was a very complex, collaborative, and multi-disciplinary experience that relied on the expertise generously offered by many different individuals, resulting in the audience being able to better explore complex themes and opposing viewpoints. Recreating these three exhibitions and considering how to give a sense of context and unity within a tight budget and small team, which, in addition to CADVC colleagues, included UMBC graphic design, theatre, and history students, Morgan State University architecture students, and Johns Hopkins University museum studies students, encourage us to think about how a richer and more engaging narrative could be presented that encouraged curiosity and exploration. It required the project's core team to forge professional relationships within and outside of UMBC some of which are discussed below.

As part of the Knoll recreation, and as discussed earlier, we used "descendant fabrics or re-editions" inspired by earlier textiles, rotating projections of historical textiles onto select panels in Knoll's pavilion. We also worked with UMBC's costume shop, which is housed in the theatre department, to sew the panels used for Knoll's exhibit using textiles donated by Knoll Textiles and other manufacturers after consulting with their in-house design teams. The Microfabrication, Machining, and Electronics team housed within UMBC's College of Engineering and Information Technology helped fabricate the aluminum structure from which the panels were hung. A Smithsonian Institution lighting designer freely consulted on the type of light bulb and wattage Knoll

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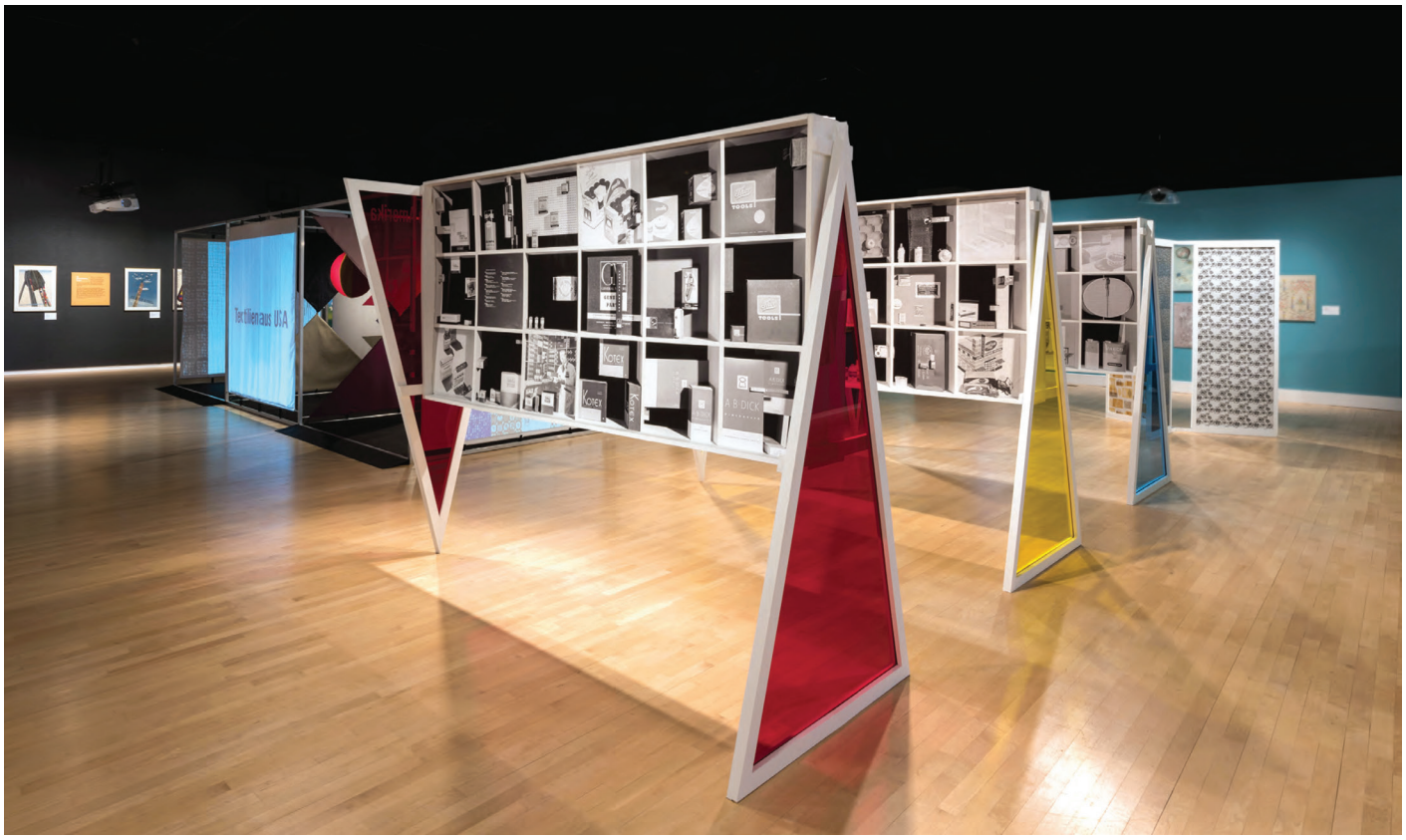

