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The Serious Play of Alexander Girard

Monica Obniski, Demmer Curator of 20th and 21st Century Design, Milwaukee Art Museum



Architect-designer Alexander Girard worked across multiple disciplines. He and his wife were also voracious folk art collectors. This lecture will explore some of Girard’s artistic projects, highlighting his playful designs, alongside his use of folk art within these projects. Girard’s work is featured in Obniski’s exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum, *Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America*, which explores the projects of over 40 designers who advocated for playfulness and whimsy within their creations for corporations, domestic interiors, and children. The exhibition presents play as a serious form of inspiration, experimentation, and problem-solving. In mid-century America, such playful design occurred against the backdrop of a booming consumer market and as a counterbalance to Cold War–era anxiety. Furniture, toys, textiles, films, posters, and ceramics are among the objects featured.

Previously, Obniski was the inaugural Ann S. and Samuel M. Mencoff Assistant Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago and had been a research assistant in the Department of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She taught art history at UIC and Columbia College. She has received fellowships from the Wolfsonian–Florida International University and the Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design. Obniski has published scholarly articles and contributed to publications, most recently to *Alexander Girard: A Designer’s Universe* (2016). She holds an MA in Decorative Arts and Design from the Bard Graduate Center in New York City and a BA in Art History from Loyola University.



Serious Play: Design in Midcentury America, co-organized with the Denver Art Museum, grew out of Obniski’s doctoral dissertation, “Accumulating Things: Folk Art and Modern Design in the Postwar American Projects of Alexander H. Girard (1907-1993)” at the University of Illinois at Chicago which examined Girard’s folk art and modern design in his postwar projects. The exhibit is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. It is on view in Milwaukee from September 28, 2018 to January 6, 2019.