

From Turnstile to Transmitter: John Vassos, Industrial Designer, 1927-1941

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Abstract

This study examines the birth of television and the modern media corporation that launched it, through the archives of the designer of the “first” set, John Vassos, a Greek-born American industrial designer, interior decorator, and illustrator (1898-1985). Vassos’s early career is used as a case study to analyze the historical and cultural forces that shaped the emergence of this new media and the new profession of industrial design, through archival materials housed in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. and at Syracuse University. Specifically, this thesis unites various parts of Vassos’s early career, from his modernist illustrations to industrial design, through the aesthetics and practices of modernism. As RCA’s lead industrial designer for over 40 years, Vassos was involved in the design and promotion of RCA’s electronic products, including radios and televisions and studio equipment. Vassos also designed the new spaces carved out for their use in the home including the “living room of the future” featured at the 1939 World’s Fair. Drawing from his skills as an illustrator, designer and display expert, Vassos helped develop RCA’s public image at a time of its greatest expansion in radio and television manufacturing and broadcasting. This reading of Vassos’s work is both diachronic, taking into account his work over the early part of his career to analyze his specific contribution and synchronic, in relationship to other designers working contemporaneously. Thus, this thesis explores Vassos’s double role as a participant, with active agency within the emergence of the new field and as a subject, constrained by social roles and forces. Ranging from turnstile to the transmitter, Vassos along with other industrial designers used the streamlined aesthetic to create visual unity among mechanical and electronic products, from home to office, from subway to skyline.

La présente étude, à travers l’analyse des archives du designer à l’origine de la première télévision, John Vassos (1898-1985), américain d’origine grecque, designer industriel, décorateur intérieur et illustrateur, examine l’avènement de la télévision ainsi que l’entreprise moderne de média qui l’a lancée. Une étude de cas est construite autour des débuts de la carrière de Vassos aux fins de l’analyse des tendances historiques et culturelles ayant façonné l’émergence de cette nouvelle forme de média et les débuts de la profession de designer. Les documents préservés par le Archives of American Art de l’Institut Smithsonian à Washington D.C. ainsi que par l’Université de Syracuse ont servi à réaliser cette étude de cas. En mobilisant à la base l’esthétique et les pratiques du modernisme, cette thèse recoupe diverses parties de la carrière de Vassos, allant de ses fonctions de consultant en design industriel à celles d’illustrateur moderne. En tant que le principal designer industriel de RCA pendant plus de 40 ans, Vassos a été impliqué dans le design et la promotion des appareils électroniques de RCA, incluant les radios, les télévisions et l’équipement de studio de télévision et de radio. Vassos a également réalisé le design de nouveaux espaces créés spécifiquement pour l’utilisation de ces appareils dans la maison familiale, dont le « salon du futur », lequel a été exposé au World Fair de

1939. De par ses compétences en tant qu'illustrateur, designer et étalagiste, Vassos a contribué au développement de l'image publique de RCA au moment où l'entreprise prenait sa plus importante expansion dans la fabrication et la diffusion de radio et de télévision. La présente lecture de l'œuvre de Vassos est diachronique et synchronique en ce sens qu'elle se base sur son œuvre de début de carrière afin d'analyser ses contributions spécifiques tout en la contrastant avec les réalisations d'autres designers contemporains. Ainsi, cette thèse explore à la fois le rôle de Vassos en tant qu'acteur social, pourvu d'agence et impliqué à part entière dans l'émergence d'un nouveau domaine, et en tant que témoin de cette émergence contraint par les forces et les rôles sociaux. Vassos, tout comme les autres designer industriels de son époque, a utilisé une esthétique épurée afin de créer une unité visuelle à travers l'ensemble des produits électroniques et mécaniques, de la maison familiale au bureau, en passant par le métro et les panoramas urbains.

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shared his own experience as the biographer of Henry Dreyfuss. Cindy Clair at the Silvermine Artists Guild in Connecticut generously sent me images from the archive there including photographs from an exhibition on Margaret Bourke-White which was recently held there.

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Preface

This thesis is a study of artist and industrial designer John Vassos (1898-1985), who rose to prominence in the 1930s. I was first drawn to Vassos while working as an exhibition assistant at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum on a show covering the history of industrial design. This exhibition included a powerful image by Vassos entitled “Dromophobia,” or fear of cars, from his 1931 book *Phobia*: an image of the dangers of crossing the street from the pedestrian’s view (see figure 18). I was deeply moved by this image and the others that I saw in a book of his compiled illustrations that offered a powerful critique of mass culture. Upon further inquiry, I found out that he was also a top industrial designer in the 1930s who designed RCA’s debut television set at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. I was intrigued that the same man who was critical of mass culture would build one of the first mass-produced television sets and many consumer radios. At the time, however, there was little written about Vassos. I put this interest aside until many years later, when I returned to his work and discovered that still no one had researched him, despite growth in the field of design history. I decided to focus on the seeming contradiction between his

criticism of urban alienation and his industrial design practice. My dissertation took shape as I began to understand the connection between his socially critical illustrations and his design for electronics, his commitment to good design for mass production, and his position as a corporate designer.

In some ways, Vassos's early career was the ideal dissertation topic for me; his work crossed thematic boundaries that had long been an interest of mine, from print to mass production in the early spaces of urban consumer culture -- the soda shop and the department store. Despite my early hesitancy about focusing on a single career and following a dramatic sidetrack into the history of chewing gum, I returned to the Vassos study. I found that he was entirely suitable for a dissertation, as his papers were yet unexamined and, luckily for me, held in archives throughout the Northeast, where this thesis was written.

My effort to piece together his design projects of the prewar period was accomplished largely without the help of a master guide to the Smithsonian Collection, which is not catalogued. This was difficult at times yet satisfying in the way that original historical research can be, as I unearthed materials from his archives for the first time. It was gritty, dirty, messy, and sometime exhilarating work. This study, I imagine, is just the beginning of the inquiry into the early career of an important American designer.

I began my inquiry at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian in March 2002, where I dove into the disorganized boxes, including files and random objects from Vassos's home office that his nephew packed up and shipped to the archive. While there on a travel grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), I discovered amid the papers not only the

early career of John Vassos but also an unfolding history of 1930s visual culture across design genres. This included dummies for manuscripts, a treasure of glass slides held in a rusted steel case, portfolios, Christmas cards, and family photographs. Amid the materials, I discovered risqué drawings in the files and a letter detailing a love affair along with Christmas cards, family photographs, and dirty jokes that he shared with the Vice President of Coca-Cola in the 1930s. I thought I even smelled his cologne as I opened his personal letters. When I heard his thickly accented voice for the first time on an audiotape from a conference on design history, I felt very familiar with John Vassos.¹ It needs to be noted that Vassos had some difficulty expressing his thoughts in writing. This may become apparent to the reader of the thesis in extended quotes from his archives. Also, the materials are sometimes housed in folders that are wrongly named, or materials are simply in the wrong place. Some RCA materials appear in files entitled “murals” for example. Indeed, almost every file contained some surprising entries.

Studying a relatively unknown artist had its advantages, including the experience of ordering a copy of Vassos’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* from interlibrary loan at McGill and receiving a book that was never opened. I had to slit the pages open with a letter opener, as the librarian instructed me to do. Another curious find was a telegram from Aristotle Onassis in the Syracuse Archive thanking Vassos for a love potion that he administered during his honeymoon with Jackie Onassis.²

¹ Vassos Papers, Awards ceremony, March 25, 1970, 8-track cassette, John Vassos Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. [hereafter *Vassos/AAA*]. Box 1.

² John Vassos Collection, Correspondence Subject File “O,” John Vassos Papers, The George Arents Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University [hereafter *Vassos/Syracuse*].

John Vassos excelled in many areas related to design throughout his career. As the rarely modest Vassos explained, “I am resourceful and versatile, having changed my career five times; i.e. newspaper cartoonist, display work, advertising, illustration, industrial designer, author, and lecturer.”³ Here, however, I focus on three aspects of Vassos's career: illustration, industrial design, and interior design. I argue that his skills as an illustrator and interior designer were subsumed under the professional heading of industrial designer. In Chapter 2, I cover Vassos's development as an illustrator moving from advertising to art books. He created powerful narrative illustrations mirroring the tempo of modern urban life that were published in illustrated books and popular magazines. Chapter 3 covers his interior design practice for department stores, restaurants, and private apartments. I pay special attention to the way Vassos used lighting to shape consumer behavior. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover his industrial design practice, from the aesthetic and business perspectives. Throughout the thesis, I track Vassos's entry into the newly minted profession of industrial design. Overall, my study evaluates the early career of John Vassos to argue that he was an important industrial designer of the era. His informed incorporation of modernist design principles into his design work makes a contribution to the establishment of a uniquely American design vernacular.

To place Vassos in the context of American cultural history, I use an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from sociology, communication studies, and cultural studies. I seek to reveal the boundaries of the profession of industrial design and Vassos's movement within them. Thus, I seek to contextualize the early career of Vassos within cultural history rather than heroize him or merely present his greatest

³ Handwritten form for "Who's Who," Vassos/AAA, Box 23.

accomplishments, as some biographical studies tend to do. In this sense, I drew from the theories of Pierre Bourdieu on culture and Andrew Abbott on professionalization.⁴ Through their work, I was able to view Vassos's double role as a participant, with active agency within the emergence of the new field, and as a subject, constrained by social roles and forces. His participation can tell us much about the society in which this new field of industrial design emerged. Increased competition during the Depression spawned a growing need for more sophisticated methods of displaying, selling, and situating products. As such, my study goes beyond the celebration of the accomplishments of a single artist to the place of his work against the backdrop of the larger culture of the 1930s.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Andrew Abbott, The System of Professions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Chapter 1

Biographical Summary

John Vassocopoulos (shortened to Vassos) was born in Romania to an affluent Greek family who moved to Constantinople, where his father ran a newspaper. As a young man, Vassos published political cartoons under the pseudonym of the “wasp,” which eventually made him a target of the Turkish police. Facing imprisonment, he fled to the United States in 1919, and his entire family soon followed. (Please see the Appendix for a more detailed biographical synopsis).⁵

Arriving first in Boston, Vassos worked as a window washer before finding employment as a sign painter for billboards and as an artist for the Boston Gramophone Company. He attended the Fenway Art School and worked at the Garfonola Company of New England in Boston.⁶ In 1924, he moved to New York, where he opened the New York Display Company, which did graphics for film premieres, and continued to do stage design. He also started doing print ads for small firms before the major department stores hired him.⁷ He designed displays for department store windows and counters for stores like Nam’s in Brooklyn and Macy’s in Manhattan and designed sets for a theater company in New England. He married Ruth Carriere, a buyer at Saks Fifth Avenue from Albany, New York, in 1923, although they had lived together for several years previously.

⁵ Vassos's father, brother Alexander, and sister Ivi Johnes also moved to New York City. "Who's Who" form, Vassos/AAA, Box 23.

⁶ This is mentioned in a letter to John Vassos from A.C. Erisman, American Catalin Corporation, July 17, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁷ See, for example, New Yorker, February 8, 1930; Vogue, November 15, 1926; Vogue, August 15, 1927; tearsheets, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

In 1926, Vassos created a cover illustration for a Columbia University stage production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which was seen by an editor at E.P. Dutton. The company promptly hired him to create a trilogy of Wilde books, including *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1928) and *The Harlot's House* (1929). *Salome*, published in 1927, launched Vassos's career when he was hailed as the modern Aubrey Beardsley. These books were followed by eleven others with E.P. Dutton, including *Contempo* (1929), *Ultimo* (1930), and *Humanities* (1935), with some of the text written by his wife Ruth. *Phobia* (Covici-Friede, 1930), written with the help of Freudian psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan, was a study of phobias triggered by urban life.

Vassos's black and white illustrations uniquely combined the eroticism of art nouveau and perspective disorientation of German Expressionism with a distinctly American sensationalism. His illustrations, which he called "projections," suggesting the connection between emotions and graphic design, were meant to shock and entertain viewers rather than be observed objectively as fine art. Their intense ambivalence about the machine age and their sharp social criticism played a part in the debate among artists and intellectuals about the effects of mechanization on human life and the obligation of artists to comment on it. Some of Vassos's books were explicitly critical of power, mass media, and the alienating effects of capitalism. They were applauded by critics for their condensed narratives and innovative style and were often published in newspapers alongside articles on the dangers of the machine age. Vassos's advertisements used dizzying perspectives and swirling vistas to associate products with speed and the wonders of urban life. Vassos also got involved in the dance world and collaborated with the Gluck-Sandor dance

choreography team, who created a dance based on his book *Phobia*.⁸ In addition, he published numerous set designs published in the modernistic *The Dance* magazine.⁹

While illustrating in the late 1920s, Vassos also began to design interiors for a range of clients, including restaurants and private homes that were featured in the *New York Times* and in prominent architectural magazines like *Pencil Points*.¹⁰ At Nedick's restaurant in 1930, for example, he used new materials like Formica at the fast serve drink stand and planned lighting to enhance sales. He also designed the interiors of private homes for his photographer friend Margaret Bourke-White, psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan, and Isaac Levy, a co-founder of CBS television.

Vassos and his wife Ruth were involved in New York's bohemian artistic circles. This social network influenced his work, expanded his reputation, and brought him into contact with a vibrant social scene.¹¹ As he described it, "Our penthouse on 82nd Street became a salon of drinking conversationalists. Ruth likes newspaper men and women, and I like artists. They mix compatibly."¹² Guests included Harry Hopkins, of the Roosevelt administration, Bourke-White, Rudy Vallee, and others.¹³ Besides contacts made through entertaining, his participation in the arts

⁸ John Martin, "The Dance: A Repertory Plan," *New York Times*, November 20, 1932, p. x2; John Martin, "Dream Phobias at Dance Centre," *New York Times*, March 31, 1933, p. 22; John Martin, "The Dance: A Reopening," *New York Times*, September 20, 1936, p. x6. For the planning of the performance, see letter to Vassos from Gluck-Sandor, December 22, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

⁹ *The Dance* magazine illustrations appeared sporadically from October 1930 to January 1931. Vassos/AAA, Box 3. *The Dance* magazine is also held in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹⁰ John Vassos, "A Small Modern Restaurant," *Pencil Points*, December 1931, pp. 889-896.

¹¹ This involvement is clearly expressed in the blurb on Vassos in Willis Birchman, *Faces and Facts By and About 26 Contemporary Artists*, privately printed, 1937, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, "Autobiographical materials."

¹² Vassos, unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 31.

¹³ "Harry Hopkins was involved with Barbara Duncan, a friend of Ruth's. Harry was at the time in the Roosevelt Cabinet at Albany," according to Vassos, unpublished autobiography. They remained friends for years. See Vassos/AAA, Box 12, correspondence with Harry Hopkins, 1943. For more on the arts culture of New York in the 1920s, see Lewis A. Erenberg, *Stepping Out: New York Nightlife*

scene included exhibitions in galleries and private homes around the city. He was also involved in arts organizations like the National Alliance for Art and Industry, where he spoke on issues pertaining to industrial design,¹⁴ and at the Art Students League. With the assistance of his publisher, E.P. Dutton, he gave a series of lectures around the East Coast on modern art and design. These were more than book promotions as Vassos discussed new ideas about architecture and modernism that were inspired by the work of LeCorbusier, whose important book *Vers Une Architecture* was published in English in 1927.¹⁵ Vassos was known in the arts scene and warmly written about by his colleagues.¹⁶

In the late 1920s, Vassos found employment in product restyling and packaging, as companies began to recognize the value of styling and beauty as a sales tool. The first of these efforts was a lotion bottle for Armand Products. For his first design job, Vassos transformed the glass bottle into a portable one with a unique screw-off top that enabled it to easily double as a flask when the lotion was emptied. It was extremely popular during Prohibition, and sales were boosted 400%.¹⁷ Following this success and enormous publicity efforts on his own behalf, Vassos gained employment with a range of manufacturers, for whom he did what most industrial designers did, which was to apply the decorative style of streamlining. The

and the Transformation of American Culture (CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); W. Parker Chase, New York: The Wonder City (New York: Bound, NY, 1983; 1932) New York Historical Society, General Collection.

¹⁴ Letter to Alan Bemont, Director, National Alliance of Art and Industry, January 31, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁵ For more on the influence of LeCorbusier on American industrial design, see Jeffrey Meikle's chapter "Machine Aesthetics" in Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939 (Philadelphia, PA : Temple University Press, 2001) 19-38.

¹⁶ See biographical entry on Vassos in Willis Birchman, Faces and Facts By and About 26 Contemporary Artists, privately printed, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, "Autobiographical materials."

¹⁷ P.K. Thomajan, Foreword, Contempo, Phobia and Other Graphic Interpretations, p. x.

various products he styled included a Lucite pen for the Waterman company, a bicycle, kitchen appliances, and a turnstile for the Perey Company. His turnstile, used in the Chicago exposition of 1933, became a standard in the field.¹⁸ Vassos soon received public acclaim for this industrial design practice. In 1934, he was listed in a *Fortune* magazine article on industrial design where he was named one of the top 10 most important designers in the country. Others listed included major players like Walter Dorwin Teague, Raymond Loewy, and Henry Dreyfuss. In this article, Vassos was distinguished for his understanding of the psychology of buyers; as the article stated, “his subject is psychoanalysis.”¹⁹ The article and the letter on which it was based reveals his income as \$50,000 annually.²⁰

Vassos's career blossomed throughout the 1930s in all three areas of his expertise. This was due to promotional events organized with his publisher E.P. Dutton which received wide press coverage. He gained a reputation as a “modernist” artist. In 1933, Vassos met his first RCA executive while painting a mural at the WCAU radio station in Philadelphia, owned by rival company CBS. He soon became RCA’s leading consultant industrial designer, in 1933. He held this coveted position for the next 40 years, at the moment that RCA was expanding its radio and television business. At RCA, Vassos was involved in the design, research, and development of RCA radios internationally, including in South America and Canada. He played an

¹⁸ In *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* Jeffrey Meikle writes, “John Vassos’s turnstile for the Perey company, first used at the Chicago Fair, became a standard for industry and is still in use at some airports and other public places,” p. 352.

¹⁹ “Both Fish and Fowl,” *Fortune*, February 1934, 40-43 (author unknown, but I would argue it is Norman Bel Geddes, see note below).

²⁰ Letter to Norman Bel Geddes who was compiling information for the article, October 25, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 7, p. 2. Letter from Norman Bel Geddes asking for information dated October 22, 1932 may clear up the mystery, since the article has been widely attributed to George Nelson, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

active role in the marketing of RCA products, coming up with the phrase “the magic brain,” which became the company’s motto; consulting on graphic design; and educating top management about design. He contributed to the 1939 World’s Fair with the “Radio Living Room of Tomorrow” and the TRK12 model television receiver, on which the first live television broadcast was aired in the United States.

Throughout his career, Vassos was a major participant in professional organizations as a founder of the American Designer’s Institute in 1938 and its first president.²¹ He also oversaw the first design education curriculum as its chairman in 1944. He was involved in arts education and was instrumental in the growth of the Silvermine Artists Guild, one of the first independent arts centers in the country, located in New Canaan, where he and Ruth moved in 1933.

Scholarship on Vassos

Vassos’s contribution to the establishment of the field of industrial design is acknowledged by scholars. While major industrial design historians mention his partial achievements, what is missing is a comprehensive overview of his contribution in the areas of illustration, interior design, and industrial design in which he excelled. The following section will examine the areas where his work has been acknowledged. However, as I will show, overall, the scholarship on Vassos is scanty, and sometimes weak.

There has been no written biography of Vassos. Nor has there been a solo exhibition of John Vassos’s work, outside of a memorial exhibition at the Silvermine

²¹ Arthur Pulos, The American Design Adventure, 1940-1975, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988) 196-197. There is a complicated relationship among the professional design organizations. To summarize briefly, Vassos encouraged colleagues to sever their connection with the American Furniture Mart and expand their area of interest beyond the focus on furniture to create the American Designer’s Institute. Through a series of transitions, the ADI became the Industrial Design Society of America. Vassos was elected to head the American Designer’s Institute in 1939.

Guild Arts Center in New Canaan, Connecticut.²² Although this exhibition presented Vassos in the broadest light, covering his career as a painter, illustrator, graphic artist, and industrial designer, he has not received a large solo show, like Harold Van Doren, Henry Dreyfuss or Raymond Loewy. Indeed, Vassos's work is little known outside of radio collectors or collectors of art deco books. This is surprising since design historians are united in their agreement about Vassos's importance to the field. Design historian Arthur Pulos, who was also instrumental in getting Vassos's papers to Syracuse University, writes that Vassos was one of the three men who "helped pave the way for industrial design in the United States" along with other designers who had their start in illustration like Raymond Loewy and Joseph Sinel.²³ Industrial design scholar Jeffrey Meikle cites Vassos as a major figure in his seminal book on the field.²⁴ In addition, Jerry Steichler lists him among the top industrial designers in his book on the emergence of the consultant industrial designer.²⁵

Of all his efforts, his books are most widely known. His illustrations in them are considered important examples of art deco design and praised for their powerful imagery fused with social commentary. Indeed, his book *Contempo* has been described as one of the most striking books published by E.P. Dutton at the time.²⁶

His illustration *The Department Store* from this book was recently featured in the *Art Deco 1920-1939* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (along with

²² Copy of the invitation was sent to me by the Silvermine Guild curator from their archives. Floor plans for the memorial exhibition are held at Vassos/AAA, Box 19, "Murals" folder.

²³ Arthur Pulos, *American Design Ethic: a History of Industrial Design to 1940*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1983) 276.

²⁴ Jeffrey Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*, p. 40.

²⁵ Jerry Streichler, "The Consultant Designer in American Industry from 1927-1960," (Dissertation, New York University, 1963): 57-58.

²⁶ John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1978) 101. There has been little written on the subject of illustrated books overall; however, this field is growing.

his RCA phonograph).²⁷ Vassos has been compared to major painters Rockwell Kent and Lynn Ward, whose work was exhibited with his at the University of Toledo in 1995.²⁸

In addition to his books, Vassos's industrial designs are held in major decorative arts collections as examples of streamlined design. His RCA Victor Special phonograph was featured in the Victoria and Albert *Art Deco* show as an exemplary use of new materials for the portable machine. It is also held in the Brooklyn Museum Collection and The Wolfsonian Museum of Modern Art and Design in Miami,²⁹ which also holds his Perey Turnstile. His television designs, including the TRK12, are held in television museums such as the Museum of Television in Toronto, which also features a brief biography of Vassos on the institution's website³⁰.

Since there has been no major study to clarify Vassos's achievements, these descriptions are sometimes scanty or distorted. For example, design historian Penny Sparke's otherwise comprehensive biographical review of Vassos omits his important design of the TRK12 television and other electronics at RCA, while listing some of his early work:

"John Vassos was Greek in origin but arrived in the USA in 1919 and became a commercial artist after studying at the Art Students League. He moved

²⁷"Art Deco 1910-1939," March 27- July 20, 2003, the show traveled to the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

²⁸"The Ardent Image: Book Illustration for Adults in America, 1920-1942, An Exhibition of Aaron Douglas, Rockwell Kent, Clare Leighton, John Vassos, and Lynd Ward," Ward M. Canaday Center, The University of Toledo, October 20-December 29, 1995, Judith M. Frieber, Curator, wrote the text for the informative exhibition catalogue (Toledo, OH: University of Toledo, 1995) 1-28.

²⁹The Wolfsonian also holds the Perey turnstile, c. 1932.

³⁰Online <<http://www.mztv.com/mz.asp>> This website wrongly notes Vassos's ethnicity as Turkish-American; he was a Greek American.

gradually into designing labels, packages, and the occasional small appliance.”³¹

Similarly, the otherwise comprehensive *Design Encyclopedia* excludes Vassos’s RCA designs, although it lists others.³²

Museums occasionally present inaccurate information on him as well. For example, in the permanent Decorative Arts Exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the label accompanying Vassos’s RCA Victor special portable gives his year of death as 1958, not 1985, a typo perhaps. Production information on the RCA Victor special phonograph is often wrongly labeled, since museums present it as an example of mass-produced streamlining. An overview of the production records of phonographs at RCA show that the phonograph was never even mass-produced.³³ This sloppy representation of Vassos has resulted since there has not yet been an exhaustive use of archives to establish a foundation of facts or a study that unites the disparate parts of his career or that takes his work seriously.

Why has no one written a biography of Vassos yet? There are many reasons, including the relatively new status of the field of design history and television design history.³⁴ Another reason is Vassos’s relatively small commercial output as a solo

³¹ Sparke, *An Introduction to Design and Culture in the 20th Century*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). 234.

³² Mel Byars, *The Design Encyclopedia* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1994) 568.

³³ Other collections, such as the Wolfsonian, the Brooklyn Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and numerous auction houses, also promote the mythology that the machine was mass-produced, but there is no evidence that it was. It may have been a prototype or display version.

³⁴ There has been increased reference to his work since the archives have become available, and I have located two scholarly papers. The first is Shelley Nickles, "More is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America," 54 *American Quarterly*, December (2002) 581-622. This article draws from letters of Hollis Baker to John Vassos in 1959 and Vassos to Baker (March 16, 1959), Vassos/AAA, Box 7. *Phobia* is mentioned in Patricia Vettel-Becker, "Clarence Holbrook Carter's War Bride and the Machine/Woman Fantasy," *Genders*, 2003
<http://www.genders.org/g37/g37_becker.html> where she writes that Vassos's book "was written

practitioner.³⁵ His decision to work with a large company, RCA, made his design work less public and less known until fairly recently, when records of his work with RCA were donated to Syracuse University and the Archives of American Art following his death in 1985.³⁶ RCA was particularly secretive due to its stake in the new radio and television industries. Vassos's television receivers, so prominent in the debut of television at the World's Fair, have not been important in scholarship on the New York World's Fair. This is one result of the relatively unimportant role that television played at the Fair, and symptomatic of the paucity of scholarship on 1930s television in general. Designers like Norman Bel Geddes and Henry Dreyfus received much closer attention for their elaborate architectural structures at the Fair.

Another reason given for Vassos's exclusion from the design canon was that he did not express a coherent design philosophy in a popular book or publish an autobiography as other prominent designers did. In this thesis, however, I will show that he did indeed have a design philosophy that he expressed through articles and lectures as well as through his design work. He expressed these foundational ideas for a limited audience in his slide show lectures, his letters to employers, and his articles written for the in-house RCA trade magazine *Broadcast News*. As I will argue, Vassos's design philosophy was shaped by a commitment to the aesthetics of modernism.³⁷ Design historian Jeffrey Meikle argues that the ideas of Le Corbusier shaped thinking and practices of architecture, display and design throughout the

with the assistance of psychopathologists," by which she means Harry Stack Sullivan, the psychoanalyst.

³⁵ Meikle (2001) makes this argument, p. 40.

³⁶ An article mentioning the acquisition of the John Vassos papers is at, R.F. Brown, "Papers of John Vassos," 29 *Archives of American Art Journal* (1989) 68.

³⁷ Audiotape of speech from March 25, 1973, at the Norwalk, CT, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

United States. Indeed, his influence was pervasive.³⁸ My study will examine the ways in which Vassos in particular articulated these ideas while at the same time struggling with LeCorbusier's grand vision of a socially engineered society dominated by machines. Mickle points out that Vassos's images in his 1930 book *Ultimo* were even critical of the machine age city.³⁹ Only a few years later, Vassos would design radios and televisions that closely fit ideas about the home as the machine. Besides Le Corbusier, Vassos drew his ideas from psychoanalysis. His book *Phobia* gave him sensitivity and the terminology to express the emotional experience of modern life.⁴⁰

Vassos's politics were progressive, and he was to the left of most other American industrial designers. These politics, on first glance, might be taken to account for his exclusion from design history.⁴¹ His scathing social criticism in *Contempo* and *Humanities* was identified as leftist; this was the label given by the curators at the *Ardent Image* exhibition and by P.K. Thomajhan⁴² in his introduction to a compilation of Vassos's illustrations. In addition to his radical drawings, Vassos played a prominent role as president of the Silvermine Guild from 1936 to 1947, at the height of the New Deal. The Silvermine was an educational arts center described

³⁸ Jeffrey Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 29-38.

³⁹ Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ The importance of Vassos's ideas was recognized in industry, however, and was also expressed in trade journals: for architects in *Architectural Forum*, in lighting magazines, and also in books such as D.E.A. Charlton's *The Art of Packaging* (London: Studio, 1937).

⁴¹ Henry Dreyfuss was educated at the Ethical Culture Arts High School, which was progressive in its secular approach to ethics. See Russell Flinchum, *Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer: The Man in the Brown Suit*, (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Smithsonian National Museum of Design, 1997).

⁴² "The Ardent Image: Book Illustration for Adults in America, 1920-1942, An Exhibition of Aaron Douglas, Rockwell Kent, Clare Leighton, John Vassos, and Lynd Ward." See also, forward to *Contempo, Phobia and Other Graphic Interpretations*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976).

as the largest independent Art Center in the United States.⁴³ It displayed the work of communist Diego Rivera and held relief and benefit shows and auctions for the Soviet Union in the 1930s.⁴⁴ However, as I learned, political involvement by artists was accepted, even typical, in the 1930s, as Michael Denning argues in his study of the cultural left in America during the New Deal.⁴⁵ Indeed, the Silvermine supported many “legitimate” art events and hosted the New York Philharmonic at one of the first televised concerts on television.⁴⁶ Thus, while Vassos's politics were to the left of other industrial designers, I was actually disappointed to find that he was not a threat to the status quo. Although his politics were never quite made clear in his books or in his writings, it would be fair to call them “progressive” rather than leftist.

Finally, Vassos's ethnicity marked him as an outsider in the industrial design profession. His heavy Greek accent made it more difficult for him at the beginning of his career. Although many designers and architects, such as William Lescaze, Paul Frankl, Raymond Loewy, and Joseph Urban, came from Europe, Vassos was the only industrial designer of Greek origin.⁴⁷ However, contrary to what I thought, Vassos used his ethnicity to his advantage by associating himself with the great art of Ancient Greece. Rather than being rejected, he was honored as a new American at the 1939

⁴³ Silvermine scrapbook. For more clippings and folders pertaining to Silvermine see Vassos/AAA, Box 16.

⁴⁴ Vassos, “Outline of the John Vassos Autobiography,” Vassos/AAA, Box 5, pp. 2, 8-10 (Please note that his autobiographical materials are scattered throughout the archive, thus materials pertaining to his autobiography are in various boxes).

⁴⁵ Micheal Denning, The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (New York: Verso, 1997) 91.

⁴⁶ Variety magazine, August 24, 1938, on the Silvermine Guild Music Festival, Clippings File, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library, Center for the Performing Arts; see also “Symphony Concert Features Festival,” New York Times, August 27, 1937; and New York Times, August 19, 1938.

⁴⁷ Actually, his fuzzy politics may have even caused the decline of his worth in the art market. Specifically, the anti-Semitic imagery in Contempo makes him seem “weird,” according to a dealer at “Modernism: A Century of Style & Design,” the annual fine and decorative arts exposition produced by Sanford L. Smith & Associates, November 10, 2004, Park Avenue Armory, New York.

World's Fair, an honor that he never mentioned. This was on the "Wall of Fame" Document of American Citizens of Foreign Birth, on a plaque honoring those "who have made notable contributions to our living, ever-growing democracy." Vassos is above Max Weber (the Polish-born expressionist painter, not the philosopher) and right under architect Joseph Urban.⁴⁸ In addition, he received awards from the Greek community throughout his career as well as valuable business contacts, making his ethnicity a factor in his success.⁴⁹

Vassos and Industrial Design

My study shows that economic, social, and political factors led to the need for industrial designers following the expansion of factory production and the rise of advertising among the growing consumer culture of the 1920s. Coming from the visual arts, mainly advertising and theater, industrial designers became the new stage designers for mass-produced products and their display in department stores. They became spokesmen for the introduction of a "modern" aesthetic in the home, including television, electronic appliances, and furniture, in their role as advisers, artists, and visionaries.

Vassos's work for RCA in particular allows me to trace the diverse patterns of reception and adaptation of the new technologies of radio and television in the 1930s. It offers the opportunity to fill in a gap in our understanding of how these new electronics were marketed and sold to consumers. Indeed, Vassos's intense concern

⁴⁸ "Wall of Fame Document of American Citizens of Foreign Birth who have made notable contributions to our living, ever-growing democracy." Vassos is above Max Weber, painter, and right under architect Joseph Urban, p. 5; Vassos/AAA, Box 3.

⁴⁹ His connections included an association with Adamantios Polyzoides, editor of The New Tribune. Letter to Polyzoides, September 14, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

with the human technological assemblage makes his engagement in electronic media design especially compelling, as he revealed in his books and drawings his dislike of mechanistic society. Vassos was skeptical of machinery, even coining the term “mechanophobia” to describe a modern condition of fear of machines. In this sense, his designs for media can be studied using McLuhan’s notion of media as extensions of the body, a concept with which Vassos would have agreed. Indeed, like McLuhan, Vassos was concerned with the ways that humans are affected by machines and how machines affect the human body.⁵⁰

Vassos’s designs for technology can also be approached through the work of historians who analyze the relationship of the media across temporal stages. The German theorist Friedrich Kittler views print as the appropriate analogue to new media and as an early technology that shaped thinking and gave technology a determining role in cultural life and the philosophies that govern it. He shows continuity among forms of technology, from the techniques of writing to the technical processes that record digital analogues replacing print as a symbolic system. According to him, media technologies do not make old media obsolete; they merely assign them other places in the system. Kittler argues that because the technologies are intertwined, we must conceive them as part of a “network discourse” rather than individual entities.⁵¹ His argument helps me to map the relationships among Vassos’s designs across his early career, particularly from his printed illustrations to radio to television. While it is tempting to valorize Vassos for creating forms from scratch for technologies that had no precedent, it is even more fruitful to show the links between

⁵⁰ Marshall McLuhan, Media Research: Technology, Art, and Communication, ed. Michel Moos (Amsterdam: OPA, 1997).

⁵¹ Friedrich Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

the “new” media and the “old,” thus developing Kittler’s analysis that technologies in the modern era are related and, even more importantly, that the way they are conceived of by a culture has a historical precedent.⁵²

Historian Carolyn Marvin is also interested in the ways that domestic technologies contain overlapping aesthetics and social meanings, although she focuses more on the cultural context than the epistemological one, which is Kittler’s realm.⁵³ Her history of electricity reveals that electricity and its attendant devices were shaped to mitigate fear and facilitate familiarity as they entered into the previously private space of the home. Her analysis helps me to situate the radio and television in the context of the technologies that preceded them by looking in the rearview mirror of design while expressing notions of the future. Her analysis adds a humanistic element, also present in Vassos’s work that views consumers as psychological actors. Their fears influence their decisions and attachments to new products. Her notion of irrationality goes beyond the typical reasons given for the success of a new technology such as technological determinism or the need for a new technology.⁵⁴ Her argument, also, goes beyond the analysis of consumers as robotic

⁵² There is more to Kittler’s philosophy, such as the notion of a network discourse. According to Kittler, media studies should not resort to the usual suspects -- history, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies -- to understand technological logic, according to Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz in their introduction to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Of course, there are limitations to Kittler’s all-encompassing, deterministic view of technological man and his impatience with the social sciences.

⁵³ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New -- Thinking About Electric Communications in the Late 19th Century* (New York: Oxford, 1988). On sound, see Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Sara Danius, “Novel Visions and the Crisis of Culture: Visual Technology, Modernism, and Death in *The Magic Mountain*,” 2 *Boundary*, (2000) 177-211.

⁵⁴ Similarly, Jeffrey Sconce discusses discourses that used electrical communication as metaphors to talk about spirits in *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

beings buying what they are told to buy and instead, views them as actors engaged in discussions about new technologies and acting and buying accordingly.

Architectural historian Witold Rybczynski studies the way that humans shape their physical environment and integrate machinery and foreign objects according to the values of domesticity and above all, what he defines as the overriding principle of comfort. He argues that to understand the modern room, you have to understand the modern person.⁵⁵ He argues that the home is a place shaped by people rather than social trends. The popular design styles are ones that fit into the daily lives of people in the home, rather than being imposed by external factors. Vassos's designs for the home took this into consideration, as he created a modular solution that hid the bulky bodies of mysterious machinery, never taking the design beyond what the client could handle and making modern design comfortable and familiar.⁵⁶ He advocated eclecticism in furniture, allowing that consumers valued various styles of furniture and wanted to build their home around them. In this sense, his designs for RCA radio and television furniture sought to fit into the consumer's life rather than forcing the consumer to conform to the demands of a new technology or the stylistic imperatives of modernism.

The design of radio and television, which are mass media shared across economic barriers, raise important issues about how design mediates taste, class and status. Andreas Huyssen argues that media technologies like radio and television break down the aesthetic hierarchy enforced by modernism's great divide between

⁵⁵ Rybczynski, Home: A Short History of an Idea (New York: Penguin, 1987).

⁵⁶ See also Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey, and Andrew Feenberg, eds. Modernity and Technology, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

high and low culture. Television already holds a lesser position in the hierarchy of activities, expressed in the idea that watching it is less valuable than reading, for example. Huyssen contends that the study of a medium in its historical, technical, and theoretical complexity can help us to avoid the perpetuation of what he calls the gap between high and low culture, since we share a common media-shaped epistemology. In other words, media truly unites people across class boundaries.⁵⁷ He argues that a focus “on mediality” would be more pertinent than the high/low distinction itself, since it gets us away from this false binary that has defined studies of media technologies that have sought to examine their effects rather than examine the conditions of their use.⁵⁸

My study is a cultural analysis, drawing on social histories of media, sociologies of professions, and institutional accounts of modernism. My notion of modernism here includes practices, aesthetics, and methods. Industrial design is a strange amalgam that unites the elitism of modernism with the homogenizing, populist tendencies of mass culture. Industrial designers promoted beauty for standardized, mass-produced items while at the same time being linked to cultural institutions like museums and arguably to the artistic movement of modernism. I do not use modernist methods of inquiry, in my study however, particularly in my reluctance to present my study as a celebration of a heroic figure. Indeed, my study identifies and challenges modernism’s own rationality in its methods of inquiry and in its quest for the truth. Another major modernistic theme that I take up here is

⁵⁷ See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁵⁸ Andreas Huyssen, “High/Low in an Expanded Field,” 9.3 *Modernism/Modernity*, (2002) 6 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modernism-modernity/v009/9.3huyssen.pdf>>

modernism's disdain of popular culture, which I argue that Vassos shared and expressed in his illustrated books.⁵⁹ However, his designs for mass production undermined this condemnation. This is a contradiction I explore. To clarify, throughout the thesis, I use the term *modernism* as the self-conscious response to the experience of modernity that appeared in the arts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁶⁰ It is a broad term that encompasses a sensibility as well as an aesthetic.

The editors of a new journal examining that culture describe the term as follows:

Modernism was more than a repertory of artistic styles, more too than an intellectual movement or set of ideas; it initiated an ongoing transformation in the entire set of relations governing the production, transmission, and reception of the arts. The modernists themselves seem to have understood this when they urged that changes in the arts be viewed in conjunction with changes in philosophy, historiography, and social theory, to say nothing of the scientific shifts that they claimed as part of their movement's cultural revolution.⁶¹

This broad notion of modernism helps me link the various aspects of Vassos's career and how they each touch upon modernism's boundaries. Indeed, the entry of Vassos into the industrial field, starting with a limited edition reprinting of Oscar Wilde's controversial *Salome*, reveals the multiple contradictions of this elitist yet mass-produced project. There was a conflict for designers who presumed modernism's exclusivity discourse while producing products for mass production. To resolve this conflict, they marketed themselves as arbiters of good taste who shape

⁵⁹ Rita Felski, "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method," 10.3 *Modernism/Modernity*, 2003, 501-517.

⁶⁰ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 41. Also see Marshall Berman for a discussion of the historical meanings of modernity and its relationship to modernism and the modern, which he examines in the relation to urban planning, the arts, and economics, *All That Is Solid Melts In Air: the Experience of Modernity* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988).

⁶¹ Lawrence Rainey and Robert Van Hallberg, Editorial/Introduction, 1.1 *Modernism/Modernity*, (1994) 1-3.

their designs to meet the needs and desires of the masses, while at the same time educating and refining them. At RCA, Vassos accepted that design for the masses meant moving away from the severity of modernistic design to something that was more comfortable for users, to create a design vernacular that merged modernist purity and streamlined accessibility.

Another aspect of modernism, its allegiance to “truth,” its “great man” worship and canonical truths of modernism about beauty, are expressed in its methods of inquiry of which the biography is one. My method, instead, draws from the more social historical traditions, which the Birmingham school of cultural studies has so importantly advocated in their exploration of popular culture.⁶² In this sense, I look at Vassos’s most popular designs with an eye towards consumer preferences as revealing valuable information about needs, which are cultural rather than, say, personal or stimulated only by advertising. I will argue that some of John Vassos’s radio designs, with their harmonious placement of knobs and dials and attention to color, for instance, are aesthetic achievements, which accounted, in part, for their popularity. I am particularly interested in the ways that Vassos expanded the acceptable boundaries of popular taste in his radio and television designs to create aesthetically pleasing and important new small media receivers.⁶³ Communications is a logical field in which to do this study, as it is marked by attention to questions of

⁶²In Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), punk clothing is analyzed as a style with formal resonances from the Avant-Garde. This kind of study gives legitimacy, historically and aesthetically, to movements previously considered unworthy of scholarly attention. Rita Felski argues that cultural studies’ attention to the structure and form of mass culture and its counter movements is one of culture studies’ greatest strengths in “The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies,” *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Micheal Bérubé, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 28-43.

⁶³ The fact that these radio designs have achieved little attention or acknowledgement, while their European contemporaries have, is yet another example of the elitism in design history, although this is slowly changing.

technological specificity and ongoing questions concerning nationalism and the appropriate methodology to use in the study of media devices. Its tools of media analysis and its concern with the relationship of the machine to the body serve me well in this study.

As will be clear in this thesis, the designer precariously balanced the role of style advocate and promoter of cultural prestige while creating products that met the style needs of the public. Vassos designed radios in both modernistic and neo-classical styles, accommodating a range of tastes. In this tension between the designer's desire to promote innovative style and the manufacturer's need to sell radios, there emerges a central issue of cultural studies, which involves the extent to which the consumer (or the audience) shapes the product being produced. The practices of consumption that motivate the consumers and the social, economic or cultural forces that influence the popularity of a particular media form are also crucial to consider.⁶⁴ My investigation similarly seeks to examine the difficulty that a designer faces when shaping a new technology for a mass audience while attempting to align himself with the cultural capital of modern art.

It is the aspect of trial and error in the early days of industrial design that make Vassos so interesting to study, as they reveal how popular demand and design imperatives are sometimes in conflict. Indeed, several of his designs were not produced, such as the streamlined bicycle or his telephone. Some of them were

⁶⁴ This issue is examined in Janice Radway's Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature. (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1984) particularly her socio-political critique of the romance book industry, with its generic formula for romance book production. Similarly, Jane Shattuc's political and economic analysis of the talk show industry leads to scholarship that acknowledges and critiques the methods of commodity production while maintaining the rationality of its viewership in The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women (New York: Routledge, 1997).

wrongly designed, like the Coca-Cola dispenser, or simply unpopular, such as the TRK12 television and the RCA Model #210 radio that was limited by a lack of automatic volume control, which prevented it from being a success in the rural districts.⁶⁵ These unpopular or never-made designs are rather like the outtakes of design history. They are discarded on the cutting room floor but wrongly so, since they reveal much about what is needed and acceptable in the culture at a given time. I do not assume that failure is a marker of a malfunction but rather the culmination of many factors, including being at the right place at the wrong time. My study thus records the moments before styles were concretized to reveal how the process of standardization takes place or doesn't, as the case may be.

Movements in Design History

Methods of design history analysis have moved from the focus on celebrated individuals, with an emphasis on aesthetic excellence, to a consideration of wider patterns of design consumption and use. Because of its value as a way of reading social change, it is becoming a coherent field. I will provide a brief overview.

The origins of industrial design are rooted in processes of commercial production.⁶⁶ Manufacturers took an interest in integrating art and mass production in the 19th century. The British dishware company Wedgwood, for example, drew from traditional motifs to differentiate product lines for mass-produced ceramics. The introduction of a specifically modern style of design came from a response to 19th century ornamentation and its early 20th century evolution into Art Nouveau. The

⁶⁵ Letter to Throckmorton, January 13, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁶⁶ John Styles, "Manufacturing, Consumption, and Design in 18th Century England," Consumption and the World of Goods, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (New York, Routledge, 1993) 527, argues that it started in the 18th century, when he finds that the craftsman was in charge.

movement for modern design, marked by a lack of added ornamentation, was begun largely in Europe, as German companies like AEG employed artists like Peter Behrens to improve their logos and typographic communications in 1907.⁶⁷ The Bauhaus movement in Germany, starting in 1919, advocated a distinctively “modern” style for mass production that came to define high style, although it was begun as an aesthetic suiting a new socialist movement.

Stripped of its political dimension when it got to the United States, modern design valued clean surfaces and geometric shapes, with non-structural decorative elements that made zigzag motifs okay but added-on wooden trellises wrong.⁶⁸ The first decorative movement of the machine age, art deco, angular and glittery, got its name from a shortened version of the important 1925 Exposition Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The style also became known as “zigzag moderne” or just moderne design. Playful and garnished with images and shapes, it drew its motifs from the shapes of modern machinery, including geometric shapes. Bauhaus design, which was more austere, emerged at around the same time with an exhibition in 1923. This design aesthetic was shaped by the ideology of socialism and encompassed an entire way of life expressed in the Bauhaus school in Dresden.

In the United States, industrial design was slow to take hold among manufacturers, who were yet to be convinced of its merits. Historically, the great European movements, like the Wiener Werkstatte or the Bauhaus, overshadowed American industrial design, which was so impoverished that at the 1925 Paris Exposition, the United States was unable to provide a representative designer who

⁶⁷ Peter Dormer, The Meanings of Modern Design - Towards the Twenty first Century, (London, Thames and Hudson, 1990), 50.

⁶⁸ Paola Antonelli, Objects of Design from the MOMA (New York: MOMA, 2003) 25.

fulfilled the criteria of an artist working in mass production. This began to change, however, in the later 1920s, as museums and artists advocated the production and display of mass-produced objects.⁶⁹ This movement towards the industrial arts was accompanied by a cultural shift in art, literature, and dance which engaged with the aesthetics and demands of the machine age. Museums that promoted the alliance of industry and design included the Newark Museum, the Metropolitan Museum under the leadership of Richard Bach in Industrial Arts, and the Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929. Urged by consumer studies which showed that beauty sells, manufacturers sought designers out in an effort to stimulate demand, Production capacities, including assembly line technologies, were available during the Depression but buyers were not. The application of techniques of scientific management in the industry had an influence on consumer theory, as marketing, advertising, and architecture were recognized as important selling tools.⁷⁰ Industrial designers, in their new field, offered advice in each of these areas.

Industrial designer Paul Frankl described the industrial designer as the modern artist who brought art to the masses.⁷¹ Business theorists like J. Gordon Lippincott, agreed that designers are “pioneers in art” and recognized the profit potential of the design style, which would offer economic value to manufacturers while providing the user with beauty and function.⁷² Sheldon and Martha Cheney’s influential book *Art*

⁶⁹ An effort which was widely covered by the press. See for example, Storey, Walter. “Beauty Linked Firmly to Design: An Exposition Reveals How Art is Applied to the Latest Products of the Machine.” New York Times, April 1, 1934: SM16.

⁷⁰ Sigfried Gideon’s Mechanization Takes Command focuses on Taylorism as the major influence on design and on experience in modern culture, including the fact that motion had been dissected into phases, revealing its inner structure. Sigfried Gideon, Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History (New York: Norton, 1969 ed, 1948).

⁷¹ Paul Frankl, Machine Made Leisure (New York: Harper, 1932) 5.

⁷² J. Gordon Lippincott, Design for Business (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947) 100.

and the Machine praised industrial design as one of the “the most vital expressions of the new age.”⁷³ Industrial design appealed to the government because it was argued that mass production could improve democracy, since well-designed products could function as vehicles of social uplift expressing the inclusiveness of democratic society, for instance.⁷⁴ This argument on behalf of the social good was beneficial to business owners as they began to note the connection between form and profit.⁷⁵

In its earliest years, industrial design in the United States had its roots in the artistic movement of modernism and progressive areas of graphic arts and advertising design. Ironically, design for mass production was bound to an ornate Victorian-influenced product which looked homemade while designers created one of kind modernistic furniture that looked factory made. The designers who started using the elements of modern design, including new materials, geometric shapes, and stark surfaces, began with the elite market and were eventually hired by manufacturers who wanted to gain from the growing interest in modern design styles. Designers tied their creations to the ideology of change as the sign of a new society where beauty was applied to everything, even the most homely products. However, because of America’s merging of commerce and art, without the pure “ideological” phase of French or German design, American design has remained a lesser area of concern among those considering the phases of modernist design. American industrial design

⁷³ *Art and the Machine* (New York, Whittlesey House, 1936). Also see Herbert Read, *Art and Industry* (New York, Horizon Press, 1954) and *Machine Art* (New York, MOMA, 1934). For a more critical analysis see, Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934).

⁷⁴ Jeffrey Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979). Conversely, design could also reflect political conservatism. In a related idea, Friedrich Kittler points out that severing of the traditional link between the social and technological program led to the “reactionary modernism” of fascism in *Gramophone, Typewriter, Film*. For more on fascist design, particularly Mussolini’s radio phonograph of 1933, see Sparke (1987) 91.

⁷⁵ George Nelson, *Problems of Design* (New York: Whitney Publications, 1957) 6.

remains muddled, as it has been bound to its consumer origins and derided for its explicit connection to American crass consumerism, while the European version has been hailed for its aesthetic purity.⁷⁶

The broadening cultural institutions of the department store and the museum promoted the new mass-produced products as modernity's art. They displayed these products like art works in newly formed "decorative arts" departments, as part of an effort to draw attention to beauty in mechanical production. Modern design was also widely applied to architectural interiors. Radio City Music Hall, designed by Donald Deskey in 1932, is an example of the opulent possibility of modern design in its transformation of a film theater into an art deco palace.

Other changes were taking place that led to the rise of industrial design. Expanding forms of visual mass media, including advertising, magazines, and film, brought consumers a new awareness of the importance of style and made it accessible through consumerism. An emphasis on external appearance was becoming pervasive throughout society as historian Warren Susman argues. He points out that a narrative of self-improvement shifted from a person's character to their appearance, influenced by shifts in work culture, where white-collar workers began to sell their labor in an increasingly competitive urban job market.⁷⁷ The rural community ties that bound individuals broke down, leaving them vulnerable to the growing influence of corporations and the standardization of mass culture. Products once made at home,

⁷⁶ Could this account for the success of Swedish furniture outlet Ikea? For authors who promote this version of American design history, see Nathan Woodham, Twentieth Century Design (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 3, "Commerce, Consumerism, and Design," pp. 65-76.

⁷⁷ Warren Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century. (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

even ones that involved new technologies like the radio, were now replaced with store-bought items. Design differentiated the manufacturers of the otherwise identical products. Industrial designers helped manufacturers change the look of their products, often divorcing the external shell from the internal object, although designers would argue to the contrary, that they drew their stylistic inspiration from the object itself.

Following the success of art deco, and influenced by the aesthetics of the Bauhaus while softening its geometric forms, American designers adopted the futuristic aesthetic of streamlining as the dominant look of the era. The style, which took its cue from the aerodynamic shapes popular for airplanes, suited new production methods, including using the die-stamped skin of material in assembly line production.⁷⁸ It was an ideal American aesthetic in some ways, not as harsh as the Bauhaus modernism but equally simplifying as it unified the elements of a product under a single smooth skin.