04

Fig. 04:
Display of *Containers and Packaging* during the exposition *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54*, as presented at UMBC's CADVC.

might have used and helped find a lighting system. Digital printing done in-house was important to ADL because it allowed for cost-efficient reproductions. Esto, which houses architectural photographer Ezra Stoller's archives, reduced fees, provided high-quality scans and gave permission to reproduce Stoller's photographs of Burtin's exhibit. Equally valuable, Cooper Hewitt generously provided scans of the presented wallpapers and permission to print them.

A façade of an Amerika Haus found at the National Archives and Records Administration was printed digitally at scale to help create a sense of place and time. To further understand the geographic location, historical context, and cultural factors, we presented select European Recover Posters (ERP) borrowed from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) at UMBC. We created a slide presentation using these ERP posters to support ADL as it traveled. Two Marshall Plan/ECA films, including one film that focused on a young German man who volunteered to work the Ruhr-Rhineland coal mines, also borrowed from VMI, were presented that were valuable in understanding how the U.S. government sold the ERP.

Today, we have the option of promoting exhibitions and presenting them digitally. Covid meant A Designed Life could not travel as extensively as planned. However, ADL was presented online as a virtual immersive experience using Matterport.[5] The Matterport exhibit, which shot in Chicago, meant that visitors could walk through the space, observe objects from different angles and distances, and interact with them as if they were physically present.

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Federico Maria Giorgi: These exhibitions where a great experimentation ground for trying different approaches toward audience engagement. A such these displays were used as influence tools capable of growing a country's soft power through cultural events. They presented a curated portrait of the American people with the objective of creating an aesthetic identity that could influence the emotions, desires and expectations of foreign countries. Do you think the role of travelling exhibitions has changed since then? What challenges and possibilities do they still offer regarding the topic of identities today?

Peggy Re: I want to answer no and yes.

I live on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., which recently celebrated Embassy D.C. The various embassies and cultural attaches open their doors and introduce themselves to the city via open houses, street festivals, and exhibits — all forms of cultural diplomacy or soft power as defined by Joseph Nye. Besides being a way to learn about other countries, these activities invite participants to consider and explore multiple facets of their identity and that of others, using a lens that can be focused on various facets of affiliation: gender, place, nationality/ethnicity, social status, traditions, governmental systems, personal interests, and more. Events like these can increase empathy and cross-cultural communication. These embassies use engagement methods like those that the US Department of State explored in 1950s Germany as they circulated Knoll, Burtin, and Lee's exhibits through the Amerika Haus program. The US Department of State was trying to find ways to introduce audiences within Germany and Europe to the United States of America and its system of government.

