



**MODERNISM 1914-39:
DESIGNING A NEW WORLD**
Victoria & Albert Museum, London
April 6–July 23
Review CAT MARTIN

Defining any 'ism' is a struggle, and viewed from this distance Modernism is no exception. Emerging through the wake of the First World War and Russian Revolution, the movement proffered extensive and sometimes contradictory ideas that nonetheless expressed a shared dream for a better future. The V&A's spring exhibition "Modernism: Designing a New World" attempts to tell this complicated story. Concentrating on 1914–1939, the exhibition focuses on European architecture and design, but also includes examples of performance, graphics, fashion, film, and sculpture. There is much to see.

Art is sparsely represented, but there are many artefacts that display Modernist ideologies of simplicity, economy, and standardisation. The once radical designs such as Aalto's Savoy Vase, 1936, or former Bauhaus student Marcel Breuer's distinctive Model B3 Club Chair, 1925 (whose early tubular steel frame looks surprisingly slender in comparison to its chunky successors) are now familiar classics, but clothing for the new



01 B3 Club Chair, 1925, Marcel Breuer 02 Citta Nuova, 1914, Antonio Sant'Elia 03 Competition design for a shopping street with housing above in Den Haag, 1924, Cornelius van Eesteren 04 Friedrichstraße Skyscraper Project, 1921, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe 05 Design for a postcard for the All-Union Olympiad (Moscow Spartakiada) Swimmer, 1928, Gustav Klucis 06 High jumper in front of Prellerhouse, 1930, Hajo Rose

era such as the Productivist outfit designed by Alexander Rodchenko defies its date of 1922, and still surprises.

Rational practical solutions so typical of the movement are most obvious in the Frankfurt kitchen of 1927 – the first kitchen made in quantity with standardised building elements. Designed with inbuilt labour-saving devices such as storage chutes, and drop-down ironing board, it's the embodiment of the pursuit of functionality.

Less successful is the section themed on "Health & Body Culture". Optimistic dreams for a new world can be humbling, although these once powerful celebratory images of group sporting activities now seem amusing and a little daft.

Architecture is well covered, but not well presented. Highlights include a breathtaking coloured chalk elevation of Corbusier's 1926 Villa Stein De Monzie; Gerrit Rietveld's investigative drawing of the first floor of Schröder House, 1924, with its open plan, sliding partitions, and blocks of colour applied to the floor; Ludwig Mies van der

Rohe's drawings for Friedrichstraße Skyscraper Project, 1921, which boasts new construction techniques and use of materials. There are also numerous intriguing film clips such as tours around Villa Savoye past and present, but frustratingly these are too brief to provide little more than a light glaze.

Crammed into the familiar but awkward sequence of three rooms it is easy to miss essential items. Other must-see treats are Henry C Beck's classic sketch for the London Underground, 1931, which shows abstract relationships in connections as opposed to distance; Duchamp's deadpan readymade *In advance of the broken arm Snow shovel*, 1915; and, less easy to miss, the supremely lacquered metal Tatra T-87 saloon car, 1937. Light and compact, this was the first mass-produced streamlined car, with central seat and compelling dorsal fin to rear.

The exhibition has refuelled the complex debate on the success of the movement. The collection itself successfully outlines the

experimental nature of early Modernist pioneers, but strait-jacketed into the confines of the rooms and the dates 1914–1939, the debate is limited, although the exhibition catalogue provides further analysis. It is interesting to see which ideas have not been overtaken by our 21st-century reality. A commitment to social reform and provision of affordable housing survives, but for the most part Modernist ideology has now settled into a saleable style, delivering inexpensive design to a wider audience. This audience, in turn, has ensured record attendance to the blockbuster exhibition, albeit with a rather venerable and nostalgic approach to the unfamiliar pre-Ikea days. Present day speed and volume of new technologies has clearly not jaded enthusiasm for an interest in visionary progress, and despite its drawbacks the exhibition is still a powerful lesson in the potential of optimistic rethinking. **M**

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Modernism

1914-1939

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