Streamlining seemed silly at times, applying aerodynamic principles to inanimate objects, such as a vacuum cleaner or a camera. Historian Miles Orvel points out that virtually everyone who used it during the 1930s tried to account for the streamlined style by invoking the uniquely American architectural theories of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright as the source of the design.⁷⁹ For many scholars, streamlining reflected the social values of the era, particularly a desire to speed effortlessly into the future and away from the Depression, and an expression of

⁷⁸ John Perreault, "Streamline Design: How the Future Was," exh. Catalogue, Queens Museum, 1984. See also Dianne Pilgrim, et al (eds), The Machine Age in America 1918-1941 (Brooklyn Museum, 1986, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.).

⁷⁹ Miles Orvel, The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), see Chapter 5, "the Real Thing and the Machine-made World," pp. 157-197.

hopefulness in this machine-age idiom.⁸⁰ As I will show, streamlining was one expression of American modernist design which industrial designers used and was interpreted in various ways. For instance, not every Vassos design reflects the bulbous sheathed look that streamlining evokes. I use the term broadly.

Modern design was widely marketed in both domestic and public interiors. Putting a gendered twist on design history, cultural theorist Carol Massey argues that modernity has been identified with masculinity.⁸¹ In particular, modernism's rejection of ornamentation was also a rejection of femininity. Overdone feminine furnishings are a recurring theme in industrial design discourse, as designers promise to produce an environment where individuals are no longer overshadowed or engulfed by their feminine surroundings.⁸² Historian Ann Douglas describes modernism as a drive towards "terrible honesty," an aggressive ideology of precision and accuracy that sought to overcome the emotional excesses and artificialities of the genteel past embodied by the Victorian matriarch and her reign over domestic settings symbolized by overstuffed furniture.⁸³ Bad taste is defined as the opposite of modernism, where form and function are united, and expressed by the distance between form and function. Designers went so far as to apply their sense of proportion to advise stout women how to dress to create the clean lines they sought.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Donald Bush, *The Streamlined Decade* (Braziller, NY 1975).

⁸¹ Bush, p. 17.

⁸² As Jeffrey Meikle describes, Vassos, while not challenging the gendering of modern design, expressed awareness of it when he attacked Hollywood for using modern settings for beautiful women while attaching virtuous women with Colonial design. Meikle, (2000), p. 170.

⁸³ Rybczynski, pp. 190-193 argues that in the kitchen, women were better advocates of efficient arrangement than Le Corbusier or Adolf Loos, so modernism entered through the living room, not considered a productive space and more open to new definitions of comfort.

⁸⁴ "Architects Plan Styles for Stout," *New York Times*, October 8, 1934, p. 19.

Vassos's quest to remake the living room as an electronics center may have reflected this gendered privilege as an attempt to place modernism most fittingly in the room that would be taken over by masculinizing media equipment. Vassos and others demanded that the new electronics appliances reflect their function as modern machines. They removed the Victorian casings replacing them with the smooth modularity and rationality of machine age design. In this sense, my study contributes to the history of the relationship of the home to discourses of the family and economic priorities. The kitchen has been well-documented, as most work on gender and design focuses on the kitchen or domestic labor, while there is little on the formation of the living room as a modern media center.⁸⁵ Lynn Spigel's important study of television in the postwar period draws attention to the ways in which television fit into pre-existing patterns of gendered labor.⁸⁶ She does not address the relationship of modern design to the incorporation of new media practices and gender in the prewar period. Although gender roles in the home are not the focus of my study, their transition in the prewar period provides a background for the emergence of the John Vassos as the living room design expert.

Design history is a relatively new field that has emerged from both the practice and theory of industrial design. The approaches to design history range widely depending on the discipline in which the designs are being studied, which include sociology, literature, history of science, material culture, psychology, and art history. It is a growing field and has expanded so much since the 1980s that design

⁸⁵ Ellen Lupton does an interesting analysis of the barcalounger chair in Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).

⁸⁶ Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

historian Victor Margolin has characterized it as a distinct field of expertise.⁸⁷ Amid many categorical strategies, synchronic and diachronic best summarize my organizing strategies. My reading of Vassos' work is both diachronic, taking into account his work over the course of his career to analyze his specific contribution and synchronic, in relationship to other television designers working contemporaneously. Those who prefer to look synchronically, such as Arthur Pulos, who covers the roots of American design history, find it useful to group designers according to their national origin.⁸⁸ J. Steward Johnson also argues that the United States, which was late to participate in the design movement, developed a design style unique from that of Europe because of its population and production methods.⁸⁹ Jeffrey Meikle's important history of the profession unites American designers to show the emergence of an American design aesthetic.⁹⁰

Margolin's observation that industrial design history has grown substantially since the 1980s is reflected in the substantial museum exhibitions devoted to design history recently. Also, an increased interest in the historical value of American mass culture has led to exhibitions that celebrate American mass culture through industrial design. The Cooper-Hewitt's *Packaging the New: Design and the American Consumer 1920-1970*, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' *Design for Delight* show, and The Victoria and Albert's *Art Deco* show stand out as shows that feature

⁸⁷ Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on design and Design Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁸⁸ His double volume history of the profession is among the most comprehensive. See *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design to 1940*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1983 and Arthur Pulos, *American Design Ethic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

⁸⁹ J. Steward Johnson, *American Modern: 1925-1940 Design for a New Age* (New York: Abrams, 2000).

⁹⁰ *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*.

industrial design history.⁹¹ These shows, by refusing to highlight a single “star,” reveal that the individual designer is less important than the cultural milieu and the nation where the products are produced. Other exhibitions have featured the work of individual designers like Harold Van Doren, Henry Dreyfuss, Harley Earl, and Raymond Loewy.⁹²

Most recently, there is a growing movement of scholars who have begun to place American consumption in a larger context. Work that juxtaposes American studies with research about other countries, investigations focusing on such topics as American relationships with other countries, the activities of U.S. firms abroad, and the significance of imported goods in American domestic interiors shows the impact of globalization studies on design history.⁹³

A common approach to the study of design history has been biographical, through the study of a single designer. British writer Nicolas Pevsner was among the first design historians who in the 1930s organized this kind of tribute in his show on great individual industrial designers.⁹⁴ Scholars began to move beyond the individual

⁹¹ “Packaging the New Design and the American Consumer, 1920-1970,” at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, 1994. There was no publication with this show, except an unpublished essay for a planned book by Thomas Hine. For a review, see Herbert Muschamp, “Stylish Persuaders For Modern Times; Persuaders for Modern Times,” New York Times, Feb 11, 1994. p. C1. Designed for Delight: Alternative Aspects of Twentieth Century Decorative Arts, Martin Eidelberg, ed., exhibition catalogue, Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, New York and Paris: Flammarion 1977.

⁹² For example, Russell Flinchum, Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer: The Man in the Brown Suit, (Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution and Rizzoli. New York, 1997).

⁹³ Susan Strasser, “Making Consumption Conspicuous: Transgressive Topics Go Mainstream,” Technology and Culture, 43 (2002) 755-770. For anthologies that juxtapose U.S. examples and foreign ones, see Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton, The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America (Oxford, UK; Oxford University Press, 2001); and Kristin Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865-1920,” American Historical Review, 107 February (2002) 55-83.

⁹⁴ Nicolas Pevsner, Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius (Pelican: London, 1975).

accomplishments to establish connections among designers and to create a history of the industrial design profession in the 1960s. Jerry Streicher's unpublished dissertation *The Consultant Industrial Designer in American Industry from 1927 to 1960*⁹⁵ includes an overview of the process of design, with research taken from interviews with practicing industrial designers. He traces the growth and development of industrial design using historical documents, with a focus on the practice and methods of industrial design professionals.

There have since been many books that uncover the history of industrial design. Penny Sparke's important book also provides "a history of designing for industry as it happened, and as such, sets out to describe rather than evaluate the evolution of the design profession, but with an international approach. It is for others to judge the activity of the designer ..."⁹⁶ Other important histories take the industrial designer as the starting point of a history of consumer goods, providing for a focused exploration of consumer culture. These include Arthur Pulos's *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design to 1940* and his *American Design Adventure*,⁹⁷ which track the origin of the industrial design profession at a particular moment in American history. Some histories view the start of design awareness earlier at the dawn of industrialization, when manufacturers noted that they varied the styles and pricing of similar mass-produced objects through design.⁹⁸ Jeffrey Meikle's book

⁹⁵ Steichler, "The Consultant Industrial Designer in American Industry from 1927 to 1960."

⁹⁶ Penny Sparke, *Consultant Design: The History and Practice of the Designer in Industry*, (London: Pembroge Press, 1983).

⁹⁷ Arthur Pulos, *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design to 1940*; Arthur Pulos, *American Design Adventure*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988).

For an excellent overview of the field, see Victor Margolin, "A Decade of Design History in the United States, 1977-1987," 1 *Journal of Design History* (1988) 51-72.

⁹⁸ Ironically, it was among the most anti-mechanical craftsmen that some of the most beautiful designs were created. Pre-Raphaelite utopians such as John Ruskin and later William Morris advocated the

analyzes industrial design through the lens of modernist aesthetics and the emergence of consumer society.⁹⁹

Beyond the role of nationalism and production methods in shaping style, another aspect of design studies concerns the best way to “read” design or how to understand it. Adrian Forty, in his important study of design and culture, *Objects of Desire*, argues that aesthetics are not just a sign of the “mood” of society or of an increased concern with “beauty” but are explicitly linked to economics. For instance, he argues that the use of futuristic symbolism in radio design, as if it were space age, represented the view that science and technology would provide a future free of discomfort and anxiety; indeed, he contends that most design innovations served this function. He states that design is an arbiter of social change and also a form of social control.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, Forty continues the work of cultural critics of the 1930s, including Brecht, Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno, for whom aesthetics were bound up with politics.¹⁰¹

Forty uses Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse that power is bound to language, architecture, and other institutions that are expressions of culture.¹⁰² This

decorative arts and craft production as a response to mass production in the 1860s. See Carlton E. Bauer, “A Study of the Arts and Crafts Movement and of Art Nouveau in Relation to Industrial Arts Design,” (Dissertation, New York University, 1955).

⁹⁹ Meikle, (2001).

¹⁰⁰ Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgewood to IBM*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986) 158-181. Also see Christina Cogdell, “The Futurama Recontextualized: Norman Bel Geddes’s Eugenic ‘World of Tomorrow,’ ” 52.2 *American Quarterly*, (2000) 193-245, where she connects Bel Geddes’s work with ideologies about racial purities, expressed in his designs for the World’s Fair’s Futurama.

¹⁰¹ See Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977). For a semiotic perspective on mass culture, including design, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* Trans. Annette Lavers. (New York, Hill and Wang, 1972). For another example, see Walter Benjamin, “Old Toys,” in *Selected Writings, 1927-1934 Volume 2* Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, editors, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996-2003).

¹⁰² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977, original edition, 1975).

view and analytical method is shared, in part, by historian Stuart Ewen, who argues that the modernism of LeCorbusier borrowed its cruel architectural idiom from the factory, bringing rationalization from the industrial unit to the home and expanding the social control of business over daily life. It was an expression of a larger process of gaining public consent for the ideology of consumerism, which deskilled, humiliated, and controlled them.¹⁰³ Warren Sussman describes the World's Fair as the pinnacle of this technological utopia at the height of the Depression, when faith in capitalism was at its low point.¹⁰⁴ My thesis uses these approaches from social history, discourse analysis, and critical theory's attention to the spectacular nature of commodity capitalism to understand and read design history through the work of John Vassos.

Methodology

Other biographies of designers focus on an individual industrial designer's practice, telling the story chronologically and piecing together a story of the designer's biggest contracts and accomplishments,¹⁰⁵ such as Russell Flinchum's *The Man in the Brown Suit*.¹⁰⁶ In contrast with this kind of biographical narrative, my study attempts a more nuanced understanding of the work of John Vassos by placing him within the context of the development of consumer culture and the rise of the industrial design profession. The intellectual challenges to life writing that have

¹⁰³ Stuart Ewen, All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

¹⁰⁴ Warren Sussman, Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945 (New York: Brazillier, 1973) writes that despite the optimism promoted at the fair, Gallup polls revealed that most people believed technological development caused the unemployment of the Great Depression.

¹⁰⁵ W.J. Hennessey, W. J. Russell Wright: American Designer (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1983); David Hanks and Jennifer Toller, Donald Deskey (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987). Stanley Abercrombie, George Nelson: The Design of Modern Design, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁶ Flinchum, The Man in the Brown Suit, 1997.

emerged over the past two centuries, from the scientific sensibilities of the Enlightenment to the “contested self” of postmodern discourse, suggest that the best biographical study is one that positions the “author” in the context of his economic, political, and social emergence.

I limited reliance on individual narrative in my study by taking concepts applied to historical materials, borrowing from Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus.” The theoretical eclecticism that I employed in my study assumes that ideas can be added without the entire heuristic. This method was appropriate to my inquiry, for I was not referring to a set of theoretical concepts about the past. The facility for dialogue across platforms allowed by this kind of social history enabled me to interpret my archival findings in the broadest light.

The work of sociologists documenting just how dense and varied were the networks and communities to which Vassos belonged was one such theoretical construct that I employed in my study. This approach, which is used by Andrew Abbott in *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert*, can pose a challenge to the genre of biography. Rather than focus on an individual, Abbott maps out the process by which a profession is established, or rather establishes itself, since it is an active process by which a group of people move into areas previously covered by other professional groups. Using Abbott’s spatial mapping to understand Vassos as an emergent player on the industrial design scene helps me break away from the individualistic tenor of biographical narrative.

The process of mapping the connections between industrial designers of the prewar period entailed mapping the boundaries of a particular network, its contours, and the connections between its members. The layering of the networks, one over

another, allowed me to see the emergence of a more multidimensional intellectual context.¹⁰⁷ This aspect of Vassos's emergence on the scene is covered in great detail in Chapters 2 and 3, where I analyze the relationship between his illustrated books, the fame that ensued from them, and his entry into industrial design. I view the emergence of his identity as an "artist-designer" as part of the development of the field of industrial design rather than a process propelled by sheer talent or luck. This method also helps me to retain Vassos's originality and eccentricities as he found his way in the field. As I will cover, Vassos had a multifaceted definition. Indeed, he presented himself as an artist, a psychologist, a lecturer, an architect, a marketing expert, and even a politician, expressing some of the ways that members of a new profession participate in the expansion of a field's boundaries.

An interesting moment that reveals the strength of professional boundaries, and in which Vassos was involved, occurred when industrial design hit the boundary of architecture. Designers sought early on to align themselves with the more powerfully entrenched and status-laden profession of architecture. Industrial design tried to move into this territory, with many designers attempting to present themselves as architects, though they did not have any professional training. For instance, in his book *Horizons*, Bel Geddes offered designs for buildings.¹⁰⁸ In *Design for Business*,¹⁰⁹ J. Lipponcott tried to clarify the boundaries when he wrote that the industrial designer is indeed an architect when merchandising or mass production is

¹⁰⁷ Evelyn L. Forget, "A Hunger for Narrative: Writing Lives in the History of Economic Thought," *History of Political Economy*, 34 (2002) 226-244.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons* (New York: Little Brown & Co. 1932).

¹⁰⁹ J. Gordon Lipponcott, *Design for Business*, (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947) 159-160.

involved. Vassos's 1932 plan to design Athens' largest skyscraper¹¹⁰ enabled him to act like an architect, but without any professional training. He never designed any buildings, but he did design exposition halls for World's Fairs, an area many industrial designers excelled in and were allowed to claim, since architecture hadn't closed this boundary.

Andrew Abbott refers to the many ways in which professionals expand their skills, and take over new territory while maintaining their status as a legitimate field, as "yoking," which involves literally pulling in aspects from other fields. Thus, "an organization is understood as a set of transactions, which are later linked into a functional unit that could be said to be the site of these transactions."¹¹¹ This fluidity of the field, built upon the marketplace, makes it difficult to write a description of what designers do. As Abbott points out, "To be sure, the tasks of a profession have certain objective qualities, ... but many basic qualities of tasks turn out to be subjective qualities assigned by the profession with current jurisdiction. These objective and subjective properties have a dynamic relation in which neither one predominates."¹¹²

As I tell the story of Vassos's movement into the field, I use the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, who also situates individual achievement amid a cultural and economic backdrop. He analyzes the individual moving through a field as a process of amassing various kinds of symbolic, cultural, and educational capital.¹¹³ Bourdieu

¹¹⁰ "Greeks Protesting Athens Skyscraper," *New York Times*, July 8, 1930, p. 24.

¹¹¹ Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988) 272.

¹¹² Abbott, *The System of Professions*, p. 57.

¹¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993).

calls this accumulation and acclimation to a cultural milieu which he names the “habitus.” This concept focuses my attention to the way in which a drive for status and prestige shaped Vassos’s early career. This is played out in every level of his early career, including in terms of where he lived; achievements of significance in the design profession, including the awarding of prizes, an issue that was particularly pressing for Vassos with his designs for the 1939 World’s Fair; and the scramble for prestigious contracts expressed in his pitch letters to clients.

Vassos often proclaimed his artistic credentials, although he actually had a limited formal education in the arts. These efforts at self-promotion were also expressed through images of the young Vassos, promoted by his publisher and himself as a “modernist.” This meant cultivating a “modernistic” meaning before this image was truly formulated. An early image of the young Vassos looking very stuffy as he puffs from a pipe is discordant with other images of him as a beret wearing artist or a corporate designer (see Figure 1 in comparison with Figure 24, for example). These shifting identities reveal his changing role as a literary figure, to an artist to a managerial consultant role. The meaning and role of the artist working in the corporation is addressed in the thesis. I will argue that Vassos adapted to the corporate culture while also resisting and shaping it in some ways. In both Vassos’s career and in the designs that he made for RCA, particularly the expensive TRK12, cultural capital and the expression of taste are important considerations.

Building a Useable Past: Perusing Archives

As a design historian working in papers not yet catalogued, I encountered both the rewards and frustrations of understanding a body of papers, drawings,

photographs, and office records. A major problem for me was that it involved a lot of detective work to tie together related but scattered correspondence, photographs, and articles that referred to a particular project. These materials were scattered not only across files in the archives but also across states, at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Syracuse University, the New York Public Library, and the David Sarnoff Library in Princeton, New Jersey. To weave together a coherent narrative, I derived information from resources as varied as an application form for “Who’s Who,” passports (where Vassos’s height was listed differently on each document), newspaper articles, and his own writing.¹¹⁴

Vassos did not keep any master diary of his projects or clients as other industrial designers did, so I often had to piece together letters and articles to understand the evolution of a project. Most challenging was the recreation of the Coca-Cola dispenser story examined in Chapter 3, as it involved letters from a range of files from various manufacturers and the main client. In the end, this effort was worthwhile, as it unearthed the design history of a drinking container that was to revolutionize the soda fountain. This engagement in multiple archives broadened my view on Vassos, which was formed across institutional contexts. Vassos’s contribution to the World’s Fair “Living Room of the Future” is very different than the story that the official records of the Fair provide.¹¹⁵ History, as I view it, is not a truth to be discovered but a series of events and traces to be collected and analyzed.

¹¹⁴ For his 1950 passport, he put his height at 5 feet 5 ½ inches, with grey hair and grey eyes, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹¹⁵ For example, Vassos refused to refer to his room by its proper title, the “musicorner,” preferring instead to call it the “Living Room of the Future,” which accounts for some discrepancies in my labeling of the exhibition in the 1940 version of the World’s Fair.

The records in the Vassos archives are heavy on correspondence with his employers and potential employers, enabling me to highlight the story of the products he designed as a series of negotiations with manufacturers, parts suppliers, and others involved in the making of a product. This kind of history of industrial design, which is based on process rather than just the “successes,” reveals some of the problems Vassos faced in getting his designs to the production stage.

The traditional approach in design history has been to record and collect the successful and well-known products that designers have made and to celebrate their achievements. By focusing on the process of designing rather than the outcome, defined in terms of the "great product," I also include the activity that made the design possible or not, as was sometimes the case. Moving my focus away from his most successful and best-known achievements also allowed me to track continuity across product lines, for instance, among his radio designs. Finally, by using multiple sources of information to create a whole picture of the design activity Vassos was involved in during the period I study, I document the networks of power and influence that shaped the final product.¹¹⁶ This method of evaluating Vassos's designs regardless of their success on the market is part of an increasing awareness among scholars in the history of technology about the value of studying failed technologies, a notion that I expand to include failed designs.¹¹⁷

Historian Mary Fulbrook argues that the process of research is best if it is active and one in which the scholar is aware of her choices about selection and

¹¹⁶ Michael Ettema, "Building a Useable Past," *Innovations*, Spring 1991, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ Graeme Gooday, "Re-Writing the 'Book of Blots': Critical Reflections on Histories of Technological Failure," 14 *History and Technology* (1998) 265-291. Several notable studies address the question of technological success or failure; see, for example, Gregory Kunkle, "Technology in the Seamless Web: 'Success' and 'Failure' in the History of the Electron Microscope," *Technology and Culture* 36 (1995) 80-103.

explanation. Reality, she concludes, is not just out there but rather is shaped by the inquiry.¹¹⁸ Her words guided me through the course of the study to ask myself questions about how to interpret the material that I found. Were the patterns made found or imposed? What institutional, social, and cultural forces shaped the events that are recorded in the archives, not to mention the material that was even considered valuable enough to save? And finally, what was thrown out?

The question regarding how the institution has shaped the material through cataloging was not an issue at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, where the Vassos archive is not catalogued. While there is no institutional order imposed on the material at the Smithsonian, the opposite is true of the Vassos papers at Syracuse University. At the other extreme, the World's Fair Archive at the New York Public Library was occasionally impenetrable, as I had trouble finding materials on the RCA pavilion there.

At the Archives of American Art, I benefited from the disorganization of the files, leading to some creative analysis as I found juxtapositions of materials and themes that would otherwise have not been seen. This was particularly true in the files that housed Vassos's private papers, leading me to a trail of leases, passports, and other personal documents that gave me vital information. Most of them were unnamed. When they did have a name, they were sometimes wrongly marked. I was startled to find that the "Misc. letters" folder from 1933 led to a group of important letters regarding the earliest television designs. Not only were letters misplaced, but files were also misdated. My research experience at the Smithsonian entailed a lot of

¹¹⁸ Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (New York : Routledge, 2002).

speedy photocopying more than critical analysis, which meant that most of the critical analysis of the work took place in front of my computer, where I had more time to grapple with Fulbrook's questions.

Finally, I want to address the limitations and strengths of focusing on a single individual to study cultural history. As Roland Barthes warns, the notion of "author" is a product of our culture, a convention, and a reflection of a capitalist society concerned with ownership and the prestige of the individual. He contends that in practice, the term "author" encompasses more than just the individual who puts pen to the paper: it designates the rhetorical personage who lives, acts, and intends through and within the pages of the historian's text.¹¹⁹ Adrian Forty also argues that biographies add little to design history and that they perpetuate the myth of creative autonomy and obliterate the idea of ideology. They are not satisfactory to explain an activity that is social; rather, he states that design is driven by ideas about society rather than individuals.¹²⁰

While I do, unapologetically, focus on a single career, I have tried to avoid the pitfalls of the "great man" approach to biography. Vassos's work is used as a case study revealing major themes, like the importance of marketing or the development of design for television, while maintaining the specificity of his practice and contribution. I show that he brought a unique sensibility to his work. This sensibility

¹¹⁹ For me, this meant reconciling the anti-Semitism in Vassos's illustration of "The Jew" in *Contempo* with his affiliation with progressive movements and views towards social justice.

¹²⁰ Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgewood to IBM*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 242. This is, of course, part of a larger discussion that Forty raises concerning the difficulty of marking the artist in the production of culture: is he or she an agent of ideology? Also, see Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, (Washington Square, N.Y. : New York University Press, 1993). This issue is also discussed by structuralist theorists, who argue that the individual is shaped by language which is bound to ideology. See Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*. Barthes, Roland. "Death of the Author," *Twentieth Century Literary Theory : a Reader*. K.M. Newton, editor. (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1997).

is not fetishized but rather viewed as an aspect of his individuality, which, of course, was always tempered by the circumstances in which he worked. By looking at someone whose career was not a transcendently successful one, I am able to show the constant interaction of individual practice and constraining/enabling factors and therefore show how Vassos's individuality was both produced in various constructs as a value and restrained in others as a possible limitation. In this sense, my work is similar to that of postmodernist biographer David Nye, who suggests that a successful biography does not attempt to produce a coherent self but rather to establish that the multilayered subject is worthy of study.¹²¹

Walter Benjamin, who according to Susan Buck-Morss took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth, also guides my study.¹²² For Benjamin, particularly in his unfinished *Arcades Project*, the various remains of 19th century culture -- buildings, technologies, commodities, illustrations, and literary texts -served as inscriptions that could lead us to understand the ways in which a culture perceived itself and conceptualized the "deeper" ideological layers of its construction. These "battered historical survivors from the dawn of industrial culture that appeared together in the dying arcades ... were the philosophical ideas, a constellation of concrete, historical referents."¹²³

Vassos's range of product designs can help us towards this goal of revealing the construction of the dream world, pointing to the process and economics behind them. Also, in my unification of products across a range of areas, from ads and

¹²¹ D. Nye, *The Invented Self: An Autobiography from Documents of Thomas A. Edison* (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1983).

¹²² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) 4.

¹²³ Buck Morss, p. 4.

department store windows to televisions, my project continues the Benjaminian tradition, which shows how a broad concept of history can be used to shed light not only on the object in question but also on the ways in which artifacts are embedded in the complex, discursive fabrics and patterns reigning in a culture. This allows for connections between objects that would normally have little in common.

Benjamin's concern with the enchanting qualities of commodities across boundaries sheds light on Vassos's design strategies, which imbued the product with those qualities. Indeed, this is one of Vassos's greatest skills in display: his choice of materials or even his verbal association with the magic he developed at RCA. His objects were designed to fascinate the user with push buttons, pop-up lids, shiny materials, smooth grooves, colorful plastics, or tactile edges built for the user's pleasure.¹²⁴ To borrow a metaphor from these products, I hope to lift the lid on the process of the production of enchantment; indeed, the Vassos papers allow us to see how it is produced. This is evidenced in almost every case study I examine. It is most clear in the Coca-Cola dispenser case study, where the company's insistence on the perfection of the colors and that they never fade suggests an awareness of the power of objects to shape perception. Another example of this is in Vassos's Bakelite radio designs, particularly the Little Nipper model, with its almost obsessive insistence on tactility and shiny, smooth material ridged lightly along the edge of the radio to create the appearance of a jeweled box.

Organizational Logic

¹²⁴ Although there is little agreement as to what constitutes industrial design, there seems to be consensus that adding enchantment to the object was a major goal. As an editorial in the trade magazine *Modern Plastics* argued, there is a "well-ordered division of opinion as to what constitutes modern industrial design; industrial design as I understand it is more than skin deep. Intelligent industrial design has made living more exiting and pleasant during the past few years," "What is Industrial Design?" September 1937, 26.

My thesis covers the time period from the emergence of the profession until the start of World War II, running roughly from 1927 to 1941. Penny Sparke dates the first industrial design firm to 1926 with the opening of Walter Dorwin Teague's office.¹²⁵ Jerry Steichler, in his history of the profession, cites 1927 as the beginning of the consultant design field.¹²⁶ I start my study in 1927 since it was the year that Vassos's illustrations for *Salome* were published, marking the start of his rise to prominence. My decision to end the study in the early war years is motivated by Vassos's own career trajectory. His work changed dramatically after the war when he focused mostly on work for RCA, and the streamlining style was by-then passé.

Sparke also notes a shift in the profession's economic strategies, as "after World War II, dominance of consultant design was tempered by growing emphasis on the in-house design."¹²⁷ Beyond the business of industrial design, other studies use the war as the dividing line between the scarcity-driven design aesthetic and philosophy of the Depression and that of the post-war boom. Post-war design in the affluent consumer-driven society marked both an aesthetic and cultural shift, according to Peter Dormer in *The Meanings of Modern Design*.¹²⁸ Historian Stuart Ewen also notes the shift in post-war design philosophy, citing the ascendancy of the United States as the world's economic leader, which resulted in the entry of high-tech design into the home.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Sparke, (1983) p. 26.

¹²⁶ Steichler, p. 41. Francois Burkhardt dates the profession as late as 1940s in "Design and the Avant Post modernism" in *Design After Modernism*. (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1988), p. 145.

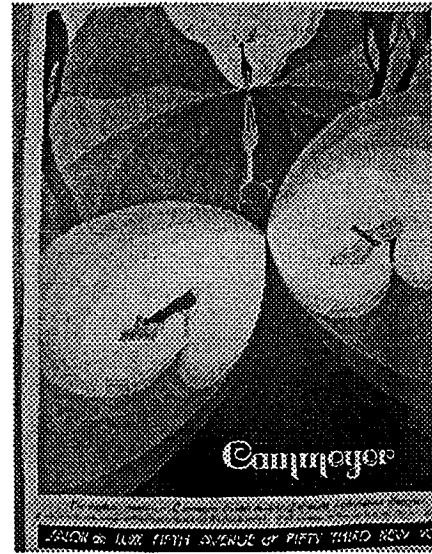
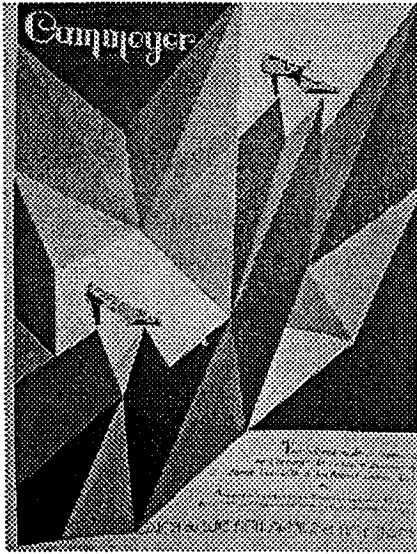
¹²⁷ Sparke, (1983) 35.

¹²⁸ Peter Dormer, (1990) 48.

¹²⁹ Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images* 215.

Chapter Two

Making and Marketing John Vassos, “A Certain Artist of Importance”



Figures 2 and 3: Ads for Cammeyer shoes designed and illustrated by John Vassos, placing shoes in odd places in urban and rural settings. On the left from *Vogue*, September 15, 1927, and on the right from *Vogue*, November 1, 1927, Vassos/AAA, Box 21.

One will not find John Vassos to be a gloomy dreamer. He is an enthusiastic New Yorker -- naïve and complex -- creative and practical -- witty and philosophical. He is an avid reader, a capable executive, and above all things, an essential modernist.¹

Although other industrial designers came from illustration and advertising, Vassos was the most prolific in these areas. He produced 11 illustrated books from 1927 to 1941 and a series of advertisements in a unique modernist style. The first of his books, *Salome*, launched his career as a “modernist” artist due to a culmination of factors: his outsider status, unique drawing style, well-timed publicity by his publisher, and the incendiary drawings for Oscar Wilde’s tale of desire and death.

¹ James Daugherty quoted in “Vassos Ventures into Man’s Subconscious Ego,” *The Art Digest*, May 15, 1932, 19, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

His unique style of illustration in rich black and white tones depicted a landscape shaped by emotion with haunted subjectivity reminiscent of German Expressionism.

Themes that he examined during this time as an illustrator included the influence of one's psychological state on perception and, more broadly, of modernity on the landscape. This attention to the interaction between images and emotion influenced his graphic design work throughout his career. Vassos's images, which were usually completed in black and white gouache paint, were printed in a range of print media in which he developed what he called a new school of illustration. This form of imagery was more like a graphic design than a painting in that it was created for mechanical reproduction. In content, it dealt with urban life, anxiety, and motion in a style that merged German Expressionism with American cartoons like Mickey Mouse. The images were meant to tap into the temporal and spatial shifts of modernity and to "express the tempo and feeling of the day, [which] cannot help but be modern."²

This chapter is a chronological study of Vassos's most productive period as an illustrator and artist. I focus on three major works: *Salome* (1927 and 1930), his first and most popular book; *Contempo* (1929), a book of social criticism authored by his wife Ruth; and *Phobia* (1930), which he referred to throughout his career as proof of his expertise in psychology. I only briefly discuss his other major books, which are *Ultimo* (1929), about a futuristic underground city, and the lesser-known political critique *Humanities* (1935). The second half of the chapter discusses Vassos's

² John Vassos, "In Quest of the Elusive and Emotional," manuscript for an article that eventually appeared in *Writer's Digest Magazine* as "Telling Your Story in Pictures," Vassos/AAA, manuscript, p. 3; copy of article in Vassos/AAA, Box 1, *Writer's Digest*, Volume x, Number 7, June 1930, pp. 27-29.

publicity campaign run by the E.P. Dutton firm, which helped propel him to fame. I will show how Vassos rose from obscure illustrator to the man dubbed in a 1930 issue of *A Review of Life and Books* as a top artist of the decade.³

Vassos had been doing sketches and political cartoons since his youth, but it was not until he came to the United States that his unique illustrating style developed. As a newcomer in Boston, he was hired by the Columbia Gramophone Company to do portraits of their recording artists, including Boston Opera Company stars such as Maria Guy and Bert Williams.⁴ In Boston, he attended the Fenway Art School, where he studied with John Singer Sargeant. He then traveled cross-country and “hoboed,” making a living as a “slogan slinger” who created large billboard advertisements for popular products.⁵ Vassos disliked this work, which he described as “hack, of course. What artist relished rehashing another original?”⁶ Moving to New York in 1921, he became enthralled and engaged by the urban scenery around him, which influenced his artistic practice. A speech in his honor vividly describes this early period, when Vassos looked to the urban landscape for inspiration and developed his own style:

[Vassos] haunted the docks and bridges, hung about the excavations, gaped at the wonder of the skyscrapers. Then he became obsessed with subways. ... He had found what he wanted to do -- to put on canvas the emotional effect of New York's ecstatic tempo on the sensitive spirit. **He developed an original technique by which the effect of emotional impact was heightened by the exaggerated dimensions of objects in relation to each other** (emphasis mine).⁷

³ “Chronicle and Comment,” *A Review of Books and Life*, 70.5 January 1930: 529.

⁴ Speech honoring Vassos at a party at the Rismont restaurant, unidentified writer, 1931, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 7, *ibid*.

⁵ Vassos recalled this in an interview in *The National Herald*, October 4, 1942, p. 7. He explained that he altered the original by adding, “part of a lady’s torso not mentioned in polite society.” Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁶ *National Herald*, October 4, 1942, p. 7.

⁷ Speech honoring Vassos, Rismont, unidentified writer, 1931, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 9. His “First Subway Drawing in Charcoal,” (1926) is held in “Drawings” at Vassos/Syracuse.

As part of his training in urban art, he also attended the Art Students League from 1921 to 1922 and the American School of Design.⁸

Around this time, Vassos started doing advertising for New York firms, like Brokaw Brothers clothing,⁹ and other small businesses.¹⁰ His big break came with his print advertisement for Best & Company, which appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1926.¹¹ The advertising manager of Best was delighted, word spread, and Vassos received commissions from big department stores like Lord and Taylor, Bonwit Teller, and John Wanamaker's.¹² As his reputation grew, he was hired for longer-term contracts with the Cammeyer Shoe Company, French Line cruises,¹³ and Packard cars.¹⁴ Vassos turned to advertising not only because it gave him a forum for his outrageous drawings but also because he needed the cash. One tongue-in-cheek biographer described Vassos's reasons for "selling out":

"being in Greenwich Village to become part of the Max Bodenheim set. [Vassos] wooed and married a Nordic blonde. The baby needed shoes to say nothing of an automobile and fur coat, and Vassos turned out three national advertising campaigns for the cause."¹⁵

⁸ Vassos/AAA, Box 23, biographical information typewritten by Vassos and extensive form filled out for "Who's Who."

⁹ Ad for Brokaw Brothers, Broadway at 12th Street, Vassos /AAA, Box 1.

¹⁰ Tearsheets for ads in Vassos /AAA, Box 21. The Florist Shop Ad is an example of an ad for a small company, from March 4, 1925, Vassos /AAA, Box 21.

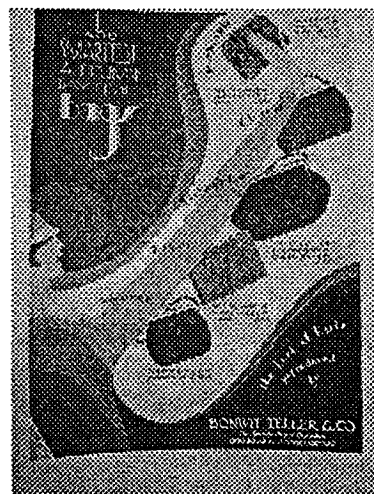
¹¹ Vassos, unpublished autobiography, Vassos /AAA, Box 12.

¹² Vassos recounts the success of this campaign in a series of letters with the company president, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Also recounted in his unpublished autobiography, Vassos /AAA, Box 12, p. 17.

¹³ French Line paid for John and Ruth, his wife, to take a cruise to the Mediterranean. Unpublished autobiography, Vassos /AAA, Box 12, p. 26.

¹⁴ The full series of Packard ads and many other tearsheets from Vassos can be found in Box 1 at the Vassos /AAA. These include over 13 different ads that he did for the company that were published in magazines like *The New Yorker* as well as ads for Cammeyer shoes and the Paragon Distributing Company.

¹⁵ Willis Birchman, *Faces and Facts By and About 26 Contemporary Artists*, privately printed, 1937, Vassos /AAA, Box 12, "Autobiographical materials."



Figures 4 and 5: Ads by Vassos, on the left for Paragon Distributing Company, and on the right for Bonwit Teller. The Bonwit Teller ad is cited in an article complaining about the rise of “Ben Day” backgrounds in print ads. Ads from Vassos /AAA, Box 1. Article on “Ben Day” in JHR, “Broadcast,” *Western Advertising*, May 1926, p. 46, Vassos /AAA, Box 20.

Although Vassos could also draw conventional imagery, he preferred images that dripped off the page, using unique graphic techniques like the full page bleed or pulsating lines to create energy in the image.¹⁶ To create dramatic effects in his advertising, he would emphasize a singular element, such as an arm or a shoe, elongating the body part or product and making the ordinary extraordinary. This is evident in the ad above for Paragon distributors, in which a woman’s head springs from a plant, or in the Bonwit Teller ad, in which a giant arm holds multiple handbags. These kinds of powerful images appealed to the advertising industry, which was beginning to recognize the power of imagery to make emotional appeals and reach the unconscious that Freudian psychology had introduced. The placement of the artist’s signature at the bottom of the page also employed these new techniques of persuasion, serving both to associate the product with the artist and to sneakily

¹⁶ An ad that Vassos did for Lord and Taylor’s furniture is a rare example of his skill at drawing conventional illustrations. See Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

draw the viewer's attention to the artistry of the ad, like a fine painting imbued with the aura of the artist.¹⁷

Advertising executives were soon skeptical about the ability of the outrageous ads to create a national campaign and appeal to consumers other than the urban crowd. Vassos's ads for Best & Company were chosen as an example of the "Ben Day" background, which according to one writer, made advertisements in the morning paper "look like something that had been inspired by a night out in Greenwich Village."¹⁸ Vassos's "fantastic puzzle" style soon lost favor to broader tastes and was discontinued by the late 1920s. Advertisers found that consumers preferred to see romantic visions and familiar settings in advertising, like Norman Rockwell's imagery or other soft dramatic representations.¹⁹ Turning away from the advertising profession, Vassos found a new forum for his graphic technique in illustrated books.

Salome

¹⁷ Ernest Elmo Calkins, "Advertising Art in the United States," 7 Modern Publicity (1930) 152.

¹⁸ JHR, "Broadcast," Western Advertising, May 1926, p. 46, Vassos/AAA, Box 20. "Ben Day" is a method of adding a tone to a printed image by imposing a transparent sheet of dots or other patterns on the image at some stage of the photographic reproduction process to create ads with a lot of visual texture.

¹⁹ For more on artists, advertising, and modernism, see Michele H. Bogart, Advertising, Artists and the Borders of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). She argues that modernist artists could not find a place in mainstream advertising since the public actually preferred more traditional representations, such as those of Norman Rockwell. Also, see Patricia Johnston, Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997).

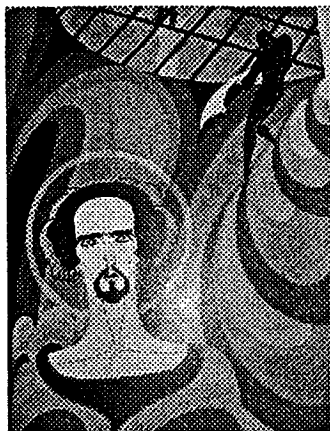


Figure 6: Illustration by Vassos that was used for the poster for *Salome* at Columbia University, which later appeared in the book *Salome*.

At the same time that he was doing advertisements, Vassos was also dabbling in dance and theater. For Columbia University's 1926 production of the play *Salome*, he did poster and program illustrations. The poster for the play featured an image of Jokanaan moments before his execution (which later became the illustration on page 53 of *Salome* (1927); illustrated in Figure 6. The play was held at the International House at 500 Riverside Drive, Manhattan, on November 4, 1926,²⁰ and produced by the Greek Letters and Arts Society. Vassos's style of merging art nouveau's spiraling lines with urban Caligariesque faces and melting mise en scène worked well with Wilde's late-Victorian textual sensibility. Vassos explained the *Salome* poster in vivid psychological terms, stating that the environment he created was an emotional landscape rather than an actual place. He wrote, "The whole world is a series of vibrations emanating from the moon with Salome a tiny figure hypnotized in their midst."²¹

A week after the performance, John MacCrae, Jr., son of the founder of E.P.

Dutton, asked Vassos to come to his Fifth Avenue office and to bring the three

²⁰ From the Vassos files of the Silvermine Artists Guild, courtesy of Cindy Clair, Director of the Guild.

²¹ "Illustrator Caricatured," *The Brooklyn Citizen*, November 2, 1930, from Syracuse University, E.P. Dutton Collection, Box 55, folder heading "Vassos, John."

illustrations for the *Salome* program. Immediately, Dutton commissioned him to do 12 to 14 pictures as he saw the play unfold, and if this went well, he would be awarded a contract for two more Wilde texts to make a trilogy.

E.P. Dutton was a publisher of fine books known for its close relationships with authors and its investment in modernist art as an elite practice of book production.²² MacCrae enjoyed cultivating an elite book market, as he disdained ventures like the "Book of the Month Club," which he considered to be lowering artistic standards in book production. One way to avoid catering to the mass taste while making a profit was to specialize in artist's books and limited press runs that would keep the price high.²³ This was considered "an ideal mode of cultural production"²⁴ in the elite publishing world, since the limited edition book turned the production methods of mass production into a patron's craft. The patron collector, a new kind of consumer who was elite yet still engaged in the marketplace, was the target of the marketing campaign.²⁵

E.P. Dutton gave Vassos a lot of editorial control, as was the practice in small publishing houses for artist-made books. He was reimbursed in a way typical of these firms, given a small advance against 50% to author and 50% to the illustrator for

²² E.P. Dutton was a company started in Boston as a small bookshop in 1865. It moved to 23rd Street and Madison Avenue in New York in 1906. Elliot MacCrae, quoted in *Publisher's on Publishing*, ed. Gerald Gross (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1961).

²³ Design was not always the first consideration. According to Peter Verheyen, conservator of Special Collections at Syracuse University Library, there are a number of binding variants on Vassos books, probably since they printed up a large quantity and bound on demand, the different colors of cloth reflective of what was on hand rather than any design mandate. Conversation, November 12, 2003.

²⁴ Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998) 45.

²⁵ "Book Illustration Grows Steadily Better: The Second Annual Exhibition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts Shows Encouraging Progress," *New York Times*, December 4, 1927, p. BR2.

royalties.²⁶ In a manner unique to this era, the author dealt directly with the publisher without literary agents. This reflected a fundamental philosophy of E.P. Dutton to respect the author's integrity. "A publisher must believe deeply some of the books he publishes will inspire them to better living and to the building of a better world."²⁷

MacCrae maintained a close relationship with Vassos during the years he published with E.P. Dutton. In the correspondence I have seen, they established that they were friends and saw each other socially, even if they had their disagreements.²⁸ MacCrae saw Vassos as fresh and new, someone who could create excitement, and he threw a lot of support behind his firm's rising star. Vassos was also promoted within the firm through exhibitions at Dutton. He was well-known and apparently well-liked throughout his association with the firm, which lasted well beyond the publication of his last book, *Dogs Are Like That*, in 1941. When *Salome* was first published, Dutton displayed the original illustrations in their window on Fifth Avenue.²⁹ A former colleague commented on the young ladies at Dutton, who would be sad when Vassos went off to fight in the war: "they idolize him, walk into this publishing house, you'll see how his pictures, his large originals [dominate] the walls."³⁰

²⁶ Memo to Vassos, "Royalty Earned and Deductions to April 30, 1933," which lists the royalties earned on *Contempo*, *Ultimo*, *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *The Harlot's House*, and *Salome* as well as advances received and copies sold. Syracuse University, E.P. Dutton Collection, Box 55, "Correspondence" folder, pp. 1-3.

²⁷ Elliot MacCrae, quoted in *Publishers on Publishing*, ed. Gerald Gross (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1961) 400. Also see *The Bookworld*, ed. Basil Blackwell (London: Thomas, Nelson and Sons, 1935); and Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America* (New York: R.R. Banker Company, 1939) 194.

²⁸ Vassos listed John MacCrae as his emergency contact on his 1929 passport, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

²⁹ Vassos, unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 25.

³⁰ Val Arms, "An Artist in New York," *The National Herald*, October 4, 1942, p. 7, Vassos/AAA, Box 5. Also, there was an exhibition of *Ultimo* illustrations at Dutton's, *New York Times*, November 9, 1930, p. IX, 12:7, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

Despite their small audience, publishers like Dutton competed for readers, using innovative packaging and rising artists and authors.³¹ One method of enhancing commodity value was to vary the covers of books to increase their worth and to launch quick press runs. The first edition of *Salome*, for instance, featured a fancy gold front page, and each page of the book was sprinkled with blue stars, which was not replicated in the second printing of 1930.³² This effort to make the book a tactile experience with its rich colors and detailed cover paid off. More than one reviewer commented on the magnificent printing and the book cover of *Salome*. One wrote, “the jacket is quite as rich as the book itself -- all of which is a high tribute to the bookmaking of the Messrs Dutton.”³³ Inside, the book revealed its visual treasures, with its gold leaf inlays and sharply reproduced images overlaid with transparent paper to protect them.³⁴

In addition to packaging, Dutton allowed Vassos to experiment with a new form of image reproduction, the Knudsen process. This process replaced major reproduction technologies like woodcuts and lithography and was faster than the prior offset dot-related printing process. This process was used for most of Vassos's illustrated books and resulted in uneven reproductions, since, according to book conservationist Peter Verheyven, the technology was so new.³⁵ Although it resulted in

³¹ O.H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930-1931* (New York: National Association of Book Publishers, 1936) 32.

³² The books were typeset by S.A. Jacobs, who created the die stamp and “completed a dummy book.” Letter to S.A. Jacobs, July 6, 1932, from Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

³³ “A Superb Salome,” *Post*, Camden, NJ, July 5, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

³⁴ However, experimental book design, especially among the avant-garde, has a longer history. See Jaroslav Andel, *Avant-Garde Book Design 1900-1950* (New York: Delano Greenridge Editions, 2002).

³⁵ Email correspondence with Peter Verheyven, January 2005.

reproductions that are not as clear as they could have been, the process did however represent a modernization of the press,³⁶ as did Vassos's choice of Futura as the font.



Figure 7: "Bearing on a silver shield the head of Jokanaan." From *Salome*, (1927, author's collection, p. 54). Vassos's vampy women and fantasia share allegiances to Gustave Klimt.

Dutton was right in choosing Oscar Wilde's most controversial play as the opening book for Vassos to show off his skill at rendering erotic emotional imagery. The story itself was incendiary and twice a scandal, first with its production and later with its illustrated book version. The 1894 English publication of Aubrey Beardsley's graphics epitomizing bell époque art shocked Victorian audiences. The play expressed Wilde's disdain for tradition, dangerous desire (and the women that represented it), wealth, and power.³⁷ Much as Dutton had hoped, there were many comparisons between Vassos and Beardsley, each an artist who embodied the spirit of an era on the verge of radical change in sexual politics and social power.

³⁶ The Knudsen process was named after Hugo Knudsen, the inventor, and it is a form of offset printing. See A.C. Austin, "An Outline of the Knudsen Process," in *The Penrose Annual: Review of the Graphic Arts*, ed. R.B. Fishenden (London: Lund and Humphries & Co. Ltd., 1938, Volume 40), quoted by Peter Verheyven <<http://www.philobiblon.com/vassos/knudsen.htm>>.

³⁷ Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1988) 112.

Critics liked the freshness in Vassos's illustrations, which pushed illustration in a new and "futurist" way, a description they used often but without a clear consensus on its meaning. In particular, they liked that he drew from cubism, using streamlined shapes and references to mass culture but keeping his realism intact so the image was readable. Reviewers were excited by the accessible modernism that Vassos offered. Despite the gruesome story of *Salome*, they welcomed the change. In the *New York Times*, Vassos's illustrations were referred to as "decorations" and "realizations" of the tragedy,³⁸ with the story "pictorially interpreted."³⁹ Commenting on the uniqueness of the images and the relationship of image to text, another reviewer commented, "Vassos seems to evoke them literally out of his imagination ... and set them down here in black and white; it is almost a verbal reproduction."⁴⁰ The art, yet another reviewer wrote, adequately captures "the over-ripe beauty, the subtle fragrance of decay, the luxuriance and ferocity of Wilde's tragedy."⁴¹

Part of Vassos's success was his ability to take an important British book and Americanize it, thus adding to the burgeoning Americanism in literature, the arts, and industrial design. Reviewers picked up on Vassos's uniquely "American" twist on the imagery. As one of them wrote, "Here was America's own Aubrey Beardsley."⁴² Reviewer Edwin Bjorkman went so far as to write, "Had Wilde seen *Salome* and her environment with the vision of John Vassos, his play might have been a bigger one

³⁸ Display ad, October 21, 1928, p. 69, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

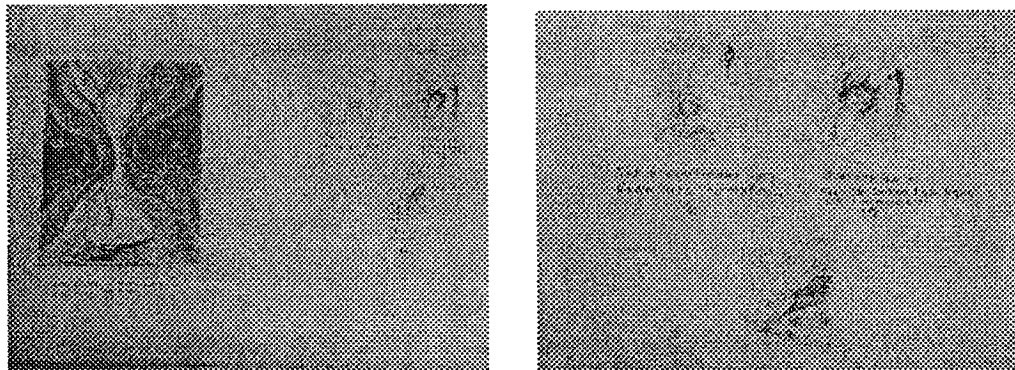
³⁹ Print ad, *Forum*, October 1929, Vol. LXXXII, p. x, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁴⁰ Robertus Love, "Miracles in Curves and Cubes Which Interpret Wilde and Us," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁴¹ N. Desdegule, *A Review of Books and Life*, December 1927, p. 445, picture caption.