The role of traveling exhibitions has changed since the 1950s. They've become more immersive. There's a strong interest in showing an object and finding ways to solicit input as exhibits are planned and invite diverse audiences into the exhibition space so that all communities feel welcomed to interact with the museum and its contents. There's also a concern with visitor accessibility and reaching visitors through engagement activities that address the variety of ways in which people learn, process, and retain information. This concern with accessibility includes creating interpretive panels that use concise everyday language and often incorporate an interactive element. Traveling exhibitions allow cultural organizations like museums to reach audiences they might otherwise not reach. They also enable museums and galleries to contain costs and diversify their offerings by bringing in materials that audiences may not be able to travel to see.

Federico Maria Giorgi: Reflecting on the different perspectives possible toward an exhibition and its various stakeholders is critical when discussing cultural events strongly linked with forms of soft power. Studying exhibitions from the past allows us to ponder their reception and critically examine whether or not both the space and the public accepted this temporary event. How was the recep-

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tion of these three exhibitions at the time? And how was the reception of the recreated display today?

Peggy Re: Most of my research was conducted within the United States, and I was unable to find extensive records documenting the reception of these exhibits in Germany. What I did find showed that German audiences were curious about these exhibits; however, their reception was uneven and often tinged with gentle humor. The Department of State's goal was to persuade Germans and other Europeans that the United States offered more attractive and better lifestyle options than the Soviet Union. To achieve this, the Department of State planned to utilize the visual language of what would become known as modernism to align consumer choice with political choice. While modernism was emerging in the United States, it benefitted from the contributions of immigrants, including those who had studied at the Bauhaus. American-made goods that might have been received within the United States as novel and exciting might not have been seen as novel or exciting when returned to Germany. The German reception was also impacted by the tension and conflict that existed between the TES and the Department of State regarding the exhibits' purpose and intended audience. The exhibits had multiple subsets of audiences. The first audience was TES Director Pope, a German émigré, who contracted Knoll, Burtin, and Lee at the advice of MoMA's Edgar Lee Kaufmann, director of MoMA's Department of Industrial Design and the "Good Design" exhibition program, to curate and design their respective exhibitions as well as create a catalog. Pope, an art historian who completed a PhD in German Baroque sculpture and studied with Paul Sachs as a postgraduate student, served as Assistant Director in charge of exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts before establishing the TES. She appreciated and would make a life for herself, organizing huge traveling exhibitions involving significant artworks. She was enthusiastic about each exhibit as she supervised their development.

Pope's Yale-educated State Department counterpart, Richard Brecker, represented another type of audience — that of the United States government. A former Marine, he was not interested in connoisseurship. Brecker, as chief of the State Department's exhibitions branch and who, based on State Department correspondence, operated primarily within the United States, viewed these exhibitions as opportunities to counter Soviet influence, foster a sense of mutuality between the German and American people, and sell the idea of democracy by showing the goods made available through a democratic government.

Brecker's colleague, Herwin Schaefer, a German-born United States Department of State officer stationed within West Germany and charged with receiving and circulating these exhibitions, represented a third perspective that was perhaps most directly connected to that of German audiences. Schaefer, like Pope, was a German émigré who, after completing a PhD from Harvard with a dissertation on medieval architecture, joined the Rhode Island

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05

Fig. 05:
Projected textiles during the exposition *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54*.

Serge Chermayeff, Navajo #1, 1952.

Alexander H. Girard, Small Squares, 1953.

Don Wight American, Garden of Glass, c. 1950.

Stig Lindberg Swedish, Apples, c. 1950.

Philip Johnson, Van Dyke Squares, c. 1953.

Eszter Haraszty, Tracy, 1952.

School of Design Museum in the Department of Decorative Arts before accepting a position as an assistant curator in the Department of Architecture and Design. He left MoMA when he was appointed assistant director of design at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Schaefer, who joined the State Department in an attempt to return to Germany, was directly concerned with how these three exhibits would be received and understood. He edited and made opening remarks to provide context for Lee's exhibition. He was also responsible for the exhibit catalogs that Knoll, Lee, and Burtin produced as part of their contracts. While the catalogs were planned to follow the MoMA's Good Design format, which credited the designer and manufacturer and provided the item's cost, Schaefer made the decision to remove the cost information deeming it irrelevant. The objects weren't obtainable, and most expenditures made in Germany were for basic living needs.

Pope compared Knoll's "Contemporary American Textiles" to "a painting by Mondrian." She considered Contemporary American Wallpapers to be appropriately flexible, asserting it was "one of the best installations I have ever seen, especially for traveling purposes." Brecker,

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06

Fig. 06:
Projected textiles during the exposition *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54*.

D.D. & Leslie Tillett, Walnuts, c. 1950.

Marianne Strengell, Textile, c. 1950.

Angelo Testa, Campagna, c. 1951.

Bernard Rudofsky, Fractions, c. 1949.

Noémi Raymond American, Chinese Coin, 1948.

Ross Littell, Border Riff #3, c. 1948.

who was interested in reaching the masses — regular folks — judged Knoll's exhibition as impractical. He felt that Contemporary American Textile's inflexible box-like structure limited its adaptability, making it unlikely that it could be presented at an America House, which was typically placed in existing structures used by or associated with the former government. The pavilion was too big.

Pope was aware of Brecker's judgment, which didn't bother her at all. She felt that the America Houses were the least important of the Department of State-specified venues. Pope was interested in high culture. To her, the venues with the highest value and utmost importance were the museums and fairs — big fairs with unlimited space and a large number of visitors, such as the Berlin Trade Fair, the Berlin Cultural Fair, and Constructa. Pope valued an aesthetic experience intended for an affluent, cultured, and educated audience that would offset the conception of the United States as "lady wrestlers, bloody strikes, and boogie-woogie fiends." Pope may have gotten her way. She wrote that Brecker requested "Contemporary American Textiles" to be featured in 1953 at the Munich Amerika Haus, in Essen, and for the Berlin Festi-

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val, despite its late arrival. Based on the date of Pope's memo, it can be inferred that the Berlin Festival referenced by Pope was the 1952 Berlin Cultural Festival, a program that was part of an American foreign policy initiative aimed at countering the European perception that America was an aesthetic desert.

The documentation found related to Contemporary American Textiles revealed that German audiences were not that impressed with it. A trade publication reviewed the exhibit when it opened at the Amerika-Haus Essen, asking, "So what?" The reviewer found that the forms presented in the various patterned textiles selected by Knoll were not unique. The reviewer, who identified the American palette as garish, found the exhibit too abstract, observing that it could have benefited from larger textile samples so that the audience could understand how these fabrics could be used in architectural spaces and on three-dimensional forms — an insight with which I agree.

How a fabric drapes is important to its use and final appearance. Knoll's presentation also meant that the audience couldn't rub the fabric against itself to determine its durability, which could influence use. As an example, Knoll included Don Wight's cotton print, "A Garden of Glass," in her exhibit. Wight created a simple half-drop repeat pattern using isometric line drawings of glassware: wine glasses, bottles, carafes, and more. Wight's textile looks remarkably different when presented flat as part of a grid, which is how Knoll presented it, than when used as a curtain and draped or hung from a rod. The resulting folds shatter the glass, creating an abstract pattern.

Pope considered Contemporary American Wallpapers to be appropriately flexible, with the TES director asserting it was "one of the best installations I have ever seen, especially for traveling purposes." Brecker, in a 1952 New York Times article, stated that the "exhibit was intended to show residents of foreign countries characteristics of the" typical American home. It would also show that Americans are not concerned solely with the machine and what it can produce but with aesthetics as well. However, that didn't mean the State Department deemed Lee's exhibition suitable for German audiences. Once the exhibit arrived in Germany, Schaefer edited Lee's selections, reducing the number of papers from sixty to forty because, in his judgment, many of the designs were not acceptable for German consumption. Schaefer's appraisal was supported by a West German press that humorously and benevolently complimented the American wallpaper industry on its courage.