⁴² H.E. Dounce, "An Imaginative Modern Who Interprets Wilde More Interestingly Than Original," *Telegram*, Fort Worth, Texas, December 15, 1929, Vassos/AAA, Box 5; also reprinted in the *Pittsburgh Press*, November 10, 1929, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

than it is now.”⁴³ As another commentator put it, Vassos “need concede nothing to the famous Beardsley editions of the same play [since] Vassos has developed a medium all his own. It is futurist without the preposterous stuff that often masks as futurism.”⁴⁴



Figures 8 and 9: Early sketches for *Salome* reveal shapes that are constant in Vassos's drawings: tunnel-like environments; the motions of Salome and the strong contrasts of light and dark; and the storyboard form of the imagery, obviously cinematic, moving from establishing shot to close-up. Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

Critics appreciated Vassos's originality. As one wrote, “[A]nother contribution of Dutton's to fine book-making is a new edition of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* with “inventions” by a young modernist named John Vassos. ... The Vassos illustrations are highly symbolical [sic] and for the most part freshly original and quite striking.”⁴⁵ The second printing in 1930, with four new illustrations or “inventions,” was described as having “a sophisticated, erotic touch to the illustrations, which are wholly in keeping with the text.”⁴⁶ Some, however, didn't know how to handle the “gruesomeness” of the story, suggesting that it wasn't for

⁴³ Quoted in “Comments” brochure entitled “John Vassos, Famous Illustrator and Modernist,” Vassos/AAA, Box 2, folder entitled “RCA Murals.”

⁴⁴ “A Superb *Salome*,” *Post*, Camden, NJ, July 5, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁴⁵ Herschel Brickell, “The Literary Landscape,” *The North American Review*, December 1927, Volume 224, p. 006. See also ad for *Salome* “with inventions by John Vassos,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 1927, p. 3, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁴⁶ “Reprints and Renewals,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1930, p. BR6, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

everyone.⁴⁷ They expressed relief that Vassos's brand of modernism was accessible and the images representational in a form of imagery that they dubbed "futurism."⁴⁸ As one reviewer commented, Vassos's art retained enough realism to be representative: "It is not that jumbling chaos, bad color, and terrible drawing that often passes for modern art."⁴⁹ While abstract cubism that was not palatable to American critics, they enjoyed Vassos's narrative drawings.⁵⁰



Figures 10 and 11: Bodies in motion, one of a series of images for *Dance* magazine in 1931. On the left, a January 1931, p. 31 stage design in which "the dance moves in the curving lines of the waltz," and the stage is on a silver platform. On the right is "traffic dance." From *Dance* magazine, December 1930, p. 13, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

In *Salome*, Vassos developed a theme that he retained throughout his books and in his industrial design practice: a concern with movement and the place of the body in relation to space. In many of his drawings, as in his illustrations for *Dance* Magazine and in the Department Store image from *Contempo*, Vassos used multiple

⁴⁷ Herschel Brickell, "The Literary Landscape," *The North American Review* (1821-1940), December 1927, Volume 224, No. 888, APS Online, p. 006.

⁴⁸ That Vassos used the human figure rather than abstract forms that were also popular speaks to Vassos's social and political commitment, according to the publisher's note. P.K. Thomajan, vii+.

⁴⁹ Art Young, "Vassos Saves Modern Art From Dementia Praecox," E.P. Dutton Pamphlet, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁵⁰ Despite his own critical acclaim, Vassos had his problems with critics, a conflict he expressed in "Critics" in *Humanities*, pp. 92-93.

bodies as a metaphor for alienation, as machine-like bodies floated amid swirling backdrops, merging Freudian symbolism with urban design.⁵¹ Like the images in *Phobia*, the drawings for *Dance* magazine extended Vassos's fascination with the movement of the body in modern society.⁵² He wanted to alter the human form, making it more geometric and almost mechanistic while retaining the sinuous, vampy shapes of Art Nouveau.⁵³

In Vassos's streets, themes of alienation and monotony were expressed in cars or bodies, tapping into a central modernist theme of urban transportation, from Hausmann's wide boulevard to the radical movement's calls to take the streets, as Marshall Berman discusses in his history of modernism.⁵⁴ This reflects Vassos's larger concern with the machine age's impact on human life. The environment was not built for the people in the drawings, who floated through alienating backdrops like zombies or were pushed by hidden forces like objects on an assembly line. Moreover, Vassos was inspired by the new vistas of perception formed by the car and also by the radio, which provided "a rich pictorial pattern of untold wealth, so that when we listen to a radio, our optical sense must also be satisfied."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Stephen Escritt, *Art Nouveau*, (Phaidon Press Limited, 2000).

⁵² "I did a series of drawings for *Dance* magazine just after I had been commissioned by Demetrious Vilan (who was ahead of his time) to do the sets for his debut at the Guild Theater. ... For the first time, the dance was done on various levels -- Vassos levels." Gluck Sandor and Felicia Sorel danced in the Vassos-written and designed "Phobia." See "The Dance: A Mexican Ballet," *New York Times*, March 27, 1932.

⁵³ For a concise history of the Art Nouveau graphic tradition, see Phillip Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992), pp. 191-213.

⁵⁴ See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts In Air: the Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), pp. 165-167.

⁵⁵ John Vassos, "In Quest of the Elusive and Emotional," manuscript for an article which eventually appeared in *Writer's Digest Magazine* as "Telling Your Story in Pictures," Vassos/AAA, manuscript, p. 3; copy of article in Vassos/AAA, Box 1, *Vassos/AAAWriter's Digest*, Volume x, number 7, June 1930, pp. 27-29.

Vassos's illustrated graphics were not entirely unique, however, and were part of a growing movement towards the increased status of reproducible illustrated arts. Graphic artists began to realize their work could stand alone, replacing words with images as visuals began to gain the focus in mass media. An exhibition of American book illustration held at the American Institute of Graphic Arts, in which Vassos's *Salome* was chosen among the 61 books representing graphic texts, intended to show the independent strength of illustration outside of children's books. Twisting the original function of the illustrator as assistant to the author, the program considered the illustrator as a creative equal to the author. This new image of the graphic artist as one who worked in reproducible arts, rather than an artist whose work merely got reproduced, was part of a growing movement to consolidate the profession of graphic design and to recognize the artist's value in the machine age. Graphic artists sought to clarify the relationship between words and images, suggesting that they were not equal. As the program for the exhibition asked,

"Is it conceivable that one man should express a certain mood in words and another should find forms expressing an identical one? ... When the writer is an artist and the illustrator is an artist there must be divergence."⁵⁶

This movement of illustrators may have been in response to shifts in the field from the growth of photography, as illustrators, edged out by photographers, sought to find a new place for themselves in book illustration, magazines, and newspapers. In

⁵⁶ "Book Illustration Grows Steadily Better: The Second Annual Exhibition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts Shows Encouraging Progress," *New York Times*, December 4, 1927, p. BR2. There was a debate among printers about the most "tasteful" way to illustrate books, including printing processes and decorative forms. See Bert C. Chambers, "Dark Age of the 'Harmonious Book Page': Exhibition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts Reflects Discredit Upon Contemporary Book Printing," *New York Times*, January 27, 1924. The growth of graphic arts as a field is suggested by growing educational programs in the field; see "Graphic Artists Urge Course At M.I.T," which observes that a "lack of school handicaps important industries," *New York Times*, May 12, 1926, p. 11.

their work, they emphasized typography, and they defined their art in opposition to photography while using some of its forms of reproduction, like half-tone photo-engraving. Graphic artists aiming to reach a wide audience drew from a “varied assembly of reproductive processes,”⁵⁷ acknowledging their debt to the creativity of advertising illustration. This widening appeal of graphic arts occurred alongside the rise of sensational photography exhibited in *Illustrated Daily News*, New York’s first tabloid picture paper, which appeared in 1919 and distributed across photographic wire services that were launched in 1929.⁵⁸

By the 1930s, photography became a source of entertainment, information, and persuasion for government and business alike. Roy Stryker of the Farm Security Administration led a new effort to images to argue on behalf of the New Deal, for instance, making a social argument using the visual code of “truth.”⁵⁹ This growing thirst for visual imagery and allowance that it was a valid source of information and social commentary may explain why Vassos’s images so frequently accompanied articles in magazines and newspapers, as they shared the heightened emotions of sensationalistic photography. This “sensationalistic modernism,” a term describing the emergence of a particular literary turn and visual imagery that emerged at the turn of the century, was a form of social critique and at the same time a form of

⁵⁷ “Illustration Is No Longer a Lost Art: First Annual Exhibit by the Institute of Graphic Arts Brings Together Many Finely Decorated Volumes,” New York Times, December 5, 1926; Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁵⁸ Stephen Klein, Culture of Time and Space, (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1983), p.12.

⁵⁹For more on the use of photography as a form of social argument in the 1930s, Jack Hurley, Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1972).

commercialized emotion.⁶⁰ Illustrators sought to find their way in this growing visual market as the composite form of illustrated books -- part magazine, part narrative -- made its brief appearance on the literary scene.⁶¹

Contempo

Following the success of *Salome*, Dutton had Vassos illustrate *Ballad of Reading Gaol* in 1928 and *The Harlot's House and Other Poems* in 1929. His first original book, *Contempo*, expressed the ideas of modern book illustration, which called for the illustrator's independence from the author. Written in collaboration with his wife Ruth, who wrote the text after seeing the drawings, the process inverted the typical relationship in which the illustrator drew from the text and made the illustrator the leading force in the book's construction. As Vassos explained, "I draw the illustrations first, and she writes the text around them."⁶² The book marked an innovation in illustrated book production by putting images before words and making them the narrative center of the book. As collaboration, with its content drawn from the 25 modernistic drawings rather than the drawings illustrating the words, the book marked a turn in illustrated texts. Even the title, *Contempo*, was coined by Vassos to express both a style and a speed -- the contemporary tempo of modern life -- articulated in the drawings, which feature the powerful people and institutions of the age.

Vassos described *Contempo* as "my first book of commentary on our Society, in which all our misconceptions and dead-ends come for scrutiny. ... [T]he book

⁶⁰ Joseph Bunce Entin, *Sensational Modernism: Disfigured Bodies and Aesthetic Astonishment in Modern American Literature and Photography*, Dissertation, Yale University, 2001.

⁶¹ One area they entered was illustrating the covers of pulp fiction novels. Vassos returned to narrative illustration during World War II, when he produced an educational guide on the value of camouflage called "Booby the Bear," Vassos/AAA, Box 7, in file marked "Misc. 1943."

⁶² Vassos, unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 31.

evokes criticism and controversy.”⁶³ Indeed, although it seems cartoonish today with its overblown imagery and caricatured figures, the book was unique in its critical overview of American life. It tied together various institutions, including mass media, transportation, banks, and religion, in a sweeping critique that predated the New Deal’s popular front aesthetic and depicted a unique art of social criticism through the visual device of art nouveau and the stylistic lens of art deco.⁶⁴

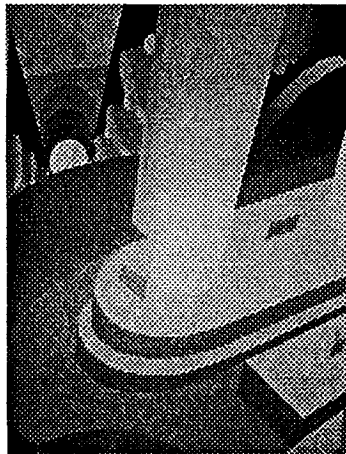


Figure 12: Shoppers in motion in *Department Store*. From *Contempo* (1929, author’s collection), not paginated.

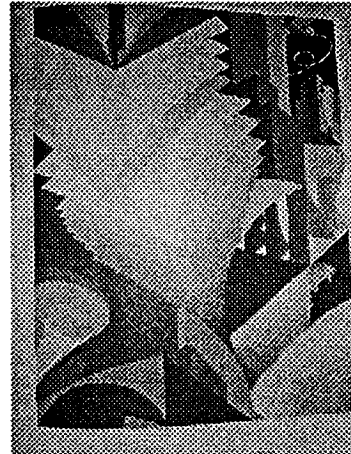


Figure 13. *Advertising*. From *Contempo* (1929, author’s collection), not paginated.

According to Vassos, the book was spawned by his disillusionment with mass society upon returning to the United States to find the country in an economic depression. Following his 1929 trip to Europe (sponsored by a cruise ship company), he and Ruth returned to find:

The crash ... in full bloom, [leaving Vassos] wondering if unchecked capitalism is a good thing for the people. Many hard-earned fortunes are wiped out, including a couple of stocks I owned. Capable men are selling apples in the streets. The Russians are having a picnic with their propaganda;

⁶³ See “Pictured Modernism,” Review of *Contempo*, *Gazette*, Cedar Rapids, IA, November 3, 1929; “Modern Life Seen in Book,” Review of *Contempo*, *Standard*, New Bedford, MA, November 3, 1929. Both in Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁶⁴ Vassos, unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 31: “My first book of commentary on our society, in which all our misconceptions and dead-ends come for scrutiny.”

intellectuals are the biggest audience the Soviets have: all sorts of “front” organizations are springing up.⁶⁵

Like many artists at the time, Vassos distrusted the notion of a mass society, in which people were homogenized and acted robotically in submission to authority. In all the images of *Contempo*, jarring shifts of perspective emphasized social inequality and dramatically shifted the viewer’s perspective. Borrowing from the cinematic vistas of Soviet Constructivists, Vassos portrayed the world from this omniscient angle and from the perspective of those who rule urban space. From this angle, Vassos was an artist/observer. His “images” provided a distant view of an unfair world, expressed architectonically rather than from the viewpoint of a participant, and were linked to photography but with the artistic freedom to distort at will. The *Department Store* image above most vividly captures the way that architecture can be inhumane, with its huge towering columns as rigid as the homogenous shoppers moving eerily up an escalator. In *Advertising*, a towering pile of paper, an ominous “pile of bunk” according to the text, dominates the urban scene.

⁶⁵ John Vassos, typewritten notes from Speech to Syracuse University, March 6, 1973, Vassos/AAA, Box 11, p. 34 [hereafter, Syracuse Speech].

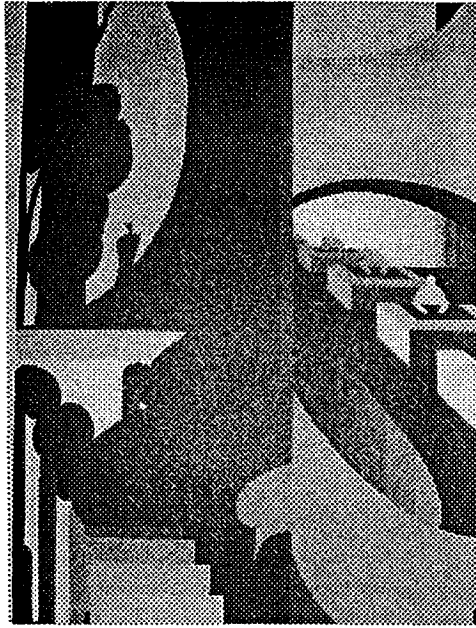


Figure 14: Workers chained to their desks in *Commercialism*.
From *Contempo* (1929).

In the drawing *Commercialism* (Figure 14), Vassos revealed patterns of domination in daily life, juxtaposing the natural and the urban as well as freedom and domination.⁶⁶ Vassos played with urban imagery, using height to represent power or a “society built on bunk;” in the image *Advertising*, for example, reams of paper overwhelm the society. Other artists shared Vassos’s critique of the alienating spaces, such as authors Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World* and Nathaniel West, whose 1933 book *Miss Lonelyhearts* portrayed a dangerous Los Angeles. The films of Fritz Lange, including *Metropolis* (1926), presented a cold industrialized society.

Despite the brutal depiction of capitalism’s main institutions, Vassos ultimately admired the American spirit that produced this society. As he wrote in his

⁶⁶ Perhaps Russian formalist Victor Schlovsky’s notion of “ostrananie” can be applied here. See Paul Jobline and David Crowley, *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation Since 1800* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996). On leftism and design, see Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, 1984), p. 233.

introduction to the book, this American tempo is “a certain sharp staccato rhythm almost like a riveting machine that exists nowhere else in the world.”⁶⁷ As in *Salome*, Vassos meant for his drawings to be heavily symbolic and to link them to sound and structure, each image a metonymy of society as a whole, for instance, transforming a city into a paper pile, a swirl of buildings, or a mess of cars. In this image experiment, Vassos also tried to link the idea of sound to image, starting with the title of the book. He may have borrowed from the increasingly popular rhythm of jazz to express the feelings of disconnection, speed, and solitude that the city evoked. As he wrote in florid language, the book presented each element given its own page and description in a kind of visual staccato:

“Emblazoned symbolic drawings [to] interpret modernism through modernistic rhythm/appreciation of the symbolism of the imagery [and] making living things of electricity, advertising, skyscrapers, the subway, Prohibition, the radio.”⁶⁸

Making living things of city sights, sounds, and modes, Vassos hoped to show their effect on the human body. Critics were clearly moved by the book, its emotional force, and its groundbreaking style. They commented on both the book’s politics and its unique visual style, which reflected a modern spirit in theme and in expression. It is, one wrote, an achievement “not only to Vassos’s reputation as an artist but to the body of achievement in modern design ... a remarkably beautiful book it is besides the first pictorial judgment of our time.”⁶⁹ Beyond the politics, critics commented on his graphic style, saying that “probably no artist today uses gray and black as

⁶⁷ Vassos, preface to *Contempo*, not paginated.

⁶⁸ Vassos, preface to *Contempo*.

⁶⁹ “Book by Vassos Serves as Pictorial Judgment of Our Time: *Contempo* Proves Unique Survey; Caricature Effectively Employed,” *Telegram*, Salt Lake City, UT, December 15, 1929, Vassos/AAA, Box 20.

effectively as he does. The gradations of black in his drawings give them depth and luminosity. Invariably, he is best when he most nearly approaches photography.”⁷⁰ They also noted his novel use of perspective: “As a graphic artist, Mr. Vassos discloses a kinship with such unlike personages as Blake, Beardsley, and Picasso.”⁷¹ Another commentator wrote that “it is completely modern, representing even old themes like religion from a new angle.”⁷² As one reviewer summed it up, “the Vassos team swings superbly free of convention in *Contempo*.”⁷³



Figure 15: *The Jew* with the world at his fingertips. From *Contempo* (1929, author’s collection).

Interestingly, few reviewers commented on the book’s politics, which wavered from socialist, to liberal, to anti-Semitic, particularly in the image of *The Jew*. This illustration and Ruth Vassos’s text, which bordered on the ludicrous, revealed Vassos’s somewhat reactionary politics and his allegiance to half-formed ideas that on one page criticized banks and on the next aimed to protect their sanctity.⁷⁴ *The Jew*

⁷⁰ Harry Hansen, “The First Reader,” *News*, Chicago, IL, November 15, 1929, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁷¹ *Springfield Republican*, December 8, 1929, p. 7, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁷² *Boston Transcript*, December 14, 1929, p. 8, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁷³ “Miracles in Curves and Cubes,” *Times – Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, December 1, 1928, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁷⁴ As mentioned, the anti-Semitic image and Ruth Vassos’s incomprehensible writing may be one of the reasons John Vassos’s books remain undervalued and criticized for their “strange” politics. They

showed a dark-haired, big-nosed man standing at the top of a building, wielding unobstructed power. He is described in Ruth Vassos's text as a power-seeking monster, with:

rings on his fingers and bells on his toes. The wandering Jew wanders no more. Our movies move at his command, he creates the songs for a nation. From Poland, from Russia, from Germany, from Austria, he comes to Park Avenue via Garment Center via Tin Pan Alley via Hollywood. Even the sacred edifices of banking and the sacrosanct mysteries of Wall Street have been penetrated. With a joyous zest he invades the dwelling places of the elect ... his plump and Oriental women disport themselves on the sunniest beaches.⁷⁵

It is unclear how this image impacted sales of the book when it was on the market. Around the same time it was published, Vassos gave a lecture at a Jewish Philanthropic Society and also began working for David Sarnoff, who was a Jew.

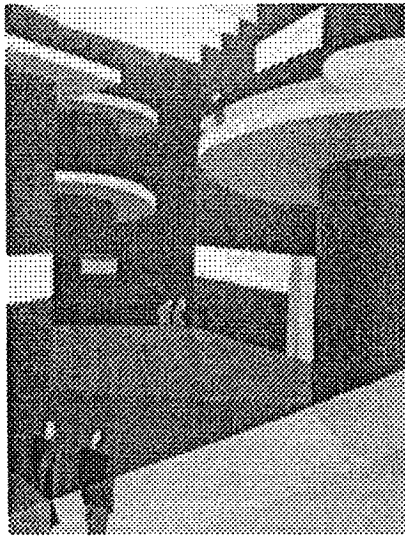


Figure 16: Image from *Ultimo* (not paginated, author's collection).

were not seen as containing the intellectual remarks of an educated leftist but rather just as poorly written, badly thought out ideas. For a society that still valued the image over the word, the level of writing was inexcusable but allowable on Dutton's part in their support of John Vassos. Many critics commented that the text was unnecessary.

⁷⁵ In none of the books or archives I have examined has there ever been a critical mention of this illustration. More research needs to be done to understand the commonality of this idea among modern artists at the time.

This social criticism with a sarcastic edge was a project Vassos continued in *Ultimo* and to some extent in *Humanities*, where he criticized both communism and fascism. *Ultimo*, “a scientific fantasy set forth in curious document by a man of the future looking backwards and recounting the history of humanity’s sojourn inside the earth,” according to the back cover, referred to debates at the time concerning building height and distance from the road, as expressed in Hugh Ferriss’s *Metropolis of Tomorrow*, published in 1929.⁷⁶ Vassos took overgrowth to its extreme, forcing humans to flee to an underground city where “buildings dripped with gigantic icicles, awesome and beautiful in the cold rays of the sun.”⁷⁷ The book presented a critique of urban growth without planning, where humans lost their personalities and expressed only the mechanical features of their society.⁷⁸ They were displaced by machines and driven underground in a kind of science-awry genre of Mary Shelley, their oppression expressed more clearly in the drawings than in the clunky text.⁷⁹ Although not a great seller, the book marked a shift in Vassos’s drawing style as he shed the art nouveau swirls to show his facility with urban streamlining, which would inform his industrial design style.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986, originally 1929). For a review of the book, see “Ferriss Reveals Visions of the Future City,” *The Art Digest*, February 15, 1932, p. 6.

⁷⁷ From *Ultimo*, unpaginated.

⁷⁸ The book was included in the Brooklyn Museum’s *The Machine Age Exhibition*. See the book that accompanied the show, *The Machine Age*, pp. 33-34. For more on Ferriss, urban planning, and the relationship of buildings to glaciers, see Lewis Mumford, *Sidewalk Critic: Lewis Mumford's Writings on New York*. Wojtowicz, Robert (editor) (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986), p. 63 especially.

⁷⁹ James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger discuss the avant-garde, which embraced machine culture and modernism, in “Six Artistic Cultures,” in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger, eds. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 13.

⁸⁰ This may have been because art deco was so out of vogue in the early 1930s that it was banned for MOMA’s canon, as the Bauhaus-influenced assembly line of interchangeable parts and machine-look

The fictional book started out with sketched notes from a study of the world outside of Vassos's 20th floor apartment window, resulting in a story of what would happen when "cities became perpendicular," the title of the first image of the book.⁸¹ In his handwritten notes in an early version of the text, he described a world with gigantic zeppelins overtaking the sky.⁸² Despite its contemporary themes and science fiction look, the book was not a great success. It is significant, however, as an early example of streamlined forms in urban imagery, a style that shapes each image in the 1930 book. As one reviewer noted, its streamlined imagery shared too many similarities with advertising campaigns, where the style was first used. A critic in the *New Yorker* described the book as "a goofy sort of enterprise with text by Ruth and projections by John Vassos. The picture, if in color, would make good posters for some brand of bed or bacon."⁸³ This harsh criticism undermined the value of the book in helping Vassos visualize and draw the streamlined forms that would later shape his industrial design.

dominated aesthetic values from imagery to objects. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *Design Writing Research*, (New York: Kiosk Books/Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 172.

⁸¹ This title became a catch phrase for the book and was mentioned in quite a few reviews, including those in the Salt Lake *Telegram*, November 16, 1930, and the Dallas *Times Herald*, November 23, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁸² Handwritten notes for *Ultimo* are in Vassos/AAA, Box 1, "Writings-Humanities-MS."

⁸³ Review of *Ultimo*, *New Yorker*, November 15, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

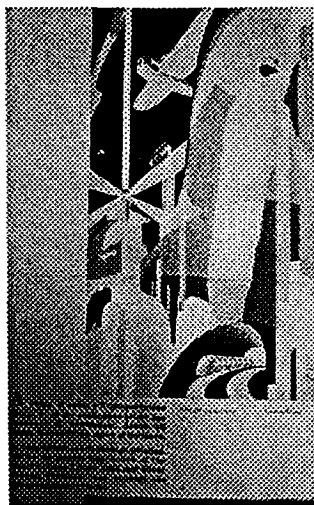


Figure 17: An advertisement for a delivery company using imagery strikingly similar to that of *Ultimo*. Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

The theme of the dangers of mechanistic and unchecked power, greed, and bureaucracy dominated Vassos's final major book of the 1930s for Dutton, *Humanities*. The images in the book returned to the style of drawing that Vassos used in *Contempo*; a rich narrative style expressing social ills in a single block print. With text written by Ruth Vassos, the book illustrated the contrast between rich and poor using a crass montage effect, with each group on either side of the page. With its sweeping critique of militarism, fascism, and other institutions like Science and Racism, the book was Vassos's most radical. For instance, in the section entitled "Philanthropy," Vassos took on the hypocrisy of the

"noble philanthropist. ... [Think] of the altruism of the man who erects in the slums a costly library: that he gets an income from the miserable tenements in which the surrounding poor live has no bearing on the case."⁸⁴

Portraying the rich as vultures and the masses as victims, the book revealed the contradictions of unfettered capitalism. It also commented on international politics particularly the growing danger of authoritarianism.

⁸⁴ John Vassos and Ruth Vassos, *Humanities*, unpaginated.

This style of coupling text with critical imagery, however, was already boring reviewers, who wanted something very different from *Contempo*. As one reviewer commented early in the book's production,

"the half-dozen pictures we already have, I feel that they are not completely successful, that they hardly advance over *Contempo* -- which is quite too bad. For Vassos' style is now well known, and people will look for advance and expect to find it. If they don't, they may turn sour."⁸⁵

The reader clearly missed the book's directed criticism of war and advocacy for the poor, a different approach than the sleek urban styled *Contempo*, which presented the powerful as evil but seductive. The powerful people in *Humanities*, which Vassos named to evoke a textbook educating readers about society, were manipulative and dangerous to society. The book, though never as popular as his others, was appreciated for its anti-war message, a theme that Vassos continued in his individual paintings for the Silvermine Social Statement art shows (discussed at the end of the chapter).⁸⁶ Vassos was proud of *Humanities*, expressing in a letter to John MacCrae that the book "is fearless, it is timely, it is necessary, and I believe it will have wide appeal."⁸⁷

Vassos's desire to provide a "new look at America" was typical of the era when editors and writers of magazines felt obligated to critique the excesses of capitalism that had led to the market crash. The new era in American populism, which historian Michael Denning calls the "laboring of culture," was typified by images of the masses and publicized through the efforts of the "popular front," an artistic and

⁸⁵ Review of *Humanities* by S.M., May 7, 1935, Syracuse University, E.P. Dutton Collection, Box 55, "Vassos, John and Ruth Correspondence."

⁸⁶ John and Ruth Vassos, "A Challenge to War!" *Humanities*, November 11, 1935, is held in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁸⁷ Letter to MacCrae from Vassos, June 29, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

political movement in which the left merged with the center to create a mainstreaming of socialism. Vassos's political allegiance was decidedly progressive and critical of power in a way that would fit the New Deal's ideology. P.K. Thomajan, a modernist artist and friend of Vassos, similarly notes, in his introduction to the only extant collection of Vassos images, that Vassos's message was consistently "anti-war, anti-racist, and anti-commercial ... [portraying] people lost in the machinations of progress. Vassos was among the tradition of the 1920s when art broke loose from tradition, questioned leaders, and toppled old idols."⁸⁸

Vassos clearly rejected communism and its idealization of the worker.⁸⁹ He presented a critical analysis of popular culture that was strikingly unique for an industrial designer. Indeed, it is his books that are better known than his industrial design, suggesting that they resonate with curators searching to find artistic criticism of mass culture prior to the popular front movement. A 1995 exhibition at the University of Toledo included Vassos among more politically left-leaning illustrators Aaron Douglas, Rockwell Kent, and Lynd Ward in a show called *The Ardent Image: Book Illustration for Adults in America, 1920-1942*. While Vassos himself despised Kent, whose style of image-making Vassos did not like, the show accurately points out that they were both artists who used illustration as a way to criticize social systems.⁹⁰ This distinction was not always clear, and in 1937, an author, in his

⁸⁸ P.K. Thomajan, introduction from P.K. Thomajan's foreword to *Contempo, Phobia, and other Graphic Interpretations*, pp. vii - xi. Thomajan was a poet and close friend of Vassos going back to the 1930s. A letter from Vassos to Thomajan suggests that they were collaborating on a surrealist film that was never realized, July 18, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

⁸⁹ Syracuse Speech, "Writings," p. 19.

⁹⁰ Writing to one admirer who called Kent a "pillar of modernism? It is the last thing I would call him ... the art of compromise and how to make pen and ink drawings look like wood blocks." Letter to Castle, February 17, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 7. Similarly, the Charlotte's Mint Museum of Craft and Design also joins Vassos's *Ultimo* with Kent's *Moby Dick* in to "illuminate how the art of illustration

informal description in a book about contemporary artists, put it this way: "his conservative friends think he is a red, and his red friends think he's pink."⁹¹

Vassos's imagery predated the rise of comic books; photographic magazines like *Life*, which was launched in 1936; and other large format visual mass media. This suggests that he had insight into the public imagination as the public became more hungry for emotionally-charged images with a political message. His mission to provide readable images of contemporary life, yoking Americans together beyond regional difference, shared another feature with the popular front in its rejection of the abstraction, which communists considered the product of an ivory tower. In this sense, Vassos was participating in a debate about the appropriate aesthetics for mass consumption, suggesting the earliest expression of his philosophy of accessibility that he continued in his industrial designs.

Vassos recycled themes and images so much that an advertising image or even an image from the social criticism of *Contempo* found its way into an ad for Packard or later on the wall of WCAU in Philadelphia. Vassos positioned himself as both a producer and a critic of mass culture. Indeed, his advertising images gave him more than cash; they also provided him with ideas for styles that germinated into complete books, such as futuristic images that later became transformed into the book *Ultimo*, scenes of swirling traffic that were reused in the social criticism text *Contempo*, or the pulsating background of *Salome* also used in Cammeyer shoe advertisements.

Phobia

paralleled artistic movements in the fine and decorative arts and became a powerful expression in the world of craft and design." " < www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa366.htm> accessed November 4, 2003.

⁹¹ Willis Birchman, *Faces and Facts By and About 26 Contemporary Artists*, privately printed, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, "Autobiographical materials."



Figure 18: *Dromophobia*. From *Phobia*

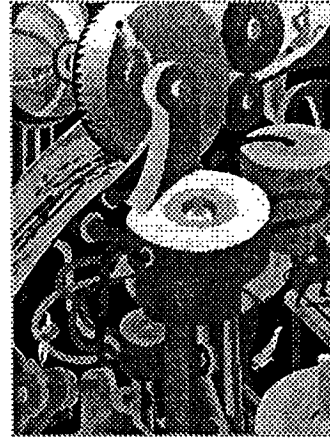


Figure 19: *Mechanophobia*. From *Phobia*

Vassos wrote his sixth and most influential book, *Phobia*, with the publishing

firm Covici, Friede.⁹² He referred to it throughout his career as back up to his claim that he had insight into the human psyche. Like *Salome*, it took themes of suffering and pain, erotic longing and death, but set them in a modern urban environment to show that the landscape of modernity was also a backdrop for terror. It continued themes that Vassos explored in *Contempo*, such as modern society, mechanization, and monotony, but described them in the context of phobias. *Phobia* presented the dangers of urban alienation, this time showing the experience of the victims rather than the victors or the powerful elite depicted in *Contempo*.

Co-written with Freudian psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan, the book, according to Vassos, was to be educational. It was his most important book, as it allowed him to claim expertise in determining the psychological state of consumers, knowledge that he drew upon in pitch letters to corporations and in his justifications

⁹² Covici, Friede, 1928. Pascal Covici moved to New York to establish a partnership with Donald Friede to become Covici, Friede. The Covici, Friede firm specialized in limited editions. It was bought by Viking Press in 1938. Papers are held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. I am not sure why Vassos switched publishers. There seems to have been no tension between Dutton and Covici over Vassos, see letter to Mr. Ricca from Vassos, June 29, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, in which he asks him to list *Phobia* along with Vassos's other books, which is a "graceful gesture and a courtesy on the part of E.P. Dutton towards Covici -- incidentally, there are no *Phobias* to be had."

for design decisions, such as the rounded corners of his turnstiles to appease those who were afraid of sharp objects. Although many of his illustrations were used to accompany articles in magazines and newspapers, *Phobia* had the greatest crossover appeal in terms of value in a mass magazine, as it was featured in the June 1936 and February 1937 issues of *Esquire*, a men's magazine.⁹³

In the book, Vassos presented 23 phobias ordered in increasing intensity, from "nichtophobia," or fear of the dark, to "pantophobia," or fear of everything. The full-page drawings, accompanied by text written by Vassos, depicted victims fleeing internal conflict in an urban setting. Dressed like they were leaving work, in suits and ties, the modern phobics were depicted in the midst of the panic attack, being assaulted by the fear. Vassos's phobics were triggered by the urban setting and the skyscraper's dangerous, pointy architecture, and they were tempted into destructive action, as they stole, fell, jumped, and fled. They were victims of both their internal and external worlds, which clashed to create a threatening world.⁹⁴ The city fed the phobia, as flying objects from buildings, heights, sharp objects (as in *Aichmophobia*; see image below), hoards of strangers, dirt, and commodities waiting to be shoplifted drove the kleptomaniac mad (Figure 22). An urban scene was transformed into a deadly landscape with modernistic architecture adding to the alienating space by providing rigid lines, monotonous geometry, and sharp angles.

⁹³ Vassos wrote and illustrated the February 1937 article entitled "A Case of Acrophobia," *Esquire*, p. 85+. Vassos received permission to use the illustrations and articles for *Esquire* from his publisher. Letter from John Vassos to Pascal Covici, October 19, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁹⁴ The term "phobia" may have come into vogue in the 1920s. Ann Douglas, in her book on 1920s urban culture, quotes a writer as having, "Hammeraphobia, I can't hear me." Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, (New York : Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995) 17.

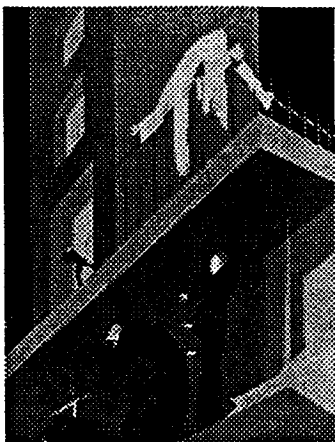


Figure 20: *Aichmophobia*, or fear of sharp objects.
From *Phobia* (1929), New York Public Library.

The idea for the book on phobias came from a chance meeting of Vassos and Stack Sullivan in a mental hospital at the bedside of a mutual friend who had just had a nervous breakdown. Vassos bombarded Stack Sullivan with questions and mentioned the possibility of collaboration on a book. Mostly, Vassos was fascinated by the pictorial elements of phobia, which were “essentially graphic in their expression” in the victim’s mind.⁹⁵ Stack Sullivan suggested a plan for Vassos to start his illustrations. Although Stack Sullivan did not take authorial credit, he openly associated himself with the book and lectured with Vassos. This collaboration began a lifelong friendship between the artist and the psychoanalyst, who was just beginning his career.⁹⁶

The unlikely collaboration between Vassos and Stack Sullivan, artist and intellectual, was an outgrowth of the blend of arts and intellectualism that marked New York artistic culture in the 1920s. They intermingled with artists and intellectuals, cross-fertilizing the genres and expanding Vassos’s knowledge of the

⁹⁵ Vassos/AAA, Box 1, “Writings, Phobia, MS” folder, notes on typewritten text for *Esquire* magazine editor Arnold Grinrich.

⁹⁶ Unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 37, as Vassos wrote in a handwritten introduction to an exhibition of the drawings a year later, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

inner world, which he so deeply sought to express. Their friendship continued throughout Stack Sullivan's life.⁹⁷ As Vassos wrote movingly in an exhibition of the drawings held at Hofstra University:

Phobia has been out print for many years -- the original book is dedicated to Harry Stack Sullivan, the eminent psychiatrist and friend who also guided me to the realization of *Phobia*, and the man who had a profound influence on my life. Although *Phobia* was a disturbing subject, I found it an excellent vehicle for graphic and intellectual exercise and expression.⁹⁸

For Vassos, the graphic art of *Phobia* expressed not only a public relations gambit but also a commitment to helping people with phobias, and it expanded the social mission that he carried out through his paintings. He admitted in his panel introducing the show at Syracuse University that he was not a psychologist. However, he went on to link psychological distress with modern life.⁹⁹ The theme helped give him the narrative cohesion that *Contempo* lacked, uniting the images in the book around a central issue, unlike *Contempo*'s scattered approach to social ills. Vassos may have had his own phobic issues, mainly about social interactions and possibly about heights. In 1933, relatively early in his career, he and Ruth moved out of the city to Connecticut, where he lived for the remainder of his life.

⁹⁷ Helen Swick Perry, *Psychiatrist of America: The Life of Harry Stack Sullivan* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982). Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, "Correspondence" folder, letter to Helen Swick Perry.

⁹⁸ Unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 37. Vassos wrote a handwritten introduction to an exhibition of the drawings a year later, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

⁹⁹ In a folder with many letters and autobiographical information, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.



Figure 21: "To properly clothe the city dweller, the man who must pass many times daily from heated indoors to icy streets, is a problem studied by modern science." The title reads, *Urban clothes for city shoppers*. Ad for Brokaw clothing, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

Another way of reading Vassos's graphic work is through its association with German Romanticism, particularly in his early advertisements but also in *Phobia*. In its dark, subjective depiction of urban life, Vassos's aesthetic was similar to that of the Viennese expressionist Egon Schiele and the dark expressions of German artist Christian Schad's urban characters. Like them, Vassos broke with naturalism to produce a world infused with eroticism in a symbolic cityscape reflective of inner turmoil. Here, New York was not the city of decadent flappers but rather a place where irrational beings walked the streets in search of protection.¹⁰⁰

Another aspect of the emotional city was presented in ads like those for Cammeyer Shoes (see Figure 2), where the city was a wonderland instead of a hell, and a playground of interesting goods. The above ad expressed both these themes and, ultimately, Vassos's ambivalence about the city, as the individual struggled to stay steady along the winding road, with his dramatic cape as a barrier against the harsh landscape. Here, as in other ads (see Figure 3), Vassos used rural imagery to

¹⁰⁰ For more on Expressionism, see Douglas Kellner, "Expressionism and Rebellion," *Passion and Rebellion* eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds. (New York: J.F. Bergin Publishers, 1983).

contrast with the city landscape. Each atmosphere was an extreme place, either a deadly trap of horror or an open land of wonders waiting to be observed and encountered. Vassos's concern with urban subjectivity and rural naiveté may have been influenced by the 1921 American premiere of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, one of the first horror films, and, in the same year as the publication of *Salome*, the 1927 opening of Max Beckmann's first one-person show in America.¹⁰¹

Beyond being sensationalistic and arousing emotional response to social inequity, Vassos's imagery was also intensely psychological. The drama of urban life was played out in the body of the individual, which was either depicted in the ad or suggested in the personalized, subjective perspective of the vista presented. There was no immediate identification of the people in the image; rather, Vassos showed a parable of pain in which victims were in distress, such as in the image below from *Phobia*.



Figure 22: *Kleptomania*. From *Phobia* (1929), not paginated.

¹⁰¹ Susan Noyes Platt, Modernism in the 1920s: Interpretations of Modern Art in New York from Expressionism to Constructivism (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 44-69.

Vassos's fixation on the external manifestation of internal suffering -- the urban scene infused with pain -- can also be read through an analysis of what Michael Leja calls "the contemporary discourse of modern man". In his book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting*,¹⁰² Leja argues that rumination about the self and its primitive and unconscious aspects were central to literature and art during the first half of the 20th century as a response to the horrors of war. Political scientist David Harvey similarly provides a historical context for understanding Vassos's concern with the inner life of man. Harvey marks a middle stage in modernism, spanning 1918 to 1945, when the nature of the modern man begins to be explicitly examined in the arts.¹⁰³ One of the key questions uniting European and North American art at the time was, "Can man survive the terrors of modern society?" This theme was also conveyed in Expressionistic rendering of the decaying, corrupt metropolis and the scientifically twisted world and forced some modernist artists to use abstraction as a response to such a confused world.

Leja's analysis of modern man fits with 1920s historian Ann Douglas's argument that the growing interest in Freudian psychology was linked to the search for the truth, no matter how ugly, that characterized modernism.¹⁰⁴ The solution to an alienating modern society was not to retreat into psychoanalysis, though, but into a collective acknowledgement of individual suffering and the search for a solution. Critics noted Vassos's affiliation with Freudianism in his portrayal of "supernatural horror, with Freudian symbols and ghostly skyscrapers," suggesting the popular

¹⁰² Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, (New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁰³ David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990, p. 241.

¹⁰⁴ Ann Douglas, *A Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*.

awareness of the theories.¹⁰⁵ However, Leja views Freud as one perspective among many in the struggle to find meaning in modern society, a struggle also articulated in German Expressionism and in the American version of this art form, which merged entertainment with social criticism.

Indeed, despite its dark content, *Phobia* was extremely popular.¹⁰⁶ A letter to Vassos from Joseph Margolies at Covici, Friede reveals that there was a print run of 1,532 copies. By May 29, 1935, there were only 207 copies left after selling 1,226 and giving away 99 copies. The book sold for \$3.50, so Vassos was entitled to \$613.00 in royalties. This revealing letter from Margolies also states that Vassos had already “overdrawn \$137.00” and expresses concern that the rest of the books will not sell unless there is a dramatic reduction in price.¹⁰⁷

People requested copies of the signed limited edition of *Phobia*, and it was widely reviewed.¹⁰⁸ One critic wrote that the subject of phobias suited Vassos's evocative imagery of subjective distress: “*Phobia* supplies him with perfect material, for its mood is his favorite one ... well-fitted to his adaptation of the well-known double and triple exposure of the photographer.”¹⁰⁹ Other reviewers who knew the Vassos name felt comfortable mocking the book and ran with the *Phobia* theme, one even going as far as to create new phobias, including “optiphobia, the fear of

¹⁰⁵ Review of *Phobia* and *Elegy* in *Review of Books and Life*, December 1931, 74, 4, p. 8, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹⁰⁶ Letter to Ricca, typesetter for *Humanities*, June 29, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Vassos from Joseph A. Margolies, Covici, Friede Inc., May 29, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰⁸ Raymond Loewy wrote to Vassos thanking him for a copy of the book, October 16, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰⁹ *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life*, New York: December 1931, Vol. 74, Iss. 4; p. XIII, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

pictures”; “reviewersphobia,” which was the fear of books; and “John Vassosphobia,” which he described humorously:

Watch out for the symptoms of this one. If you find yourself slouching over a copy of *Phobia* and pursuing a strange gent, intent on compelling him to read it, you’ve got John Vassosphobia. It is believed that authors deliberately spread this dreaded phobia. It has many names -- Sinclair Lewisphobia, and so on. The only way to avoid it is to say, “I read nothing but detective stories -- and that’s nearly as bad.”¹¹⁰

The publisher, Covici, Friede,¹¹¹ ran a campaign to publicize the book, requesting that people send in new phobias; the responses included aquaphobia (fear of washing) and radiophobia (fear of loudspeakers).¹¹²

Vassos held *Phobia* to be one of his greatest achievements and often referred to it in his industrial design practice. For instance, in response to Norman Bel Geddes’s request for biographical information for a *Fortune* magazine article in 1934, Vassos responded that his unique skill as a designer resulted in his successful application of psychological awareness: “My book *Phobia* is a basic treatise on human fears and conflicts of today”¹¹³ from which his design practice emerged. He bragged that it was entirely unique and that he was “the only artist who ever made a study of the psychiatry and then presented a graphic presentation of the fears and phobias that harass mankind, *Phobia*.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Juliet Lit Stern, “And What is Your Phobia,” review of *Phobia*, The Philadelphia Record, November 1, 1931, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹¹¹ Vassos seemed to have a more formal relationship with Pascal Covici. Letter to Mr. Pascal Covici, Covici, Friede Inc., October 19, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, “C” correspondence. He wrote to his editor to thank him for permission to use the illustrations, but as Vassos wrote he is “treating both illustrations and text as differently from the book as is possible.”

¹¹² “Have You a Phobia,” review of *Phobia*, Citizen, Columbus, OH, December 18, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹¹³ Letter to Norman Bel Geddes, October 25, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 7, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Vassos to Mr. Franken, February 1, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 7, correspondence.

Promoting Vassos

"A new entrant, especially a new generation of potential symbolic producers, a potential already heavily class-determined, faces a field in which the dominant positions are already occupied."¹¹⁵

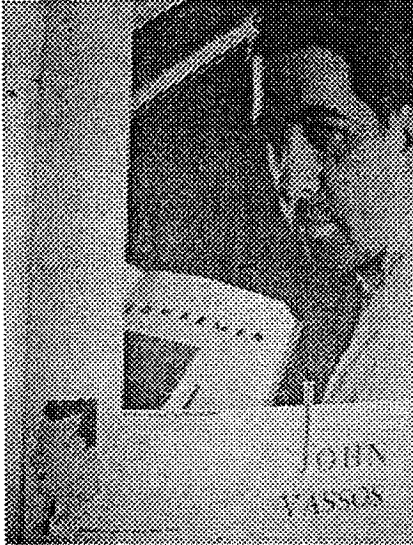


Figure 23: Vassos poses with his book *Contempo*, along with a caricatured picture by Andrew Vignaux, in the Cuban magazine *Social*, September 1931, p. 67, accompanied by an article about Vassos, "Sibolista," pp. 64-67, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.¹¹⁶

Vassos was massively promoted at the Dutton firm through brochures, public events, book signings, and exhibitions. His image appeared in magazines nationally and in Cuba (see Figure 23 above), familiarizing readers with his handsome young face and offering them the chance to better know this modernist illustrator. Some texts even relished in the caricature of Vassos, as in the image above, in which the photograph is accompanied by a drawing in the left corner of the picture. I will show in this section of the chapter that his promotion specifically as a "modernist," beyond merely helping Vassos sell books, was tied up in the development of a new system of marketing the modern author (or, in this case, illustrator). Lawrence Rainey's study of

¹¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 1980, p. 59.

¹¹⁶ *Social* ran from 1916 to 1938.

the publicity campaigns of modernist authors and their texts sheds light on how the modernist author in particular was packaged and sold, but the analysis can also be applied to Vassos the illustrator.

All of the media generated fanfare around Vassos appears contradictory to his work which was critical of the mechanizations of the mass media. Indeed, *Contempo* features an indictment of the “media” and of “advertising” while relying heavily on them. Literary theorist Lawrence Rainey suggests that presumably contradictory practice was common among modernist artists at the time. He draws his analysis from original research into the promotion of modernist writers and their texts. He reads their efforts as part of a larger set of formal principles and ideological constellation that he calls modernism. His definition goes beyond the aesthetics of this movement into a set of social practices. This includes “new strategies of reputation building involving theatricality, spectacle, publicity, and novel modes of cultural marketing and media manipulation.”¹¹⁷ His method suggests a way to analyze Vassos's promotional campaigns as orchestrated by his publisher, E.P. Dutton.

As part of their efforts to win public attention for their new artist, Dutton scheduled numerous appearances in a range of venues, including book fairs, publisher's conventions, parties, exhibitions, political discussions, and debates. To create wide exposure, Vassos the person was also promoted through the publication of his images in numerous magazines. In order to prepare for this media attention, Vassos had to develop what Rainey calls techniques of “authorial self-construction,” which entailed particular attention to clothing, personal narrative, and even choice of

¹¹⁷ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 38.

home. Vassos's snazzy penthouse on the Upper West Side, the site of many promotional parties and book launches, was the backdrop for the playboy artist's emergence in the urban art world and part of this self-construction. Journalists picked up on the resonance between his home and his art; one commented that the "Vassos' have achieved that haven that all city dwellers sigh for, a penthouse with broad veranda overlooking the Hudson river and within the last word in modernist furniture, his own design."¹¹⁸

Another aspect of his self-construction was the improvement of his voice. Vassos recounts this process in his autobiography, in particular, his efforts to master public speaking. This may have been a challenge for the thickly-accented Vassos. As he recalled, "I was careful to study other speakers. ... I must say, some of our literary giants were indeed very bad speakers: they stuttered, hesitated, and the most distracting habit was the 'errr.'" He became increasingly interested in the dynamics of public speaking, choosing a style with which he felt comfortable that involved using a mild beginning and increasing in tempo.¹¹⁹

Vassos spoke on all sorts of topics, beyond merely promoting his books, and was announced as an expert on modern art. Although it is hard to measure the intentions behind these events, certainly they brought more people in touch with the

¹¹⁸ Alta May Coleman, "Greeks Wary of Mr. Vassos Bearing Art: For He's Turned Modernist in New York," Chicago Tribune, July 19, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5. Although no one else has made this claim, the timing of the plan and the lack of evidence that Vassos was at all planning to build a skyscraper suggest that this was a fabrication aimed at gaining him coveted press attention. Vassos never mentions it again in his biographical materials or elsewhere. There are many press clippings on the plan; see "Ancient Greece and Modern Skyscrapers," Telegram, Youngstown, OH, July 12, 1930, which notes that a new edition of Salome will come out in the summer and announces the October publication of Ultimo, repeated in Telegraph, Macon, GA, July 13, 1930; Republican, Waterbury, CT, July 6, 1930; "Vassos Proposed Greek Skyscraper Under Fire," Star, Wilmington, NC, August 3, 1930; "Greek Designs Skyscraper," World, Tulsa, OK, August 17, 1930; "Book Illustrator Plans Legion Home in Athens," Gazette, Cedar Rapids, IA, September 21, 1930; Mayfield News, Palo Alto, CA, Sept. 9, 1930. All clippings come from Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹¹⁹ Syracuse Speech, "Writings," p. 36.

writer, brought him press attention, and eventually helped him expand his interior and industrial design practice, as he gained some “scholarly” credentials as a lecturer. His lectures were held at venues throughout the city, like the Plaza Hotel¹²⁰ and the Barbizon Plaza.¹²¹ Other engagements included participation in a debate on the rights of women at the Pierrepont Hotel, which also included Ralph Borsodi, economist and foe of the modern woman, and Margaret Kilkes of Collier’s.¹²²

Exhibitions of Vassos's work were held in galleries featuring framed drawings of images from his books, at the Art Center, and at the Advertising Club of New York, which held a show featuring images from *Contempo*.¹²³ A publicity brochure put out by the company lists the lecture subjects and contains a brief autobiographical study of the “Odyssey of John Vassos,” which brags that “he made an instant success with his first illustrative work, Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, which has sold over fifteen thousand copies. Today he is accepted as the founder of a new school of illustration.”¹²⁴

Many staff at Dutton were involved in promoting Vassos, including Dutton head John MacCrae, who also booked Vassos, suggesting the importance of these public events. As he wrote in a letter to Vassos, “Wanamaker’s would like to have you give a little talk on the Thursday program, Nov. 14, during their book week,”

¹²⁰ “Discuss Arts and Letters: Actors and Writers Speak Before 250 Women at Luncheon,” New York Times, January 10, 1931, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹²¹ “What is Going on This Week,” New York Times, October 18, 1931, p. 38.

¹²² Letter to Vassos from Helen Shalet, on stationery from the Pierrepont Hotel, inviting Vassos to speak on women’s rights, no date, Vassos/AAA, Box 7. The event is covered in the newspaper.

¹²³ For example, see “Local Notes,” New York Times, October 7, 1928, p. x12, which states, “at the Art Centre are now to be seen John Vassos’s illustrations for Oscar Wilde’s ‘Ballad of Reading Gaol.’” To obtain the desired atmosphere for these striking pictures, the Greek artist is said to have visited many prisons; see “Local Art News and Comment,” New York Times, April 6, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 5. In November 1930, there was an exhibition of original drawings from Ultimo at Dutton’s to promote the publication of the new book.

¹²⁴ This brochure, entitled “John Vassos: Famous Illustrator and Modernist,” can be found in Vassos/AAA, Box 2, folder entitled “RCA Murals.”

confirmed in an ad for Wanamaker Book Week.¹²⁵ In 1931, the firm hosted a big party at the Rismont restaurant, which Vassos designed, with 92 people from the worlds of art and journalism there to admire his new restaurant interior and dine on Turkish food like Shish Kebab and other regional specialties.¹²⁶

Dutton's invitation to the event points to the publishing house's pride in their author's crossover achievement in interior design. Enthusiastically, it calls the new restaurant an excellent example of "modernism gone wild" and thus an extension of Vassos's work as an illustrator who also has "the last word in modern art."¹²⁷ The press, as hoped, reported on the party and Vassos's accomplishments in design and book illustration, including his newest book promotion. The party, one reviewer wrote, took place at the Rismont, which Vassos "designed between books, since he has just turned over to his publisher, E.P. Dutton, the illustrations for *Gray's Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, which they will publish this fall."¹²⁸ Other public events and exhibitions included a show featuring works from *Phobia* on display at the home of Mrs. Walter Hoochchild.¹²⁹

For these events, Vassos prepared a number of themed lectures, among which he allowed his hosts to choose and which were based loosely on the major themes of his books, although they extended into interior design. There was one on "The Predicament of Modernism," a comprehensive résumé of the various "isms" in painting and their culmination, with a discussion of the contemporary scene and

¹²⁵ New York Times, November 14, 1929, p. 7. Also see New York Times, November 5, 1930, where Vassos is listed for the tenth annual Wanamaker Book Week event with other authors, including Russell Crouse and J.P. McEvoy. Draft text for the invitation is in Vassos/AAA, Box 5, "Dear ---- John Vassos will be host to a number of his friends... Wed. May 6 at 5pm."

¹²⁶ List of invites and menu for party, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹²⁷ Letter from E.P. Dutton to guest, signed E.P. Dutton Publicity Department, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹²⁸ "Versatile John Vassos," World, Tulsa, OK, May 31, 1931. Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

¹²⁹ Clipping from New York Evening Post, October 14, 1929, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

American contribution. Another featured the theme of “Phobia – Its Whys and Wherefores,” a study of the fears that harass civilized man with the underlying causes for the existence of these phobias. The announcement for this lecture notes that “this psychiatric discussion is for advanced groups.” Yet another talk focused on design; asked the question, “Is Modern Design Permanent Expression?” and explored “its value in industry, in architecture, in advertising, in decor, and in our daily lives.” “The Art of Illustrating” covered Vassos’s theory of illustration, and “The Art of Graphically Portraying Emotions and Ideas” demonstrated the true function of the modern illustrator.¹³⁰ This lecture was linked to a book launch, the forthcoming interpretation of Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*.¹³¹ It was also alternatively titled “Illustration and Its Function in Our Time,” a talk which he gave with Ruth Vassos.¹³²

For these talks, Vassos received a small honorarium to cover expenses.¹³³

Requests for lectures came from groups throughout New York City, including philanthropic organizations like the Junior Federation of the Jewish Philanthropic Societies,¹³⁴ arts organizations like Rebel Arts, a socialist organization (which he declined),¹³⁵ and the College Art Association.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ All of these lectures are described in a brochure entitled “The Odyssey of John Vassos,” Vassos/AAA, Box 2, Vassos/AAA file entitled “RCA Murals.” Letter to Mr. James Pond on February 18, 1933, regarding speaking at the Explorers Club, lists the following lectures: “The Art of Illustrating,” “Painters and Modern Painting,” “Modern Art – Design and Interiors,” “Human Phobias,” and “Kubla Khan,” Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

¹³¹ Indeed, many of Vassos’s talks in the mid-1930s referred to the upcoming *Kubla Khan* release, this following the mediocre response to *Contempo* and Vassos’s contract with Covici, Friede for *Phobia*.

¹³² “What is Going on This Week,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1931, p. 38.

¹³³ “I believe \$25.00 will take care of my expenses,” Vassos wrote in a letter to Mr. Orsamus Turner Harris, April 12, 1933, agreeing to present a lecture at the “Men’s Club at Cranford,” Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

¹³⁴ Letter to John Vassos from Joseph Franken, January 16, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

¹³⁵ Letter from Rebel Arts, November 21, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

¹³⁶ Letter to/from Frances Pollack, March 14, 1930, in which the fee is quoted at \$100.00, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

Other markers of Vassos's success include heavy press coverage and acclaim. In the "Chronicle and Comment" in *A Review of Books and Life*, an article summarizing the literary achievements of the past decade, Vassos was listed among the great authors of the 1920s. He was described as "The new illustrator of Oscar Wilde and author with Ruth Vassos of a pictorial record of American life, *Contempo*, illustrated in caricature in a statue by Hidalgo."¹³⁷



Figure 24: An early publicity photograph of Vassos cultivating the accouterments of the upper class, with his pipe and suit, in a representation never seen again. Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

Publicity photographs produced by Dutton reveal the construction of the artist and author as modernist through movement, dress, and affiliation with urban icons. With his crisp suits and pipe, Vassos was posed as a singular individual, a creator, and a modern self-made man, composed and unsmiling. The early photograph (see Figure 24) is unique in its portrayal of the artist as a literary icon, reader, and pipe smoker. Later photographs of Vassos, as his image as an artist became established, showed him as a more hip person dressed in baggy suits and swinging with radio

¹³⁷ "Chronicle and Comment," *A Review of Books and Life*, January 1930, 70, 5: p. 529. The picture caption reads, "the new illustrator of Oscar Wilde and author with Ruth Vassos of a pictorial record of American life, *Contempo* Statue by Hidalgo."

stars. One image shows him on the rooftop of his penthouse apartment hanging out with Rudy Vallee. The group shot, taken at an E.P. Dutton press party in New York in 1928, includes Ruth Vassos, Rudy, and John. The caption on the back reads “PR shot with Rudy Vallee at E.P. Dutton Press Party.”¹³⁸ Although Ruth was rarely seen in images with Vassos, her presence as a collaborator was important, not only as evidence of Vassos’s progressive views on women, as he shared the spotlight with his wife, but also because she was an accomplished artist, having established a career as a fashion writer.¹³⁹

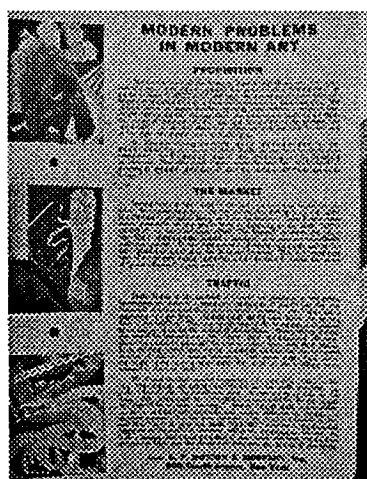


Figure 25: This publicity brochure published by E.P. Dutton featured images from *Contempo*. From the top, Prohibition, The Market, and Traffic. Publicity release for *Contempo*, E.P. Dutton Papers, Box 55, file "Vassos, John".

By far, the most elaborate staging of a public relations event was an announcement of Vassos’s plan to build the largest skyscraper in Athens, which was met with huge opposition there. This announcement, which took place in Vassos’s Upper West Side penthouse, was mentioned in many major newspapers just in time for the release of the second edition of *Salome* in the summer and of *Ultimo* in the fall

¹³⁸ “Mr. Vassos with Mrs. Vassos and Rudy Vallee at E.P. Dutton Press Party in New York, 1928,” E Vassos/Syracuse, Box 5, Memorabilia, Photos (personal).

¹³⁹ “Monodoy,” unpublished scripts, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, in a file labeled “RCA Murals.”

of 1930. The announcement that Vassos was designing the building on behalf of the American Legion in Athens was made at a “tea party at his studio” and led to a string of articles covering the angry response by Athens residents against the plan. The heavily publicized story was accompanied by a caricature of Vassos by Wolf Kska in certain editions.¹⁴⁰ In the *New York Times*, which covered the story most fully, it was reported that the \$1,000,000 cost of the 16-story skyscraper would be defrayed by Americans of Greek origin and that more than \$300,000 had already been collected. “The architect [Vassos] explained yesterday that in design, it would tend toward the modernistic.”¹⁴¹ The event was never mentioned again after this, suggesting that it was more publicity and fabrication than a realized plan. Indeed, the fact that Vassos was not an architect seems to have gone unnoticed in the press accounts of the event.

Held on the eve of the release of *Ultimo*, a response to architect Hugh Ferriss’s recent publication on urban planning, the well-timed announcement of Vassos’s involvement as a builder substantiated his participation in the era’s most important discussion about the height of skyscrapers and their impact on light. The Athens skyscraper plan, Vassos’s most elaborate publicity event, thus connected the artist with great architecture, got reporters to his apartment, and drew attention to the forthcoming *Ultimo*.

¹⁴⁰ “Likes Skyscrapers,” *News*, Charlotte, NC, August 3, 1930. The same picture was also used in “As Wolf Kska Sees Vassos,” *Star*, Wilmington, NC, October 12, 1930, Vassos/AAA, Box 20.

¹⁴¹ “Greeks Protesting Athens Skyscraper,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1930, p. 24, Vassos/AAA, Box 20.



Figure 26: "As Wolf Kska Sees Vassos," *Star*, Wilmington, NC, October 12, 1930, Box 20, Vassos/AAA.

At the same time that his books were being promoted, Vassos's illustrations were being printed in magazines to illustrate articles, often those relating to the decline of modern civilization.¹⁴² Editors appreciated that Vassos's readily accessible and bold images complimented the growing number of articles on urban ills.¹⁴³ For example, an image from *Phobia* entitled *Mechanophobia* (the fear of machinery) was used with an article entitled "Taking Heart Against our Perils in The Machine Age."¹⁴⁴ E.P. Dutton encouraged editors to use the graphics, offering to "supply mats (65 screen cuts)" at no charge through the publicity department at Dutton.¹⁴⁵

Beyond gaining wide exposure through the publication of Vassos's illustrations in the print media, E.P. Dutton used innovative packaging and price scales for his books to increase sales. Vassos, named "a certain artist of importance,"

¹⁴² "Mechanophobia: The Fear of Machinery" is used to illustrate an article by Rose C. Feld, "Taking Heart Against Our Perils in the Machine Age," *New York Times*, January 3, 1932, p. BR3.

¹⁴³ Among the places his images were reproduced outside of book reviews include "Books Especially Prepared for Christmas Giving," *New York Times*, December 4, 1927, p. BR5; and from *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, "Conceptions by John Vassos," in *Forum*, December 1929, p. 320. "The Market" is reproduced in *Forum*, February 1930.

¹⁴⁴ *New York Times*, January 3, 1932, p. BR3.

¹⁴⁵ Vassos/AAA, Box 1, "Illustration and Advertising," for example, "Modern Problems in Modern Art" brochure. The information about availability of images is listed at the bottom of the page.

topped the Dutton Christmas list of authors with books that had been “selected because of their gift qualities, because of their 'good press' and because of the versatility of their appeal.”¹⁴⁶ Dutton promoted Vassos’s books, bundling similar work as a trilogy, including *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *Salome* and *The Harlot’s House*, at a savings of about \$1.00 for the purchase of all three.¹⁴⁷

Vassos had other affiliations in the literary world that expanded his social network and, subsequently, increased his visibility in the modernist art world. He worked closely on the literary magazine *Contempo*, out of North Carolina, which took the name of Vassos’s 1929 book with his permission. The short-lived magazine, running from May 1931 to February 15, 1934,¹⁴⁸ was published by Milton Abernathey and Anthony Buttitta.¹⁴⁹ It was a compilation of major modernist writers and journalists, who took a stance against traditional literature, described as “a violent tonic for that haberdashery of current bourgeois literature,”¹⁵⁰ and featured writings by Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Langston Hughes, and William Carlos Williams. Vassos was involved in the design of the magazine and also contributed writings and reviews. His innovative cover used a new modern type called Futura, which met with the approval of Buttitta, whose letter revealed the novelty of the use

¹⁴⁶ “Royalty Earned and Deductions to April 30, 1933,” for John Vassos from E.P. Dutton & Company, June 2, 1933, E.S. Bird Library, E.P. Dutton Papers, Box 55, “Correspondence,” p. 1.

¹⁴⁷ Advertisement in *A Review of Books and Life*, December 1929, 70:4, p. xvii. “Trilogy of John Vassos is \$3.50 each and bound in a beautiful gift box, \$10.50.” For a study of advertising and books, see Megan Benton’s “Sizzle and Smoke: Iconography of Books and Reading in Modern American Advertising,” 18 *Publishing History*, (1995): 77-90.

¹⁴⁸ Hutchinson, Nathaniel West, “Contempo Magazine and the Composition of Miss Lonelyhearts,” 24.1 *Resources for American Literary Study* (1998): 84-100.

¹⁴⁹ Vassos’s involvement with *Contempo* is chronicled in a series of letters between John Vassos and Anthony Buttitta, from July 2, 1932 to March 3, 1933, located in Vassos/AAA, Box 8, which also discuss the fall out between the two editors.

¹⁵⁰ *Contempo* promotional materials, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

of Futura and the meaning of Vassos's design to a regional arts journal. He wrote to Vassos in praise of the design:

You can't imagine how much I like the cover design you made for our magazine. It's goddam good ... it adds so much to the magazine. You don't realize what a difference it makes. I couldn't get Futura Bold. ... I got Bernard gothic ... had to buy some for this print shop ... they didn't have it. ... That is as good as Futura ... they didn't even know what Futura is.¹⁵¹

Beyond Vassos's engagement in the "alternative" arts scene and the connection of the modernist book *Contempo* to the modernist author it published, letters between Vassos and Buttitta revealed Vassos's stature in the modern art scene. In a letter to Abernathey regarding a dispute over the ownership of a Vassos illustration, Buttitta wrote that "Vassos doesn't need publicity nor promotion; he is too big and too much of a genuine creator for that. ..." ¹⁵² After the magazine folded, Vassos maintained his connections with modernist writers through the Silvermine Arts Guild.

Despite all the efforts made towards promoting Vassos, his books did not actually sell out. According to letters from MacCrae at Dutton, by 1932 there was major overstock: "In looking at our inventory records, I see that we have on hand at least 2,000 extra copies each of *Ultimo* and *Contempo*." There were 167 limited numbered copies signed by both John and Ruth Vassos at \$25.00, of which only 56 of sold between October 29, 1929, and April 30, 1930.¹⁵³ MacCrae hoped to unload the copies at a cheap price to Vassos. A letter to Vassos, which detailed the financial

¹⁵¹ Letter from Buttitta to Abernathey, July 2, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁵² Letter from Buttitta to Abernathey, July 2, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁵³ Letter to John Vassos from John MacCrae, January 19, 1934, *Vassos/Syracuse* Box 55, folder entitled "Correspondence."

arrangements, revealed that Vassos was actually overpaid, as, according to the letter, he received an advance royalty of \$1,000 on both *Contempo* and *Ultimo*.¹⁵⁴

Why did Vassos end his publishing career? Advertising had long abandoned modernism as a visual form, and illustrated books had given way to comic books, where powerful imagery with little accompanying text found a new home.¹⁵⁵ The narrative graphic cartoon art in the emergent form of comic books became wildly popular in the 1930s.¹⁵⁶ Like the cartoon art that replaced it, the rapid editing style of surrealist film and the fantastic perspectival shifts characterized Vassos's work, but were moved into the realm of the comic book. By the mid-1930s, Vassos's drawing style was becoming increasingly in demand on murals, where he continued to express the elaborate themes using similar methods as he did in his illustrations, but this time on the walls of his corporate clients. He continued to produce paintings and murals throughout his career, particularly at the Silvermine Artists Gallery in Connecticut, but also for RCA as a consultant designer, where he frequently contributed to the in-house newsletter and continued to create murals for World's Fair exhibitions and other displays.

Vassos and The Art Market Today

Vassos's short life as a book illustrator; the unpopular subjects of his books, with their sketchy politics; and his cartoon-like drawing style excluded him from the canon of important modern book illustrators, despite the early comparisons to

¹⁵⁴ Letter to John Vassos from John MacCrae, January 19, 1934, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 55, folder entitled "Correspondence."

¹⁵⁵ "Book Illustration Grows Steadily Better: The Second Annual Exhibition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts Shows Encouraging Progress," *New York Times*, December 4, 1927, p. BR2.

¹⁵⁶ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994). See also Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*, trans. Nadia Fowler (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

Beardsley. His brief fame and relative obscurity as an artist have left contemporary curators confused about how to characterize and understand his work. Usually, it is categorized as social criticism and included in major exhibitions on the machine age and art deco eras. Hopefully, this chapter will help contextualize and root his imagery in popular aesthetics, which at the time were undergoing a great shift. The reemergence of stylized animation in Disney films and the rise of full-time cable programming devoted to animation, with animators searching for new material, may lead to an increase in popularity of his work.¹⁵⁷

Even in the 1930s, no one knew how to characterize Vassos's imagery as modern artist or as radical critic. While this differentiation may speak to the more polarized political position of artists in the United States, it also speaks to confusion about how to interpret his affiliation with German Expressionism, its individualistic perspective, and its expression of inner turmoil. Vassos used two styles of illustration: the expressionistic architecture of *Contempo* and *Phobia* and the streamlined drama of *Ultimo*. This shift, along with his refusal to align himself with a political party, have made him hard to pinpoint in terms of genre.

Vassos's work can be understood as an expression of the popular front's critical view of mass culture and its demand that artists participate in social debate. These ideas were most vividly expressed in Vassos's work for the Silvermine Guild. Its *Social Democracy* show was held at the Riverside Museum in New York City while Vassos was president of the Guild. The was accompanied by a symposium on "Art in Democracy" and was meant to express an alternative view of the "World of

¹⁵⁷ I have always thought that "Dromophobia" would make an excellent logo for a commuters' rights group.

Tomorrow” to the one being presented at the 1939 World’s Fair, which depicted a corporate version of the world to come. The *Social Democracy* show contrasted sharply with that vision in its process, with no jury, no hanging committee, no competition, and no refusals, and its themes of social inequity and the dangers of militarization.

The well-received show, which included work by Drexler Jacobson, Leslie Randall, Walter Siner, and David Robinson, was seen by 30,000 people during the music festival at the Guild and then moved to Philadelphia to the Warwick Galleries.¹⁵⁸ One reviewer commented on the scope and power of the show, observing that it drew its “vigor [from] the pictorial propaganda of the Russians” to show the dangers of modern society. Indeed, the guild acknowledged its debt to the Works Progress Administration in stimulating artists to express their political views openly.¹⁵⁹ Vassos wrote in the introduction to the second show of the Social Statement Series, also held at the Riverside Museum, that it was;

“the obligation of the creative person to sustain cultural values in a time like this... through his talent to crystallize, to unify to keep alive and to advance the vital hopes and aspirations of a people.”¹⁶⁰

Vassos's contribution to the show, the sarcastically titled “Everything is Hunkey Dorey” (see Figure 27 below), incorporated the symbols of the World’s Fair, the trylon and perisphere placed in the back of the image, to express the theme of humans being forced to go underground while machines take over the earth. The

¹⁵⁸ Michael Shaw, “Exhibits and Studio Chips,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 5, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 20.

¹⁵⁹ *The Silverminer: Devoted to Silvermine and Silvermine Life* (New Canaan, CT: New Canaan Publications, 1943), New York Public Library of the Performing Arts. Also, see Vassos/AAA, Box 1, “Photos” for photos from the *Social Democracy* show at the Riverside Museum, New York, June 30 -- July 31, 1938.

¹⁶⁰ Edward Alden Jewell, “Silvermine Guild Gives art Display,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1941, p. 28.

huddling, wounded human figures, reduced to primordial shapes with their giant heads and big eyes, retreated helplessly in this frightening image. Vassos's critique of the World's Fair is particularly poignant since his designs for RCA televisions were being exhibited there.

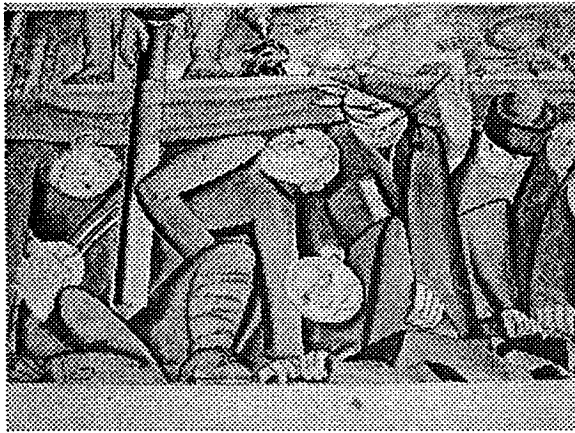


Figure 27: *Everything is Hunkey Dorey*. From the Silvermine Social Statement Show, 1936.¹⁶¹ Vassos/AAA, Box 25.

Thus, at the Silvermine, Vassos found another outlet for his artistic practice and social criticism. While he did not continue publishing books, his experience as an illustrator influenced and informed his industrial design practice. In particular, it made him attuned to the relationships between people and machines and between individual bodies and the settings they inhabit. He continued to examine the emotional impact of graphic imagery in the logos that he designed, which were visual composites of the main theme he explored in his illustrated work, mainly the integration of the image and the word.

¹⁶¹ Vassos's picture "God Bless Our Hoe" was reproduced in *Time*, July 25, 1938, pp. 41-42, along with an announcement about the show.

Selected Publications List

Salome, Oscar Wilde, 1927 & 1930
Ballad of Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde, 1928 & 1930
The Harlot's House and Other Poems, Oscar Wilde, 1929
Contempo, Text by Ruth Vassos, 1929
Ultimo, Text by Ruth Vassos, 1930
Phobia, John Vassos, 1931
Elegy in a Country Church-Yard, Thomas Gray, 1931
Kubla Khan, Samuel Coleridge, 1933 & 1934
Humanities, Text by Ruth Vassos, 1935
Synthesis No. 1: Poems by Dorothy Randolph Byard, 1937¹⁶²
Dogs are Like That, 1941

¹⁶² This was a job he tried to pass off onto Lynd Ward; see letter to Lynd Ward, March 30, 1936, in which he asks Lynd if he can illustrate the poems, which would be "an interesting thing to do." Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "W" correspondence, p. 1. Ward refuses, stating that a person affiliated with the Silvermine would be a better choice to "interpret the relationship between the picture and the text": Letter from Lynd Ward, April 12, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "W" correspondence.

Chapter Three

Selling with Style: Vassos, Industrial Design, and Other Sales Techniques

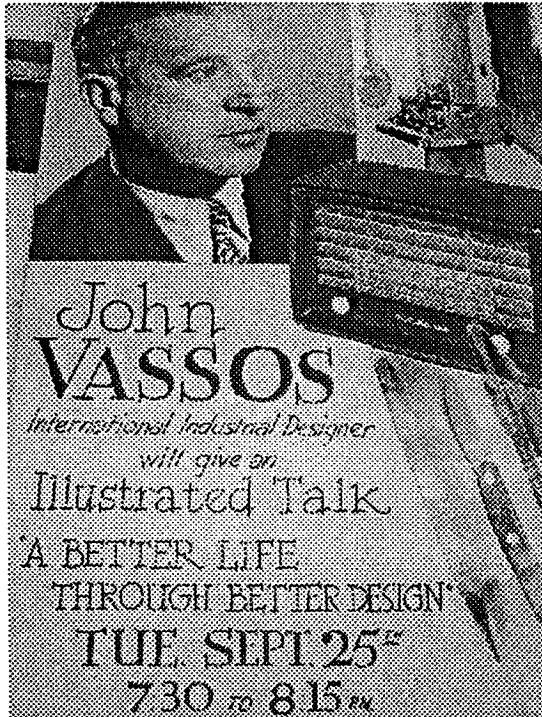


Figure 28: This poster shows some of Vassos's most important designs -- which will be discussed in this chapter -- including the streamlined paring knife for Remington and the New Yorker Radio for RCA. Vassos/AAA, Box 20.

The field of “industrial design” emerged in the late 1920s.¹ Individuals from various professions, including graphic design, stage design, and advertising illustration, offered their services in a bundled package, providing materials for improving profits from sketch to sale. During this time, along with his illustration and interior design work, Vassos branched into industrial design. He cultivated a client base through contacts and promotional letters, which resulted in him being hired by

¹ One may take 1927 as the seminal year when the title “industrial design” came into public use, as General Electric and General Motors added stylists to their staffs. In 1927, Vassos also began working for Armand. Raymond Loewy’s first assignment came in 1929, according to Arthur Pulos, America’s Industrial Design Genesis,” *Innovation*, Spring 1991, p. 11.

the country's largest manufacturer of radios by 1933 and solidified his position in the new field. This chapter presents Vassos's major early industrial designs for various manufacturers and as such, reveals the networks of power, authority, and influence through which Vassos worked. The archival papers, which contain a vast compilation of detailed letters between Vassos and his clients, enabled me to track the enormous effort and collaboration involved in the production of a single product.

The letters show the process of industrial design as balancing, compromising, and sorting out the disparate demands of all the people involved. The process involved more than Vassos having a new idea or sketching out an idea for a product redesign; there were other forces involved which would enable a design to come to the market. The process included negotiations with manufacturers, engineers, materials companies, and sales that are not self-evident in the final product.

My effort to trace Vassos's designs revealed the factors that led to failed products and the ones that led to success. In this overview of Vassos's self-construction as an industrial designer, I also provide a summary of the factors that led to his inclusion among this first designers of the 1930s. This chapter also serves as a compendium of Vassos's major design efforts, which I separate from his interior designs, restyling efforts for RCA corporate equipment, and the television, which is covered in the last chapter. In addition, I address the impact of streamlining, the dominant style trend of the 1930s, and its meaning for Vassos as a stylistic imperative. In terms of scope, I move from Vassos's first design in 1927, the year generally accepted as the birth of the profession, to his 1940 radio designs for RCA.

Normally, studies of a design will record and collect the products, using a synchronic approach to put a product in perspective among others of the same time. Jeffrey Meikle takes this approach in his overview of 1930s radios.² Another approach diachronically positions the product in relation to developments over time. Ellen Lupton's compilation shows the evolution of the telephone using this method.³ My study, instead, freezes the activity of a single designer at a single moment. It covers the activity that made the product possible, adding depth to the study of an object by tracing it from conception to production.⁴ This pared-down case study reveals the multiple roles played by Vassos as an engineer of packaging materials; a specialist in production technologies, including quality control; and an expert in sales techniques. This moment in design history is especially complex, as it occurs before the specialization of functions and increased hierarchization of manufacturing renders the consultant industrial designer obsolete. It was a moment when the designer was involved in all processes of design, from soliciting the contract to drawing and marketing.

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of Vassos's designs prior to 1939 and details the ones that were most important in his development, including the Armand lotion bottle, the Coca-Cola Dispenser, and the turnstile. Each of these case studies reveals an aspect of design specialization, including packaging design, materials malfunctions, and the use of psychology in design for urban space. The last

² Jeffrey Meikle, "Domesticating Modernity: Ambivalence and Appropriation, 1920-1940," *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885-1945*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1995): 143-168.

³ Ellen Lupton, *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).

⁴ This method of telling the story of the evolution of a product from idea to manufacture to sale is also used by Russell Flinchum in *The Man in the Brown Suit* and in Raymond Loewy's *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*.

part of the chapter covers Vassos's radio designs, focusing on materiality, design education, and the challenges of working for a large corporation.

Entering the Industrial Design Field

Vassos's output as an industrial designer outside of RCA was not huge but was significant, as his earliest designs taught him valuable lessons and established his reputation as a serious industrial designer. Although he went to work for RCA in 1933, he continued to solicit clients throughout the 1930s, adding to his income and client base. His early contacts with clients consisted of pitch letters in which Vassos listed, sometimes ad nauseum, all of his accomplishments. These letters are a good place to cull information about the process of soliciting new work and the networks that were formed to unite designers and manufacturers. The letters are heavily promotional, biased by the designer's effort to make himself appear as prolific as possible. For example, in a letter to a potential client, Walgreen's Pharmacy, he wrote as if he had been designing for decades, stating that by 1933, his work included:

“redesigning and bringing up to date the entire line of Armand Products; revolutionizing the turnstile industry by the creation of a turnstile for the Perey Turnstile Company; Coca-Cola dispenser and sterilizers; a modern stove for Montgomery Ward – and many minor objects too numerous to mention.”⁵

These minor objects “too numerous to mention” were actually just a few other products, including silverware for the Wallace Company, which was never produced but was photographed by Margaret Bourke-White⁶; the first Lucite pen for the

⁵ Letter to R.H. Riemenschneider, head of Walgreen's Pharmacy, February 18, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2.

⁶ Vassos criticized the Wallace Silver Company, for not understanding that the designer was more than a draftsman, but also a publicist. Letter to Richard Bach, February 23, 1937, Vassos/AAA, Box 8 in reply to Bach's letter from February 11, 1937.

Waterman Company in 1928⁷; and a modern French telephone for AT&T, which was also never produced but for which Vassos received a patent⁸.

Vassos primarily considered himself an illustrator and display expert (as discussed in the next chapter). Yet, as he strived to bundle all his talents in a self-promotional sweep, he soon realized that he could package these skills into the profession of “industrial designer.” As such, Vassos’s pitch letters, which list his various accomplishments, reveal how broad the category of industrial designer really was.⁹ They also reveal the priority of the manufacturer to reach the wealthiest client. In his earliest letters, Vassos associated his products and therefore himself with the institutions of status and prestige, and he tended to list companies aimed at the high-end markets. A letter to Carl Weeks, owner and president of Armand Products,¹⁰ contains such a list as Vassos sought to align himself with prestigious firms. He wrote:

My style has been associated with nothing but the finest products. Cammeyer shoes 1927-1929, French line 1929-31, Piver perfumes 1920, Bonwit Teller, Saks Fifth Avenue, Lord & Taylor, Wanamaker Venturus, Curtis Wright Transport service, and for the past five years the Packard motor car; this outside of my industrial design, which has all been for class products. My style is definitely associated with class products and class advertising ...¹¹

Vassos also began to include his accomplishments as an interior designer among the skills he offered. For example, in a letter to the head of Walgreen’s Pharmacy, Vassos wrote, “I devoted my talents and energies for the past four years to

⁷ Vassos /AAA, Box 2, “Half-Century of Design,” p. 49.

⁸ See Design Patent 81562, July 1930.

⁹ See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, for a discussion of this early period before “advertising put on overalls” during the Depression.

¹⁰ Letter from Vassos to Roy Norr, December 10, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹¹ Letter from Vassos to Carl Weeks, March 14, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p.2.

... modern decor.”¹² Although these letters sound crudely self-promotional, Vassos was not the only industrial designer using vanity to promote his fledgling business. As design historian Christina Cogdell documents, Norman Bel Geddes was similarly boastful. In his pitch letters, he states that he is “a man of great versatility and dynamic qualities. Norman Bel Geddes has through the medium of design found himself in the midst of innumerable vastly different fields and in each one of them has left his mark.”¹³ The newly minted designers needed to find ways to sell themselves in an open market, which at the time had no real definition of the field, leading to this unchecked bragging.

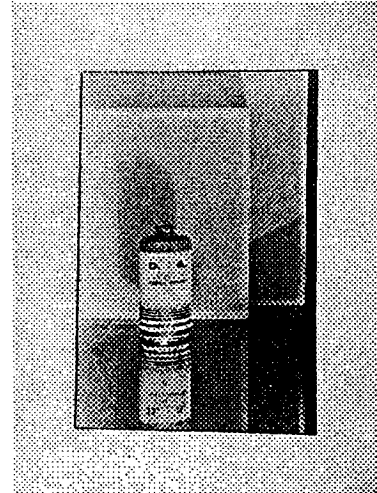
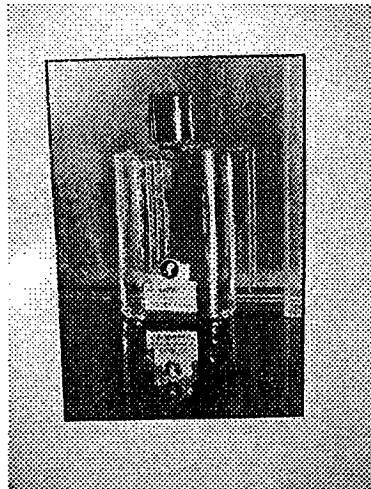
Another notable feature of these pitch letters, evident in the Bel Geddes letter cited above, is the way in which designers sold themselves on the versatility of their skills set: the more skills they had, the more they could offer their client. At the same time, they sought to differentiate themselves from other designers offering the same services by choosing a specialty. From 1927 to 1934, Vassos’s description of himself shifted from that of a man associated with class -- as expressed in his advertising illustrations in his association with Packard and Bonwit Teller -- to a man who was knowledgeable about psychology. He increasingly emphasized this claim, especially following the publication of a 1934 *Fortune* magazine article where this unique talent is mentioned. This special skill enabled him to stand out among the other designers, none of whom had Vassos’s intense association with psychoanalysis.

¹² Letter to R.H. Riemenschneider, head of Walgreen’s Pharmacy, February 18, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2.

¹³ Norman Bel Geddes, from a draft of a press release titled “Caption Material,” file 381, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, the Theater Arts Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, quoted in Christina Cogdell, “The Futurama Recontextualized: Norman Bel Geddes’s Eugenic ‘World of Tomorrow,’” 52.2 *American Quarterly* (2000): 193-245.

Vassos entered the area of product design with a bang. As he mentioned many times in his letters, his first design for the Armand company was extremely successful. The dual-function lotion bottle that doubled as a flask was popular during Prohibition as a way to smuggle liquor to clubs. As well, its curved shape allowed easy portability as it fit into a back or shirt pocket. Vassos described the bottle years later, perhaps with some exaggeration:

“We were at the height of the so-called noble experiment. Meaning the prohibition days and all of us used to make bathtub gin. We mixed it in the bathroom with gin, always good alcohol, juniper, and glycerin. But we had no way of carrying it to nightclubs, no flasks. sales [went] up....”¹⁴



Figures 29 and 30: Images of Vassos's designs for the Armand Company. On the left, the screw top bottle, and on the right, the D.A. toothpowder. Images by Margaret Bourke-White from the Silvermine Guild. The D.A. powder image is also at Syracuse University, with the caption "packaging solution for tooth powder, color ivory and viridian green." These photos are also held in Vassos/AAA, Box 20.

The design was successful particularly since Vassos took into account the dual function of the product, first as a container, and second and more importantly, as a flask. Drawing from human experience, his design exhibits the subversive use of mass production to undermine legal restraint. This first design led Vassos to be aware

¹⁴ Vassos Autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 20.

of the power of the package, which could convey a range of meanings to the customer related to status, convenience, “eye appeal,” and association with a reputable company. The role of the designer went beyond the product to include the way it is represented.

Photographs of the clever bottle by Vassos’s friend Margaret Bourke-White show that as early as 1927 Vassos was aware of the need for visual beauty as captured by photography. This meant the designer had to consider how the package would be displayed in the first stages of the design process. Heavily reproduced photographs from the archives show that although they were mass-produced products, Vassos’s packages for Armand were photographed as if they were works of art. Vassos, who knew Bourke-White from the Art Students League, seemed to have exchanged interior design for photography.¹⁵

Bourke-White’s big bold black and white photographs reveal her characteristic style, with dramatic lighting and heightened attention to form. To create an emotional portrait of the packages, she added lighting and texture; the soft curtains and the black shiny sensuous surface reflected the label in a pool of light, revealing a narcissistic bottle in love with its image. This doubling effect expands the product, endowing it with the magic and aura that advertisers sought.¹⁶ Bourke-White was in many ways the ideal person to photograph Vassos’s “monumental designs.” With the groundbreaking modernist photography that became her signature style, she could

¹⁵ They also shared job leads and props. Letters between Bourke-White and Vassos are held in the Bourke-White Papers, Syracuse University, Box 53, “Vassos.”

¹⁶ The conceit that a mirror is magical in some way, that what we see in the mirror is another world rather than a reflection of this one, is an idea that appealed also to the photographer Brassai, among others. See Mark Pendergrast, Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair With Reflection (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

capture the heroic optimism of the machine age through a single object.¹⁷ Other photographers, working at the same time, were exploring the relationship of design and photography, particularly the Bauhaus who were concerned with geometry, repetition, and reflection. Unlike the Bauhaus imagery, Vassos used photography as a way to enhance package design.¹⁸

These images were not used in any advertising campaigns; rather, they were included in the portfolios of Vassos and Bourke-White. They reveal Vassos's strength in recognizing that the salability of the product goes beyond styling the package to how the package is displayed. As Vassos later explained, "The styling and designing of a product is not where the work of the industrial designer stops. Promotion and presentation after the styling and designing have been done are equally important and are a very definite part of the industrial designer's job."¹⁹

Vassos knew from experience that modern marketing techniques were needed to sell modern products. Indeed, he was frustrated when the Wallace Silver Company refused to let him get involved in display and marketing. After designing three separate lines in metals of sterling, plate, and functional alloy over a six-month period, the company let him go, as they were not "progressive enough to continue [his] programs" of marketing.²⁰ Other designers with similar backgrounds were also involved in merchandising in all areas of product presentation. In 1936, Henry

¹⁷ Dianne Pilgrim et al., *The Machine Age*, p. 91 analyzes Bourke-White's cover photograph of the Fort Peck dam for the first issue of *Life* magazine on November 23, 1936, in these terms.

¹⁸ See Suzanne E. Pastor, "Photography and the Bauhaus," *The Archive: Center for Creative Photography*, University of Arizona Research Series, no. 21, March 1985, p.12. For more on advertising and photography in the 1930s, see Patricia Johnston, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography* (1997).

¹⁹ Letter to Mr. Brown, Gray and Dudley (Stoves), July 11, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ Letter to Richard Bach, February 23, 1937, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Vassos complained about Mr. Morris, the president of Wallace Bros. Mfg. Co., in a letter to Roy Norr, December 10, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

Dreyfuss noted that, “a second important change in industrial design is the way it is breaking into new fields the designer must be able to understand merchandising.”²¹

Vassos’s bottle for D.A. toothpowder, a new concept in tooth cleaning, is another example of designing packaging not only for sales but also for photography. Vassos wrapped the bottle with thick strips that encircled the base, creating a striking exterior that fused letters and shapes. The double boxed geometric frame in the photograph (Figure 30) emphasizes the package’s graphics. The package was intended to be photographed, according to Vassos in a letter to the manufacturer, who wrote that this package had enough photographic appeal to “dominate the pages of any magazine.”²² So while these photographs were used to sell the design to the manufacturer, Carl Weeks, Vassos also anticipated the way that the product would look in the pages of a magazine, in a modern ad layout.²³

Although the product was never produced, Vassos was tapping into a fashion trend that went beyond packaging. Fashion historian Anne Hollander argues that cinema’s impact on style in the 1930s led to increased use of black and white in fashion. Bodies and fashion in the age of black and white cinema conformed to the visuality of photographic style, since “as the sense of luxury began more and more to depend on the confections of the movie imagination, color drained out of elegance

²¹ Henry Dreyfuss, “Industrial Design is a Profession,” 18 Electrical Manufacturing, October 1937 quoted in Flinchum, The Man in the Brown Suit, p. 73.

²² Letter to Carl Weeks, March 14, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2.

²³ Vassos inquired about the production status of the package from Carl Weeks, Armand owner, writing, “I had visions of being able to purchase the perfected D.A. can. I designed but evidently you have not put it on the market.” Letter to Carl Weeks, January 28, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

and was replaced by the whole black-and-white spectrum."²⁴ Luxury was exemplified by the colorless textures in motion, sequins, flat platinum hair, and fur, which all looked great in black and white. In Bourke-White's photos, similarly, glamour is suggested by the drapes behind the bottle, the doubling of the image, and the layered beveled glass that add action to the still images and excitement to the product. Her photographs tie fashion to packaging and photography to wealth and power, which is just what Vassos was seeking when he asked Bourke-White to mass-produce these images.

Beyond designing packaging for luxury goods, designers worked in a range of media, applying "styling" to everything from toothpicks to cars, which led to the overapplication of design and accusations about the frivolous nature of the profession. This wide-ranging application of style, regardless of the significance or cost of the product, remains an object of fascination among scholars. For example, the title of industrial design historian John Heskett's recent book is *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*.²⁵ The title reflects a fascination with the designer's scope and also refers back to a chapter in Raymond Loewy's *Never Leave Well Enough Alone* entitled "from toothpicks to locomotives."²⁶ It also refers to the designer's enormous versatility to design in a range of materials for a range of uses. Designers indeed agreed that they would willingly restyle anything. As Vassos wrote somewhat theoretically,

²⁴ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 243. Lucy Fischer, *Designing Women: Cinema, Art Deco and the Female Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) discusses the relationship of cinema to design and its impact on the social construction of femininity in the 1920s.

²⁵ John Heskett, *Toothpicks & Logos: Design in Everyday Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002); this point is not made in the book but is made in my forthcoming review of the book for *Design Issues* (Spring 2005).

²⁶ Loewy, *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*, pp. 133-141.

“Industrial design consists of styling an object from the point of view of form, of color, and of functionalism in order to make the object of more appeal to the buying public, **no matter what that object might be**”(emphasis mine).²⁷

While the overblown approach to style was costly, it was worthwhile to producers and retail outlets that were desperately seeking to improve sales. The sense of “appeal” included levels of sensory satisfaction, primarily visual and tactile attraction.

In the 1930s, “styling” as Vassos mentions was synonymous with streamlining. Streamlining was the second major aesthetic to shape mass production in American consumer society, after the art deco or “zig zag moderne” of the 1920s. It was a style that replaced the “exuberance and easy money ... like something in a motion picture.”²⁸ Streamlining removed the “curlicues and reduced forms to clearly logical lines.”²⁹ Reviewers like the one quoted above, who was responding to a Metropolitan Museum design show, appreciated the simple forms of machine art that would fit a Depression-era budget, with forms able to fit in with furnishings already occupying a room. Although modernistic furniture started with elite designers like Walter Dorwin Teague and Norman Bel Geddes designing, ironically, one-of-a-kind furniture, the modernistic forms were well-suited to the limitations of machine manufacture and the demand for low prices. Streamlining moved the modernistic style towards a more bulbous and stylized form but was in keeping with the needs of machine production and fashion.

²⁷ Letter from Vassos to Thomas F. Stokes, B.F. Goodrich Rubber Company, March 17, 1934, AAA/Vassos, Box 8.

²⁸ “1931 Industrial Art Show Eliminates Curlicues of 1929,” Business Week, October 23, 1931, pp. 22+.

²⁹ *ibid*, Business Week, October 23, 1931, 22.

Vassos participated in the streamlined craze, a designer's bread and butter in the 1930s. According to scholars of design, the aerodynamic streamlined aesthetic was popular, not only because of production dictates but also because it fit Depression-era hopefulness, as the forms pointed towards a prosperous future that lay in technology and mass production.³⁰ Reading aesthetics as a reflection of collective unconsciousness, Lupton and Miller focus on the centers of waste production and removal in the home to argue that part of the popularity of streamlining was its tube-like shape suggesting human bodily waste products, which could be speedily evacuated.³¹ The seamless sheath of plastic or metal often used in streamlining also served to hide the internal parts of new machine-driven products, which allowed the product to look less threatening, as its internal mechanisms remained unseen.³² The production practices in which machines placed a single piece of material over a product, which facilitated production by omitting rivets or bound edges, also contributed to the popularity of this design and production style.

For some scholars, the streamlined craze epitomizes the wastefulness of consumer society and a technocracy of style that culminated in the streamlined orgy of the 1939 New York World's Fair. For them, the application of the principles of "aerodynamic" styling and of features suggesting wind resistance to objects like vacuum cleaners seems to make little sense. Australian cultural theorist Tony Fry

³⁰ Meikle (2001) argues that industrial design made people comfortable with technological change, Preface to Second Edition, p. xi; also see Meikle, *American Plastic*, p. 116. Pulos argues that streamlining added beauty and function, conforming to modernist principles; see Pulos, p. 7. Terry Smith argues that it rendered mass culture more visually appealing; see *Making the Modern*, p. 365.

³¹ Lupton, *The Kitchen, the Bathroom, and the Aesthetics of Waste* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

³² Christina Cogdell, "Reconsidering the Streamline Style: Evolutionary Thought, Eugenics, and U.S. Industrial Design, 1925–1940," (Dissertation, University of Texas, 2001). Adrian Forty also makes this argument, p. 202.

calls this style "streamlining," associating the aesthetic with the society from which it emerged. He writes that streamlining is "a convergence of factors culminating in the rise of mass desire, the mass design of a new product as well as a poverty of mind, with no assessment of use and impact."³³ Industrial designers defended their use of streamlining, drawing from science to support the style as more hygienic. Henry Dreyfuss referred to it as "cleanlining," referring to the easy-to-clean jointless sheathed skins.³⁴ The bottom line, however, was sales, as Vassos jokingly commented that the new style not only looked more aerodynamic but also "eliminated a great deal of sales resistance."³⁵ In letters to clients, this was clear as he proposed to streamline and "modernize their design, to give [them] more eye appeal and sales value."³⁶

Vassos was commissioned to streamline a range of products, some smaller than others, like the Paragon Company's ticket punch,³⁷ the streamlined bicycle,³⁸ and plumbing equipment like the Quimby screw pump.³⁹ His more profitable redesigns included the kitchen paring knife and the turnstile. For the ticket punch, Vassos also suggested a snappy name -- "Shur punch" -- to reflect the new efficient design.⁴⁰ Transportation vehicles were obvious choices for the application of the streamlined style. For this reason, Vassos was enthusiastic about his design for the streamlined

³³ Tony Fry, A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing (Sydney, Australia: UNSW Press, 1999).

³⁴ Henry Dreyfuss, Designing for People. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955).

³⁵ Letter from Vassos to W.T. Quimby of Quimby Pump Co., September 21, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

³⁶ Letter to Vassos from Walter J. Barbecker, Sales Manger at the Shollhorn Company, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, June 4, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

³⁷ Bernard, company ad for "Paragon" Ticket punch, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

³⁸ A project for which he may not have been paid, which may account for why it was never produced. See letter to Louis Weiss, February 15, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

³⁹ The Quimby Company made screw pumps, centrifugal pumps, sewage ejectors, and sump pumps.

⁴⁰ Letter to M.E., regarding, Paragon" Ticket punch, October 8, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

bicycle, the “aerobike,” for which he received a patent.⁴¹ His study of the market was hopeful, as he revealed in a letter for the project, which never got off the ground:

I read with extreme interest the bicycle market data. ... It will be very wise for us, even if we don't manufacture the two sketches submitted to copyright or even patent the designs or certain elements. Thus, we can at least prevent others from going into the market with a streamlined bicycle ... constructed on aeropolane studies where stresses of resistance and wind resistance were minimum.⁴²

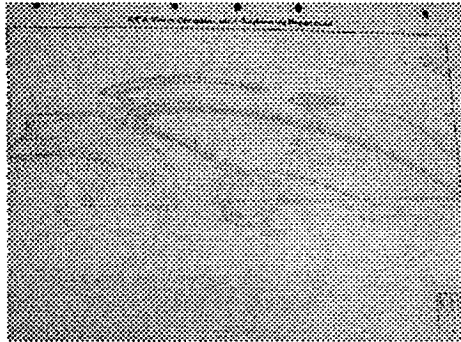


Figure 31: Design for a streamlined bicycle, which Vassos wanted to call “aerobike,” and for which he received a design patent. Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

While it is doubtful that the design of the bike affected the speed, the bulbous forward-directed shape in the image above suggests that it would go faster than a regular bike.

Vassos also streamlined kitchen accessories like the stove and the paring knife and reached into the feminine space of the kitchen for one of the few times in his career. Later on, he specialized in furniture designs for the living room. His stove (see below) is a classic case of reinventing a familiar item according to the principles of streamlining, with its squared-off base that created an abstract grid feeling and its decorative horizontal lines.⁴³ Vassos had the tricky job of applying the streamlined

⁴¹ Design patent, 113,584, February 28, 1939

⁴² Letter to Pierre Boucheron of the Cutlery Division of Remington Arms, February 17, 1937, referring to letter from Mr. Page of Savage Bikes, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁴³ Norman Bel Geddes's metal stove for Standard Gas shares similar design features. See Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, pp. 101-102.

form to the coal stove, making it modern despite the promise that it would get dirty. He cleaned it up stylistically by removing the control buttons on the piece against the backburners, highlighting the simplicity of the design, and adding a simple button on the side, presumably where the user would put the coal. In the carefully constructed sketch that sold the idea, Vassos added a geometric shape -- a black square -- on which he blocks the image, adding depth and motion to make the drawing more visually interesting.

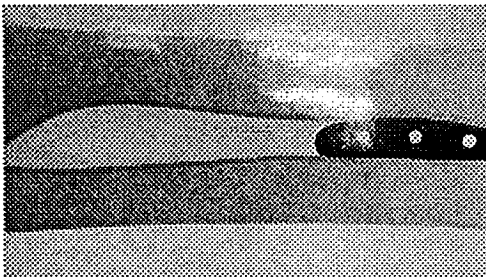


Figure 32: Moby Dick knife for Remington Dupont, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

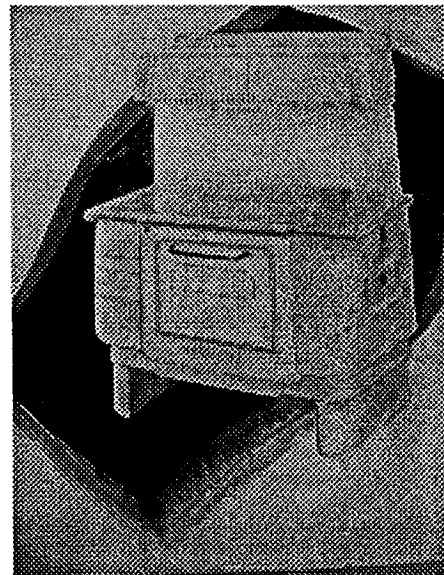


Figure 33: Stove for Montgomery Ward Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

Another design in which Vassos applied streamlining as well as innovation in design was his "Moby Dick" streamline paring knife for Remington Cutlery, which added a new kind of handle. The design was featured in an article in the *New York Times* where the author praises the tool's functionality and its groundbreaking form:

For the first time in a hundred years and perhaps in its whole history, the kitchen paring knife has been streamlined and fashioned to conform to its function requirements as a result of the work of John Vassos. Mr. Vassos spent more than a year on studies aimed to revolutionize and make more efficient and more comfortable the much-used kitchen tool. The new paring

knife is intended to give the right blade balance for the work with a maximum leverage at the cutting point of the blade itself.⁴⁴

Was this streamlined knife actually a “revolutionary kitchen tool,” or was the press simply repeating the publicity claims of the company? Vassos had introduced ergonomic principles by shortening the blade length and shaping the handle to conform to the size of the user’s hand. The improvement boosted sales, which according to Vassos, reached the quarter million mark.⁴⁵ Although the name of the knife, “Moby Dick,” was excessive, the effort of applying ergonomic principles to the cutlery design suggests that streamlining may have been more than just a marketing strategy to suggest wind resistance or trendiness; it was also a set of design practices that improved functionality. Although designers have been accused of wasting resources in their streamlined design, it is important to recognize the other aspects of design that were enhanced in the effort. Vassos improved each of the knives in the Moby Dick collection and heightened name recognition by inscribing the name on the blade and expanding Remington’s presence in the kitchen through the “No Fumble Rack.” The cutlery won the 1940 Golden Seal Jury Award at the New York World’s Fair.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “Kitchen Paring Knife is Now Streamlined,” New York Times, August 26, 1937, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁴⁵ Letter to Bernice L. Maguire, Lord & Taylor, March 29, 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Box 2, Vassos/AAA certificate from when he won the Gold Seal Cutlery Award.