A local newspaper reviewed Lee's exhibit when it opened at Kassel's Museum of Natural Wonders, with Schaefer providing opening remarks. According to the article, the exhibit opened with a wallpaper composed of realistic pocket watches presented alongside early colored German wallpapers and four large pictures of nineteenth-century American life. Several nails placed next to the opening paper, on which visitors were invited to hang their own watches, reflected what was perceived as the exhibition's avant-garde nature. The displayed

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papers, intended for residential and commercial use, included motifs inspired by chicken wire (Ilonka Karasz), marbled paper (Erwine and Estelle Laverne), foliage (Ben Rose), and empty frames. The reviewer suggested that the exhibition was not received as the Department of State had planned. Schaefer had to introduce the audience to the idea of a significantly larger country with a less homogeneous and more mobile population where homes were not created for generations of living. According to the reporter, Schaefer's words elicited "a more unprejudiced" response from this audience. The review concluded that the Schaefer-supplied context opened the audience up to a lively discussion about the use of patterns.

State Department records document that Contemporary American Wallpapers were exhibited in American Houses in Munich, Berlin, Mannheim, Essen, at the Wallpaper Fair in Darmstadt, in the Ulm town hall, in Hagen, and at a large wallpaper store in Düsseldorf, which appears to have been the most successful. The store owner estimated an unbelievable 525,000 visitors saw the exhibition. These records also indicate that the exhibition was shown at America House Hof and at the "For Every Woman" Fair, sponsored by the America House Hannover, where it raised a controversial discussion. The America House Hannover reported that visitors didn't like the exhibit. America House Hof played it safe — they noted that the exhibition was excellent but too advanced for the taste of most visitors. The State Department planned to offer the exhibit to museums interested in modern design, supporting Pope's belief that museums and fairs were the venues with the highest value and importance.

Pope wrote to Burtin that Contemporary American Containers and Packaging was a wonderful and creative project that she was proud to present abroad. I didn't find direct documentation of the German reception to Burtin's Container and Packaging exhibit other than the repeated theft of packages containing products that could be eaten or used. State Department officials stationed in Germany requested replacement packages, writing that the exhibit was successful and tempting. So, it can be somewhat cynically inferred that in this time of need, there was an enthusiastic reception of some sort.

However, correspondence exchanged between Brecker, Schaefer, and other State Department officers revealed that the State Department felt that Burtin's exhibition, like Lee's wallpaper exhibit, could be of real use to German museums interested in American design and manufacturing. The State Department may have hoped that Containers and Packaging, while smaller in scale, would be received with enthusiasm like that enjoyed by MoMA's "Design for Use, USA," the Kaufmann-curated 1951 exhibition of American household goods presented at Stuttgart's Landesgewerbemuseum, which attracted sixty thousand visitors over five weeks.

So, what happened to these exhibits? I believe the State Department abandoned these three exhibits of mass-produced goods or donated them to earn good will. In all likelihood, traveling via boat, truck, and train and being presented at venues of differing sizes, where they were

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viewed by untold numbers of people, took a toll on them — because of its size, the textile pavilion was limited to venues where crowds of visitors could walk through it. I found no record of handling or shipping instructions or of specialized packaging planned to protect the exhibitions. There is also no record of exhibit conservation or repair, except for the State Department's request for replacement packages for Burtin's exhibit. The Department of State planned to offer the wallpaper exhibit to art schools and museums interested in modern design.

The exhibits may have also been abandoned as the Department of State reduced its association with the TES due to coordination and communication issues. One officer wrote regarding Knoll's exhibit: "… almost as much time and work was expected of us as … if we contracted directly with the designers." The Department of State may have also decided to limit its relationship with the TES as it guided the1953 Eisenhower-established United States Information Agency in developing larger international expositions that presented American designed and made products in environments that showcased American lifestyles. These larger exhibits included the 1959 American Exhibition in Moscow, which featured an apartment complete with modern furnishings.