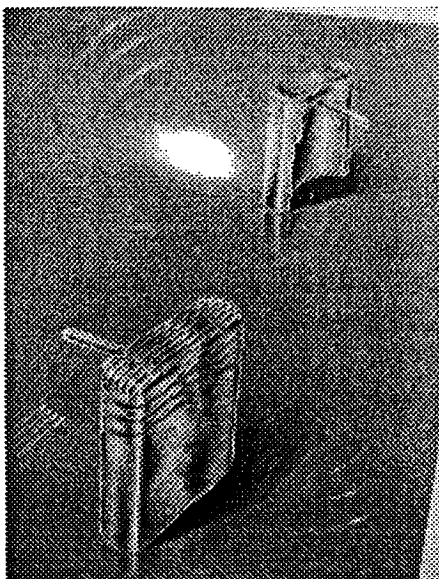


Figure 34: Early sketches of the Perey turnstile. The “passimeter” emphasizes speed and flexibility with the dual-sided rotary motion of the arms. Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

One of Vassos’s most successful streamlined designs that improved the look and function of the product was for the Perey Turnstile Company. In an effort to sell their newest turnstile, the company turned to Vassos to enhance their newly engineered device. In a 1929 letter to Vassos requesting his assistance, the Perey Company revealed that they were working on a “new automatic” type of turnstile that would always be unlocked and would let the person pass without being released by an operator.⁴⁷ The new machine had a reversible feature to permit an exit when desired, and each visit could be counted on leaving.⁴⁸ The “Kompact Space Saving Turnstiles” would help traffic flow and enable subway stations to gain 66% entrance capacity without structural change.⁴⁹ The need for new crowd control and payment mechanisms made the turnstile a necessity for urban planners and others who wanted to improve upon the earlier propeller-like turnstile as well as eliminate the need for staff intervention in ticket-taking.

⁴⁷ Letter to Vassos from Mr. Bacon, December 10, 1929, VASSSOS/AAA, Box 8, “Misc. 1934.”

⁴⁸ Vassos/AAA, Box 2, from promotional material of Perey Turnstiles, 1010 Park Avenue, New York.

⁴⁹ “The Perey Pioneer,” Perey Company Newsletter, no date, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, “Misc. 1934.”

Vassos's drawings for the company (Figure 34) reveal his design process and the use of streamlining in a public design. In the drawings, he responded to the concerns of the manufacturer, visualizing new features. Specifically, his sketches drew upon the speed, size, and efficiency of the turnstile. He placed two of them side by side to show the small size of the turnstile, the efficiency of the mechanism moving freely without an operator, and the dual turning ability that made it possible to go in and out of the same turnstile. Vassos improved the casing by placing the turnstile in a silver body and adding three vertical speed whiskers to the surface. Although he took credit for changing the turnstile from a propeller to a sort of "milk stool on its side" design, the turnstile was actually developed by owner John Perey and Conrad Trubenback shortly before Vassos was hired.⁵⁰

The addition of these design features may have simply been superficial, but to Vassos, who turned to his book *Phobia* to explain the psychology behind his design, they actually took into account the range of experiences of customers who would pass through the machines. In particular, Vassos wanted phobic people to feel more comfortable as they passed into the subway. As he explained, "here my knowledge of the aicmophobic's reaction -- fear of pointed objects -- guided me, and I produced a simple contrivance with gently curving surfaces, with any disturbing design around the feet of the user eliminated."⁵¹ According to the Perey company, "[t]he humble turnstile which we have always regarded as a just and ugly commonplace necessity in

⁵⁰ Vassos takes credit for it, however, in his Syracuse Speech, p. 11.

⁵¹ "As the Walls Come Tumbling Down," unpublished article, Vassos/Syracuse, April 21, 1932, "Writings, Essays," p. 2.

the commercial world of today suddenly takes on a new individuality pleasing in appearance and miraculously harmonizing with its surroundings.”⁵²

The Perey turnstile became one of Vassos’s best known designs, valuable for its elegant look as much as for its meaning. It became the industry standard in turnstile design long after streamlining went out of style.⁵³ The popularity of the design suggests his skill at understanding mass transportation and crowd control and his success in working with a client on a one-time design project.⁵⁴ Vassos was happy with this design, as he wrote after its premiere at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, where the turnstile was chosen for the official entrance: “I have always felt that it is one of my best pieces of industrial design ... the attendance at this exposition is about a thousand people a day.”⁵⁵



Figure 35: The Perey turnstile premiered at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair as a crowd-control and counting mechanism. Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁵² “The Perey Pioneer,” Vassos/AAA, Box 2, no date, p. 1.

⁵³ Obituary for John Vassos, *New York Times*, December 10, 1985, p. B10, which cites that he designed the Perey turnstile “used in some New York City Subways.”

⁵⁴ “Turnstile,” *Industrial Design*, September/October 1983, v. 30, p. 116, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁵⁵ Letter from Vassos to P.L. Gifford, Perey Mfg. Co., April 23, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

New Materials and New Products

Designers were also innovative in their use of new materials in product designs and in displays. This required knowledge of the chemistry of materials and manufacturing processes. Materials industries smartly began to woo designers, recognizing that designers could influence manufacturing decisions. They created promotional campaigns for designers in an effort to gain favor and create cross-promotional opportunities. For instance, Vassos was called on by “the Bakelite Corporation [with] the only ten living designers in America (the rest having all starved to death)” to lunch at Pierre’s to promote better design through a series of ads uniting the designer and the Bakelite product (figure 47).⁵⁶ Vassos in turn became a spokesperson for Bakelite, which he used in his radios. *Steel* magazine also tapped him as a design expert.⁵⁷

Vassos also used new technologies like electric light bulbs in exhibition displays, including the innovative use of “artificial” lighting for the Packard Company booth at the Roosevelt Hotel. His innovative use of lighting at this booth garnered him attention in magazines such as *Signs of the Times*, *Edison Magazine*, *Lighting* and the *Nela Park Magazine* of the General Electric Company.⁵⁸ In his displays of commercial products, Vassos was able to experiment with and display the largest number of new materials -- materials that he would continue to use during the

⁵⁶ Letter to Ross Treseder, January 23, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Draft of autobiography, Vassos/AAA Box 12, p. 31.

⁵⁷ Vassos points out that RCA was the first to introduce tubular steel radios. Letter from Vassos to William Hammerquist, Associate Editor, *Steel* Magazine, December 10, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁵⁸ Letter to A.L. Powell, General Electric, July 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

1930s, particularly Formica, fabricoid, and brushed aluminum. All of these materials were later used in his modern office at RCA's Camden plant. A display for the Packard Company included this melding of modern materials and display techniques: "The background is treated as three separate units, and the materials used are the most modern, celloglass for the lights, Formica and fabricoid for the colored parts, brushed aluminum for the metal trimmings, and the entire display wired to meet the lighting requirements."⁵⁹

Vassos frequently used plastics, an increasingly popular material. His design for the Modern Plastics Award⁶⁰ used textured bas-relief to highlight the malleability of the product and the modern beauty and classic design of the award. He also used rubber, which he called a "very pliable and interesting material to play with."⁶¹ Glass was not a big part of his design repertoire in the 1930s, although he did try to design a radio in glass, an effort that stopped at the design table.⁶² He mostly turned towards synthetic materials and wood in his radio designs.

⁵⁹ From Vassos to the Packard Motor Car Company, December 8, 1932, "Attention Mr. William Elliot," Vassos/AAA, Box 8..

⁶⁰ tearsheet, "What does it mean to win the modern plastics award?" Vassos/AAA, Box 2. Norman Bel Geddes also lists medals among his accomplishments; see Norman Bel Geddes, Vassos/AAA, Box 4 for an example of his General Motors Jubilee Medal of 1933.

⁶¹ Letter to Thomas Stokes, B.F. Goodrich Rubber Co., March 17, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁶² Vassos mentions glass radios in a letter to Throckmorton, October 28, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. He needed to get engineering limitations and clearances from Corning glass "should we decide to make decorative glass radios. The two designs are very contrasting -- one very flowery and the other simple and classic." I do not believe this radio was ever made. He may have been inspired to use glass to get a radio into an exhibition, according to a letter to Miss Harriet B. Meyer, Department of Industrial Art, Brooklyn Museum, February 24, 1936. "I have done nothing in glass in the last two years," he wrote in response to an invitation to include his glass designs in a show to be held March 12-April 19, to which he was invited in a letter from Meyer dated February 1, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.



Figure 36: Coca-Cola dispenser, for which Vassos received a patent (D87654) in August 1932. Photographed on a mirrored surface by Margaret Bourke-White, from the archives of the Silvermine Artists Guild.

Eventually, failure came, as a new product failed to win the bid for the Coca-Cola dispenser, the model of which is photographed above (Figure 36) in another dramatic image by Margaret Bourke-White. Mainly, the Bakelite Company's new Formica product was unable to prevent the Coca-Cola Company's bright green and red colors from fading. Vassos lost a valuable contract with the Company, which was later gained by Raymond Loewy. Vassos spent a lot of money and time on this effort to gain the Coca-Cola bid. The dispenser, which he gained a patent for, taught him valuable lessons about the limitations of new materials. It also may have influenced his decision to devote his time to RCA rather than chase down unsuccessful contracts and deal with the headache of working alone to coordinate contacts between multiple parties.

When Vassos started communicating with Ross Treseder, a vice president at Coca-Cola,⁶³ he knew he had to work fast to convince the company to hire him to design their automatic fountain dispenser, which mixed caramelized syrup with carbonated water and was set to premiere at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. The dispenser reduced bottling costs and enabled restaurants to measure the output of Coke. It also facilitated faster handling by employees, who only had to flip a nozzle to release the liquid rather than open a bottle. It was a prized opportunity to work with the growing beverage company that Vassos first encountered through his work developing the first drink dispensing stand station at Nedick's restaurant in New York.⁶⁴ Vassos was prescient in realizing that the dispenser would become increasingly popular as soda fountains grew in popularity. In preparation for the project, Vassos patented his design for the dispenser.

From the start, the design was a challenge to Vassos, as there were many requirements. The unit had to be compact; it had to be easy to clean so the sugary syrup did not cling to the surface; and the exterior had to serve as a display and advertising device. As his design patent shows, Vassos addressed the issue of limited counter space by creating a tight, small base with a larger bucket bulging on top, similar to a water cooler on top of many New York buildings at the time.⁶⁵ To make the colors stay bright, Vassos chose Bakelite. Although it was typically available in dark colors, the Bakelite company was experimenting with a new plastic formation

⁶³ Treseder went on to become the vice president of National Distillers, according to Vassos in a letter to Roy Norr, December 10, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Letter to Allan Brown, Bakelite, Co. May 23, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁶⁵ Raymond Loewy, Never Leave Well Enough Alone, p. 206.

that would enable the malleable material to take on the vibrant Coke colors. This new material

“would be very simple to make a die of the Coca-Cola trademark to be inlaid in the Bakelite itself, making it sanitary and easy to keep clean, permanent and of course very smart looking. My personal choice would be Bakelite if they can guarantee permanency and correct shade of color, however I will survey the field for any other suitable material,”⁶⁶

Vassos explained in a letter to Treseder.

The company liked Vassos’s modern design, with its elegant ringed base and its metallic touches. According to Treseder, who was wary of the traditionalists among Coca Cola management who rejected modern design, “most everybody that’s capable of understanding modern treatment in designs is greatly pleased with the unit. I know I am.”⁶⁷

Despite the enthusiasm for Vassos’s innovative container, the color problem ultimately caused the company to abandon Vassos’s dispenser, a situation which troubled him. A string of letters to Allan Brown at Bakelite reveal Vassos’s frustration. In their letters to Vassos, Bakelite admitted their failing: “Lighter colors will fade somewhat if subjected to the direct rays of the sun over a long period of time. Therefore, if it is absolutely necessary to retain the original color indefinitely, we cannot recommend the material for this particular application.”⁶⁸ In addition to the Bakelite problem, the sterilizer Vassos produced in conjunction with the General Electric Lamp Company also failed to work.⁶⁹ Vassos eventually lost the contract to Raymond Loewy, who in 1946 designed the dispenser in a boxy shape very similar to

⁶⁶ Letter from Vassos to Treseder, no date, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁶⁷ Letter to Vassos from Ross Treseder, June 13, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁶⁸ Letter to Vassos from Allen Brown at Bakelite, May 20, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁶⁹ Letter to Vassos from A.J. Butolph at General Electric Lamp Company, October 19, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

Vassos's design. Eventually, over 30,000 Coca Cola soda fountain dispensers were built in Raymond Loewy's design.⁷⁰

Vassos, who had invested tremendous energy in getting the Coca-Cola account, rightfully took credit for the innovative design. He included it in his portfolio and on a few occasions, asked the company if he could exhibit the model as an example of his work. These occasions included a modern design exhibition at the Art Center and an exhibition at Radio City. The Coca-Cola company, careful of its image, refused to grant him permission,⁷¹ as they did when he wanted to feature the model in his ad for the Bakelite company.⁷² This model, perhaps more than any other of Vassos's designs, reveals the problem with a design that comes before its time. Although it was properly planned and designed, with the requirements in place, Vassos was missing the support of the company, which eventually dropped the three colors for the Loewy model that was almost exactly the same as Vassos's design. It is an example of the limitation of the designer's power to make a design happen. As design historian Adrian Forty explains, "Although designers prepare designs, the responsibility for carrying them out rests with the entrepreneurs."⁷³

⁷⁰ Raymond Loewy, Never Leave Well Enough Alone, pp. 206-207, "over 30,000 Coca-Cola fountain dispensers have been built."

⁷¹ Letter to Vassos from Ross Treseder, Vice President, June 13, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Letter to Alan Bemont, Director of the National Alliance for Art and Industry, from Ross Treseder, June 13, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁷² Letter from Vassos to Ross Treseder, September 13, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁷³ Forty, Objects of Desire, p. 241.

Getting the Modern into the Home Through Radio



Figure 37: This radio design uses curved corners and an “undisturbed parabolic curve” to create “a violin back stream-line motif.” It has a flip top lid and “uses beautiful treatments of wood” integrating modern and traditional elements. (John Vassos, “A Case for Radio Design,” *Furniture Index*, May 1938, pp. 16-18, Vassos/AAA, Box 2).

In the next part of the chapter, I will focus on Vassos’s work designing and selling radios for RCA, his biggest contractor. This case study brings together themes discussed throughout the chapter, including the use of streamlining, new materials, relationships with vendors, and a new area for Vassos -- in-house design education among engineers and sales staff. There were many design challenges involved in making the radio modern, and designers scrambled to prove to radio manufacturers that they were the ones who could meet these challenges. Radio manufacturers realized that since the technology was so similar across the board, style would be a major factor in determining the customer’s purchase decision.

There was no design precedent for the new technology of radio.⁷⁴ Its earliest designers took their cue from the typical Victorian furniture scheme that seemed to dominate the American living room and entailed hiding the machine in big wooden furniture. Designers were infuriated by the old packaging of a new media and argued that the design challenge presented an exciting possibility to think about new shapes in modern society. As Carolyn Marvin writes, “Radio aroused thinking about new forms of visual identity for a product that had never been imagined before, like the bicycle and automobile which came before it.”⁷⁵ Industrial designers came up with these new forms of visual identity for the radio, as this part of the chapter will reveal. Radio design was a priority for manufacturers who sought to beat their competitors in the growing radio receiver market. Vassos was well aware of this concern, as he wrote to the RCA VP in his introductory letter: “The problems for radio design have been of constant interest to me since radios first entered the home, and I feel convinced I have a contribution to make.”⁷⁶

Indeed, there was a raging debate among radio designers in the early 1930s as to what the new appliance would look like. Torn between thinking of it as a piece of furniture and an entertainment device, like the phonograph that preceded it, designers felt that, overall, the radio had a greater role to play than merely entertaining listeners in the home. As it brought a live stream of new information into the home, produced in the most modern of studios, it would also help modernize listeners by introducing

⁷⁴ For more on the advances that led to the domestication of radio, including the development of semiconductor crystals leading to the miniaturization of radio, see Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 284.

⁷⁵ Indeed, Vassos had created a bicycle for the Savage Company: “I was asked to do a bicycle, and a bicycle is a totally classic concept. You will never be able to change or improve it.” Syracuse University Speech, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Letter from Vassos to Throckmorton, May 9, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

new decorative styles into the home. Vassos hoped that innovation in the design of the new electronic product would break down resistance and familiarize consumers with modern design for the home, becoming “the direct cause of this country’s mass acceptance of modernity.”⁷⁷ As Vassos explained, the radio would transform the home, rather than keep it mired in the old furniture traditions. He made a

prophecy that when the very instrument known as the radio, which has been enclosed in that monstrosity known as the radio cabinet, makes its transformation into beautiful modern cabinets, and with the inevitable entrance into the homes of America, it will be the direct cause of this country’s mass acceptance of modernity. Instead of the most hated of designs, radio will be the most loved; it will set the pace for beauty of design in the home and eventually will influence even the design of the house itself.⁷⁸

The excitement with which Vassos approached the radio design suggests the social importance of the new medium, as a successful designer could win fame, an achievement Vassos sought. It reveals not only the fact that radio had no design precedent, as Marvin points out, but also the unique situation that American designers faced when tackling a design product for a country without a design tradition of its own. Design historian Jeffrey Meikle observes that American industrial designers faced a double challenge when creating a new product for the modern home in a culture without a tradition of its own. Without the historical traditions of European cultures, he argues, streamlining became acceptable as an “optimistic celebration of modernity brought under control through domestic assimilation.” Thus, products took inspiration from the larger forms of a mechanized society that marked American progress, such as the streamlined transportation machines, which epitomized

⁷⁷ Letter to John Higgins, Worcester Pressed Steel Co., October 2, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, Letter to John Higgins, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

futuristic technology.⁷⁹ Designers were certainly comfortable with this kind of styling as a sign of modernization; indeed, they were experts at it.

The radio, I would argue, meant more than just a stylistic quest: it was also a new way of conceiving the consumer as someone that needed to be readied for the home of the future, as designers increasingly turned their attention to the “home as machine” model of planning. As a result, the use of new materials, innovative user interaction, increased miniaturization, coordination of home electronics, and importance of style predicted the postwar consumer boom, with its ultra-modern prefabricated houses and mass-produced interiors.

In evaluating the form that radio would take in the home, designers looked not only to the present for inspiration but also to the future to recognize that it was in their best interests to have consumer acceptance of the newest design trends.

Streamlining was not the only way to “domesticate modern design,” as Vassos’s multifarious designs for the radio reveal; beauty in design was more important than streamlining in radio design. Indeed, he suggested that the company offer a full line of merchandise representing the major periods used in interior decoration to integrate the radio with the average interior. This was in addition to the distinctly modern device that he proposed would “breathe the spirit of today and establish an identification” with RCA Victor.⁸⁰

The issue of radio’s future was discussed at a “Radio Style Clinic” that took place on March 20, 1933, at the National Alliance of Art and Industry, where Vassos

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Meikle, “Domesticating Modernity: Ambivalence and Appropriation, 1920-1940,” *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885-1945*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1995) 143-168.

⁸⁰ “John Vassos’s Report, RCA Radiotrone,” Vassos/AAA, Box 8, “Misc. 1933,” pp. 1-2.

was an honored guest. The clinic, attended by radio manufacturers and leading American designers, including Henry Dreyfuss, Walter Dorwin Teague, and George Ball, sought to bring together designers and radio manufacturers to exchange design ideas “so that a common direction might be given to the new styling trend” and to “increase radio-receiver sales through improved external design and artistic appearance.”⁸¹

The meeting was not only to share design ideas but also to facilitate connections between manufacturers and designers. It was intended for the “radio men in attendance to have an opportunity to contact the design people”⁸² and to convince them that re-designing and re-styling had indeed helped sales. Vassos mentioned this clinic in a letter to George Throckmorton, a Vice President at RCA, to show his familiarity with issues in radio design: “I recently attended an important meeting sponsored by the National Alliance of Art and Industry between the leading designers and the radio manufacturers which clarified in my mind many of the issues involved.”⁸³

Although Vassos was courting RCA, he covered his bases in case RCA didn’t hire him. So confident was he in his ability to develop radios that he also offered his radio design services to Isaac Levy at CBS, RCA’s major competitor in broadcasting. Vassos asked Levy, “If RCA are not the people for me to offer my ideas to, perhaps there is some manufacturer closer to you?”⁸⁴ At this point, Vassos had not designed a

⁸¹ “The time to re-style radio sets is now! Cabinet designer’s job is to give sets new merchandising appeal for 1933 sales,” advertisement for the National Alliance of Art and Industry event, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, tearsheet, one page.

⁸² Ibid, National Alliance of Art and Industry event tear sheet, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁸³ Letter from Vassos to Throckmorton, May 9, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁸⁴ Letter to Isaac Levy, May 18, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

radio, nor had he any actual experience working with electronics beyond working with engineers on the mechanical dolls in the windows of Kaufman's Department Store in Philadelphia. Participation in the clinics, where he was a featured designer, and his early experiments with plastic may have convinced him that he could do it well.

Shortly after his interview with Throckmorton⁸⁵, Vassos wrote a letter assuring the company that they needed him for many reasons beyond merely designing the radio: "after two and one half days of intense activity ... there is no doubt that there is a great need for a designer to shape up, guide, and hold together harmoniously your whole line of radio products, working along with your present design set-up, your sales promotion and engineering departments, as well as bringing in a fresh point of view."⁸⁶ On the strength of the letters and of a meeting, Throckmorton agreed to give Vassos a chance to prove himself. Radio manufacturers like RCA urgently needed designers to get their product moving in the newly opened radio market.

Radio purchases skyrocketed in the early 1930s. The number of American homes with a radio was up 4.5 million over the previous three years. There were 13,500,000 more homes with radios than telephones, and radios in American homes exceeded bathtubs by more than 5,800,000, according to statistics presented by the National Association of Broadcasters.⁸⁷ In addition to the growth in sales, the radio

⁸⁵ Letter from Vassos to Throckmorton, May 9, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, and return letter from Throckmorton, May 12, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. The purpose of the clinic was to address "the problem of increasing radio-receiver sales through improved external design and artist appearance." It included a discussion of new materials for re-styling as well as the 'general future trends in radio-cabinet designs.'" Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁸⁶ Letter to G.J. Throckmorton, June 10, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁸⁷ From Orin Dunlap, The Future of Television (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947) 19.

was perhaps the most prominent and expensive piece of furniture in the home.⁸⁸

RCA's main competitor at the time was Philco, which sold cheaper radios. RCA Victor needed to grow the radio side of the business, as the company had not made a profit and had actually lost money from 1929 to 1937.⁸⁹ Rising radio receiver sales gave them a chance to cross-market their broadcast product, which was manufactured at the newly built Radio City Music Hall with their radio receivers. The possibilities for synergy between the company's growth areas was enormous.

Recognizing Vassos's versatility in design and in display (he had met RCA executives while making a mural for rival station WCAU), RCA jumped at the chance to have the young new designer take on the task of evaluating the needs of the consumers through interviews with managers at selected retail locations.⁹⁰ In what would become yet another role for the industrial designer -- that of marketing surveyor -- Vassos was asked to produce a report outlining what was wrong with the product and what should be done for it. Immediately after the report was submitted, he was placed on a retaining fee of \$12,000 per year at half working time, two full days a week.⁹¹ Excitedly, he described that in addition to producing the survey, he

⁸⁸ It was also one of the most mysterious, and radio broadcasters sought to understand their market. See Susan Smulyan, "Radio Advertising to Women in Twenties America: A Latchkey to Every Home," 13 Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, (1993): 299-315. See also Pat Weaver, From the Best Seat in the House: The Golden Years of Radio and Television (New York: Knopf, 1994) 10. Not all Americans had access to radio. There was a striking disparity in the distribution of "receiving sets"; for instance, 96% of homes in the District of Columbia had them while only 24% of the homes in Mississippi were supplied, according to Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport, The Psychology of Radio (New York: P. Smith, 1941) 85.

⁸⁹ Interview with Alex Magnoun, David Sarnoff Library, August 11, 2004.

⁹⁰ "John Vassos's Report, RCA Radiotrone," Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "Misc. 1933," pp. 1-2.

⁹¹ Vassos records the details of his early work for RCA in a letter to Louis H. Engle at Business Week, March 23, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2.

was "on a retainer fee to redesign their whole line, which was a job that all the designers in the country were after."⁹²

His next effort at RCA, while still under his first-year observation period, was to go to the major department stores to evaluate how the radios were being marketed and what was selling. As he wrote: "The next activity was to canvass the big furniture departments in three major cities: ... at Altman's and A&S in Brooklyn, Wanamaker's, Gimbels, and Macy's," as well as Marshall Fields in Grand Rapids and Chicago.⁹³ He reported that the company needed to make better merchandise that would entail changes in facility of use and improved appearance. In addition, Vassos found that there needed to be an education program.⁹⁴ Taking these factors into consideration, one of Vassos's first changes was to place a greater emphasis on style by getting rid of the cathedral arch that had defined the shape of early radios, moving from an ornate, backwards-looking style to a more modern geometrical one. As he explained, "my first job with RCA was the elimination of the wooden tombstone radio."⁹⁵ (See Figure 39 for an example of this popular radio style).

After being offered a longer term contract and a raise in February 1934, Vassos got more involved in the organization of the styling department.⁹⁶ He was involved in a range of activities, including advertising; planning the unification of building facilities; developing an educational program for engineers, management, and sales staff; and the consolidation of the design team and streamlining of methods

⁹² Letter from Vassos to Ross Treseder, September 13, 1933, p. 1. Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁹³ Letter to Throckmorton, August 26, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁹⁴ "A Half Century of Design," Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁹⁵ Syracuse University Speech, p. 10.

⁹⁶ The letter explains that he has gotten a raise from Mr. Throckmorton to \$700.00 a month. Letter from E.F. Hainster, February 15, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

to work with engineers. According to Vassos, when he first arrived to work for RCA in Camden, there were three designers: Stevenson, who was the manager, Chew, and Barnes. This team expanded to include Bradton and Holley, in addition to "Mr. Stevenson, Mr. Nicholas, and Mr. Vogel."⁹⁷

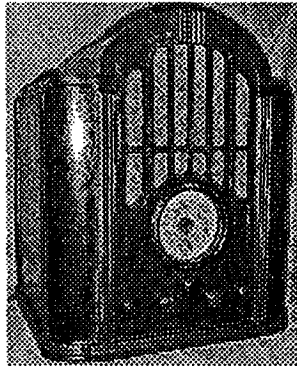
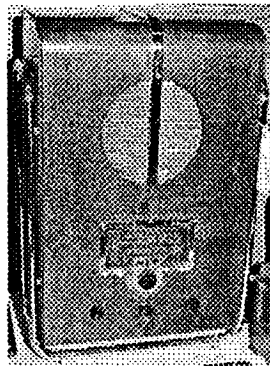
The general procedure for the design plan was that Engineering would ask that Styling help them with a feature, like a dial, to determine such issues as the size and graphic information on the device (for example, numbers and color). Vassos suggested that the procedure would be better-organized if the Style team got involved as early as possible in the inception of a project. It became clear that the issues that Styling dealt with went way beyond superficial design features to include the very processes by which the product is developed through a series of tests on users. Other information gathered on the product in the process of styling included length and type of use, which would affect placement dials; heat dissipation mechanisms; and other crucial aspects of design. This expanded notion of design encompassed the very creation of the product, rather than serving as an adjunct to technological advancement. Vassos listed some of the major tasks of the Styling department as including consideration of the following factors:

Standardization of components, materials, and finishes; The Field in which they will be sold; Type of surroundings and location; Associated apparatus or auxiliaries; Location of visual units, dials, meters, etc.; Type and arrangement of controls; Manufacturing methods and equipment; RCA family resemblance; Countries in which product will be sold; Selection of basic materials, plastics, metals, wood, synthetic materials, and colors; Number of hours or control manipulation; Whether one or more will be used side by side; Accessibility for servicing or dismantling; Heat dissipation allowance for

⁹⁷ John Vassos, "Industrial Design at RCA -- A Report Covering 1932-1970," Vassos/AAA, Box 2. "Mr. Stevenson, and Messrs. Nicholas and Vogel" are mentioned in "John Vassos's Repot, RCA Radiotrone," Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "Misc. 1933," p. 1.

tubes, transformers, and the like; Underwriters and local requirements; Finishes for components and unit; Trend; Safety; Method of shipping; etc.⁹⁸

Despite the numerous ways in which a design is considered, it is the final product that is known to have the marker of the designer's input, that is, the very crude analysis of what the radio looks like rather than the strength of its heat-dissipating mechanisms or its RCA family resemblance. By 1934, Vassos had simplified the entire line of cabinets and created a line called the "Neo-American," leading to reduced production costs and higher sales. His first console, the Model #210, was limited, he admitted, "by a lack of automatic volume control and a limited number of tubes, which prevented its being a success in the rural districts."⁹⁹ Despite these minor design flaws, overall, his designs were popular among salespeople from the beginning. One department store representative praised his work, writing that "Mr. Vassos has done more than 'style' a line of cabinets; he has helped rekindle enthusiasm and hope in many an anxious heart, and that is not art but psychology."¹⁰⁰



⁹⁸ Lecture on styling for training course, Fall 1936, From the Lewis Clement Papers, 1938-1975, at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, courtesy of Alexander Magnoun, David Sarnoff Library.

⁹⁹ Letter to Throckmorton, January 13, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Boucheron from H.L. Capron at Bamberger's Department Store, September 5, 1934. Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

Figure 38: Radio, c.1935, designed by Vassos.
First “tubular metal” radio, model 8710, AAA, Box 1.

Figure 39: RCA cathedral style radio, c. 1934¹⁰¹

Among Vassos' first radio designs was an early modernistic radio with “tubular metal” features used to create a simple streamlined boxy transmitter.¹⁰² This innovative design of the small format radio marked a departure away from the gothic arches and ornate grilles of the “cathedral” or tombstone radio and created a unique vision of radio as a media that should be associated with modern materials and shapes. One can compare the horizontal dial with a boxy window to the round dial, for example, or the placement of the speaker in the middle of the radio to see the differences between these two machines, which in other ways are quite similar. The metal tubes running down the middle of the machine are not only ornamental but serve the function of drawing the viewer's eye to the dial. The metal strips placed around the edge of the radio highlight the mechanical nature of the machine, which is also made of metals and tubes inside.

Vassos understood that modern “cutting edge” design needed to be tempered by the desires of the public, which was still wedded to ornate and decorative furniture. Thus, his American period line “offer[ed] an opportunity for the use of a variety of fine wood finishes – maple, mahogany, oak, cedar, and some in pine.”¹⁰³ However, he was not satisfied to merely create modernized period reproductions to house the radio or even the modernized version of the radio in Figure 38 that still relied on wood, making it more acceptable to the consumer. He wrote to his boss that

¹⁰¹ Image from < <http://home.ican.net/~24858/cathed.htm>>.

¹⁰² Letter from Vassos to David Munro, December 24, 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰³ John Vassos, “Industrial Design at RCA -- A Report Covering 1932-1970,” Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

“there still needs to be another line,”¹⁰⁴ one that would use the newest of synthetic materials -- Bakelite. Vassos, like other radio designers, realized that this material, which had advanced since his Coca-Cola fiasco, could give him more creativity and allow him to move away almost completely from the boundaries of traditional design.

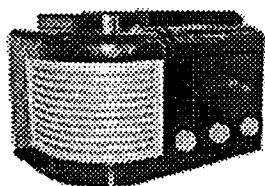


Figure 40: 1939, Model 96x, Bakelite, designed by Vassos. This radio exemplifies the versatility of Bakelite. The body is brown, and the grill and knobs are a tan Plaskon. The radio is designated # 96X1 on the back. The unique step-back design of the Bakelite and the asymmetrical sweep of the Plaskon grill make this one of the more unusual American radio designs. Image courtesy of the Modernism Gallery.

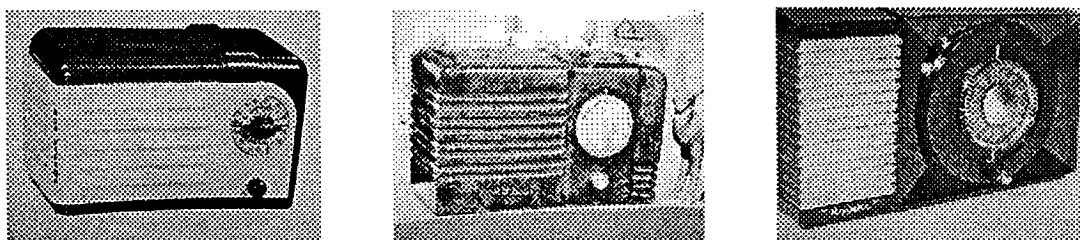
Although Bakelite was considered by many designers to be the best material to interpret the modernism of radio, people considered it dirty and were resistant to using plastic in the living room.¹⁰⁵ In a letter to VP Throckmorton early in his post, Vassos emphasized the “absolute necessity of using synthetic compounds like Bakelite not only for trimming but for the whole radio.”¹⁰⁶ His correspondence with the Bakelite manufacturer also revealed his plans for this radio and his hopefulness in 1933 that RCA would let him make one. He wrote a detail-packed yet obscure letter to Allan Brown at Bakelite regarding the use of the material at RCA: “I cannot reveal the particulars of his recent tie up with one of the largest radio manufacturers but can

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, “Report Covering 1932-1970.”

¹⁰⁵ For more on the history of Bakelite in radio design, see Jeffrey Meikle, *American Plastic*, pp. 115-118. Meikle argues that Bakelite was also used to create traditional “gothic cathedralettes,” gothic-shaped consumer products that utilized the malleable plastic coating, p. 114. For more on the Bakelite Company’s efforts to convince manufacturers to use the product, see Penny Sparke, *The Plastic Age: From Modernity to Post Modernity* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1990) 48. See also Robert Hawes, *Bakelite Radios: A Fully Illustrated Guide For The Bakelite Radio Enthusiast* (London: 1990), p. 53.

¹⁰⁶ Letter to Mr. A.C. Erisman, August 3, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, “Misc.” folder.

say that of the many recommendations I am making and suggestions for radical changes, Bakelite comes in for good measure, for handles and surfaces as well as trimming particular for the smaller cabinets.”¹⁰⁷ Vassos also asked about the new “Plaskon” material that he wanted to use in his radios. The firm wrote back immediately to say that they were “extremely pleased to hear that you have recommended Bakelite to a large radio manufacturer, and when the job is done, will you send us a photograph?”¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey Meikle points out that Bakelite first gained widespread consumer acceptance in the mid-1920s with the “great radio do-it-yourself boom” that put radio components made from phenolic resin into American parlors and carved a niche in the domestic sphere for other plastics products.¹⁰⁹



Figures 41, 42, and 43: Bakelite radios designed Vassos, for RCA, prior to the development of the horizontal dial or push-button tuning, all with Zenith dials. On the far right is the little “Nipper,” Vassos/AAA, Box 9.

Vassos made it clear that the company needed to invest in lightweight plastic receivers. As he wrote in his report, “It is in your smallest instruments that you have missed an opportunity to use synthetic materials like Bakelite, Formica, or some of the other lightweight compounds, where the introduction of metal could also be successfully brought in, and subtle harmonious color schemes could be worked

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Vassos to Mr. Barbour, June 14, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Vassos from Allan Brown, advertising manager, Bakelite, June 16, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰⁹ Meikle, American Plastic, (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1995): 57.

out."¹¹⁰ He reiterated this complaint in a letter to Throckmorton: "As I see the potencies in our cabinetmaking set-up, we can build expensive cabinets cheaper than anyone else, but when it comes to the small stuff, outsiders have us licked." He proposed table type radios on which he could use a new speaker dial, which Dr. Baker had assigned him to design.¹¹¹



Figure 43.5: Vassos in his office studio working on the RCA New Yorker radio, one of his top-selling designs (Publicity photo from Vassos/AAA, RCA Files, Box 2). This was a later version of one of the first plastic radios, selected as the "1940 plastic expression of contemporary radio" by the *Architectural Forum* in its *Design Decade* issue. (Vassos, Letter to Maguire, March 29, 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 1).

Finally, by the end of 1935, RCA introduced its first plastic radio.¹¹² Vassos had created elegant streamlined boxes made of Bakelite. Besides using the new material in an unprecedented shape, the designer explored different placements for the radio grilles, knobs, and buttons.¹¹³ Bakelite indeed was a good material to use: it was smooth, versatile, and could conceal the inner workings of the machine. Injection molding smoothed the sharp corners, leading to more streamline shapes and fewer

¹¹⁰ "John Vassos's Repot, RCA Radiotrone," Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "Misc. 1933," pp. 4-5.

¹¹¹ Letter to Throckmorton, November 24, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

¹¹² Syracuse University Speech, p. 10.

¹¹³ Magazines like *Durez Molder* celebrated Vassos's "many contributions to functionalism. ... His most recent accomplishments in the art of plastics and the radio field have brought a new high to that medium," *Durez Molder*, p. 9, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

joints.¹¹⁴ Other radio manufacturers had used the material earlier, but they had retained the “cathedral” look, changing the material but holding on to a popular style. Vassos sought to create a small format radio that expressed modernistic design, but in moderation. In a letter to Richard Bach, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vassos clarified his philosophy of radio design, saying that by using the term “progressive styling, I mean I advise against going into ventures too functional and of too pure design, Russell Wright’s radio design for Lyric as an example.”¹¹⁵

Writing to Bach, Vassos expressed his affiliation with Philip Johnson, the curator of MOMA’s April 1934 “Machine Art” show, which rejected streamlining completely in favor of a pure engineering-influenced design style exemplified by The Lyric.¹¹⁶ Unlike any of Vassos’s designs, this severe radio fits the functionalist demand to use pure form rather than soften it by streamlining. Wright created a pattern out of the machine’s basic elements: the boxy casing, the square tuner, and the square grill. The radio is made up of a series of squares, with the box of the radio reiterated on the body of the radio through the boxy grill and a boxed off radio dial section to the right.

In his own designs, Vassos rejected this execution of design purity, making his designs appealing for the living room and to a wide audience. He preferred to mix circles and squares in his radio design, with clarified protruding knobs, and to soften the edges of the radio with curved plastic. Soft, sweeping grills over the speakers

¹¹⁴ Jeffrey Meikle, *American Plastics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 57. For more on the futuristic symbolism of Bakelite and chromium in radio design, see Forty, pp. 200-206. Penny Sparke claims that Loewy was the first designer to use Bakelite in his Gestener duplicator, *Consultant Design*, p. 125.

¹¹⁵ Letter to Richard Bach, Metropolitan Museum of Art, September 3, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹¹⁶ Meikle describes the debate among curators about streamlining vs. functionalism. See Meikle, 2001, p. 180.

created long horizontal lines, tracing the top of the radio to create an elegant and asymmetrical receiver that was not harsh or “too radical.”¹¹⁷ His philosophy was to use modernism conservatively since, as he explained, “A program of gradual change must be laid out and followed because any radical change, even if it be for the better, is dangerous for any standard product on the market. The public will not accept it.”¹¹⁸ This philosophy was perhaps best expressed in his New Yorker plastic radio designed for RCA in 1939-1940 that was selected as the “1940 plastic expression of contemporary radio by the *Architectural Forum*.”¹¹⁹ It sold over 120,000 sets.

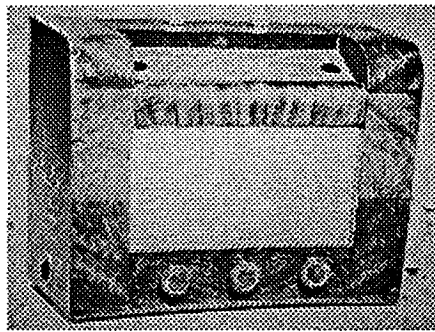


Figure 44: Model 15-X, 1940 winner of the Gold Seal Award at the World's Fair, introduced the horizontal dial in small sets and became the bestselling set at RCA in 1939, with its bull's eye pointer and large numerals that made it easy to read; Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

Vassos made many other improvements to the radio, including changing the user interface. He introduced push-button tuning and also worked on an innovative auto radio with a chromium-plated spring that lifted out into the onlooker's hand.¹²⁰ The best known of his innovations was the horizontal dial, which replaced the huge airplane dial called the “Zenith dial” and made a readable template from left to right the steering mechanism of the radio, as in the Model 15-X above. Vassos explained,

¹¹⁷ Letter to Mr. Isaac Levy, May 18, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, “Misc.” folder.

¹¹⁸ John Vassos, “Design for Selling,” *Sales Executives Club Weekly News Bulletin*, 1935, p. 1, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 5, folder entitled, “Design for Selling.”

¹¹⁹ Letter from John Vassos to Bernice Maguire, Lord & Taylor, March 29, 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 1.

¹²⁰ Letter to Throckmorton, February 9, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

“We omitted the airplane dial of Zenith and put in the horizontal dial, which is the normal way of reading from left to right.”¹²¹

In 1937, Vassos wrote that “when the product improved and we began to maintain an undisputed position in the field, engineering-wise as well as style-wise, Philco forged ahead with dial tuning. To meet this, I came up with the idea of push-button tuning on RCA’s ‘Console Grand.’”¹²² While this gadget added immeasurably to the undisputedly strong position of RCA Victor in the field of radio, it had first been rejected by the head of development for consumer products, whom Vassos refers to as “Richardson.” After Vassos went to him with this concept, which would help people find radio dials more quickly, he wrote: “I feel that it will be hard to make people tune a device consistently standing up; as you know, the arrangement is that a push button releases a spring top, which exposes the tuning device. I feel that our styling is more graceful.”¹²³

Vassos wrote to Throckmorton that regretfully, the company didn’t jump on the “dial-less” and “knob less” front of their competitor:

It is difficult to say how the public will react to Philco’s dial-less and knob less fronts, although two years ago when I designed the Box Humana cabinet I **proposed such an arrangement** (emphasis mine). However, at that time I accepted the judgment of the sales force, the designers, and the ad dept. that the radio is still regarded by the public as an instrument, and such gadgets as the RCA aero plane dial and tuning knobs satisfied an emotional urge on the part of the public, and I relinquished ...¹²⁴

¹²¹ Syracuse University Speech, AAA/Vassos, Box 12, p. 12.

¹²² Raymond Spillman, “IDSA Mourns the Passing of Design Leader John Vassos,” Vassos/AAA, Box 1, IDSA Newsletter, p. 1.

¹²³ Letter to Throckmorton, June 1, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

¹²⁴ Letter to Throckmorton, June 1, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

Apparently, Richardson turned Vassos down after Vassos told him the price of developing the push button unit. The idea was eventually accepted by Bonfig, another RCA manager.¹²⁵ The company gained increased trust in Vassos's styling decisions, thanks to the popularity of his designs. As early as 1934, the company was benefiting from Vassos's designs. According to an article in *Business Week*, "To the retailers handling the RCA Victor line, John Vassos's work on the 1935 models meant an appreciable sales increase Incidentally, that job furnishes a good example of what a designer can do in following through to the point of sale and educating dealers on the merits of new models."¹²⁶

Vassos was also involved in radio design in Canada and South America. In Canada, he was sent to the Montreal RCA Victor Company plant to work with engineers to develop a model for the Canadian market.¹²⁷ His radio design for the New Yorker met South American standards, as he chose materials fitting to the hot climate there.

On The Salesroom Floor

At RCA, Vassos maintained his commitment to the role of industrial designer as a salesman, not just a stylist. He realized that in order to sell the new designs he created, he needed to educate people about good design so that this information would be "followed through to the point of sale," as the above quote reveals.

¹²⁵ "Industrial Design at RCA," Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 8.

¹²⁶ Article from *Business Week*, May 30, 1936, quoted in "Half Century of Design," Vassos/AAA, Box 2, p. 46.

¹²⁷ A. Usher, "With RCA -- North of the Border," *Radio Age*, July 1943, pp. 20-23, from David Sarnoff Library. Also, John Vassos, "Designing Export Radios," *Radio Age*, July 1949, which mentions the 1936 radios.

Education was one of his favorite ways of getting people to appreciate modernistic design, and at RCA, he found a company receptive to this. In the Fall of 1936 (and maybe at other times), he gave a series of lectures to teach managers and sales representatives the basic principles of design.¹²⁸ Like a mini-class in visual literacy, the lessons were intended to convey the value of design and that the radio designs were works of art.¹²⁹

Much of the material on the history of art and design was drawn from Vassos's earlier talks while on the modern art lecture circuit following the publication of his illustrated books. Vassos the educator sought to give sales managers a vocabulary in which to articulate new ideas about style. As he explained to the salesmen in one of his lectures, language use was very important to educate the customer. He advised the salesmen on specific words to use:

[U]se correct conversational lingo [that] will make your speech sound authoritative ... Avoid the word "modernistic." This word has been misused to be euphemistic with "futuristic." Avoid the word "functionalism" -- it is unhappily an anathema. Use such expressions as "simplified form, ... well arranged, ... beautiful woods, beautiful design, beautifully styled, of the modern age, ... contemporary expression of artistry, ... smart, ... a functional chassis, ... a functional speaker, ... disturbing surfaces, badly thought out."¹³⁰

This simplified vocabulary list would help salespeople describe the special qualities of the new design. In the list there were many euphemisms of modernistic, including "simplified form, in good taste, well-arranged, contemporary expression of artistry, of the contemporary age, horizontalism, functionality, smart." Words that

¹²⁸ The other stylists, W.B. Stevenson and L. Brodton, may have also given lectures, as their names are listed on the cover sheet for the training course, but I do not have copies of their lecture outlines. From the Lewis Clement Papers, 1938-1975, at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, courtesy of Alexander Magnoun, David Sarnoff Library. Also at Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

¹²⁹ His New Yorker line of 1939-1940 was considered a "good will design" for Latin America. Letter to Bernice Maguire, March 29, 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 2

¹³⁰ Vassos in the fourth lecture for the training course in the fall of 1936, p. 5, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

conveyed the dangers of the non-modernistic and evoke mental disturbance like “disturbing surfaces” and “badly thought out” are also suggested on the comprehensive list as terms with which to describe the competitor’s brand.¹³¹

On one occasion, at a meeting of sales managers, Vassos gave tips on more covert forms of psychological manipulation. He drew upon his knowledge of psychoanalysis to describe the importance of involving the customer’s body in the sale and having them move around the body of the radio to get involved with it, similar to the techniques used by magicians to get the audience involved:

I know the district managers are coming Monday why don’t you ask the star salesmen of Raymond Rosen and Arthur Krett to come down and go through the motions of the simplified method of selling Magic Voice, which I worked out in Philadelphia three weeks ago? Since that time letters have come in from the stores applying it – Bimble’s, Litt’s, and Strawbridge & Clothier’s -- proving that it actually works without a lot of paraphernalia or any cost. Because its psychological effect is this: the salesman, to prove his point, proceeds to command the prospective buyer to bend down, to stand up, to bend down to the other set; this sort of an approach is similar to a magician’s in the theater after they have taken an actual part in this routine, their resistance is bound to be weakened, and they are far readier to say yes.¹³²

While it may seem crass to manipulate the customer’s body so that their resistance is weakened, it reveals the extent to which Vassos saw himself as a technician of human behavior, a self-perception that motivated most of his styling decisions. It was rather a matter of degree to which the customer is convinced to buy the radio because of the ease of use, the educational value of the salesman, or the interaction of the potential buyer with the radio. On each level, Vassos was involved in predicting and shaping the needs of the customer.

¹³¹ “Outline of Mr. Vassos’s Fourth Lecture for the Training Course,” RCA Manufacturing Company, A Series of Lectures Given by John Vassos, W.B. Stevenson, and L. Brodton For the Training Course, Fall 1936, Vassos/AAA, Box 11.

¹³² Letter to Thomas Joyce, RCA Manufacturing Co., August 20, 1936, p. 1, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

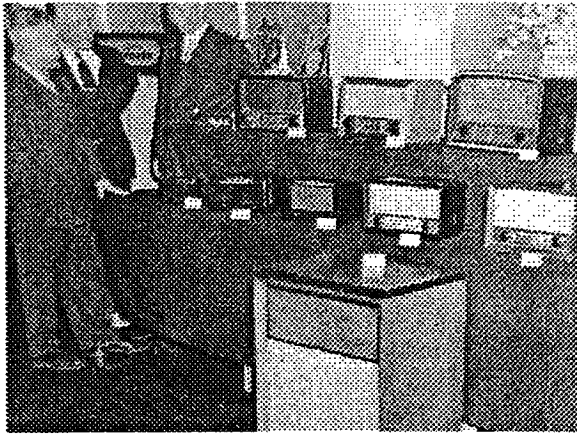


Figure 44: John Vassos and other RCA executives with a range of RCA radios at the 1939 World's Fair, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

Indeed, the pattern that can be seen throughout Vassos's industrial design work is his concern with the psychology of the buyer, whether this buyer was the manufacturer, as in the case of Margaret Bourke-White's beautifully photographed bottles, or the customer. The impact of writing *Phobia* continued to give Vassos the confidence of a psychologist, despite not having any training beyond his association with Harry Stack Sullivan. Andrew Abbott calls this corralling of skills that seemed useful to the new profession as "yoking."¹³³ Indeed, Vassos did all he could to yoke the psychological knowledge that he bragged about in the 1934 *Fortune* article. It differentiated him from other designers and became his specialty at RCA. According to Vassos's colleague, Carroll Gantz,

"though Vassos was not a tall man (he was rather short and stocky), he made up for this with his personality and leadership qualities, and dominated meetings with his dynamism. It was these qualities that landed him at RCA in 1933 to organize the design organization there and produce results, even as he continued his private practice."¹³⁴

¹³³ Abbott, p. 272.

¹³⁴ According to Carroll Gantz, who knew Vassos for many years at the IDSA. "His role as a WWII war hero typified his personality as a confident leader and risk-taker -- one might use the terms "swash-buckling" personality or "a man's man." Via e-mail correspondence with the author, December 12, 2003.

By 1937, the RCA Company's offerings in radio met a host of consumer needs from the modernist to the traditionalist, as an advertising poster for the year's radio collection described. The offerings included "a complete choice of authentically designed cabinets for every type of home furnishing, including exquisite 18th century cabinets, ultra modern console, and continental style models."¹³⁵ New radio forms consisted of "superb sets for unwired homes" and sets like the 9K, with a "magic brain and magic eye." The 9K's nine tubes gave it its name, and this radio aired weather reports, domestic programs, practically all foreign programs, and calls of police air pilots and amateurs.¹³⁶

New ways of selling radios included educating the sales staff about design and increasing attention to the body of the customer at the store. The styling plan at RCA -- to improve radio sales through style -- was indeed a great success, proving Vassos's importance at the company as well as revealing his skill at working with Bakelite to make the new radio form accessible and beautiful. Although his radios haven't received acclaim, the Little Nipper stands out for me as one of the most elegant miniature Bakelite radios of the 1930s, with its boxy shape tempered by the balanced horizontal grooves of the Bakelite. Working with new materials like Bakelite and moving the form of the radio away from its cathedral shape, Vassos envisioned a style of radio listening that would integrate the new medium into the home in a case that would be as modern as the listening experience itself.

¹³⁵ Paul Richardson, manager of Radio and Victrola Sales, quoted in "Improved electric tuning for all is a keystone of new RCA Victor standard line of domestic models," RCA catalogue, Vassos/AAA, Box 3.

¹³⁶ Poster of 1937 RCA Victor radio offerings, Vassos/AAA, Box 3.

This chapter has covered some of the issues that Vassos faced upon entry into the manufacturer's market. Vassos had to learn how to work within a corporation and how to get the materials and approvals he needed. I was struck by his role in the company as advisor and educator of the sales group and had not realized the extent to which the designer participated in this aspect of promotion. Rather than seeing the designer as having changed fields, Vassos became more integrated, finally landing in a place where he would invest all of his skills as a salesman, a display artist, and an illustrator. He had found a home.

In the following two chapters, I will examine Vassos's work within the company as he made it look modern from inside and streamlined relationships among departments as well as buildings. I will also look at his design for the television, which he released in 1939 and for which he faced similar design issues. As this chapter has shown, although the manufacturer has the last word, the designer in the early 1930s was able to push a philosophy forward, shape the company, and improve its sales.

Vassos's affiliation with major advocates of the art in industry movement such as Richard Bach at the Metropolitan Museum, expressed through his letters and through his involvement in modern art exhibitions, reveals that his styling decisions were informed by more than just the company's bottom line. Instead, they were part of a larger effort to incorporate the style of modernism into mass production through the radio.¹³⁷ Indeed, Bach "pioneered the concept of industrial design" in his position as curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where by 1934, he held 13 exhibitions

¹³⁷ Letter to Richard Bach at the Metropolitan Museum, September 3, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

of Industrial Art.¹³⁸ This was more than merely streamlining, as historians of industrial design have sought to argue; rather, the new media machinery entered the home in the form of a modified cubist shell, and not simply a sheathed aerodynamic case. It was housed in wood and in plastic and influenced both by the radio tube and the airplane. In this sense, Vassos bridged the gap between the harsh functionalism of the Bauhaus advocated by the “pure” design movement and the streamlined radios that infused fun and usability into the design while also reflecting some basic tenets of modernism. Customers, not even aware of the benefits of good design, had to be trained like employees to understand the value of a modern radio with more artistry over the value of the older models. They may not have even been aware that the radio was designed by an “artist.”

Vassos did use streamlined features, like curving edges, rounded knobs, and streamlined whiskers, but these designs looked nothing like the formulaic shapes of the streamlined bicycle or the streamlined stove. At RCA, Vassos used a range of methods to both improve and simplify the radio, terms he viewed as synonymous. Although he catered to mass taste with his range of designs, he desired simplicity and integration in radio design. Above all, Vassos conceived of the home as a machine for living, an idea expressed as he looked towards the future of the home as a place with a functional “entertainment system where ease of operation, acoustic qualities, and visibility will be the prime objectives, and meaningless decoration will play no part.”¹³⁹ His ideal living room of the future was realized two years later in the “Living

¹³⁸ Meikle, 2001, p. 84.

¹³⁹ John Vassos, “A Case for Radio Design,” Furniture Index, May 1938, pp. 16-18, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, p. 36.

Room of the Future” at the America at Home Pavilion of the 1940 New York World’s Fair, as the next chapter on interior design and RCA electronics will examine.

Chapter Four: From Lighting to All Electric Living Units: Vassos's Interior Designs

This chapter examines Vassos's interior design practices and links them to ideas about the home as a machine.¹ Starting in the late 1920s, Vassos developed modular geometric electronic units that consolidated the entertainment features of the living room. His designs for the home morphed European modernism with American eclecticism, edging towards Bauhaus-style modularity. He discussed the history underpinning the modern design movement in his lectures and in articles and expressed in the interiors he designed for Margaret Bourke White and for his own "small modern" apartment. His ideal of the integrated but mobile electric unit represented the home of the future, and it was erected and displayed at the New York World's Fair in America's Home Pavilion. I show how he developed his theories on interior design in lectures he conducted for the E.P. Dutton publishing house. I examine its historical roots in the architectural theories of Le Corbusier and in American interpretations of modernism in interior design in the 1930s. Vassos, who was invited to interpret the "Living Room of the Future" for the America at Home Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair was among the many designers who were dealing with the entry of new media technologies in the home and their integration with earlier forms, such as with books.

This chapter is arranged thematically according to the venues of Vassos's designs starting with window display, restaurant design, and interior design for private homes. It concludes with his futuristic setting for the Living Room of the

¹ Chris Cullen, "Gimme Shelter: At Home in the Millennium," Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 11.2 (1999) 204-227.

Future. Firstly, I discuss his early displays for public spaces in department store windows and restaurants. In each of these places, Vassos developed new ideas in display that would continue to shape his work throughout his career. These ideas included the innovative use of materials, the use of modular shapes, and the use of lighting to create a mood. The next section of the chapter discusses the theories developed in his lectures and then demonstrates how he applied these theories to interior designs for private apartments. In particular, he developed the “corner concept”, an entertainment nook with the appropriate seating and lighting for relaxation. I show how this arrangement led to the development of the living room of the future which anticipated the introduction of new media technologies and their integration with older ones.

The Modernist Store Window

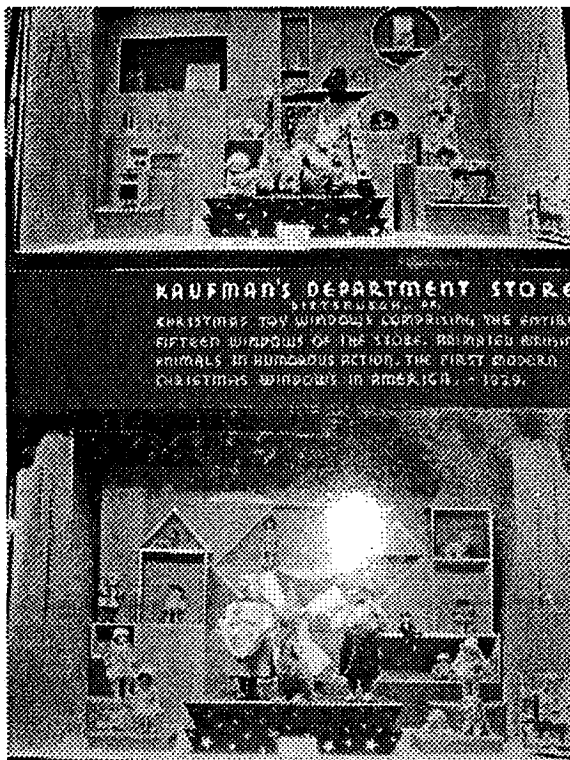


Figure 45: According to a note from Vassos's portfolio (Vassos/AAA, Box 25) these are the windows of Kaufman's Department Store with animations of amusing animals in the first modern Christmas window in America in 1929.

John Vassos, like other industrial designers, such as Norman Bel Geddes who did Franklin Simon's in New York and Raymond Loewy who did windows for Macy's, sold his services to department stores. Department store windows were among the first places where modernism entered the American consciousness. The wide glass window, created in part due to the greater accessibility of sheet glass, offered the possibility to revolutionize the window display. Earlier window displays were based on scarcity, and featured piles of goods stacked high. These product-centered windows were replaced by narrative-centered windows that featured carefully placed objects displaying not only the product, but also a way of life.

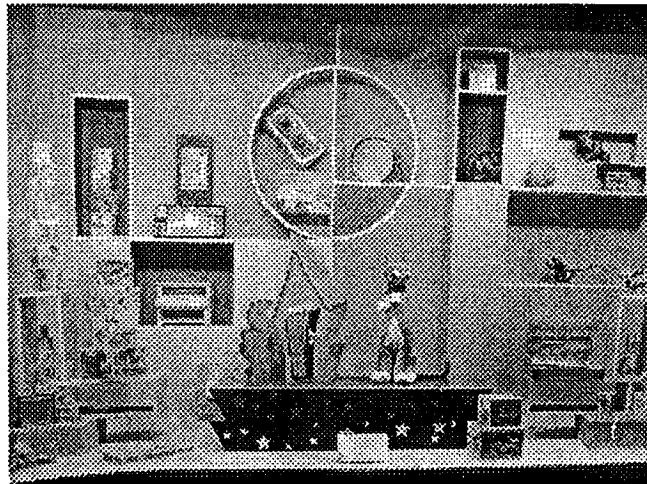


Fig. 46: Another window for Kaufman's designed by John Vassos, from Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

Vassos did his first windows in 1929 for Kaufman's Department Store in Pittsburgh. The store was operated by Edgar Kaufman, who was an early champion of a distinctly modern design aesthetic in window and store design. The display was one of the first wraparound Christmas windows as it was placed along the perimeter of the building so as to carry a visual product theme from window to window. The string of 15 windows with a "modern Christmas display" (figure 45 and 46) featured many toys, including animals in motion within a modernistic decor.² In addition to

² "IDSA Mourns the Passing of Design Leader, John Vassos," Vassos/AAA, Box 1, IDSA Newsletter, January 1986.

Kaufman's in Pittsburgh, Vassos dressed windows for Wannamaker's and B. Altman's in New York.³

With the slogans "good design is good business" and "modernism is design", the Kaufman's store was among the first to hire modernists.⁴ According to historian William Leach, in 1929, Kaufman also hired socialist Boardman Robinson within the same year to create modernist murals for his store.⁵ Vassos's work on the Kaufman windows featured cubist shapes, multilayered spaces, and architectonic arrangements of toys with skyscraper motifs breaking from the moribund form of the store window. Vassos describes his experience working with the innovative storeowner:

"I was invited to Pittsburgh to do storefront windows. Edgar Kaufman was a very elegant guy with a lot of imagination. He said the kids want a modern Christmas."⁶

The window was the ideal location to showcase new modern interior aesthetics. Borrowing concepts from theater to create the total modernist environment, the modern interior is expressed as a tiny theatrical space enveloped by the walls of the window. Leach points out that in the late 1920s, when modernism gained popularity, industrial designers were hired to liven up department stores windows throughout major cities. They used theatrical techniques, such as innovative lighting using spotlights and careful use of color to create dramatic vignettes that lured entertainment seeking shoppers to the windows⁷. The skyscraper motif, created by towering boxes and stacked display cases, foreshadows Modrian's 1942 **Broadway Boogie Woogie** by also suggesting a busy urban grid. The graphic display suggests

³ Letter from Vassos to B. Altman's, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁴ Richard Cleary, **Merchant Prince and Master Builder: Edgar Kaufman and Frank Lloyd Wright**, (Heinz Architectural Center, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, 1999), p. 22. Also see, Meikle, Twentieth Century Limited, pp. 17 on Kaufman's department store.

⁵ William Leach, **Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture**, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 304.

⁶ For more on department store windows and modern aesthetics see Nancy Troy, 'Reconstructing Art Deco: Purism, the Department Store, and the Exposition of 1925,' Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

⁷ Leach, p. 306-307.

that modern design was used as a sales tool to appeal to children. The use of moving animals added to its matrix of technology, design, and entertainment.

Despite the innovation, the modernistic windows didn't appeal to customers.⁸ Vassos and other designers then found other outlets for the application of these theatrical techniques,⁹ within homes and businesses which were also undergoing modernization. The window displays, however, helped Vassos articulate one of the tenets of modernist design that balanced design required the investigation of the relationship between its parts and its wholes.¹⁰ This idea played out in a display strategy where elements could be mixed and matched to create an environment of contrasts, such as in Figure 46, where round and square, horizontal and vertical lines create an exciting tableau. Vassos's experience doing windows also showed the importance of proper lighting to create a theatrical presentation. He continued to be concerned with product display and was angered at the lack of effort by others to improve product presentation. In a letter to the editor of Display magazine, he wrote that:

“Ninety-seven percent of the windows in America are badly constructed and architecturally wrong... It is erroneous to think that windows must always be lighted from the top.”¹¹

He applied these ideas of planned lighting to the restaurants he designed.

Making Fast Food Elegant: Vassos's Restaurant Designs

⁸ Raymond Loewy's windows were a flop too, according to Russel Flinchum, “Henry Dreyfuss and American industrial design.” dissertation, City University of New York, 1998, p. 21. Paul Frankl's window didn't bring him business either, according to Christopher Long, “The New American Interior: Paul T. Frankl in New York, 1914-1917” 9 Studies in the Decorative Arts, (2002).

⁹ Letter from B. Altman's saying his services are no longer needed, October 24, 1932, “It is impossible to work with you this Christmas,” in Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰ Terrence Doody review, “Home Smug Home,” 37/38 Design Book Review, (1996/1996) 6-8.

¹¹ Letter to R.C. Kash at Display magazine, November 18, 1935, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

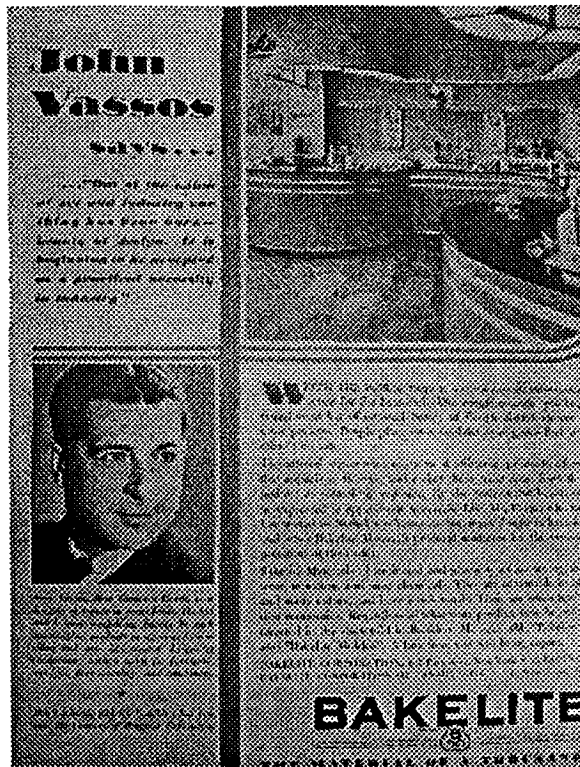


Figure 47: Ad for Bakelite, 1934, tearsheet, Vassos/AAA, Box 1 showing Vassos's first restaurant design. The Nedick's interior, is unique for its curving counter and clean lines.

In the 1930s, a massive modernization of businesses kept designers like Vassos busy with architectural renovations. According to Jeffrey Mickle, a survey conducted by the *Architectural Forum* revealed that from 1924 to 1938 three-quarters of the nation's commercial establishments conducted modernizing efforts.¹² Industrial designers participated widely in this effort, which suggests that designers were still affordable for small businesses to hire. Designers modernized storefronts, department stores, and smaller establishments like bakeries and small restaurants.¹³ They showcased their multiple talents at transforming physical space and at creating a total

¹² Mickle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, p. 117 quotes from "Main Street U.S.A.," *The Architectural Forum* 70 (Feb. 1939). Lewis Mumford also discusses and critiques modernist architecture and interior design in his "Skyline" column for the *New Yorker* in the 1931-1940 which are also compiled in *Sidewalk Critic: Lewis Mumford's Writings on New York*, Wojtowicz, Robert (editor). (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986).

¹³ Mickle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, pp. 115-127.

environment where each element was designed to coordinate with the dominant theme as well as to the understanding of consumer engineering.¹⁴ The idea of building as a package can be traced to the White Castle restaurants of the 1920s. In the 1930s, the plan was most effectively applied to other chain establishments, such as Walter Dorwin Teague's Texaco gas stations. Working with Nedick's, Vassos hoped that his design would become part of a standardized restaurant chain but it never did.¹⁵ The transformation of the restaurant reveals the extent to which modernistic décor became the norm in the early 1930s.¹⁶

Many industrial designers were forbidden by architectural boundaries to tread on the turf of architects, and so turned to interior design where they applied their knowledge of beauty and of consumer demand. Vassos's first applied design psychology to two New York restaurants, Nedick's Stand in 1930, and again to the Rismont Restaurant and Tea Room at 1410 Broadway in Manhattan in 1931. Following the publication of his book *Phobia*, he was eager to apply his ideas regarding the psychology of interior design. The concepts that he presented in the book influenced how he designed the restaurant interiors and allowed him to justify these decisions later in trade publications where he discussed these interiors. Most

¹⁴ See Ernst Elmo Calkins, "Beauty the New Business Tool," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1927 which is considered an important article signifying the rise of the new philosophy of beauty as a selling tool. It is also repeated in numerous articles where design is linked with commerce; see, for example, Storey, Walter. "Beauty Linked Firmly to Design: An Exposition Reveals How Art is Applied to the Latest Products of the Machine." *New York Times*. 1 April 1934: SM16.

¹⁵ The idea of Nedick's style restaurant selling Coca Cola instead of orange juice is expressed in a letter to Ross Treseder, December 11, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Vassos writes somewhat cryptically, "I feel that a dignified modern and freshly conceived place, keeping the good features of the Nedick stands plus what the Nedick stands lack, would be sure fire. It couldn't help but be a paying proposition providing it sells the best Coca Cola drink on Broadway, the best five cent cup of coffee and a good sized glass of beer."

¹⁶ The redesign of individual bakeries are an example of a small scale products which received elaborate overhauls by famous designers, see Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, pp. 110-129.

importantly, he was interested in the psychology of urban dining and specifically in creating a setting that would encourage customers to buy but not to linger. He compared dining to theater. Drawing upon his work in *Phobia* he writes:

“Should the artist for instance be called upon to design a restaurant, the achievement of beauty is not his only objective. He must bear in mind that a great number of people suffer from topophobia – stage fright – and his aisles and seating and lighting arrangements must be conceived with this in mind, if the place is to be successful.”¹⁷

In 1930, Vassos redesigned Nednick’s drink stand at Broadway and 47th street, which expressed idea of eating as a theater in the round. Unlike most “fast food” stands, Nednick’s was similar to the Brooklyn hot dog stand Nathan’s in that it had an integrated interior where the customers had to walk inside to get their food. This redesign took into account density, traffic, and sales figures for the new concept of creating a standardized eating experience. To suggest speed, Vassos added a curvilinear counter that was to be one of the first free standing counters for soda service.¹⁸ This concept was impressive enough to lead the Coca-Cola Company to seek out Vassos as a contact for his proven understanding of beverage service. Besides wanting him to design a beverage container, the company wanted Vassos to influence Nedick’s management to sell “something other than orangeade.”¹⁹ Vassos anticipated that the restaurant would be a new kind of bar for soda drinking in a society deprived of bars during Prohibition. Vassos hoped that the restaurant would become like a bar in the post-prohibition era. He even went as far as to build in a

¹⁷ Draft of article, April 21, 1932, Vassos/Syracuse, folder “Writing essays,” typed manuscript, “As the Walls Come Tumbling Down,” p. 2.

¹⁸ White Castle started in 1921, see David G. Hogan, Selling ‘em by the Sack: White Castle and the Creation of American Food, (New York, NYU Press, 1999). The history of roadside chains is covered in John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age, (Baltimore, Maryland, John Hopkins Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Speech given at John Vassos party, Rismont Restaurant, Vassos/AAA, p. 2.

polished keg with a black Formica background and base with white metal trim, for “near beer or possibly real beer.”²⁰ Vassos was prescient in realizing the importance that soft drinks would take in the growing consumer culture, although they did not really take hold until after the war along side the rise of the fast food chain.

The restaurant design heralded the age of a new kind of dining experience with its massive swirling counter. At this Formica counter, colored orange and cream, two employees dispensed food and drinks. Without the annoyance of having to walk to and from tables to serve customers, the employees were able to serve thousands. Besides speeding up dining by providing self-service, Vassos took into account the factors of the time taken and the distance traveled to serve the customers. As he explained, the worker’s hands move faster in the enclosed space.²¹ In addition to speed, Vassos created a packaged experience by designing all the details including the uniforms, for which he suggested a light green washable material that matched the green in the company name. To add to the elfin “employee at your service” look, the pants legs were cropped above the knees and were belted with black patent leather. The matching hat would also have a band of black patent leather and was made of straw for use in the summer.²²

Vassos planned the architectural factors to increase the customer’s appetite by improving lighting, service, speed, and cleanliness. As Vassos explained, (Figure 47), the beauty of the restaurant would help sales:

²⁰ Nedick’s is still in operation. There is a branch located on 34th street between 7th and 8th Avenue across from Penn Station in Manhattan.

²¹ Syracuse speech, p. 11.

²² Typewritten report, no recipient, probably to Nedick’s since it refers to drawings attached to the proposal, October 2, 1931, pp. 1-3, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, p. 2.

“With the public there is a conscious or sub-conscious preference for the beautiful. The weighing scale, gasoline pump or refreshment bar of unusual beauty of design always entices coins from more pockets. People place more confidence in goods that are pridefully offered for sale.”²³

Specifically, Vassos used architectural features like lighting, color and furniture to shape the dining experience, making the restaurant more inviting and the display of the food and drink more appealing. A properly lit restaurant could shift the customer’s mood Vassos explained, “The idea was to light up the stand and create the feeling of excitement, color and light and brightness.” While the service counter was brightly lit, the rest of the restaurant was “softly lit affording confidence for the customer, as the average person dislikes being exposed to glaring light.”²⁴ Vassos also considered the relationship of the restaurant with the people on the street passing by the place. He found that he was able to create the most pleasant and least intrusive atmosphere when “the light [was] directly focused into the interior and on the counter rather than thrown out into the street or on the people who were eating. This is most important.”²⁵ This was an improvement over the old eating space where “the food looks as though it were spread on a table on the sidewalk” because of the interaction of people and the light inside and outside of the restaurant.²⁶ As these quotes reveal, Vassos analyzed the whole visual range of the space and its impact on the eating experience.

²³ Bakelite Ad, tearsheet, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

²⁴ note attached to picture, Vassos/AAA, Box 9.

²⁵ Ibid. Vassos also stressed this idea in a discussion of his design in the Magazine of Light, September 1931, p. 11, Vassos/AAA, Box 1, where he states that customers don’t like being “in the limelight.”

²⁶ Typewritten report, no recipient, probably to Nedick’s since it refers to drawings attached to the proposal, October 2, 1931, pp. 1-3, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

The counter, at center of the restaurant, was made of a curving, seamless surface of Bakelite and it was the first Formica “dispensing stand.” Bakelite’s colorful synthetic resin called Formica was perfectly suited for creating an exciting but clean effect, as the slippery surface could be quickly and easily wiped, making it increasingly popular as an architectural material. Vassos used the material generously in the restaurant’s paneling, ceiling, and bar, which were all made of Bakelite. The material’s colors also reflected the orange drink theme.²⁷ In addition, the counter was edged with chrome trim and had a black “kick plate” adding a serious edge to the playful design and emphasizing the horizontality of the design. The restaurant was featured in an ad for the Bakelite Company, although Vassos had originally wanted the ad to feature his Coca-Cola dispenser (see Figure 47).²⁸ Vassos often referred to the dispenser in his talks and lectures.



Figure 48: Exterior View at Night, Rismont Restaurant, Broadway New York, *Lighting*, July 1931, p. 13, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

²⁷ “Nedick’s Seventh Avenue and 47th Street,” *Transitions I.E.S.*, December 1932, p. 770, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

²⁸ The restaurant may have also been written about by a journal from the “Illuminating Engineering Society,” as Vassos thanks the Chairman, A.L. Powell in a letter dated December 29, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

For the Rismont Tearoom at Broadway and 38th street, Greek restaurateurs, the Garis Brothers, asked Vassos to create a small, modern restaurant in a heavily trafficked part of Manhattan. To accommodate their request, Vassos gutted the former restaurant to create a tightly organized, well-lit vessel. The restaurant departed from the usual tearoom style with quaint Spanish, Italian, and English styles. Rismont was one of the first restaurants in the country to use indirect lighting by inserting lights into the architectural features of the restaurant, such as beams and along its ledges.²⁹ For its use of light and its innovative design, the restaurant was featured in *Pencil Points* magazine in December 1931 and in other architectural periodicals.³⁰

As with Nedick's, Vassos approached the Rismont dining experience from the perspective of the customer and accordingly drew on his theories of consumer psychology to shape the space. Undoubtedly, this restaurant was important in establishing Vassos's expertise in using lighting as a means of shaping consumer behavior. His lighting drew customers into the space like flies to light, and at the same time, it forced them out of the space for a high customer turnover. The indirect light flowed from aluminum troughs and through a specially designed drop gallery that was installed over the fifty foot eating counter to act as a light conductor and as an air ventilator and air conditioner.³¹ To attract street traffic, Vassos spread out the name in wide neon lights and used big modernistic, sans serif letters in an angle reminiscent of motion picture credits. This sweeping lighting became the motif of the restaurant, and its primary unifying feature. Vassos was not alone in using lighting to

²⁹ "Half Century of Design," Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

³⁰ *Pencil Points*, December 1931, pp. 889-896. Also see, "Interesting Lighting Gives Tea Room Distinction," *Lighting Magazine*, July 1931, p. 13, 21 featuring the Rismont Tea Room.

³¹ Typewritten article, with Vassos as the writer, May 10, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

shape the modern restaurant. Arthur Pulos points out that the need to control and manipulate the quality and quantity of light had a profound impact on the shape and organization of architecture and public spaces in the 1930s.³² The curving lights hugging the edge of the restaurant created the feeling of an ocean liner, a moving vessel. (See figure 49).

Vassos explained that part of his plan was to stimulate the customers, since “[i]nterest had to be created as the room itself held none.” To diversify the floor plan, he partitioned the room into three distinctly lit sections. Ranges of light appeared in unexpected places, behind the bar, in the walls, and above the tables to highlight each section. For solitary diners, Vassos added a counter that spanned the width of the room to maximize the number of people the restaurant could accommodate. Vassos used new materials in innovative ways as was popular in modern design. He covered seats in Spanish rose fabricoid with black buttons to add contrast.³³ He replaced the rectangular wooden display cases and baseboards outfitted in ornate molding with a single display counter made of glass featuring brass fittings. This counter swept the store’s length and ended in a full curve. He covered the entire counter with black Carrara sheet glass, a pigmented structural glass popular for its smooth precision and geometric regularity.³⁴ At this sprawling glass candy counter, the elegant lighting fixtures look almost edible and are suggestive of things that can be eaten, held, or touched. “People liked it,” Vassos later recalled.³⁵ He particularly

³² Pulos, *American Design Adventure*, 411.

³³ “Interesting Lighting Gives Tea Room Distinction,” *Lighting*, July 1931, p. 31.

³⁴ Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 119.

³⁵ Syracuse University Speech, p. 13.

enjoyed that his modern designed restaurant did “not necessarily belong to any particular stratum of life or of business.”³⁶

The challenge for Vassos, was to make the restaurant comfortable, but not too homey as the restaurant depended on a high turnover for profits. The establishment “had to be attractive and comfortable, but it had to be planned so that people would not be tempted to lounge. Therefore, the benches are wide enough – but not too wide – and the customer realizes after eating his or her luncheon that the place to smoke one’s cigarette is outside. The chairs are comfortable – if one doesn’t sit too long on them.”³⁷ From the visual experience to the physical one of sitting on a hard bench, Vassos’s redesign shows an awareness of traffic patterns, human bodies, and density. Not only did the modern restaurant look like a machine, but also it was being planned as one.³⁸

Finally, Vassos sought to unify the space by taking a singular visual cue of the design feature and developing it throughout the interior. As Vassos explained, “[e]ven the lettering for the restaurant name and the cards for the windows were especially designed and lettered to be in conformity with the whole.”³⁹ Jeffrey Miekle points out that this expression of taking a significant element of the design and extending it was a feature of American design in which designers “extended this principle of total control to encompass the redesign of the entire environment.”⁴⁰ This principle was also used by industrial designers in interior designs as part of their effort to package

³⁶ Vassos, Pencil Points, December 1931, p. 896.

³⁷ Vassos, Pencil Points, December 1931, p. 896.

³⁸ He also designed the kitchen for the restaurant; see The Architectural Forum, October, 1931, p. 460.

³⁹ Pencil Points, December 1931, p. 896. On this use of a single design element in interior design, see Pulos, American Design Adventure, 411.

⁴⁰ Pulos makes this argument, American Design Adventure, 411.

the company. Later, this concept would evolve through package design as the visual quotation would be found in all the physical expressions of a corporation, including its setting, its products, and its advertising.⁴¹ For the Rismont, long thin vertical lines are the visual motif that Vassos spells out in the letters of the name, in the chrome piping, in the lines created by the chairs at the counter, and by the movement of light across the ceiling. It was an idea that Vassos would extend in his interior designs for the RCA Company's offices and studios which are discussed in the following chapter.

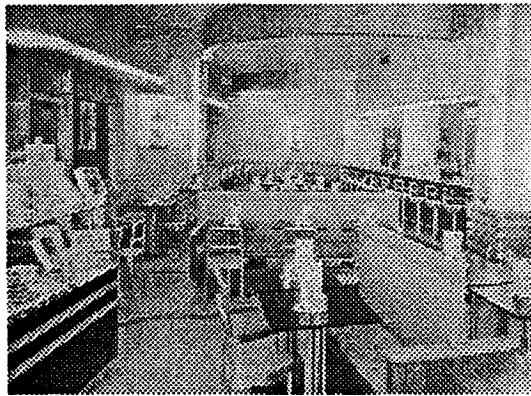


Figure 49: Inside the entrance doorway of the Rismont Restaurant and Tea Room, designed by John Vassos, from *Pencil Points*, December, 1931.

In addition to his modernist interiors, Vassos proved that he was also fluent in the “old world style.” Using heavy mortised antique tables and chairs with backs cut from thick oak planks, Vassos created a Bavarian effect for the tap room in Manhattan. “Time-stained” seeming oak ceiling beams and wainscoting with chandeliers of cartwheels hung by chains completed the effect, which must have been

⁴¹ Russell Flinchum, Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer, The Man in the Brown Suit, p. 71-75. Among the interiors that Flinchum discusses is the Western Union office where he integrated lighting and other design features for the company, p. 71.

striking.⁴² These restaurants however, marked the end of his interior design for public spaces outside of World's Fair displays and merchandising for the RCA display room.

At Home in the City with Vassos

Along side his interior designs for commercial establishments, Vassos also worked on private homes, starting with his own Upper West Side apartment where he lived briefly between periods spent living in Greenwich Village and New Canaan, Connecticut. More completely than in other areas of his work, Vassos's apartment designs explored the principle of modularity, an idea that would be more fully expressed in his plan for the World's Fair living room of the future that is discussed later in the chapter.⁴³ His main idea was to make furniture as useful and functional as the people who used it. Vassos also paid careful attention to lighting with these design concepts.

Among the influences for Vassos's approach to design, was the idea of modular, simple furniture that was easily moved and replaced. This was an idea that came from the design school that I term modernism, which had its origins in European efforts to merge art and design. Modernism came to the United States slowly through Le Corbusier's L'Esprit Nouveau pavilion at the International Exhibition of decorative Arts in Paris in 1925. His pavilion used mass produced materials to produce functional, ornament-free furniture and storage systems, which he envisioned would be suitable for the mass housing projects he would design in the future. Le Corbusier was influenced by Adolf Loos, the first designer to reject the need for ornament in interior design. Adolf Loos's Ornament and Crime, written in

⁴² "New Tap Rooms Hark Back to the Past," *New York Times*, December 10, 1933, p. SM16.

⁴³ See Elaine S. Hochman, *Bauhaus: Crucible of Modernism*, p. 177-178.

1908 gave Le Corbusier (born Charles-Edouard Jeanneret in Switzerland in 1887) new ideas about decorative arts. His theories and buildings reflected the principles of rationalization and standardization that demanded the use of new technologies in the building of homes to produce a “machine for living.” His ideas also influenced the Bauhaus, which translated the machine aesthetic through a socialistic vision. Modern design progressed slowly in the United States, starting with Alfred Barr then at Harvard University and many other designers who had been at the 1925 Expo. It wasn’t until the 1930s that its principles were adapted to American industrial design. With his designs of the early 1930s, Vassos was an early public advocate of modernism in interior design. This may explain the frequent and enthusiastic press coverage he received for interiors that applied the principles of functionality and simplicity. Vassos gave talks at places like hotels, social clubs, and cultural institutions, and these presentations on interior design in particular, offered “his theory as to what a truly modern interior should be. [It] is most arresting” ⁴⁴ the E.P. Dutton brochure claimed. ⁴⁵

In his lectures, Vassos described his place in American industrial design history, and argued on behalf of the American modern design movement. He did this by telling the story of modern art movements and how they relate to industrial design as a method of styling mass produced goods, which he then related to his own interior designs. He traced the movement of modern design from Europe to the United States, revealing the interaction between art and architecture. He writes:

⁴⁴ Dutton brochure, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, in a file labeled “RCA Murals.”

⁴⁵ Department stores like Kaufman’s mentioned earlier were also early advocates of modernism in interior design see, Marilyn Friedman, Selling Good Design: Promoting the Modern Interior (New York, Rizzoli International, 2003).

“...there could be no more definite tie up than that between the supremacists who eliminated all beauty and expression to a black square and the white box-like houses on the landscape in LeCorbusier’s architecture.”⁴⁶

His slides drew from both art and industry showing the influence of machines on art and architecture. His collection of slides ranged from the paintings of Cezanne, Picasso, Andre, and Chirco, to photographs of machinery by Margaret Bourke White. There were images of American vernacular architecture, such as the grain silo, which LeCorbusier had hailed as a great architectural triumph of modernity.⁴⁷ He included other reflections of modern design on “industry, in architecture, in advertising, in décor – and in our daily lives” such as turbines, light bulbs, and electronic equipment.⁴⁸ In these lectures, Vassos was presenting ideas that were fresh and new at the time. It wasn’t until 1934, for example, that surrealism began to enter the collection of the Museum of Modern Art which itself was founded in 1929. This period marked a turning point in the cultural recognition of the importance of modern design in the United States.⁴⁹

Vassos was particularly concerned with the relationship between urban space and domestic space as expressed in the *Phobia* drawings, which take place in the city street and in the vertiginous interiors of the city. Design, Vassos thought, could bridge the spheres of work and home by taking the technological advances used in the workplace and incorporating them into the fabric of the house literally through careful planning and prefabrication. The relationship between the home and work was

⁴⁶ Typewritten note, no date, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

⁴⁷ Vassos/AAA, the metal box of glass slides is located in Box 5.

⁴⁸ Dutton brochure. Vassos/AAA, Box 2, RCA Murals.

⁴⁹ Smith, Making the Modern Industry, Art and Design in America, p. 390.

originally explored by Le Corbusier who, according to urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, tried to unify the elements of home and work, nature and urban planning:

“the homogeneity of an architectural ensemble conceived of as a “machine for living in” and as the appropriate habitat for a man-machine, corresponds to a disordering of elements wrenched from each other in such a way that the urban fabric itself – the street, the city – is also torn apart. Le Corbusier ideologies as he rationalizes unless perhaps it is the other way round. An ideological discourse upon nature, sunshine and greenery successfully concealed from everyone at this time – and in particular from Le Corbusier – the true meaning.”⁵⁰

Vassos was intrigued by the notion of the home as a machine for living.

However, I argue that his ideas presented an alternative version of modernist design that sought to separate the home from workplace rationality rather than integrate it while still using elements of the machine. The home for Vassos, despite his affinity to modernism, remained a refuge, a “haven in a heartless world” filled with light and people rather than a rational cave. Vassos, like Le Corbusier, made the link between psychology and design, particularly in relation to phobias produced by poorly designed urban spaces in the home and on the street. He expressed this notion clearly in a letter exchange with a fan who got a copy of the book from Mr. Richard Bach at the Metropolitan Museum (with whom Vassos was in contact)⁵¹ and who worked for industrial designer Donald Deskey, another important industrial designer. The letter inquired if Vassos had any ideas for using the book *Phobia* in a lecture on modern art. Vassos responded directly, “I cannot see how you will link *Phobia* with modern art.

But I can easily see a true marriage between *Phobia*’s and modern living, which

⁵⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976). Also see Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Architectural Press, 1946), p. 190.

⁵¹ Richard Bach began the industrial art program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and was an advocate of industrial design; see Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, p. 20-21. Also see, J. Stewart Johnson, *American Modern: 1925-1940, Design for a New Age*, (New York: Harry Abrams, 2000), p. 11.

perhaps is the out spring of any contemporary expression.”⁵² These ideas were expressed through his designs for the streamlined knife, for the turnstile, and also in his own penthouse apartment where modernism was not only an aesthetic, but also had a hygienic and mentally calming effect, as I examine below.



Figure 50: “A Small Modern Apartment Designed by the Artist for His Own Use,” *Pencil Points*, October 1930, pp. 789-792, original reprint courtesy of Silvermine Guild of Artists.

For his modern Penthouse, which was featured in *Pencil Points* in October 1930, Vassos created a livable space that conformed to tight spatial limitations. The apartment’s simplicity and elegance coincided to modernist dictates of equating beauty with simplicity. Vassos argues that, “The true modernist eliminate[s] all unnecessary detail in attaining a practical – and by reason of its intense practicality [sic], a beautiful – result.”⁵³

⁵² Letter to C.A. Castle from John Vassos, Vassos/AAA, Feb. 17, 1933.

⁵³ *Pencil Points*, October 1930, pp. 789-792, original reprint courtesy of Silvermine Guild of Artists.

Unlike the austere modernism of the Bauhaus, Vassos retained a sense of comfort in the room by providing variations in the size and mass of the furnishings that he custom-designed. The *New York Times* ran a story featuring the apartment and applauded this merging of simplicity and comfort. In the article, the author comments that:

“... there is not air of stiffness in the room. This effect is no doubt due to the variation in size and form in the furnishings and the studied lack of formal balance of masses true of the traditional style.”⁵⁴

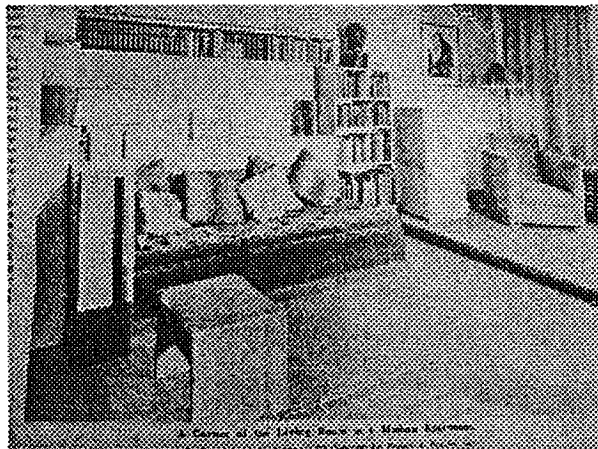


Figure 51: “A Corner of the Living Room in a Modern Apartment,” utilizing horizontal and vertical stacks of book in the modular corner, designed by John Vassos.”⁵⁵

His furniture was well suited for the small apartment space. He used moveable units and built-in furniture to create variations in the space that separated different areas of the apartment without constructing walls. His apartment design alternately allows for sociability and isolation within a single room by using variations in lighting sources, such as lamps of differing heights and light that differed in its quality. In Figure 51, a chair in the corner is lit separately than the corner couch area.

⁵⁴from Walter Storey, “Modernizing the Walls of Our Homes,” *The New York Times*; 16 February 1930, pp. 16+ Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

⁵⁵ “Modernizing the Walls of Our Homes,” 16.

His low-lying, built-in bookshelves with their simple forms create functional barriers between occupants while providing storage space that does not crowd the interior with bulky pieces of furniture (See Figure 50). In addition, he separated spaces for new experiences, such as reading and listening to the radio.

Geometric modular furniture pieces that could be easily moved was a feature of modern design, but the idea was not new in furniture design as the 1909 Sears and Roebuck catalogue had advertised “sectional bookcases.” The Bauhaus however, added new storage features such as multiple file-cabinet like drawers that borrowed office aesthetics for the new home machine.⁵⁶ For example, in 1926, during the early years of the Bauhaus, Marcel Breuer applied this system to an apartment. At the same time, the unit idea was making progress in Germany and in England. It appeared in the United States between 1929 and 1930 in the designs by Donald Deskey and Gilbert Rhode. Rhode’s designs were shown in the “Design for Living House of 1933” at the Chicago World’s Fair. However, according to a publication produced by the Museum of Modern art, the unit idea only became popular in the United States after 1938.⁵⁷

Vassos used the square furniture (no more Victorian spindly legs) to create L-shaped living room corner spaces. These spaces were ready to receive the modular radio and phonographic cabinets he designed, representing a new way of coordinating the various media forms within the home, and more importantly, of integrating the various experiences that one could have in relation to these media, for although their

⁵⁶ MOMA “Organic Design” catalogue, 1941, p. 9, Vassos/AAA, Box 3. Kristina Wilson argues that a few critics had written on the technology and function-based principles of German design by 1929, but in general the aesthetics and ideal of such work were not well known or understood in the United States until the 1930s, p. 100.

⁵⁷ MOMA “Organic Design” catalogue, 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 3, p. 9.

functions were different, they were harmonized by the cabinetry that literally united them.⁵⁸ Economically, Vassos's small apartment would not be accessible or practical for most Americans, but the simple bold furniture gained popularity throughout the 1930s and into the postwar period.⁵⁹ Functionalist modern interiors eventually became icons of expediency and frugality, and being neither trendy nor wasteful, they allowed a merging of various styles by economic necessity. Consumers could buy single pieces whenever necessary and integrate them into an existing set.

Vassos, however, had to find a way to interpret modernism to an American audience. He needed to produce a "livable modernism" that kept the functional features of modernism but added an American demand for comfort. The term "livable modernism", coined by art historian Kristina Wilson, refers to designers in the 1930s that mixed avant-garde principles with middle-class taste and marketing savvy to generate a distinctly American streamlined aesthetic. During the years of the Great Depression in America, modernist designers developed products and lifestyle concepts that were intended for middleclass and not for elite consumers. Livable modernism combined International Style functional efficiency and sophistication that respected the consumers' desires for physical and psychological comfort.⁶⁰ Thus, Vassos sought to create an atmosphere that enabled him to retain his criticism of

⁵⁸ In the post-war era, Leavitt and Sons took built-ins to a new depth, even incorporating television sets in the entertainment units, often found under the stairs in a viewing "nook," so they could be financed with the home's mortgage. Carma Rynne Gorman, "An Acquired Taste: Women's Visual Education and Industrial design in the United States 1925-1940, (Dissertation, UC Berkeley, 1998), p. 99.

⁵⁹ Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism, Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression*, (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2004).

⁶⁰ Kristina Wilson, "Exhibiting Modern Times: American Modernism, Popular Culture, and the Art Exhibit, 1925--1935." (Dissertation, Yale University, 2001).

modernism's abstraction, universalism, austerity and coldness⁶¹ while embracing its production of spaciousness, order, and visual stability.

In clarifying the space of the home by means of removing excess ornament and emphasizing functionality, modernists articulated a notion of selfhood that viewed an individual's personality as reflected and shaped by their surroundings. Vassos expressed this notion in *Phobia* in his portrayal of nervous modern people dominated by frightening architecture. According to the philosophy of the modern self, an individual should be unfettered by the accumulation of historical junk, personal clutter, or random design periods in their home. The home, no longer a center of production, offered a reflection of the inner life of the inhabitants. Later, this concept became associated with their worth as individuals an idea promoted in advertising whereby nosy visitors harshly judged their neighbor's homes. As art historian Hal Foster explains, this philosophy of the emergent self was part of the reason that modernists fought against the overstuffed clutter and engulfing femininity of traditional home design. The modern home, in their view, was a theater for the expression of the self and not a space laden with the historical residue of others.⁶² The simple modernistic plan, with its emphasis on bare spaces, clean lines and hidden objects, seemed to be an ideal setting for the expression of interiority and the containment of emotion.

Vassos, who rebuilt apartments from scratch, also sought to remove the historical residue of others through modern design. He recognized that apartment

⁶¹ A situation that Rbyczyński argues is a result of Le Corbusier's reading of Taylor, unlike the domestic engineers who got it right combining function and comfort. See *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, (NY: Viking, 1986). Also see Terrence Doody's review "Home Smug Home," *Design Book Review*, 37/38, 1996/1996, pp. 6-8.

⁶² Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes*, (London, Verso 2002), p. 13-19.

dwellers would move frequently (a new concept in the 1930s!) and that built-in furniture would have to be shared. He designed rooms in buildings that were completely new, such as the Chrysler building. Here he built Bourke-White's studio and in his own skyscraper Penthouse, suggesting that their longevity go beyond the changing careers of their current inhabitants.

When he described his color choices for living room pictured above, it was obvious that Vassos was attune to the home as theater for the self. He explains that he chose neutral beige, combined with the wood tones of the furniture, to create "a flattering background for people who are in the room [as it is] they [who] supply the color."⁶³ The sparse room provided a neutral setting for the colorful personalities of the inhabitants. This new conception of the living room also suggests a new increasingly unisex home where men began to inhabit the parlor following the 1920s. Historians Mary Ann Clawson and Mark Carnes argue that Victorian men, in contrast to modern men, spent many of their evenings at fraternal meetings, which, like their jobs, kept them away from the perceived female world of the house. These meetings provided men with the psychological permission to break from the inhibiting bonds that tied them to their mothers. This picture of the father-as-stranger under his own roof is consistent with the movement of work outside the home: their world of both work and leisure lay beyond the white picket fence.⁶⁴ For Vassos, who, at times, both lived and worked at home, the functionality of modern design provided a solution to the domesticity as feminine problem. It wasn't always easy to introduce the new

⁶³ Pencil Points, October 1930, pp. 789.

⁶⁴ Mark C. Carnes, Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Mary Ann Clawson, Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989); Steven Gelber, Do It Yourself: construction, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity, 49 American Quarterly, March 1997, 66-112.

furniture forms into the home. Vassos mentions that he finally convinced Ruth Vassos to get rid of her “Adam desk and colonial dresser including a fine spool bed” at their Penthouse, since she eventually preferred the modern approach.⁶⁵

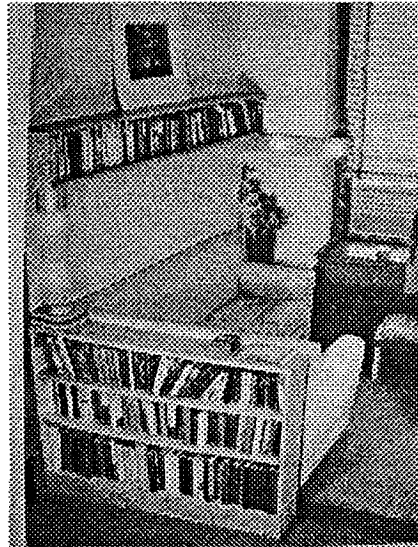


Figure 52: Office and studio of Margaret Bourke White, New York, NY” photograph by Margaret Bourke White, *Architectural Forum*, January 1932, p. 29, note the tubular light column uniting the lower and upper book cases and also wrapped around the wall.

Vassos applied the modernist principles he used in his own home to the Chrysler building studio of his friend and photographer of the machine age, Margaret Bourke-White.⁶⁶ She was a fitting first client on which to express the values of the machine age in interior design, and both Vassos and Bourke White recognized the publicity value of the two modern artists working together.⁶⁷ Bourke White, whose photographs of modern machinery were being published widely, was also concerned with clarity, form, and the impact of machinery on perception. There is, I would argue,

⁶⁵ Draft of Autobiography of John Vassos, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 31.

⁶⁶ Vassos also modernized Harry Stack Sullivan’s office at his brownstone at East 64th street in Manhattan; see *Psychiatrist of America*, p. 347.

⁶⁷ A letter to Vassos from Mrs. M. Levine (possibly Vassos’s publicist) suggests that “the prestige of the combination of John Vassos designed and Margaret Bourke-White working in that interior would influence the London editors” of a magazine called *The Studio*, October 6th, 1932, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

a relationship between Vassos's modernistic interiors and Bourke-White's photography that illustrate, what Terry Smith calls, "the new aesthetic of modern architecture", which needed modern artistic photographs to do it justice.⁶⁸ In her new studio situated in one of the city's most important new skyscrapers, Bourke White wanted an interior to match her growing reputation. Bourke White's biographer Vicki Goldberg describes the space:

"The studio announced that Margaret Bourke White was poised on the edge of tomorrow. It was a streamlined, art moderne environment; all built in curves and decorative angles with an aquarium for tropical fish at eye level on the wall, Venetian blinds of corrugated aluminum and light fixtures of aluminum and frosted glass. She moved to another penthouse studio, larger but less expensive in 1933 to 521 Fifth Avenue. Once again, John Vassos designed the interior."⁶⁹

Vassos used new materials, modular furniture, and targeted lighting. As he recalled, the new materials were inspired by Bourke-White's own clientele:

"In 1929, she approached me and asked me to design her studio. This is the year of Art Deco. I said, Margaret you work for Pittsburgh Plate Glass, you work for Armstrong Cork and Alcoa and DuPont products. I am going to surround you with all the things you do for your friends. And she loved that desk."⁷⁰

Vassos also made the studio comfortable in other ways by surrounding Bourke-White with her photographs and books. He created boundaries between spaces using innovations like an L-shaped nook where books create a natural shelf and raise the height of the apartment above eyelevel. He used books as a decorating device, adding lit columns to prop up the bookshelves and creating a sculptural,

⁶⁸ Smith, p. 402.

⁶⁹ Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke White: A Biography*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 141.

⁷⁰ Speech to Syracuse University, p. 11.

architectural form with the light.⁷¹ This semi-indirect lighting system using frosted glass held by aluminum strips, was designed to furnish 'cakes of light' where light concentration was most desirable. Thus, Vassos blended comfort and technology when he throws multiple pillows on a day bed surrounded by geometric lights.

Books and Interior Design

In the next brief section, I discuss the importance of books in Vassos's interior design as it influenced the development of his integrated modular entertainment unit and shaped ideas about places of leisure in the home. While he discarded most other features of the former parlor, Vassos used bookshelves frequently in his interior design. He not only used them as shelves, room dividers, and to add color, but also he decorated these homes with framed images from his own books. Books had new meaning in the modern home in the 1920s, not only intellectually, but also as a decorating device that would compliment the modernistic interior by adding geometric shapes and visual interest without overwhelming or cluttering the space.⁷² Books are clever to use as part of interior design as their spines are visually interesting and create a visual literary collage on the multiple tiered shelf units. Books also convey information about the owner's intelligence. According to book historian Megan Benton, book buying expanded dramatically in the 1920s due to both economic prosperity and the beginning of a technological revolution in communications media. Books, unlike the other new media form of radio, offered a more extended, intimate engagement with texts. Their format ensured a permanent and enduring "ownership" rather than the ephemeral contact offered by radio, which

⁷¹ *Architectural Forum*, January 1932, p. 29.