However, there's a third reason why the Department of State may have abandoned or donated these exhibits in Europe — which leads to the question of how today's audiences received A Design Life. The Department of State may have felt it couldn't return them to the United States because of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, the first significant U.S. legislation on international information activities officially authorizing American government public diplomacy efforts abroad. Smith-Mundt permitted the "preparation, and dissemination abroad, of information about the United States, its people, and policies" through various media, including press, publications, radio, motion pictures, and information centers. It also contained a de facto provision restricting materials prepared for presentation overseas from being presented within the United States, out of fear that this could allow the American government to propagandize its people. Smith-Mundt, which allowed the Department of State to contract with individuals or organizations deemed important in combating communism, allowed the Department of State to fund these exhibits through the TES. However, the Department of State may have also concluded that this restriction prevented the return of these exhibits and thus these exhibits were never seen in the United States. The audiences that viewed A Designed Life were intrigued by this law and its implications. Many audience members were equally interested in learning about Smith-Mundt and to be invited to reflect on the ideas of personal identity, choice, propaganda and soft power as related to design. They were surprised to learn that design can consciously/unconsciously influence/shape social systems. As an educator it helped me point out to students that as designers, they have a responsibility to understand what the messages they create. It also helped convey to audiences that we are all consumers

On the surface level, audiences

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were very receptive to A Designed Life because of the popularism of modernism and the names associated with it. Knoll and Burtin are well known American design professionals.[6] The exhibits that they and Lee curated also contained work created by other well-known modernists including Evelyn Anselevicius, Eszter Haraszty, Marianne Strengell, Angelo Testa (Contemporary American Textiles); Marion Dorn, Illonka Karasz, Ray Komai, Alexander Calder (Contemporary American Wallpapers), and Saul Bass, Lester Beall, Morton Goldsholl, and Paul Rand (Containers and Packaging).

As they visit A Design Life, audience members were equally interested in reflecting on the ideas of personal identity, choice, propaganda, and soft power as they relate to design and its influence. They were surprised to learn that design can consciously or unconsciously influence and shape social systems and to consider how what we choose reveals about us. Audience members who toured A Designed Life were intrigued to consider how the people who viewed the original exhibits might have valued and used the display products. The accompanying educational programming created a well-received "shopping experience" that invited individuals to consider the display items and select those that were relevant to their lives today.

Federico Maria Giorgi: The context in which an exhibition is built is always an essential factor in its development. From this point of view, travelling exhibitions have the rare opportunity to continue to learn and evolve after their completion by picking up new pieces of information along their journey. The pandemic didn't allow *A Designed Life* to complete its journey fully; can you tell us more about its travels? What were the different venues initially programmed for the exhibit, and what were (if they were pre-programmed) the design changes made to the exhibition for each location?

Peggy Re: A Designed Life opened at UMBC's Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture and then traveled to the Center for Architecture Sarasota before the pandemic impacted its existing travel schedule. At this time, UMBC's Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture (CADVC) was also planning to propose this exhibit to other educational institutions. The CADVC was in discussion with Drake University for fall 2020 when the majority of American universities and colleges decided to close for that semester. The Chicago Design Museum presented "A Design Life" in the spring of 2021 when many parts of the United States were still closed due to the pandemic[7].

Like the three original exhibitions, the three reconstructed exhibitions faced challenges — and some of these challenges mirrored those faced by the original exhibitions. For example, reconstructing Knoll's Contemporary American Textiles exhibit at the original scale meant that it required a space that allowed audience participants to move through and around the textile exhibit — an additional five feet was needed on each side, as detailed in Brecker's State Department correspondence. Size was an issue when

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the Center for Architecture Sarasota presented A Designed Life. The space was tight. There wasn't room for visitors to walk comfortably around the outside. However, the Center for Architecture Sarasota, which is bounded on two sides by curtain walls, recognized this and positioned the Knoll and Burtin exhibits close to these windows, creating a strong visual impact from the street. Discussions with Drake University revealed that Knoll's exhibit would have required them to show A Design Life in two locations. Due to the space needed by Knoll's pavilion, the Chicago Design Museum presented Burtin's Containers and Packaging exhibit in a space directly across the street from it.