⁷² Nicholson Baker, "Books as Furniture," in *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* (NY: Vintage, 1996), pp. 182-193.

had a visual presence, but was transmitted orally. Books were something to collect, and so represented an investment of time, money, and household space, making them something to incorporate into one's life rather than use and discard.⁷³

Book collection was influenced by the new forms of mass media which expanded in the 1920s, such as radio and cinema, adding to newspapers and mass magazines as new sources of information. Starting in the 1920s, almost half of American households owned a radio, a technology which had only been introduced ten years earlier. Steady, rapid improvements in print production and distribution techniques enabled printed media to enter the popular consciousness as never before. Nationally distributed magazines like *Reader's Digest* and *Time* (founded in 1921 and 1923, respectively) and daily newspapers, which for the first time in history reached more than 90 percent of American households, were largely responsible for this increase.⁷⁴ These new media provided cheap, immediate, and seemingly inexhaustible sources of information and entertainment, leading some to fear that books would quickly become obsolete. However, the new developments in mass media may have actually helped clarify what made books distinctive in the modern interior. Vassos designed units which held books (representing high culture) and the other media which helped ensure the integration of the media forms literally into the seams of the house, situating them in physical proximity to one another.

The manner in which books were incorporated into one's daily life was a crucial indication of one's interest in and commitment to book ownership. Several writers cautioned readers about the difference between books sequestered in a home

⁷³ Megan Benton, "Too Many Books: Cultural Identity and Book Ownership in the 1920s," *American Quarterly* 49.2 (1997) 268-297.

library--described by Emily Post as a "mausoleum" because it was usually off limits to visitors and children--and those books that were "invited into" the living room where they would be on display. People who entombed their books in cold, inhospitable surroundings--behind glass doors, for example, a treatment likened to "shutting out your best friends"--simply missed her point of books' superlative value to modern home decorating. Books were to be understood as bridges that effectively linked their owners with new and often "better" territories of civility and not as walls that preserved those cultural boundaries. Using books to exclude, intimidate, or chastise others, by contrast, was to Post a form of antidemocratic snobbery profoundly at odds with the social ethic of home decor in the 1920s.⁷⁴ To misrepresent yourself through books was of course fraudulent, but worse still, it was rude--bad manners.

For Vassos, who integrated books into his modular units believed that they served many useful functions, both as an expression of the owner's taste and as a way of organizing space. He used the book shelves to create architectural archives, emphasizing horizontal and vertical stretches that added depth and visual interest.⁷⁵ In the Bourke White apartment he used them to create a shelf above the reading corner on top of which a photograph is displayed. In his own apartment, he used them to divide space and reflect his own reading practices. As an author intimately involved in the growing book market, he also had an interest in making books

⁷⁴ Yet to display books you hadn't read would also be deceitful as Post wrote "to fill your rooms with books you know you will never open, rather than with those you like, . . . is to produce the same impression of misfit as if you wore a mask and wig." Emily Post, The Personality of a House: The Blue Book of Home Design and Decoration (New York, 1930), 356; 437, p. 281 -282. Garrison, "Bookcases As an Integral Part of Interior Architecture," 158; Minga Pope Duryea, "When Books Become a Decoration," 24 Arts and Decoration (Feb. 1926): 45.

⁷⁵ For more on book design, see Henry Petroski, The Book on the Bookshelf, (NY: Knopf, 1999).

important in interior design. Books would continue to play a role in his interior designs even in the Electronic Living Room of the Future, where the old new media and the new new media could coexist.

Musiccorner in the Living Room of the Future

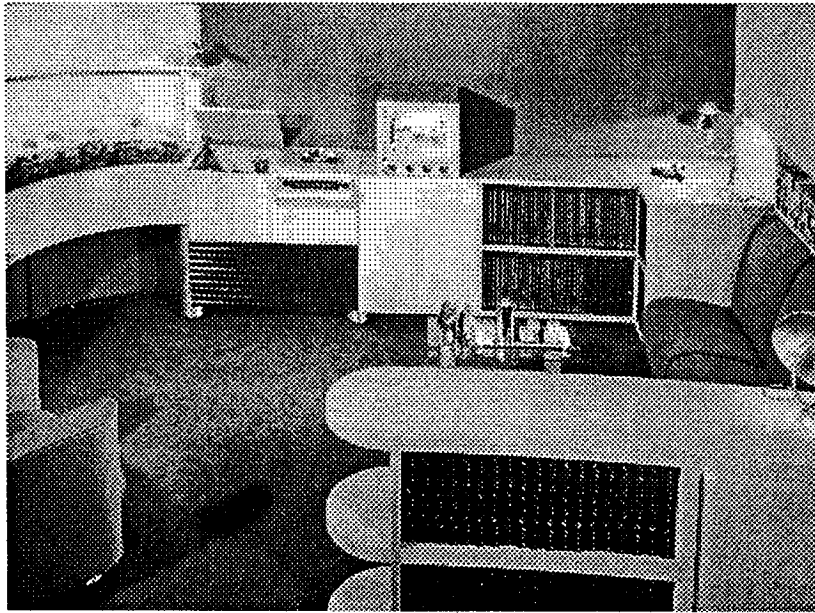


Figure 53: the "Musiccorner" at the American at Home Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1940, Vassos/AAA, Box 3⁷⁶

Vassos faced a new challenge with the introduction of electricity in the home as his designs would have to move beyond books to incorporate the new forms of audio and visual entertainment. He came up with modular solutions, similar to those in his modern apartments that integrated the various electronic appliances inside the boxy housings with expanded storage space. The modular cabinetry that he had produced for his own apartment was the perfect solution for the new media forms and electronic devices that were beginning to be introduced. The cubes were integrated, fit well together, and created the clean linear surfaces that modernists loved. Vassos

⁷⁶ This publicity shot has been used many times, including Architectural Record, June 1940, p. 94.

expressed his plans for an integrated entertainment area in his “musiccorner” design at The America’s At Home exhibit held during the second summer of the 1939 New York World’s Fair.

This special pavilion, added to the 1940’s pro-America version of the fair, was hastily planned to represent the future of American domestic design by drawing from the most talented industrial designers who had also done the architecture for the fair. According to a letter from the organizers pitching the plan to designers, it was “a program planned to dramatize the development of design in manufactured articles and consequent improvement of taste in every day living.”⁷⁷ To plan the rooms, the doyens of high modernism, including scholars, manufacturers, and other “taste makers”, were invited to join the Jury that planned the rooms. The Jury included prominent manufacturers and design curators, such as: Richard Bach of MOMA, Edgar Kaufman Jr. of Kaufman’s department store, architect Edward Stone, Francis Taylor, director of the Worcester Museum, John McAndrew, who was associated with MOMA, and Carl Feiss of Columbia University School of Architecture. The goals of the exhibition were to produce an elite, yet exciting, vision of America’s Home of the future; or rather homes of the future, with rooms that were to be luxurious, but simple, compact yet elegant.⁷⁸ The Jury acted as a planning body, leaving copious minutes through which to record the process of planning the rooms and awarding prizes to top designers and their products. In this section of the paper, I draw largely from the planning records of the Fair that are housed in the New York

⁷⁷ America At Home, “Designer’s Room Files,” letter to Walter Dorwin Teague, February 23, 1940, New York World’s Fair (1939-1940) Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Section, New York Public Library (hereafter, NYPL), Box 363.

⁷⁸ In a letter June 10, 1940, NYPL, Box 364, American At Home Inventory list.

Public Library's World's Fair collection.⁷⁹ There are few references to the Living Room of the Future, although its presence at the fair suggests ways that leading modernist designers were thinking about how new media would be integrated into the home.

The America at Home Pavilion, a huge impressive building with large columns and surrounded by Greek sculptures, included a series of sixteen series rooms and "living concepts" each designed by a top designer or a team of designers. Among the designers who participated were: Theodor Muller, who did the "Beginner's House," John Yeon who designed the "North Pacific Slope," William Muschenheim who did the "Parents' Retreat," Donald Deskey who designed the "Sport Shack," Russel Wright who created a "Winter Hide-Out in the Adirondacks," and Gilbert Rhode who did the "Unit for Living" apartment.⁸⁰ The intention of the pavilion was to celebrate accomplishments in designs nationally in a "dramatization of regional contributions and trends in different sections of our country to American home furnishing and decorating."⁸¹ The project raised awareness about the national trend in modern design, and specifically, gave media attention to the manufacturers who participated. The show then did not serve as a series of showroom exhibits selling available merchandise, since the rooms, with the exception of Gilbert Rhode's Unit for Living, were made of merchandise that was not immediately available. The

⁷⁹ For an example of this which takes an account of art-viewing and exhibitions based on diaries of visitors to the Chicago 1893 World's Fair Columbian Exposition, see, Michael Leja, "Modernism's Subjects in the United States," *Art Journal* 55, (Summer 1996) 65-72.

⁸⁰ "America at Home" Rooms, Credit page draft, May 8, 1940, to Mr. Vogelgesang, NYPL, Box 363.

⁸¹ "Notes on decorators, designer and architects for series of special rooms in America at Home" NYPL, Box 363.

pavilion was located at Rainbow Avenue, near the Gas exhibition.⁸² It was heavily attended, as roughly 18% or more of visitors to the fair visited the pavilion during the Fair.⁸³

As revealed by letters to original designers and from minutes of the Jury's meetings, Vassos was not part of the project until February 26, 1940, well after ten to twenty other major designers were asked to participate.⁸⁴ When he was finally asked to design a room, it was originally to be called the "musicorner", suggesting the small role the radio would have in the living room. It seems that Russel Wright was originally invited by the jury members to do the section.⁸⁵ Vassos had already been a part of the fair through his involvement in the RCA pavilion for which he designed the TRK 12 television. After he was finally asked, Vassos responded graciously to the offer to produce a living room for the fair. As he wrote:

"I have read with interest the brochure of the fair that you sent me, also your letter. My clients have their own pavilion, which we are now planning to enlarge and improve over last year. However your project "America at Home" appeals to me and I am taking the matter up with the powers that be to see if we cannot participate and have something designed especially for this exhibit."⁸⁶

Vassos saw the invitation as a good opportunity to express his new ideas about radios in the home. He felt that the appliance needed to be increasingly modernized to suit the society and not hidden in ornate cabinetry as had previously been the case. He suggests that "to date most manufacturers as you know are

⁸² "Today at the Fair – Complete Program and Map Guide," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 13, 1940.

⁸³ These figures come from a file called "Attendance n-6," NYPL, Box 364 which compares gate figures to attendance in the building. 12.5% was the smallest number of visitors, recorded between August 26, 1940 to September 1, 1940.

⁸⁴ NYPL, Box 363, "Designer's Room" Folder, memo entitled "Notes on Decorators."

⁸⁵ see letter from John McAndrew, February 26, 1940. "Exhibitors Prospective" NYPL, Box 363.

⁸⁶ letter from John Vassos to Lousie Bonney-Leicester, Director of America at Home, February 28, 1940, NYPL, Box 363.

reluctant about developing uncompromising well-designed sets that may be the best designer can create yet are far from commercially sound. This is particularly so with the radio industry. However the magnitude of your project and my own persuasion may induce them to be included in this particular case.”⁸⁷ Always a collaborator, Vassos offered in this early letter to suggest that other designers among his colleagues at the American Designers Institute may be interested in participating, although it is unclear what evolved from this request.

Despite his early interest, Vassos needed approval from RCA to do the project. These negotiations reveal the complexity of Vassos’s role as an independent contractor and as an affiliate of RCA. Early on, there were problems regarding RCA’s request for an exclusivity contract and the fee for the space.⁸⁸ It appears that in the beginning, the organizer Louise Bonney received a \$1,000 contribution from RCA. The same amount was requested from other exhibitors, however, according to the budget file, very few industries actually contributed to the fair.⁸⁹ Although the room would be identified as a “musicorner by John Vassos,” RCA would be given full credit for all products, Bonney explained in her letter.⁹⁰ Vassos, acting as the RCA intermediary, asked that RCA be the exclusive radio provider for the pavilion in return for paying the fee and setting up the room. Bonney, however could not commit

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Letter from John Vassos, March 22, 1940, NYPL, Box 363, “John Vassos” folder.

⁸⁹ NYPL, Box 363, America at Home, “Budget File,” records contributes of \$750.00 from RCA and the Detecto company, \$3,000 each from Kara Gheusian and Alex Smith, carpet manufacturer. Also see “Exhibitors General File” which records that pressure was suggested from 22 companies to get them to contribute more money to the exhibit, March 22, 1940 in a memo to Lousie Bonney, “John Vassos” folder.

⁹⁰ March 22, 1940 in a memo to Lousie Bonney, NYPL, “John Vassos” folder.

to exclusivity promises that excluded other accounts from solicitation.⁹¹ In response, on April 14, 1940 Vassos wrote that he could not make a deal, without an exclusivity clause. This curt letter blamed Bonney for being unclear from the start and expressed Vassos's deep disappointment with the impending withdrawal from the project. He had already done most of the work, as he explained:

"I had already lined up my electric units, lamps etc. also some comfortable and functional furniture. However, my plans and sketches have not been completely in vain as one of the big furniture manufacturers has asked to do a room along these lines for his company."⁹²

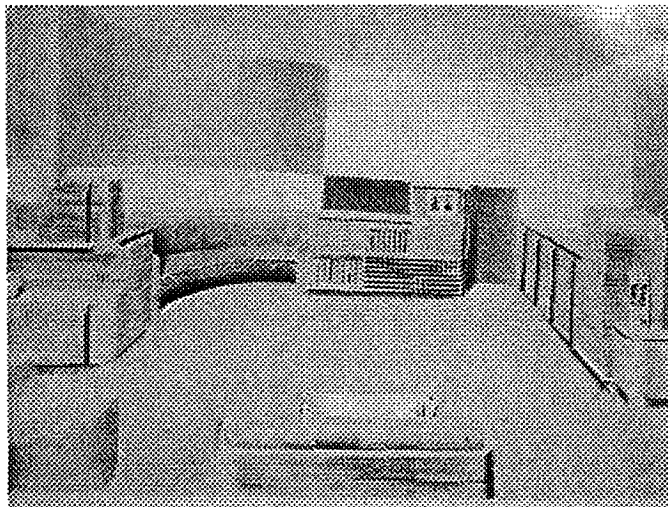


Fig. 54: Rendering for the Musiccorner, by John Vassos, no date. Notice the fax machine bringing in fresh news on the right hand side of the modular unit. This unit was not included in the final room. Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

Finally, after more haggling, RCA's participation at \$750.00 for a room now called the "entertainment corner by John Vassos" was confirmed. (In the final credits,

⁹¹ "If any other radio account comes in we shall be obliged to submit it to the jury. However, I can assure you that we are not taking any steps to get other accounts. We have stopped all aggressive selling of industrial participation in order to concentrate on the exhibit of rooms and assume the completion of the exhibit." To Vassos, April 9, 1940 from Louise; April 17, 1940 memo from Bonney regarding Vassos mentioning exclusivity clause; April 15, 1940 memo to Vassos accepting proposition but not exclusivity clause, NYPL, Box 363, "John Vassos" folder.

⁹² Letter from Vassos to Bonney, April 14, 1940, NYPL, Box 363, "John Vassos" folder.

it was called a “musicorner.”) The letter lays out the contract and the freedom that Vassos would have in designing the space:

“Mr. Vassos and RCA will be responsible for the furnishing of this room and the Fair will build the envelope. It will be 10 feet by 14 feet. If Mr. Vassos uses outside sources for chairs or lamps they must definitely be custom made products by cabinet makers who do not have showrooms.”⁹³

The wording suggests the tenor of an exclusivity agreement without ever really saying it. In addition to the musicorner, there was also to be a separate display of an RCA TV cabinet and 3 small radios (on the outside of the sealed off room, the TRK 12 and a black and white model of RCA’s new bakelite radio were displayed).

⁹⁴ Other than some slight delays in the production of the room and questions about the materials, such as the color of the telephone, and occasional problems with timing, the production went smoothly following the contractual glitches⁹⁵ One major change to the room was the removal of an ambitious plan for a news dispensing “pretentious facsimile exhibit,” which was depicted in an early rendering of the room (Figure 54) and would provided hardcopies of fresh news, as an adjunct to the television.⁹⁶

In the end corner, a tight space of only 16 feet by 15 feet, contained numerous equipment, including a 16mm sound film projector, a radio, a phonograph, and a television receiver which were housed in bleached Mahogany modular furniture.⁹⁷

The furniture unit positioned against the wall consisted of a blue chair, a desk bar,

⁹³ April 17, 1940, telephone conversation, NYPL, Box 363, “John Vassos” folder.

⁹⁴ “Jury for the Gold Seal Award” NYPL, Box 363; also see Vassos/AAA, Box 16, scrapbook photo of TRK12 indicating Goldseal award.

⁹⁵ In one letter, the head of exhibition crew writes, “What happened to the TV cabinet, the stand for installation has been complete for nearly a month!” June 11, 1940, NYPL, Box 363, “John Vassos” folder, America at Home, letter from Vogelgesang, June 11, 1940.

⁹⁶ “This equipment will transmit at the rate of one 8 x 12 page every 18 minutes and is inteneded for home use.” NYPL, Box 232, File, 4.44.

⁹⁷ “Television in the World of Tomorrow”, by Iain Baird, ECHOES, Winter 1997. Also in letter from Vassos to Shepard Vogelgesang, April 25, 1940, NYPL, Box 363.

and a flower box. Every detail of the room was planned, including the well designed glass and aluminum coffee table, which came from the Egli Company. The streamlined bar accessories from the Manning-Bowman and Company⁹⁸ included six highball glasses on a metal tray, six cocktail glasses and one metal shaker on a mirror, two metal ash trays, and an ice tray and tongs. Sixty-eight books that were donated by the E.P. Dutton Company, obviously through Vassos's connection, expanded the "leisure" theme while retaining the modernistic design of the space.⁹⁹ The soundproofed room seated between eight to nine people and was, as Vassos described, "clean, simple and honest."¹⁰⁰ It was intended for a home or apartment.¹⁰¹

The area, then, was the first recreation room, accommodating television watchers -- a media "hive," with radio, a phonograph, books and games.¹⁰² It was arranged for communal recreation. In order to help the television viewers' eyes adjust to television, Vassos painted the wall blue behind the television screen to enhance the image and the "effect of light transmission."¹⁰³ In addition to the television, one of many media forms here, the phonograph and radio were also emphasized. The music was planned by Vassos and marketing people at RCA, with selections chosen by

⁹⁸ "Musiccorner" descriptive sheet, NYPL, Box 364, "Inventory" folder.

⁹⁹ E.P. Dutton was Vassos's publisher. Inventory Room #30, "Musiccorner, Furnishings," NYPL, Box 364, "Inventory" file.

¹⁰⁰ Syracuse Speech, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ According to an article about the room entitled "Designed for Living," tearsheet from Victor Record News, Vassos/AAA, Box 1, no date.

¹⁰² This is an area about which there has been little scholarship, according to media unit historian Professor Haidee Wasson, Concordia University, in interview on May 21, 2004. Postwar leisure-time recreation rooms have, of course, been better documented, see Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs. By Lynn Spigel. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001. However Vassos's multipurpose room/corner was an idea other designers were thinking about. This is clear in an article on multipurpose rooms from Architectural Record, September 1940, p. 64 which features a room by Harry Maslow with "a multipurpose cabinet...areas on the living room side are cupboards, shelves, radio and phonograph case and a plant box. The unit was specifically designed to provide ample space for entertaining in a small home."

¹⁰³ Vassos, from Directions magazine, Volume 4 #3, March 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 1, p. 12.

prominent musicians to reflect and compliment the relaxed, contemporary space while also retaining its connection to education. Arthur Fiedler, conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra chose the luncheon music; Mr. Tommy Dorsey “that sentimental gentleman of swing” chose music that he would like to play during the day; Mr. Koussevitzky -- “rightly ranked with the greatest living conductors since the Boston symphony, as developed under his direction is accounted among the finest the world has ever heard”¹⁰⁴ -- chose music that he would like to listen to during the evening.¹⁰⁵ There were 129 record albums in total.¹⁰⁶

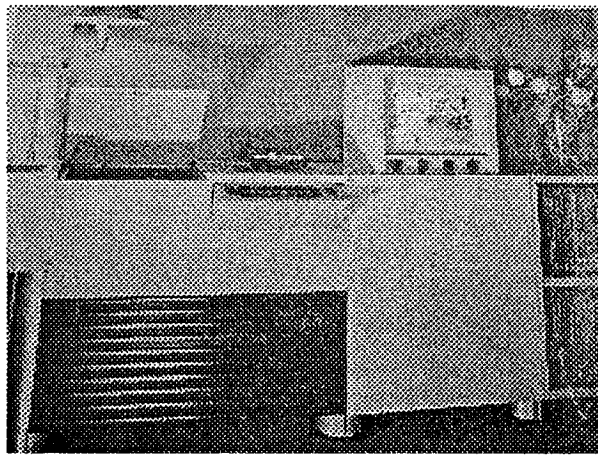


Figure 55: detail from Musiccorner, Vassos/AAA, Box 20.

The segmentation of the room, according to units of the day, units of space, and units of experience was in keeping with the Vassos’s attention to the various ways that the room would be experienced. His unobtrusive design, which leveled the tops of the phonograph and the television (even the flowers are visually at the same height) as seen in Figure 55. Thus, Vassos camouflaged the set itself, drawing attention away from its transformative qualities to present it as just another piece of

¹⁰⁴ James Stanley at RCA sent these bios to Louise Bonney, NYPL, Box 363, “John Vassos” folder.

¹⁰⁵ Letter to Louise Bonney from J.M. Williams, manager Record Advertising and Sales promotion RCA, August 9, 1940, NYPL, Box 363.

¹⁰⁶ Inventory Room #30, “Musiccorner, Furnishings,” NYPL, Box 364.

the entertainment unit, united with the audio components. The white casing he chose would never be a popular housing color for television. His placement of the knobs at the base of the frame reflects Vassos's consideration for the user's fingers making his or her interaction with tuning mechanisms (which must have been frequent as the reception was very bad) more enjoyable.

Like the units in his own apartment, the various appliances and elements of the musicorner were mobile, and according to Vassos, these "units...gave the room identity and character."¹⁰⁷ It is not surprising then that in the promotional literature provided to the media, which emphasized the modern design of the pavilion, these units, with their easy reproducibility and mobile modern design, were paired with Gilbert Rhodes apartment. For example, in a pitch letter to Roman Slobdin of the then bi-monthly arts magazine *PM*, Louise Bonney sent a photo of one of Gilbert Rhode's housing units along with a picture of the musicorner. In another publicity-oriented letter, the room is described as "a 20th century music room...[with] cabinets specially designed as separate movable units – radio-phonograph, record library, movie project and television sets. The units are adaptable to a number of other arrangements."¹⁰⁸ Like Rhode's designs, Vassos's prefabricated modular electric units moved away from the streamlined aesthetic that dominated the fair. These spaces anticipated the prefabricated housing market with their easy reproducibility and disregard for craftsmanship in furniture design. Undoubtedly, the most popular exhibition in America's Home of the Future was Donald Deskey's Sport Shack, a prefabricated

¹⁰⁷ "Half-century of Design" article from Vassos/AAA, Box 2, p. 46.

¹⁰⁸ Architectural Record, June 1940. p. 94.

weekend home, made of Deskey's patented plywood Weldtex.¹⁰⁹ The home featured the standardized assembly process that would make housing easy to build.¹¹⁰

Some press inquiries were made about the Musicorner, for example Meteor Publishing wanted a photo of the musicorner, however,¹¹¹ it was not met with the praise and enthusiasm given to the Sportshack. This may have been, because television was only one of the many wonders of future technology, and as such, it was not especially emphasized at the exhibition (or even by subsequent scholars of the fair). The family recreation room was not foreseen. Overall, despite the fair's theme of the future, electronics played a small role in the home of the future which was more traditionally decorated and conceived of as a retreat. The other America At Home pavilion exhibits that featured radios were Russel Wright's "winter hideout in the Adirondacks", which was outfitted with a Crosley radio, and Gilbert Rhode's "unit for living", which included an Emerson plastic radio.¹¹² Other electronics, besides the radio and television, included in America at Home, included GE air conditioning, a refrigerator, a garbage disposal unit for the kitchen, and Westinghouse's sun lamp for the "all American budget nursery."¹¹³ This is in contrast to the domestic fantasyland produced by the rest of fair's exhibits, with displays such

¹⁰⁹ This is judging from the number of requests from the press for information on this exhibition. See NYPL, Box 365, "Magazine Publicity" file.

¹¹⁰ For more on Deskey's Sportshack, see Thomas Hine, "Newness Comes Home: Donald Deskey Associates and Postwar America," unpublished manuscript for "Packaging the New: Design and the American Consumer," Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1991, p. 22-28.

¹¹¹ "Minutes of Jury Meeting" letter to Popular Mechanics April 27, 1940, NYPL, Box 363.

¹¹² "Exhibitors General File" List of corporations, Crosley Dist. Corp, March 14, 1940, NYPL, Box 363; also see Box 363 "Exhibitors General" March 26, 1940, "a radio for the hunting lodge designed by Russel Wright," also in NYPL.

¹¹³ "Exhibitors General" March 26, 1940 memo, NYPL, Box 363.

as Westinghouse's seven-foot robot Elecktro, Democracy, and AT&T's massive phone display.¹¹⁴

Vassos's musicorner marked a departure from the prior display of the radio in "music rooms", which referenced the past while bringing new media forms into the home. The Philco radio company presented such a room at an exhibition in Radio City Music Hall in 1934 that featured the Philco radio in the mist of a 19th century aristocratic parlor. In this "Radio Music Room," the architectural firm of Stair and Andrew showcased a collection of antiques, such as paneling from 1760, an old mahogany work table, four black and gilt Sheraton armchairs with loose cushions of ribbed green silk, and finally an antique harp of black and gold lacquer. The room, which was intended to "give radio a setting worthy of its importance as the center of family life and as a cultural instrument of great value",¹¹⁵ could not have been further from Vassos's modernist version.

Vassos was critical of the Philco exhibition, complaining that, although the rooms were inventive and provocative, the show didn't "go far enough [towards] looking to the horizon."¹¹⁶ With this comment he suggests a failure of other exhibits to present the unification of standardized home appliances. As it became clear that the radio and the lamp were integral parts of the home, Vassos sought to integrate the electric features under the cover of singular sheets of plastic materials. In planning

¹¹⁴ See Joseph Corn and Brian Horrigan. Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future. (New York: Summit Books, 1984), Remembering the Future: The New York World's Fair from 1939 to 1964 exhibition catalogue, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1989).

¹¹⁵ John Vassos, "Report on Exhibition of Philco Radio Music Rooms Mezzanine Gallery Number Three Rockefeller Plaza" November 3, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "Misc. 1934" folder.

¹¹⁶ John Vassos, "Report on Exhibition of Philco Radio Music Rooms Mezzanine Gallery Number Three Rockefeller Plaza" November 3, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, "Misc. 1934" folder.

and predicting the consumption needs of Americans, the home of tomorrow will be the realm of the furniture designer. Vassos insists that the home

“will be designed and built from the inside out; and by that I mean that these units will be preconceived and placed before the house or apartment is completed to give maximum enjoyment and comfort for the man of tomorrow, and that is really something for the furniture manufactures to worry about.”¹¹⁷

His ideas for arrangements between builders, furniture makers, and electronics companies were most fully expressed in an article that appeared in 1940. For this piece, Vassos takes ideas from the Living Room of the Future and expands them throughout the home on behalf of integrating electronic appliances.



Figure 56: Brochure, “Why Not All Electric Living Units?” from *Electrical Manufacturing*, October 1940, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, RCA Misc., note the Musiccorner on the top of the page.

¹¹⁷ John Vassos, “Report on Exhibition of Philco Radio Music Rooms Mezzanine Gallery Number Three Rockefeller Plaza” November 3, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, “Misc. 1934” folder.

In order to achieve harmonious design in the home, there would have to be solidarity between the furniture producers and the electronics manufacturers. Vassos was actively forging this relationship in 1939 through his involvement as founder and the first president of the American Designer's Institute. This partnership was the second largest professional organization of industrial designers, drawing its membership from the American Furniture Producer's Association.¹¹⁸ He addressed the issue faced by radio designers who had to adapt their pre-existing product style to fit into their client's living rooms. He wrote about the modern living room:

"Today there is hardly a living room in America, be it Georgian, French provincial, Spanish or just home that does not have a radio, or phonograph or both in it. And the reason for this is that the radio and phonograph companies adapted the styling of their product to fit the room in which it was going to be placed."¹¹⁹

He believed that the range of furniture styles could be consolidated by the development of the prefabricated "electronic living unit", which he discussed in the article quoted above. Vassos suggests merging the electric components inside singular modular structures that would centralize the electrified areas. In his article, "Why Not All-electric Living Units?"¹²⁰ Vassos argues for the integration of nearly all electronic devices into a single unit. He explained the benefits:

"These units [would be] electrically energized to supply any such definite function as light for instance for the dresser, desk or headboard of the bed. Today with the advent of television with the 16mm film project no longer a novelty but a commonplace in many homes, with the radio and phonograph so permanently established that they have become the focal point of the room, electrically energized units can now be accepted as functionally and

¹¹⁸ Arthur Pulos, The American Design Adventure, p. 196-197.

¹¹⁹ Electrical Manufacturing, October 1940, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, RCA Misc; also in Vassos/Syracuse, Box 5, "Writings/essays," folder.

¹²⁰ Electrical Manufacturing, October 1940, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, RCA Misc. Donald Deskey was working on an integrated unit for appliances of in the home with Ingersoll steel, Thomas Hine, "Newness Comes Home," p. 26.

dynamically elevated units creating and complementing an ensemble that will definitely reflect our age, not as separate items unrelated to the interior as a whole.”¹²¹

He insisted that the electric unit would help everyone feel better in the home because it unified disparate elements of furniture. He wanted to “create[ing] an interior which is not only pictorially and dynamically interesting, but which expresses a directness and restfulness achieved through comfort and convenience of electrical invention.”¹²² The plastic laminate of the electric unit, however, was yet to be accepted into the living room. Vassos’s plan for the integration of electronic elements was channeled into his involvement in the design of the Berkshire home entertainment centers that he would design for RCA in the postwar period.

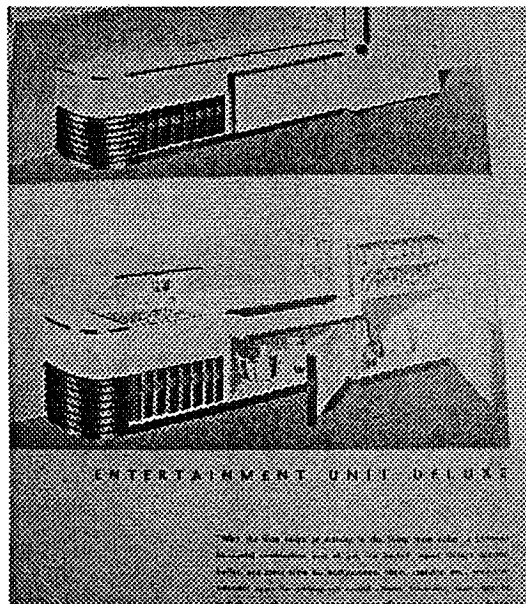


Figure 57: *Furniture Index*, March 1939, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

Vassos envisioned the total integration of appliances in the living room, including the mini-bar, the phonograph as well as the bookshelf. This semi-

¹²¹ Electrical Manufacturing, October 1940, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, RCA.

¹²² Electrical Manufacturing, October 1940, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, RCA.

biomorphic form was resonant of the Rismont counter with the skyscraper feel of the Kaufman's window, combining the various living room activities of drinking and listening. This "entertainment unit deluxe" unified "the wide range of activity in the living room today."¹²³ The cabinet was a generous horizontal combination unit of bar, ice bucket, liquor storage cabinet, buffet, and game table for board games, such as backgammon, chess, and roulette. In addition, it had considerable storage space for phonograph record albums, television, radio receiver, and phonograph.¹²⁴ With its doors closed, the unit blended into the wall, its unobtrusive L shape maintaining the lines of the room while providing valuable storage space and integration of units of activity.

Conclusion

Is the living room a machine for living or is it a place to unwind, melding the aspects of work and home into a comfortable mix? Vassos conceived of the home in both ways. He was interested in where people in the home would fit in relation to the machines, or rather, the appliances in the living room.¹²⁵ Vassos used modernist cabinetry to enclose the machinery of the new media. His electric unit was a creative approach to dealing with the new appliances that came into the home by unifying them rather than separating them, and by folding them into broader theories of modern interior and architectural design that stressed unity over partition. Undoubtedly, this new category of domestic multi-machine in the living room media center cleverly exploited the new production forms of single piece units which

¹²³ *Furniture Index*, March 1939, Vassos/AAA.

¹²⁴ *Furniture Index*, *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Hal Foster, "Prosthetic Gods," 4.2 *Modernism/Modernity* (1997) 5-38

worked well in mass produced housing. The *New York Design Digest* called Vassos the “originator of the multi-unit architectural interior.”¹²⁶

A few years after its inception, Long Island real estate developer, Levitt, predicted the demand for standardized furniture for the television. He included the living room unit in the home, folded literally into the body of the house (under the staircase), and he also tacked it on to the mortgage plan. RCA continued to develop machinery which strayed from this unification principle.¹²⁷ Television historian Lynn Spigel wrongly dates the unification of television and furniture manufactures as taking place in the postwar era. As Vassos’s 1940 call for collaboration between the manufacturing groups reveals, it was actually an earlier project, and one that was rooted in the design philosophy of functionalism as well as in the profit philosophy of capitalism.¹²⁸

The function of interior design changed greatly from the mid-1920s onwards as designers recognized the power of design to shape behavior. Other new developments that occurred during the same period included the large scale electrification of the 1930s, the mass production of homes, and the standardization of new technologies like radio and television. Designers were at the forefront of the movement to predict consumer demand in the new electrified media age. In his

¹²⁶ “Designer of the Month: John Vassos,” IDSA Publication, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 2, folder “IDSA publications.” Other designers were also thinking about the unit. This is clear in an article on multipurpose rooms from *Architectural Record*, September 1940, p. 64 which features a room by Harry Maslow with “a multipurpose cabinet...areas on the living room side are cupboards, shelves, radio and phonograph case and a plant box. The unit was specifically designed to provide ample space for entertaining in a small home.”

¹²⁷ For more on furniture styles in Levittown, see Herbert J. Gans *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a new Suburban Community*, (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 270-71. Also see Gorman, pp. 322-344 for a discussion of the role of the built-in television in Levittown homes.

¹²⁸ See Spigel, *Make Room for Television*, pp. 99-103 where she discusses efforts by furniture manufacturers to link up with electronics companies to combine services.

interior design for the “musicorner,” for instance, Vassos proved that designers needed to think about the audiences for radio and television in order to predict required seating capacities. Vassos was skilled at creating media centered interiors that were pleasing and comfortable, despite their modernist look.

In his drawings there is a profound sense of the homelessness engendered by modern society. Humans are forced underground in his book *Ultimo* and his drawing, “Everything is Honky-Dorey”, depicts men huddle in a subterranean cave, driven there by technocratic militaristic culture. The beauty and efficiency of modern design were well suited for a populist like Vassos, who above all, wanted accessible modernism to be available to everyone. In this way, electricity was the great unifier, bringing together in the living room the various aspects of the home, entertainment, reading, listening, and watching. The electric house that Vassos imagined, one that was dominated by electric units, may have seemed futuristic in the 1930s. It was however, remarkably prescient as family togetherness taking place in the “family room” would become a dominant value shaping the home in the postwar era, an age in which the nuclear family was united, at least briefly, in front of their television. Indeed, Vassos’s dream of building a “technically correct home” was still being developed in the postwar period as RCA continued to deal with the development of home furnishings that would meet the specifications of future technology. According to a confidential document detailing the “development of the technologically correct home” the bundling of services in the home of the future would go beyond the living room to include all of the elements of modern home life, such as; heat, light, cooking, cleaning, music, and electrical communication, such as two-way telephone

conversations and personal television two-way viewing.¹²⁹ Implicit in this document and in the domestic interiors that Vassos designed, were important questions about the very nature of what constituted home in the modern age, particularly as the television was to transform the home spatially, visually and temporally.

¹²⁹ Letter to Dr. E.W. Engstrom of RCA from Alfred Goldsmith, November 3, 1954, Vassos/Syracuse, "Correspondence," Box 3, with "Company-Confidential memorandum" attached.

Chapter 5

Money, Media and Modernism: Vassos the Modern Artist and RCA

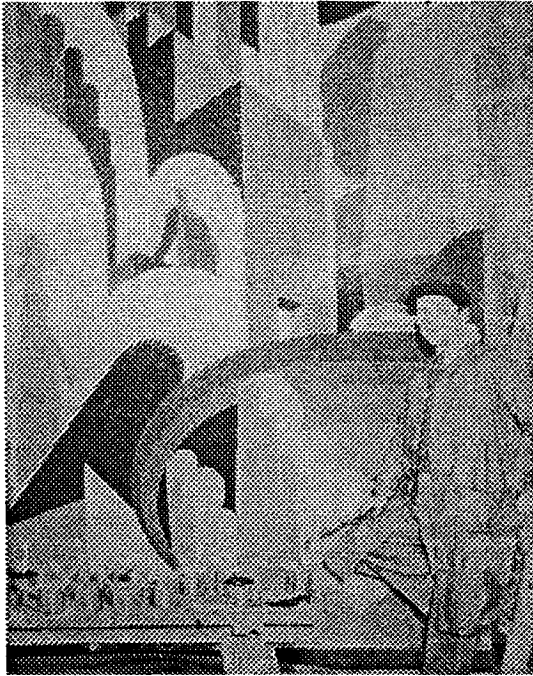


Figure 58: Vassos stands by his mural at WCAU, Philadelphia, 1932, Vassos/ AAA, Box 2.

John Vassos was discovered by RCA vice president George Throckmorton in 1932. When Throckmorton first met the beret-wearing Vassos, he was on a scaffold finishing two giant murals which honored radio at WCAU, a CBS owned flagship station in Philadelphia.¹ Vassos, at that point a reputable illustrator, had been hired to make the murals for the luxurious studio, “a modern monument to the art of broadcasting.”² The murals paid tribute to radio’s important role in democracy to forge a link between business and culture. Depicting dreamy, well dressed figures

¹ This story has been corrected by others, it indeed may have been “Bake” or George Baker, another RCA executive who first met Vassos on a ladder at WCAU and who was the one to mention Vassos to higher-up Throckmorton, letter from J.P. Taylor to John Vassos, November 13, 1970, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 4, “Memorabilia” folder. Another letter, to Throckmorton from Vassos, May 9, 1933 proves that he never met him on the scaffold and refers Throckmorton to the murals in Broadcast News to see them.

² This is the title of an article about the station, by John G. Leitch, Broadcast News, July 1932, pp. 2-4.

floating up an escalator to the sky, the mural extended the style and themes of Vassos's books to present a fantastic vista of social movement motored by radio. (figure 58). This was to be Vassos's only work for CBS, before he was hired away immediately by the RCA executive who met with him briefly at the Camden production site.³ The murals he created at WCAU along with his later work for RCA are worth a close analysis as they embody the principles of modern design and the aesthetic face of modernization that was to define Vassos's radio and interior designs for RCA in the 1930s.

In this chapter, I analyze Vassos's contribution to producing this new type of corporation, one that sought to enhance its public presence through design.⁴ I start with his murals for WCAU which express his philosophy of radio, and so immediately impressed the RCA executives that many of them hung the image "Great God Radio" on their walls. Next, I discuss Vassos's design approach for back-end equipment, such as the transmitters and the electronic microscope followed by an analysis of his nation-wide work on the transmitter house buildings. In the final section of the chapter, I discuss Vassos's contribution to unifying the RCA family of products. Besides his early restaurant designs, Vassos had little experience with helping to "package" the corporation, but this did not discourage him. RCA executives trusted the young artist who became an energizing force for corporate design, an effort for which the company, busy with acquisitions and the emergence of

³ Vassos knew the Levy's from his interior design for Leon Levy's private home Letter to Mrs. Levy from Vassos, August 23, 1933, about the design of her house, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁴ Churches have always been interested in impressing a corporate uniformity and order, mostly through architecture, according to Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 113.

new technologies, was grateful. Vassos was rewarded with his own windowed office, a design team, an educational series, a steady, renewable contract, and good pay.

After he was hired in 1933, Vassos became RCA's lead consultant designer, doing radio design, studio equipment design, and interior design for the firm. He created his role as the company stylist by doing everything from murals to advertising campaigns. As the overarching stylist of in-house and consumer products, Vassos was in a position to help shape the company's visual identity, which consolidated multiple businesses including receiver production, a phonograph business, and a broadcasting wing. Throughout the 1930s, RCA was rapidly expanding their reach into national broadcasting, which necessitated the unification of the corporate message and to connect satellite stations with the head company. One method of achieving this was through styling the RCA look which I term "corporate modernism," an expression of radio-influenced aesthetic that reflected the mission of the company during this period. In the 1930s, RCA tapped into the regenerative powers of design in all aspects of its corporation with Vassos as their guide to the new style. Even for in-house design, Vassos helped the company embrace the "chic modernism" of streamlined design. In Vassos's view, it was imperative to pay attention to the smallest visual details since these affected the experience of the visitors and employees, and more importantly, solidified the image of the company as modern.⁵

At RCA, Vassos modernized old and new equipment, including cameras, speech equipment, sound amplification machines, and other equipment that RCA distributed to its affiliates. He also worked on top-secret projects, such as Vladimir

⁵ Peter Dormer, *The Meanings of Modern Design: Towards the Twenty First Century*, (London, Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 51-52.

Zworykin's design of the seminal electronic microscope. This was in addition to his other role as designer for consumer equipment, design educator, and representative to the sales team.⁶ He designed modern architecture and interior design for studios nationwide, including transmission towers and studio layouts.⁷ Before visiting the archives, I was unaware of the extent of Vassos's role in shaping RCA's corporate look across mediums and institutional departments. This involvement is well documented through internal memos, letters, lecture notes, sales meeting notes, and in house journals. However, Vassos's work in this area has not been chronicled by historians, and the company's own website merely mentions Vassos. This may be the case because these documents were previously confidential.⁸

Most certainly, the aesthetic history of RCA's corporate expansion in the 1930s has yet to be told. This is mainly due to media studies' emphasis on content or regulatory issues over aesthetics in broadcast history. There is now a growing awareness of the value of design as a way to reveal the priorities and shifts in corporate strategy among broadcast giants. Design historian Dennis Doordan, for instance, examines the influence of William Lescaze, architect and industrial designer, who designed CBS radio studios during the 1930s. Doordan tracks Lescaze's earliest work for CBS in 1934, which involved the conversion of an existing Broadway theater, leased by CBS, into a radio production facility.⁹

⁶ "A Series of Lectures Given by John Vassos, W.B. Stevenson, L. Brodton for the Training Course Fall 1936," RCA records, Vassos/AAA, Box. 10.

⁷ See for example, John Vassos "Modern Broadcast Station Design," Broadcast News, December 1935, p. 22 where Vassos describes a streamline building where the "principles of horizontalism" have been applied; also see John Vassos, "Modern Transmitter House," Broadcast News, April 1936, pp. 16-17.

⁸ <<http://www.davidsarnoff.org>>

⁹ For a detailed account of Lescaze's involvement with CBS, see "William Lescaze and CBS: A Case Study in Corporate Modernism" in William Lescaze and the Rise of Modern Design in America, a special issue of 19 Courier (Spring, 1984); for an account of his career see: Lorraine Lanmon, William

Doordan's study provides an important early case history of studio design, particularly in revealing the value of live audiences to broadcasters in the early years. However, Doordan's focus on the New York studios limits the scope of his study. Lescaze's work for CBS was very similar to what Vassos was doing at RCA studios, as he too was infusing theater with radio's modernism, which changed the studio from a live experience to a broadcast arena.¹⁰

In the 1930s, the institution, apparatus, and experience of radio changed with the advent of network broadcasting which provided improved technology and saw the consolidation of radio broadcasters with increased power and capital. In a single decade, all aspects of radio changed. At this time, the institution of radio needed to overhaul its image from a rough military technology to an elite science, a project which was ripe for a designer's repackaging efforts. Radio's newest phase that moved it from the battlefield and garage to the living room, was described in class terms, as radio rose in social status to "stop wearing work clothes"¹¹ and start "dress[ing] up for visitors."¹² This shift was expressed in terms of content, sound quality, and production,¹³ and was expressed through the visual metaphor of streamlining. Manufacturers hired designers as part of the effort to disassociate themselves from the raw, early radio of the 1920s, which provoked images of tangled wires in back rooms, and transmitters spitting blue sparks accompanied by an earsplitting din.¹⁴ Radio

Lescaze: Architect (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1987), Christen Hubert and Lindsay S. Shapiro, William Lescaze (New York: Rizzoli, 1982).

¹⁰ Vassos may have had this role if he was not hired by RCA. In a letter to CBS co-owner Levy (who was co-owner with William Paley who hired Lescaze) Vassos mentions if the job with RCA doesn't work out that he would like to continue his work with CBS.

¹¹ Lynn Brodton, "Modern Design – Simplicity," Broadcast News, January 1939, p. 9.

¹² "Designs Have Been Revolutionized," Broadcast News, July 1939.

¹³ Adrian Forty makes this point, Objects of Desire, p. 200.

¹⁴ "Radio in the Palmy Days," Broadcast News, July 1932, p. 9.

listening was no longer limited to men who wore headphones while they searched for stray voices in the ether.¹⁵ There was a new conception of the audience as a nation of listeners united by radio.¹⁶ In terms of public relations and advertising revenue for this captive audience, the possibilities seemed endless. For the users, the experience of radio listening was made more pleasant as radio manufacturers were able to remove shrieks and scary sounds. An era where battery acid leaked on living room floors had ended, and radio's other unpleasant and mysterious aspects, including its association with ghosts lessened.¹⁷

Styling radio meant retooling the public's image of the machine by associating it with Hollywood glamour and prestige. Beyond the listener's experience, which was made more pleasant with Vassos's elegant radios as discussed in the previous chapter, RCA recognized the power of remaking the corporate image through the architecture of its studios and production units. Here, RCA expressed an aesthetic of corporate elitism, bathing the once amateur medium with the symbolism of luxury and class through deco design and later by streamlining. Radio's classy product was best represented at Radio City Music Hall, the spectacular theatrical outpost of RCA and the site of RCA's important production studio¹⁸. Merging

¹⁵ This hobby had its own benefits for users, according to Kristen Haring, "The "Freer Men" of Ham Radio: How a Technical Hobby Provided Social and Spatial Distance," 44 *Technology and Culture*, (2003): 734-761.

¹⁶ The imagery of a consolidated nation of listeners was promoted by the official photography unit of the New Deal, the FSA, which portrayed the poor as engaging in radio listening, by the mid-1930s considered a middle class activity.

¹⁷ See Tim Taylor, "Music and the Rise of Radio in 1920s America: Technological Imperialism, Socialization and the Transformation of Intimacy," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 22, (2002), pp. 425-436. Jeffrey Sconce, *Television Ghosts: A Cultural History of Electronic Presence in Telecommunications Technology*, (University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1995).

¹⁸ Donald Deskey designed the interiors of Radio City Music Hall in 1932. For more on Deskey, David Hanks and Jennifer Toher, *Donald Deskey: Decorative Designs and Interiors* (NY: E.P. Dutton, 1987). His papers are held at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum which has extensive holdings on Deskey's work for Radio City Music Hall.

production and distribution at their luxurious broadcast studios, RCA built the architectural foundation of the now elite medium, even though only a small portion of the population actually saw the studios. At the studios, even when there was no audience, radio paid tribute to the glamour of film with surroundings designed by the nation's top art deco interior designers. Transmitter stations, the architectural outposts of RCA scattered nationwide, including in rural locations were also completely redone in the streamlined style.

While television would inherit this discourse of the wealthy audience with its early advertisements of viewers dressed in tuxedos, radio broadcasters sought to express elitism through its programming and design. Using this fancy image and its stylish radio receivers, RCA successfully disassociated itself from Vaudeville's programming while salvaging some of its formatting.¹⁹ For RCA's owners, poised to sell their programs to millions, the future of radio would hopefully be as streamlined and uni-directional as their studio. The restyling of RCA across all fields, then, was a marketing effort in the visual vernacular of the 1930s, a style, which as I argue in the chapter six, was out of date with the postwar face of technological achievement. RCA with its amusing product, radio, promised democratic pleasure as it emerged in the 1930s. Radio would be a new, free form of media that was shared by the public but controlled by the corporation. As radio historian Susan Douglas observed, the invention of radio "from its first public unveiling and through the next 25

¹⁹ See Eric Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) on the relationship of radio to television programming.

years....evoked a range of prophecies – some realistic, some fantastic, and nearly all idealistic of a world improved through radio.”²⁰

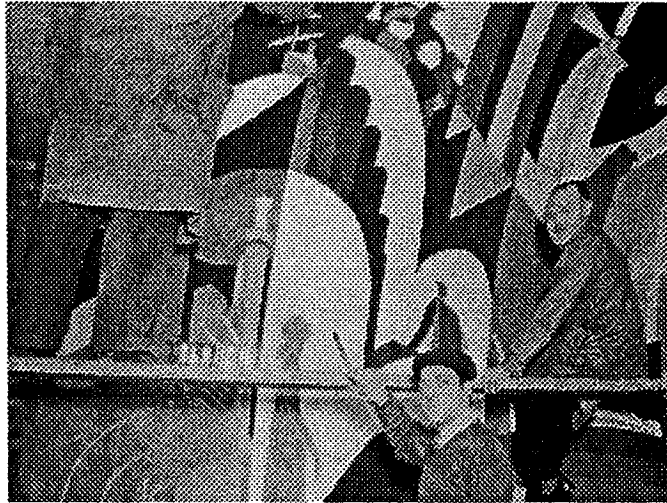


Figure 59, Vassos with assistants at work on the mural “The Merging of Industry with Art in the form of Music” in Studio C at WCAU, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

Radio Murals at WCAU

Although he had never created a mural before, Vassos designed three murals at WCAU in 1932. These visuals, “the spirit of Radio,” in Studio D, “The Great God Radio,” in Studio C, and “The Merging of Industry with Art in the form of Music” in Studio J reflected this theme of a world improved by radio.²¹ Corporations liked the art form of the mural with its communal, public service air and its narrative epic, through which they could associate the goals of their business with the good of the nation. They commissioned top artists to do murals at their headquarters. The murals expressed classical allegories or historical and literary allusions as corporations sought to convey an air of high art, religious resonance, and civic responsibility. As

²⁰ Susan Douglas quoted in Susan Smulyan, Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934, (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), p. 127.

²¹ Letter to C.W. Tucker from John Vassos, June 13, 1935, p. 1, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3.

business historian Roland Marchand points out, elevated taste expressed in ornate décor and architectural innovation allowed companies to project their place in history, right on the wall.²² Murals were placed in the lobbies of corporate buildings, uniting art and industry. When CBS hired Vassos, they were contracting a top illustrator whose career had been established by the popular book, *Salome*, and others he had written for E.P. Dutton. They asked the young artist to draft a mural illustrating the story of radio in a sweeping drama. Vassos, firmly rooted in the illustrative style for which he was known, used imagery from his books and graphic shapes that he had perfected in advertising.

The hiring of Vassos confirmed the important status of the WCAU station, which was in many ways, the temple to the “Radio God.” The revamping of the studio was a big improvement over the makeshift facilities in old garages-type buildings that Susan Douglas describes in her history of the medium.²³ Undoubtedly, this is exactly what WCAU sought to achieve. “No longer is the broadcast studio of the progressive radio organization a makeshift arrangement”²⁴ at Studio J, according to the trade magazine *Broadcast News*. It featured modern colors of deep blue, black, and chromium, indirect lighting, and triple plate glass windows along with Vassos’s dramatic black, white, and grey mural as the backdrop for the entertainment.²⁵

Talk back microphones, improved acoustics, including carpeting, and modern “time clocks” were just some of the new features of this flagship studio. Interior

²² Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, p. 268. Margaret Bourke White’s photographic murals depicting WJZ’s towers were featured in the radio studios of NBC, see *Broadcast News*, August 1934, cover photo.