Burtin's Containers and Packaging exhibit was flexible but heavy. It was easy to install, and all three 'crate-units,' as Burtin called these structures, could be displayed radially or linearly. The option also existed to present one or two crate units instead of three. Balancing the crate units was a challenge. Burtin used opposing triangles to support the crate units, with one side of each crate unit resting on a vertex. As Burtin's exhibit traveled, this point required reinforcement with a small but wider triangle — a very inelegant solution. I hadn't considered what the constant pressure on this point would do to it. Burtin must have reinforced the vertex by drilling a threaded metal pin into the wood to which he discretely screwed a flat plate. In addition to preventing the wood from splintering and spreading weight, this screw would have allowed a crate unit to be adjusted so that it sat more stably on an uneven floor. The Center for Architecture Sarasota presented Containers and Packaging linearly. The Chicago Design Museum presented it in three staggered rows. Lee's Wallpaper exhibit employed

Fig. 07:
Display Elements of *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54*, as presented at UMBC's CADVC.

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traditional presentation methods, with the majority of the wallpapers displayed on the wall. A 'kiosk' composed of three vertical panels radiating out from a center point referenced the structures on which Lee hung the original wallpapers. The ERP posters belonged to the Virginia Military Institute's Marshall Museum and, therefore, couldn't travel. Instead, we were able to present these posters in a digital format.

By exploring the behind-the-scenes challenges faced during the project "A Designed Life" we can focus our attention toward some critical aspects linked with exhibition design. First and foremost, ADL highlighted the logistical challenges of the design practice, both from the point of view of display hardware and curatorial management. However, it also showed how making these difficulties visible was a great way to resonate with public and help them understand the processes and the historical objectives of the U.S. Traveling Exhibition Service. Furthermore, this curatorial experience underscored the importance of creating a vast and multidisciplinary network of professionals both before, during and after the exhibition life-cyle. These types of projects initially draw on a wide variety of materials and information, belonging to different bodies and agencies, and characterized by very different supports. This variety of sources also translates into a range of new materials produced, which often seek to exploit a broad spectrum of communication methods mixing both physical, digital and mixed medias. These exhibitions thus become an opportunity to create large "resonance chambers", as described by museum theorist Stephen Greenblatt, that can bring together and confront the views, interests, and specialist knowledge of a wide variety of actors around a single theme. A final aspect that seems very interesting about "A Designed Life" is how the practical act of designing it was able to shed light into the history of three American Traveling Exhibition and shape the way we understand them. From this perspective, historical research and the concrete presentation of this research blur the boundaries between museography and museology, underscoring the necessity for collaboration among the designer, architect, and historian, as multiple and very layered stories are told within one construct.

This dialogue was organized in between February and June 2025 by Federico Maria Giorgi, Editor of the Section Architecture and Displays of this review. Many thanks to Professor Peggy Re for her time, her energy and her generosity in sharing with us the curatorial experience of the exposition "A designed Life"

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Endnotes:

1 See the catalogue of the exhibition: Gute, Re 2020. From this point onwards, the exhibition will often be referred to by the abbreviation ADL.

2 See: https://theconversation.com/florence-knoll-bassetts-mid-century-design-diplomacy-110878

3 See: https://www.transatlanticperspectives.org/entries/will-burtin/

4 See: https://cadvc.umbc.edu/

5 See: https://cadvc.umbc.edu/a-designed-life/

6 See: https://www.printmag.com/daily-heller/modernism-rediscovered/

7 See: https://www.designchicago.org/a-designed-life

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Gute, Re 2020: Gute C., Re M. (eds.), *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951–54,* Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, UMBC, 2020.

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