²³ Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1987).

²⁴ *Broadcast News*, February 1934, p. 20.

²⁵ Brochure describing WCAU, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 5.

design was significant at the studio where every room expressed “radio modern,” such as the “client’s audition room” with its cubist sofa and chairs. On the exterior, the modern company installed “condenser plates...silent, motionless but nevertheless hurling far and wide the voice of this new radio giant.”²⁶ The lavish studios and its technological sophistication were well matched with the glamour of Vassos’s modernistic art.

Vassos’s black and white painting had photographic references and rich visual metaphors, using cross-cutting and montage to tell the story of radio.²⁷ As large-scale narratives, his murals were also reminiscent of a church, a vertical triptych for the new radio “cathedral.”²⁸ They may have also served the function of actually orienting the visitors and the performers by instructing them where to look or stand in the absence of a studio audience. This new space of “sound production” demanded a new architectural setting for the spatio-temporal transitions caused by sound, such as the one below featured in Studio J.²⁹

²⁶ Broadcast News, April 1933, p. 11.

²⁷ Susan Smulyan, Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934, p. 139-142.

²⁸ In 1960, Vassos did a series of murals depicting the development of electronics in the lobby of RCA’s Washington Office, “Vassos Mural Unveiled in Washington,” The Norwalk Hour, May 26, 1960, p. 16, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

²⁹ For more on the spatio-temporal distortions caused in interiors caused by sound reproduction see, Sergio Frerje, “Early Musical Impressions from Both Sides of the Loudspeaker,” 13 Leonardo Music Journal, (2003): 67-71; Walter Benjamin, “Reflections on Radio,” in M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith eds. Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin II: 1927-1934, Trans. R. Livingstone, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).



Figure 60: WCAU, Philadelphia studio J with Vassos's mural as a striking backdrop to the well dressed performers in the empty studio, *Broadcast News*, April, 1933, p. 11.

Vassos himself described the mural as a mythical story of radio expressing its motives.³⁰ He describes the mural in Figure 59:

“In this decoration it is shown the activity which takes place behind the scenes –and reaches ends of the earth. In the lower left are the architects and designer planning this new radio building and above a glimpse of Philadelphia's new rising skyline, the female figure is a symbol of voice coming into the rhythmic modulations of the new radio organ with the organist above are current events – politics, conflicts of nations, personalities of rulers etc. At the lower right are the factories and above industrial wonders of man – railways, bridges, dams, tunnels, airplanes, Zeppelins, motors, ships – all typifying industry served by radio with big business in the from of the rising skyscraper.”³¹

For studio C, with soundproofed studio with 600-pound airtight doors, Vassos illustrated “Great God Radio.”³² This image of a flying man also appeared in his book *Contempo*, as a criticism of the threat of radio to encompass daily life. A print of the

³⁰ Vassos went on to continue his large-scale homage to the electronics industry with his “Ourania” mural for the Van Nuys Electric Center in California depicting importance of science, Vassos/AAA, Box 1, Memo from John Vassos, April 4, 1940.

³¹ Kenneth W. Stowman, “A Visitor Tours WCAU,” *Broadcast News*, April 1933, p. 10-11.

³² Brochure describing WCAU, Vassos/Syracuse University, Box 5.

image “Great God Radio” was sold to individuals for \$1,000.³³ Vassos himself hung a print of the work in his office at RCA.³⁴ Vassos later included the mural as a standard feature in his plans for RCA broadcast stations and transmitter buildings. The overlap between Vassos’s book illustration and the mural suggests that Vassos was flexible enough to take his socially critical image from *Contempo*, where radio was seen as yet another tool of social control, and use it to illustrate the walls and decorate the offices of radio executives. The use of his illustrating style thus was more than just a form of entertainment, which he claimed. It was also a way of expressing an aspect of mass culture that was originally sarcastic but later became a reflection of how RCA viewed itself, as a distributor of the radio ether, as God-like. The WCAU studio represented an advanced vision of radio, one of a stylish and modern medium, and one that Vassos would replicate in his radio designs for RCA.³⁵

Modern Company – Modern Artist

³³ Vassos did paintings on commission for RCA and NBC employees, letter to R.C. Patterson, Jr., NBC, December 28, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Also Vassos agrees to “execute two copies of the Great God Radio” for Mr. R.J. Reid of WCKY, letter dated July 18, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Recently, “Great God Radio” sold for \$10,000 at Modernism show at the Armory, New York, November 16, 2004.

³⁴ John Leitch, “WCAU – A Modern Monument to the Art of Broadcasting,” *Broadcast News*, July 1932, p. 2, 9. Did Vassos get “hired away” from the rival company in 1932? Although WCAU was a CBS station, there seems to have been involvement of NBC in the venture. The station was also covered in detail in *Broadcast News*, April 1933, for “mural decoration by John Vassos,” and photomontage about station. Issac Levy sent a copy of the magazine to Vassos, letter from Issac Levy, May 5, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Vassos’s previously prolific correspondence with the Levy’s the owners of the station (and the brother in law of CBS owner William Paley) ended around the time he was hired by RCA.

³⁵ A letter to Dr. Levy from O.H. Caldwell, President of the Science Forum of the New York Electrical Society, May 27, 1933, suggested this too as he wrote congratulating Levy on the WCAU studio, “what you have done for broadcast studios, we are trying to do for radio sets themselves – to give them eye value as well as ear value.” Vassos/AAA, Box 8.



Figure 61: From *Broadcast News*, February 1934 "New Art in Radio: Celebrated Designer Joins Staff of RCA Victor Company," pp. 18-21. David Sarnoff Library collection. From top going clockwise: Cammeyer ad, modern apartment, streamlined stove, image from *Phobia* "fear of sharp objects," coke dispenser, from *Salome*, Packard ad and Nedick's restaurant.

RCA hired the young artist shortly after the mural was finished. Other industrial designers vying for the coveted job included Norman Bel Geddes.³⁶ The early 1930s were crucially important for the company, which was massively expanding its radio receiver business, as discussed in Chapter three, and this is the area that Vassos concentrated his earliest efforts. As an article covering the industry reported, RCA was focused on radio. "RCA has very definite business reasons for wishing to see 1932 a radio year. Not the least among them is the fact that the company does not intend to market a television receiving set until the fall of next

³⁶ Letter from Norman Bel Geddes to David S. Little in the Aviation Radio Section, forwarded to Vassos with the note "why should he write this to me?" November 27, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 11. Bel Geddes eventually did get hired by the company in the RCA Victor division during the postwar period, which angered Vassos as he expressed in a letter, "Bel Geddes is brilliant and an original thinker, but chooses to run a factory instead of a personal service, letter from August 1, 1943 to Jonny (no last name), August 1, 1943, Vassos/AAA, Box 7.

year.”³⁷ Although the company didn’t get to the receiving set until 1939, the article was right in saying that RCA needed to seriously focus on its waning radio business in order to survive the depression slump. Vassos was certain that he could help the company. In an early letter to his potential boss G.J. Throckmorton, Vassos promised to deliver what the company needed, “a fresh point of view, creating that new path which the radio industry is so badly in need of.”³⁸

When the company hired him in 1933, RCA was not in great shape. The company badly needed coherence in visual communications and structure having just undergone massive financial and structural changes. This stage arguably began in 1919 when the stations formerly owned by American Marconi were turned over to RCA giving it control over “radio telegraphy in the United States.”³⁹ The 1926 creation of a new company with GE and Westinghouse, named NBC, gave RCA the world’s largest distributor of radios the greatest stake in program quality. An anti-trust suit in 1930 broke up the radio patent monopoly of GE, Westinghouse, AT&T, and the United Fruit Company (which was interested in radio for its banana boats).⁴⁰ This case broke its monopoly over radio and transformed RCA into an independent company. Other major factors which influenced the company were the Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934, which provided assistance to privately owned commercial radio through deregulation and allowance for commercial

³⁷ Thomas Calvert McClary, “How About Television?” The Reader’s Digest (November, 1931): 91-93.

³⁸ Letter to Throckmorton, June 10, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, folder labeled “Misc. 1934.”

³⁹ Barnouw, Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 60.

⁴⁰ Barnouw, (1966) p. 60. Also see, Mary S. Mander, “Utopian Dimensions in the Public Debate on Broadcasting in the Twenties,” Journal of Communication Inquiry 12 (1988): 71-88; William Boddy, “The Rhetoric and the Economic Roots of the American Broadcasting Industry,” 2 Cine-Tracts (1979): 37-54; Daniel J. Czitrom, Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982).

programming.⁴¹ The 1934 Communications Act accepted the equipment ‘trust’ and the network system of chain broadcasting.⁴² The company was also expanding geographically and financially. RCA had acquired the Research and Development staff of the former General Electric vacuum tube plant in Harrison, and that of the Victor Talking Machine Company in Camden, giving the company rights to musical reproduction technology.⁴³ In addition to these changes, the company gained a new leader in 1931 when David Sarnoff became the head of RCA (until 1967). His reign, which largely overlapped with Vassos’s career with the company, marked RCA’s emergence as a broadcast giant⁴⁴

As I suggest, RCA sought to promote itself as a good corporate citizen. Erik Barnouw and Robert McChesney have shown that the 1920s and early 1930s witnessed battles over the control of broadcasting in the United States. RCA was a major participant in them and emerged victorious in the battle over privatizing the airwaves.⁴⁵ Although there was huge resistance to the commercial takeover of the airwaves, by the mid 1930s these battles concluded.⁴⁶ The first step in RCA’s expansion was to increase the number of stations it owned and to improve the Radio

⁴¹ See Barnouw, (1966) pp. 184 -188.

⁴² Smulyan, (1994), p. 150.

⁴³ Zelinski, p. 152. Other major radio networks besides RCA who also expanded into television included, CBS in 1931, the Don Lee Broadcasting System in Los Angeles in 1931, General Electric (1928), Westinghouse (1938), Philco (1931) and Zenith Radio (1938), see J. Fred MacDonald, One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network Television (NY: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 11. Developments in Canada were similar. In 1929, the Victor Talking Machine Company merged with Radio Corporation of America to become RCA Victor, and the Canadian subsidiary became RCA Victor of Canada, with headquarters in Montreal. For more on the history of RCA see Robert Sobel's RCA (New York: Stein & Day 1986) or Benjamin Aldridge's The Victor Talking Machine Co (New York 1964).

⁴⁴ Eugene Lyons, David Sarnoff (NY: Harper & Row, 1966).

⁴⁵ Robert McChesney, Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴⁶ “NBC’s New Hollywood Studios,” Broadcast News, April 1936, p. 12.

City's studio.⁴⁷ It was an exciting time for the company as not only did they have a new president, but also NBC had begun experimental broadcasts from New York's Empire State building in 1932. In addition, the rapid modernization of acoustical equipment improved sound quality, transmission, and speed of delivery.⁴⁸

Amidst this era of rapid corporate growth, Vassos moved up through the ranks of the company as an influential spokesperson on behalf of in-house modernism. He applied his modernist influence to RCA on three fronts; firstly to home appliance design, since Vassos's receivers were a well-styled luxurious item in the home, secondly to his in-house studio equipment design, and thirdly through his educational series on design. He argued for making the entire corporate experience a "modern" one, which entailed that the employees become more like their product. As he explained; Radio is advanced – a modern art. People in radio business must be modern to the core. Best procedure is to think modern, talk modern, be modern....⁴⁹

RCA's celebration of their new employee was expressed in a lengthy article announcing his hiring in *Broadcast News*, RCA's in-house journal (Figure 62). The montage layout positions Vassos's head at the center of his design projects, thus showing his artistic range, from Nedrick's in the left hand corner (this image is also included in Chapter three) to *Phobia* in the right hand corner without prioritizing one

⁴⁷ On November 11, 1933, NBC began network operations at "30 Rockefeller Station. The 11-story building, just to the west of the 70-story RCA Building Tower, simultaneously fed two networks and the two local stations. The Vassos also did the interior design of executive offices there, see letter to R.C. Patterson, Jr., NBC, December 28, 1933, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁴⁸ See Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002) describes the modern development of acoustics. She shows that reverberation equations, sound meters, microphones, and acoustical tiles were deployed in places as varied as Boston's Symphony Hall, New York's office skyscrapers, and the soundstages of Hollywood. Her work is particularly relevant to the production of RCA's soundscape.

⁴⁹ John Vassos, Lecture on Styling, Fall 1936 from Lewis M. Clement Papers 1938-1975, University of California, Berkeley.

project over another. This visually unites the disparate parts of his career, through equal sized pictures and marks an acceptance of the multi-dimensional achievements of the industrial designer. The comprehensive article also lists his theater productions and his radio designs among his many accomplishments:

“As an indication of his versatility, we might add that he has designed the ballet costumes and scenic sets for two recent theatrical productions – one being the “Sixth Sense” presented at the Theater Guild and the other “Phobia” at the Barbizon Plaza. Such magazines as *House and Garden* are already beginning to use the new RCA Victor radio sets, betide the Vassos influence in external appearance, as examples befitting the up-to-date artistic home, and it can be safely said that the Vassos influence in the radio industry is only at its beginning.”⁵⁰

This promotion of the industrial designer as a multi-talented artist accurately predicted Vassos’s contribution at RCA, where he was also to be involved in a range of projects.⁵¹ It fit the public image of the industrial designer as an artist “at large,” in public and in private, in popular culture and in the arts. Not surprisingly, given the tone of the article and his concern for his self image, the article appears to be largely written by Vassos himself.

⁵⁰ *Broadcast News*, February 1934, p. 21.

⁵¹ From my review of the archives, it seems that RCA was collaborative and supportive of Vassos’s innovations and engagement with the company. Christophe Lecuyer, “High-Tech Corporatism: Management--Employee Relations in U.S. Electronics Firms, 1920s-1960s,” 4 *Enterprise & Society*, (2003), pp. 502-520 also found that electronic firms that he reviewed in Boston and the Silicon Valley gave substantial autonomy to their engineering staffs and often organized research and product development work around teams. They sought to involve their professional employees in the decision-making process.

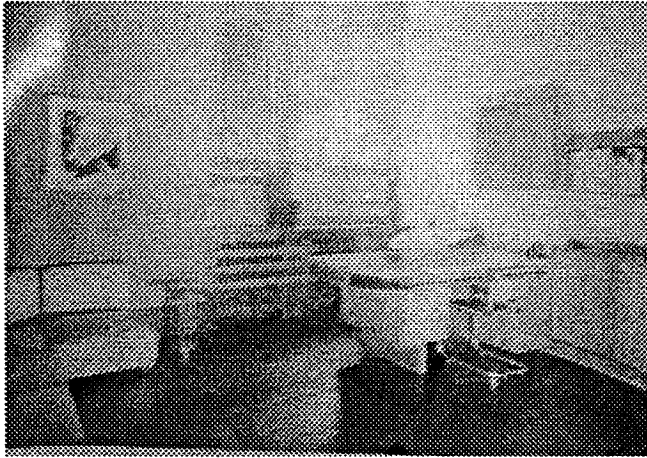


Fig. 62: John Vassos's spacious office studio at RCA, Camden, designed by him. Note dominant horizontal lines, Venetian blinds, tubular steel desk chair and a "built in" desk. Vassos's picture "Great God Radio" is on the wall. "Corner seating unit of six movable seats are covered in fabricoid, walls and ceiling are in a medium burnt amber." According to papers accompanying the photo, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

To extend his reach into the company, Vassos argued on behalf of a "design styling section for engineering products."⁵² This team would have sustained involvement in the design process with greater access to and contact with the engineers at the earliest stages of new product development than was previously granted. As the "styling" consciousness of the corporation, the team would also be responsible for coordinating the image of the company across its product lines and through its departments. These tasks ranged from "designs [of] broadcast stations, studios and control rooms, mobile unit exhibits, theaters and special installations of customer equipment, [to] interior decoration."⁵³ As Vassos recalled, "for the record, in 1934, after two years of serving as a consultant, I recommended that we establish a "design styling section" for engineering products. The result was immediate and

⁵² Letter to Mr. W.W. Watts, from John Vassos, June 28, 1954, from Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, "correspondence" folder.

⁵³ "Engineering styling department and its relation to engineering, sales and manufacturing," John Vassos Report, RCA Victor Company, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 1 (no date).

phenomenal.”⁵⁴ RCA approved the formation of the team which consisted of Lynne Brodton, a full time RCA employee, and Mr. Stevenson, also a designer.⁵⁵

Beyond its design responsibilities, the group tried to prove to the largely technology-driven company that artists were an important, intrinsic part of the production process. This was accomplished by a series of lectures for managers and sales staff that were aimed at educating them about style and promoting sales techniques (detailed in the previous chapter.) As Vassos’s colleague in the style department pointed out to the no-doubt incredulous engineer-techie crowd, “Artists are not crack pots.”⁵⁶

Equipment Design and Improvement: Form Follows Function

Vassos was involved in the redesign of RCA’s major in-house machines including transmitters, the electronic microscope, television cameras, speech equipment, and the RCA streamlined truck.⁵⁷ Streamlining RCA’s in-house equipment served a number of purposes; it saved space, it reduced production costs, it eased pressures caused by stressful machines, and it enhanced the look of the back-end. Perhaps most importantly, restyling improved the value of products sold to affiliate stations who were encouraged to “discard usable equipment” in favor of the

⁵⁴ Letter to Mr. W.W. Watts, from John Vassos, June 28, 1954, from Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, “correspondence” folder.

⁵⁵ Vassos also worked early on with “Vogel and Nicholas,” see John Vassos Report, RCA Victor Company, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 1 (no date).

⁵⁶ Lecture on styling, Fall 1936 for training course. Lewis M. Clement Papers 1938-1975, microfilm. L.M. Clement was Vice President in Charge of Engineering and Research at RCA; also in Vassos/AA, Box 10.

⁵⁷ Information about the truck is included in Vassos/AAA, Box 5, in steel case with glass slides. Vassos was also involved in the styling of the casement for the new camera of the “photo phonic” equipment, Letter to Throckmorton from Vassos, January 13, 1934, Vassos/AAA.

new machines.⁵⁸ Improvements often meant hiding ornate or protruding design elements, integrating speakers into machinery, or folding the elements into a single, integrated shell.

For the renovation of RCA's in house machinery at the company, Vassos needed the support of his superiors. George Throckmorton promoted the design team, and Vassos thanked him for "imbuing the existing staff with this consciousness of appearance."⁵⁹ Design changes took place throughout the company, but RCA president David Sarnoff seemed surprised to learn the extents of Vassos' activities in the company. Upon meeting the President for the first time, Vassos explained to Sarnoff that not only was he involved in designing the consumer appliances, but also "that I had a hand in designing our more rugged merchandise, such as transmitters, microphones, centralized sound and other equipment."⁶⁰ Apparently, Sarnoff was "rather surprised at the all-comprising way the new regime was tackling the situation in Camden,"⁶¹ although he was pleased. In the same letter Vassos reported that L.M. Clement, Vice President in Charge of Engineering and research at RCA, had asked him to discuss the styling of a chassis. The styling team eventually gained acceptance in the engineering driven company -- an effort that was helped, no doubt, by publicity generated in the trade magazine and through photographs documenting the styling team.

⁵⁸ "Designs Have Been Revolutionized," Broadcast News, July 1939, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Letter to Throckmorton, July 20, 1935, p. 2, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

⁶⁰ Letter to Throckmorton, July 20, 1935, p. 2, Vassos/AAA, Box 8. Sarnoff's personal style was 19th century traditional as I observed at the replica of his Radio City office recreated at the David Sarnoff Library.

⁶¹ ⁶¹ Letter to Throckmorton, July 20, 1935, p. 2, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

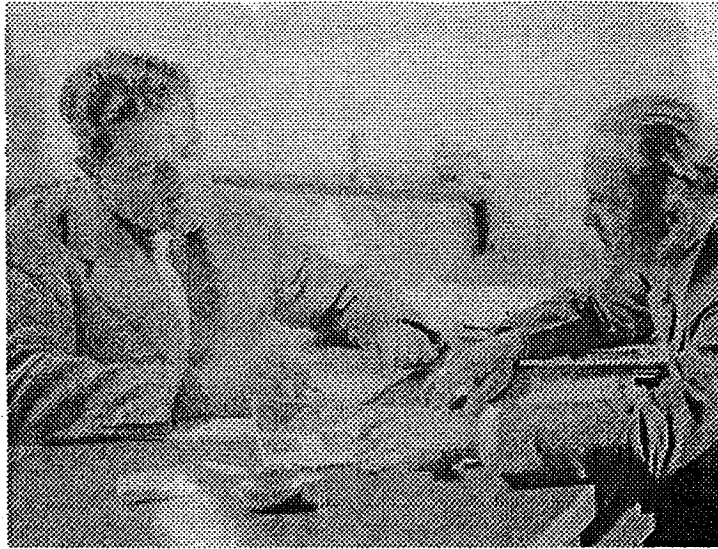


Figure 63: Vassos photographed in his office with Mr. E. Vogel, one of the RCA Victor executives “discussing the problems of design,” according to the caption on the photo, in his office at RCA Camden. Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

In general, Vassos’s approach to equipment design was to use ergonomic principles along with streamlined external elements to produce a unified design. The resulting machine was integrated with the rest of the room, converting a space previously filled with unmatching equipment, knobs, and devices into a harmonious facility. Vassos approached a project from the perspective of the user, since he admittedly knew little about electronics. For example, he used ergonomics and intuition as his guides for the redesign of the RCA50D transmitter and control desk. In his typically blunt manner of writing, he explained that the improvement of the machine took into account the hand and arm movements of the user:

“You have to be an octopus to the thing [the transmitter]. It was really a monster. It was in 1933 when we introduced the first unified transmitter....I didn’t contribute anything electronically, because I don’t know anything about electronics. But I do know form and the human figure.”⁶²

⁶² Syracuse University Speech, p. 10. He explained this as part of his process as a designer, paying attention to intuition and applying logic. As he explained, “[use] intuition first, logic afterwards. Remember that. You are artists. Don’t start with logic and fight off intuition. Intuition first and logic after. That’s the way you react to a girl, no question about it.”



Figure 64: A sketch of Vassos's control room, on the left and on the right corner are designs for the Hohner accordion and the New Yorker radio apparently tying the elegance and simplicity of these tools with the newly streamlined room. Vassos/AAA, Box 2. The picture of the RCA-50D is also in *Broadcast News*, July 1939, p. 15.

This U-Shaped RCA 50 D and control desk, seen in the bottom of this image after the redesign, gave the operator full view and “finger tip control of the working environment.”⁶³ It was “designed with function in mind and free from unessential decorative detail” which is the very definition of modernism, where the form follows the function.⁶⁴ The integrated components are set into the wall creating an undisturbed continuity. Their unity is enhanced with a dark band of color that runs the entire length of the transmitter above the desk area. Located at waist height along the transmitter, there are a series of control panels normally concealed by doors which

⁶³ “Designs have been Revolutionized,” *Broadcast News*, July 1939.

⁶⁴ Caption for machine, in Lynn Brodton, 's “Modern Design – Simplicity, New Forms Arise from Industry's Requirements,” *Broadcast News*, July 1938, p. 2-3.

swing downward and become miniature individual desks for each control panel.

Lumaline lamps illuminate the panel and desk when it's open for operation.⁶⁵

Vassos viewed his job as an artist working to unveil the natural beauty of the machine, highlighting its machine aesthetic by using illuminated dials or steel trim.⁶⁶

Vassos's coworker, Lynn Brodton, explained that the RCA 50 D machine was a pinnacle of modern design because of its allegiance to this principle of a machine aesthetic. According to Brodton, the transmitter is the definitive modern instrument, an

“outstanding example of form follows function [design] since the panels are arranged to present a focal point at the control console from which all instruments are visible and controls accessible via the shortest distance from the operator.”⁶⁷

This transmitter was also featured at the World's Fair backed by a mural describing the machine which read “RCA designs and builds radio transmitters from 5 to 500,000 watts over 60% of the power on the air is broadcasted by RCA equipment.”⁶⁸

Vassos applied streamlining to other studio equipment including the RCA Speech Input Equipment. Here, he streamlined the bulky machine to make it look like a car or an airplane, and he used the classic streamlined principles of horizontalism. The illuminated meters, streamlined knobs, and fin like air conditioning louvers made it look truly modern.⁶⁹ The redesign was meant to embrace the formal attributes of

⁶⁵ Also see “Modern in Every Detail” about Canadian station CKCK where the new transmitter and modern layout conform to these principles, Broadcast News, December 1937, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁶ “An Artist Looks at Details,” Broadcast News, October 1936, p. 18-19.

⁶⁷ Lynn Brodton, “Modern Design – Simplicity,” Broadcast News, January 1939, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Tearsheet ad for transmitter, Vassos/AAA, Box 4.

⁶⁹ John Vassos, “An Artist Looks at Details,” Broadcast News, October 1936, p. 18.

the machinery. In particular, the illuminated meters, streamlined knobs, and silver louvers were meant to construct the form rather than “maintain it” – that is to create a coherent machine whose parts were recognizable and also integrated into the larger machine. Again, the design sought to articulate the relationship of the parts of the machine to the whole, a feat considered essential to create the unified machinery that the stylists sought.

These streamlined surfaces symbolized corporate modernism, suggesting a vision that RCA had of itself as a singular entity. Cultural theorist, Andrew Ross, writes that this public display of corporate dominance was expressed by many corporations at the time who choose to highlight their affiliation with the futuristic aesthetic at the 1939 World’s Fair. There, he continues, the streamlined shapes featured by the corporate sponsors embodied the future with their “friction-free, energy efficient and seductively constructed... attractive surfaces of Bakelite, Vitrolite, and newly synthesized plastics.” This representation of the hygienic speed of tomorrow was the analogue of progress, according to Ross.⁷⁰ RCA’s equipment, such as the speech output machine and the transmitter were also displayed at RCA’s 1939 World’s Fair pavilion. The public appearance of the backend machines suggests to the viewing public the extent to which the company was modern. To use a digestive metaphor, it reveals the internalization of modernism, expressed in the control room, the very guts of the company.

Beyond public reputation, ergonomics was another major reason justifying redesign efforts, as it was cost efficient. According to Vassos, the body of the

⁷⁰ Andrew Ross, Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits, (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 132.

engineer needed to be considered, making sure the organized components were adjusted to the human figure and meters adjusted to the human eye.⁷¹ This was a new way of thinking about machine design, from the perspective of the user. Henry Dreyfus was another industrial designer who applied ergonomics to his styling of machinery. Well known for this attention to the body, Dreyfus drew from data on human bodies. He included measurements of heads and of all the extremities, such as thighs, forearms, shoulders, and every other conceivable part of the body, to create more cost efficient and more comfortable machines. In his book aptly named *Designing for People*, he wrote on the subject:

“We must know how far buttons and levers can be placed away from the central controls of a machine; size of earphones, telephone operators’ headsets, helmets for the armed services, binoculars – all are determined by our information on head sizes. From these facts we arrived at this maxim – the cost efficient machine is the one that is built around a person.”⁷²



Figure 65: Vassos’s drawing shows the minor knob to be a powerful force, the machine dominating the man, looks very silly here. The caption reads, “So you didn’t realize how important I was?” from *Broadcast News*, November 1937, p. 7.

⁷¹ Letter to Mr. W.W. Watts, from John Vassos, June 28, 1954, from Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, p. 2.

⁷² Dreyfus, *Designing for People*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 26-27.

Vassos was also attuned to the importance of building the machine around the person and thus employed ergonomics throughout his designs. His redesign of the knob, featured in the article pictured above (Figure 65), reworked it so as to make it easier to handle. For this project, he drew from studies, which he conducted himself, that examined the effect of pressure on the human hand. He “took the proportions of the hand of the average engineer, and then created a putty model.” He discovered that operators developed calluses and infections from the metal pointer that existed on the old knobs.⁷³ His improved knob had no sharp protrusions and was more comfortable to hold for hours on end. Large and easily gripped, the enunciated pointer enabled the user to feel the knob without looking. This design was later adapted by the military since it was especially useful for operators who had to run controls in the dark. This relatively small detail of knob design proved to be very important when considered from the perspective of the user. This attention to detail embodies a modernist principle in its attention to the smallest part as well as being a sound one for reasons of employee health and comfort. As Vassos wrote, “It’s only a knob. Only a little knob. But the effort and research and the intellectual approach to it was just as if you were designing a skyscraper.”⁷⁴ This idea is expressed in the drawing above where the domineering knob controls the engineer, rather than vice versa.

⁷³ “Streamlined Convenience: A Minor Detail Becomes Important” *Broadcast News*, 1937, p. 7. Vassos served as a Colonel in World War II, where he designed brochures for soldiers including “Booby the Bear” which dealt with camouflage in Vassos/AAA, Box 7. For more on the impact of the military on media design, see Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 99; for a discussion of stealth black box design, the military and home media equipment, see Peter Dormer, *The Meanings of Modern Design: Towards the Twenty First Century*, (Thames and Hudson, 1990), pp. 19-23.

⁷⁴ Syracuse University Speech, p. 14.



Figure 66: Engineers at the electron microscope. Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

Another example of the application of streamlining for ergonomic improvement and style was the electron microscope (see Figure 66).⁷⁵ The electron microscope marked the major, second phase in RCA's movement towards television. It was created by the famous scientist Dr. Vladimir Zworykin, the Director of the Electronic Research Laboratory and the inventor of the iconoscope.⁷⁶ Its technology epitomized futuristic technology in using a stream of electrons to see a microscopic object. Undoubtedly, the future of the company rested on the machine, as it was not until RCA gained control over the basic components of electronic television with this microscope that they could prove they had a serious interest in television. Vassos reduced the enormous machine, which previously took over a room, to a compact unit that was easy to transport and store.⁷⁷ He also improved the ergonomics, such as

⁷⁵ This collaboration is cited in many places, see for instance, "Designer of the Month," IDSA Publication, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 2, "Vassos" file.

⁷⁶ An iconoscope is a camera tube in which a high velocity electron beam scans a photoactive mosaic which has electrical storage capacity, name developed by RCA, according to Albert Abramson, The History of Television, 1880-1941, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Press, 1987), p. 334. Information on Zworykin from "Notes on Our Contributors," Broadcast News, April 1936, p. 36.

⁷⁷ "Servicing and Maintenance" typed document detailing industrial design efforts for industry, Vassos/AAA, Box 2.

changing the height of the seat to make additional knee room. In terms of styling improvements, the device was offered in blue (which does not reflect light) and stainless steel, marking a colorful departure from the black that was used previously.⁷⁸ The machine won the Electrical Manufacturing award for the finest design achievement in electronics of that year.⁷⁹ It was a crucial technology for RCA's advancement in the field and it was profitable. RCA built and sold over 2,000 electronic microscopes from 1940 to 1968.⁸⁰

Radio Architecture and Interior Design

While in-house machinery was important to improve, the effort to modernize was most intense in the places where the public interacted with the company -- in the studios and in through its architecture. As it spread franchises across the country, RCA pumped enormous resources into modernizing studios and transmitter buildings throughout North America starting around 1932. A string of stations nationwide in rural areas as well as cities, were transformed, and in some cases from wire-strewn shacks to elegant offices. These changes were recorded in the company magazine regularly and featured exclamatory statements like "WBRE at Wilkes Barre is Modernized."⁸¹

⁷⁸ "Industrial Design at RCA – A Report Covering 1932-1970," Vassos/Syracuse, Box 4, "Correspondence-Subject File, RCA, Reports."

⁷⁹ Vassos/Syracuse, Folder "IDSA Publication" Box 2.

⁸⁰ According to Alexander Magnoun, Archivist at the David Sarnoff Library, email communication June 16, 2004.

⁸¹ Broadcast News, February 1934. Other outstanding coast installations included KSFO, KARM, KBFO and NBC's new home in Hollywood.

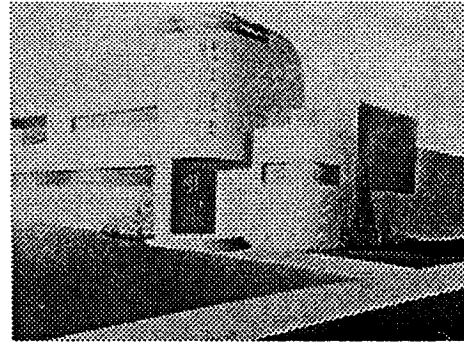
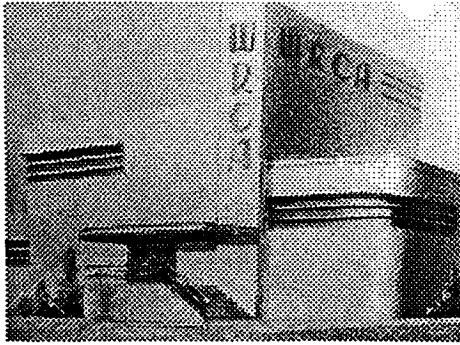


Fig. 67 and Fig. 68: Modern Broadcast Station Design,
Both images are from, Vassos/AAA, Box 2, "Misc." Folder.⁸²

These sketches of transmitter buildings, the one on the left appropriately named after its parent, WRCA, (a pseudo-station suggesting the corporate owner RCA) was proposed as a standard design for the exterior. Many transmitter buildings nationwide were modeled after it.⁸³ Vassos wanted these buildings to “express the tempo and spirit of the most modern invention of the age – the radio.”⁸⁴ This was accomplished through the shape of the building and its architectural materials, which included steel, cement, glass, and aluminum. In shape, the building resembles a radio tube, with the smooth rounded curves that characterized most RCA equipment and streamlining in general.⁸⁵ With “speed whiskers” and external steel tubing in the banisters, the building takes its strongest visual cue from the heat releasing “louvers”

⁸² An image in Figure 67 is also repeated in “Modern Broadcast Station Design,” *Broadcast News*, December 1935, p. 23, signed by Vassos.

⁸³ For more on technology’s influence on architecture see, Thomas P. Hughes *Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Hughes documents how American artists and industrial designers from Marcel Duchamp and Charles Sheeler to Margaret Bourke-White and Raymond Loewy were inspired by and celebrated the engineered world that surrounded them. Some stations refused to “go modern,” sticking with the Victorian aesthetic, see WTAR Goes High Fidelity, *Broadcast News*, January 1934; “A New Station for Reading, PA,” *Broadcast News*, December 1934;

⁸⁴ *Broadcast News*, December 1935, p. 23. For a comparable redesign in the streamlined style, see Rosemary Donegan, “Legitimate Modernism: Charles Comfort and the Toronto Stock Exchange,” in *Designing the Exchange, Essays Commemorating the Opening of the Design Exchange*, (Toronto: Design Exchange, self published, 1994).

⁸⁵ WRCA was also used as the call letters in Broadcast equipment, see RCA Broadcast Equipment ad for 1,000 Watt Transmitter, *Radio Age*, September 1941.

which provided the vertical motif that Vassos later emphasized in his television design for the TRK12 (discussed in chapter six). The slits also symbolize the expression of sound--the speakers-- where sound is released from the machine, further mirroring, and perhaps even creating, a communications aesthetic.⁸⁶

The architecture of the building also expressed the function of the building. In particular, Vassos created a building that integrated the transmitter into its design by encasing the unit “in new Pyrex glass brick,” at the back of the building. The glass glowed from the interior light to create a “desired electrical effect at night, in particular, since the glass is non-transparent but luminous.”⁸⁷ Vassos ensured that the front of the building would glow from the transmitter by using structural glass directly above the main entrance. This practical glass archway also provided an adequate light shaft for the entrance and reception hall in the daytime and at night would transit the glow from the back of the building. Form thus followed function in the structural elements of the new building where the technology of the transmitter shaped the building in a harmonious fusion of light and electricity, merging the natural and artificial. Transmitter houses that followed this model of modernization included locations at Radio City in Hollywood⁸⁸, KFJZ in Fort Worth Texas⁸⁹, KFAM in St. Cloud, Minnesota,⁹⁰ WHBL in Sheboygan, Wisconsin,⁹¹ WWL in

⁸⁷ Broadcast News, December 1935, p. 23.

⁸⁸ “NBC’s New Hollywood Studios,” Broadcast News, April 1936, p. 12-13.

⁸⁹ “Popular For Tower Station Increase Power,” Broadcast News, October 1936, p. 18.

⁹⁰ “Better than Ratings,” Broadcast News, January 1939, p. 11-12. “The transmitter building...combines the utmost in efficiency and utility, reliability and permanence, together with modern architectural beauty....The structure is of monolithic concrete with strips of dark finished granite and glass brick adding a modern tone.”

⁹¹ “WHBL Improves Facilities,” Broadcast News, December 1936, p. 4, “the exterior walls are to be of masonry finished with white stucco set off with horizontal bands of red brick between the window openings to obtain the modern design.”

Lower Mississippi,⁹² and WFMJ in Youngstown, Ohio.⁹³ Stations in Canada were also modernized, such as CKCK in Saskatchewan.⁹⁴

The interior of the prototypical studio that Vassos proposed would include a huge mural depicting the Spirit of Radio,” representing the union between Art and Industry,” similar to mural he created for WCAU.⁹⁵ Vassos’s articles in *Broadcast News* even laid out the prototypical modern transmitter building office, describing each detail down to the “minute clock set obliquely in the corner” of the transmitter control desk. The clock, an important element in the transmission, was explained in exquisite detail, expressing the importance of time in radio transmission. The executive room, Vassos wrote, would have a clock sunk into the wall, lighted in a “manner showing the minute’s progress.” A beam of light moving clockwise would show the progress of the minute around the face of the dial, indicating each quarter of a minute that had passed then going out temporarily when a full minute was completed.”⁹⁶ The desk in this functional room would contain only utilitarian objects, leaving the clear desk space to create the full horizontal effect of modernism’s clean lines and open spaces. While I am uncertain how many offices Vassos eventually designed, this article is important as it makes the link between design and efficiency, time and streamlining, modernism and speed. By the 1940s, the modern transmitter

⁹² *Broadcast News*, July 1940, p. 5.

⁹³ *Broadcast News*, March 1940, p. 18.

⁹⁴ “Modern In Every Detail, CKCK An Outstanding Canadian Station,” *Broadcast News*, December 1937, pp. 2-3 was also outfitted with RCA equipment. This station had historical importance having aired “one of the first broadcasts of a church service and the first play by play description of a hockey game. This latter is also believed to be the first sports broadcast ever attempted.” p. 1. In addition, RCA equipment was produced at the Montreal RCA Victor plant including two 50,000 watt transmitters for CBC in December 1938, A. Usher, “With RCA – North of the Border,” *Radio Age*, July 1943, pp. 20-23; David Sarnoff Library.

⁹⁵ *Broadcast News*, April 1936, p. 36.

⁹⁶ “Designs Have Been Revolutionized,” *Broadcast News*, July 1939

house was a blueprint that RCA offered to broadcasters worldwide. These plans were detailed in an article written by John Vassos and Stewart Pike, then manager of RCA's Functional Design Department.⁹⁷

Magic Brain



Fig. 69: Giant RCA poster, with magic brain logo, created and designed by Vassos, Vassos/AAA, Box 3.

Another area of the corporation in which Vassos made contributions was his suggestion for a major advertising campaign featuring the term and image of the “magic brain.” Vassos recalled how he came up with the successful RCA “magic brain” campaign, while walking around the engineering labs of the company.

“On one of my trips through Building 7, I noticed an engineer working on a chassis with a hole in it. It looked like ‘magic brain’ and a ‘magic eye’.”⁹⁸

Vassos came up with the slogan which he thought was particularly fitting since the chassis with a hole in it was an original feature, which used filters to control sound quality. This idea was eventually embraced by the company leadership and used for over 40 years in all RCA's advertising campaigns and literature. The RCA “Magic

⁹⁷ “Planning the Transmitter Building,” *Broadcast News*, March 1948, pp. 46-55. In this article, “for the first time, RCA is offering their experience and thinking in the layout of typical transmitter stations in a complete line of buildings covering all the various types and sizes of transmitting equipment,” p. 46.

⁹⁸ “Industrial design at RCA” Vassos/Syracuse, Box 4, “Correspondence-Subject File, RCA/Reports,” p. 6.

Eye” and “Magic Brain” mobile advertising vehicles toured America in 1935 with the magic imagery emblazoned on the side. The logo, which is rarely known today, was successful then, since it drew attention to technological wizardry, describing and acknowledging the mysterious electronic processes while humanizing them by adding the bodily actions of seeing and thinking alongside the company’s letters. The Magic brand stamp became part of the company’s visual identity and was added to the other dominant RCA logos on RCA letterhead, alongside the “meatball logo” and the RCA Victor Dog.

The icon of the magic brain referred to both RCA’s technological dominance in the radio and television fields with geniuses like Zworykin, “the father of television,” and to the power that the products would transfer to the user. It also tapped into an old idea about the power of machinery to transcend and add to human capabilities. According to Siegfried Zielinski, the earliest ideas about television involved the idea that the tele-vision or kino eye was an extension of the human body.⁹⁹ A kind of magic box, the radio receiver went right into the brain, overcoming distances of time and space. Vassos himself was aware of the power of technology as an adjunct to the body. He expressed this idea in the *Phobia* image called “mechanophobia” which depicted a man overwhelmed by industrial machinery. The merging of the concrete and the irrational, the eye and the brain, might have been appealing to the customer as television began to become a reality and RCA sought to associate itself with the awesome power of this new “magic eye.”¹⁰⁰ The logo’s unusual-looking eye situated in the mechanical brain would seem frightening today, but the image must have had resonance in the science fiction-oriented society. According to Andrew Ross, visual expression of fear and fantasy merged in the radio age where corporations expanded on the powers of technology to expand knowledge and coordinate society. The floating eye might seem “big-brotherish” to us today, but

⁹⁹ Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entr’actes in History*, translated by Gloria Custance. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), p. 152.

¹⁰⁰ For more on logos see: Carolyn Thomas de la Pena, “Designing the Electric Body: Sexuality Masculinity and the Electric Belt in America, 1880-1920” 14 *Journal of Design History*, (2001) 275-289.

then it suggested competent, dominant leadership, like the corporate benevolence that RCA expressed in its murals and in its control of the airwaves.¹⁰¹

Vassos particularly liked this logo because it merged the emotionally charged imagery of the brain and the eye with words. This relationship of word and image was a graphical project he had explored in his illustrated books. He explained the appeal of the logo in Pascalian terms, although not explicitly, that God was in each RCA product, the motor behind the machine, which gives the logo itself a magical appeal. Vassos describes the Magic Brain:

“when I conceived the idea of the Magic Brain, its implication as so forceful and pictorial and so challenging that it soon began to supersede the RCA trademark, which had no romantic or magical associations. The reason for this is, first that man believes that because he is fashioned in God’s image that any machinery capable of functioning in a human manner must be good. Witness the success of “knee action” a mechanical spring principle that imitates the smooth and effortless activity of the human body.”¹⁰²

Thus Vassos’s logo, if it worked, has the capacity to inspire the customer to think of the RCA product as both Pascalian, animated by God, and also Cartesian, as a thinking machine. It is both a reflection and expression of the human spirit animated by God and small machines running on scientific principles, reflecting larger concerns about human nature and progress.¹⁰³

Once again recalling the importance of soliciting the human body in advertising and sales campaigns (mentioned in the previous chapter), Vassos rightly viewed the trademark as a way of giving the public “an emotional pictorial

¹⁰¹ On technology, technocratic culture and computerization see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999). For a thorough history of technocracy and technocratic reason, see Frank Fischer, *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), John Sculley, *Odyssey: Pepsi to Apple . . . A Journey of Adventure, Ideas, and the Future* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), Jodi Dean, “From Technocracy to Technoculture,” 5.1 *Theory & Event* (2001), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.1dean.html>.

¹⁰² Proposal to RCA, folder “Designs – Magictron,” Box 3, Vassos/Syracuse University.

¹⁰³ These ideas are expressed by Brian Sutton-Smith in relation to toys, but I think they can be applied here, *Toys as Culture*, (NY: Gardner Press, 1986), p. 122.

relationship where immediately a visual descriptive association is created”¹⁰⁴ For Vassos, as in the comic books which were becoming increasingly popular in the 1930s, the connection between the word and image was essential to forge the participation of the viewer and to engage an emotional response. This impressed the image and the words more deeply into the viewer’s imagination and memory, demanding the cooperation of the reader in piecing together the words with the image.



Fig. 70: A Version of the Magic brain logo used in RCA publication, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

The magic brain was a far cry from RCA Victor’s sweet little dog icon (on the coffin of its dead master as media historian Jonathan Sterne points out),¹⁰⁵ and it moved the company away from its other major logo, the RCA letters encased in a circle with the lightning bolt. As Jeffrey Mickle argues, the 1920s and 1930s were

¹⁰⁴ Proposal to RCA, folder “Designs – Magictron,” Box 3, Vassos/Syracuse University.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 302. Adrian Forty says that there were patterns and organizational identity which were part of the church since the middle ages. They fulfill the same purpose as early Gothic architecture for the Cistercians, making the identity of the company apparent to the employees and advertising the company’s special characteristics to the public, according to Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 223. Modern organizational identity serves to make a brand recognizable and unify products of a single manufacturer across product platforms.

the age of the logo, as the stylized art nouveau motifs were replaced by more explicit signs of the machine age, including “stylized lightening bolts (electricity) gears and radio waves or abstract constructions whose impersonality, precision and metallic look suggested by implication the machine.”¹⁰⁶ RCA’s “meatball logo,” as it was called in house, achieved what every logo is designed to that being to simultaneously built brand loyalty and consumer goodwill.¹⁰⁷ RCA’s technical superiority was reflected in its logo. Vassos had other ideas for expanding RCA brand signage and adding images to more radio parts, such as his suggestion that the company place on the knobs of the radio, “in bas relief, a section for the hemisphere showing the American and European continents – literally “the world at your finger tips.”¹⁰⁸ This elaborate idea was not taken up by the company.

Vassos invested his time heavily into logo design for the company. Since he was hired, he offered numerous suggestions about improving the company’s logo, so he must have been relieved when the Magic Brain idea was accepted. As he complained in an early report:

“I do not feel that as unsuccessful result has been reached as regards your trademark since the merger of the two companies. You have retained the emblem of each...you are taxing the public’s ability to memorize by giving them two ideas. And pictorially it is unsound, as the two designs are so radically unlike in composition that they are not only are confusing but actually clash.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Mickle, Twentieth Century Limited, p. 32.

¹⁰⁷ These strategies were pervasive among major American businesses, see William Bird, Better Living: Advertising, Media and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955 (1999); Richard Tedlow, Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950 (1970). Also see, Olivier Zunz, Making America Corporate, 1870-1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Mr. Thomas Joyce, from John Vassos, September 29, 1934, Vassos/AAA, Box 8.

¹⁰⁹ see John Vassos Report, RCA Victor Company, Page 1, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 1. (no date.)

His suggestions to put the RCA Victor dog with a radio replacing the phonograph or to “incorporate the RCA initials around the phonograph with the horn emerging from the letter C” in a bulls eye circle were rejected.¹¹⁰ Vassos continued to invest his time in the development of the company’s image even up until his retirement in 1970. For example, when RCA’s “acucolor” television appeared on the market, he wrote a letter to Tucker complaining that the company’s new set shared its name with a word, which in French, a vulgarity referring to a body part .¹¹¹ It would be a joke among French consumers, Vassos predicted.



Figure 71: This publicity image from the Vassos/AAA, Box 1; RCA files show the collaboration of designers and stylists, a human team with hands on interaction with RCA products.

The introduction of styling for industrial radio equipment marked a new era in the production of “backend” machinery as RCA realized that its name had market value beyond their studios. In-house magazines like *Broadcast News* promoted this alliance of art and industry, using their resident stylist as a sign of their commitment to modernism and their progressive design. Publicity stills such as the one above,

¹¹⁰ Vassso, RCA Report, (ibid) p. 2-3.

¹¹¹ As Vassos wrote, “Does anybody in the advertising department both in the agency and your own know?” I ask you how can anybody be so lacking in the universality of communications and not to check first...what really happens when one begins to incorporate a little bit from here and a little bit from there..you end up in “acucolor.” letter to Tucker, October 3, 1970, Vassos/Syracuse University, Box 5, “Memorabilia,” folder.

show the partnership between engineering and designer as something to be admired at the company, rather than a hidden procedure. The “behind the scenes” look at the collaboration photograph reveals this alliance. This posed shot shows Vassos and engineers gathered around the mass-produced receiver at the thick of the production line, coming up with solutions, touching the machines, and improving them.

Although it would be rare to see a visual depiction of this process today, RCA’s 1930s focus on innovation and style inspired this photograph as it literally shows the unity of artist and engineering. As RCA entered the television age, they believed that they had to prove that their cutting-edge design department and the knowledge and power behind the “magic brain” wasn’t so magic after all, but rather the product of hard work, engineering know how and manly power.

In many ways, this image captures the RCA philosophy, providing a team of technical experts, acoustical consultants, structural engineers, electricians and designers in the construction of the mass produced machine. The Vassos wearing a suit and working among engineers is very different than the artist Vassos that RCA hired in 1933. He was now responsible for the design resolution of a variety of technical, commercial, public relations, and artistic concerns. The design solutions discussed in this chapter reflected the corporate virtues of economy, efficiency, adaptability, and unity with other RCA products. The beret-wearing Vassos seen on the scaffold at the beginning of this chapter was folded into the company as its internal artist working from within by a variety of forms, through publicity, through education, and also through the efforts of managers like Throckmorton. The modern radio corporation demanded subsuming the artistic ego into the company’s plan, a

deal Vassos was willing to make. In the RCA corporate culture, he was given authority and an outlet to explain his design decisions, share his opinions and shape the design of the company's major products.

Andrew Ross argues that the 1930s made this movement of artists into the corporation possible since it was a time when artists turned to the commercial sectors of film, radio, advertising, TV, journalism, and recording to work at their arts. Here, they would accept a more stable and increasingly union wage in exchange for the virtual surrender of artistic autonomy. By moving into the heart of RCA, as a corporate artist, Vassos moved away from the independence that marked his success on the illustrated book market. His transformation from solo artist to corporate stylist suggests a transformation in the meaning of what constitutes art in the age of mass production.¹¹²

¹¹² Andrew Ross, "The Mental Labor Problem," 18 Social Text (Summer 2000), pp. 1-31.

Chapter 6

Streamlining the Image: The TRK12, RCA's First Mass Marketed Receiver



Figure 72: Three models that Vassos designed for RCA, from top, the TRK12, the TRK9 (left), and the TT-5 (right) featured in ad from 1939, which reads "A New Industry is Born as RCA and NBC Present Television," Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

Vassos's earliest television receivers used the then-futuristic idiom of streamlining to create a receiver design that became outdated before it hit the market. The style of streamlining was not used again in television after television made its American debut at the 1939 World's Fair. The story of this television commonly referred to as a receiver,¹ the large TRK 12, reveals numerous details about the design process and the challenge that Vassos faced in choosing the appropriate cabinet for RCA's newest technology. Even RCA was unsure how to promote the new medium -- was it radio with pictures or something else? More than in other chapters, I examine here how advertising and display anticipate the ways television would be integrated

¹ The terminology "television" was still so new, that the machine had not yet adopted the name of its technology. A "receiver" more accurately described what the machine did, capture the transmission of television.

into the home. I have drawn from a range of materials to reconstruct the social and design milieu in which the receiver was conceptualized and built. I start with the structural challenge that Vassos faced in housing the machinery, since the internal machinery was so large. Then, I discuss how advertising and promotions for the television reflected ideas about its association with air travel. Finally, I discuss television's promotion at the RCA pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

This television design occurred at the end of Vassos's prewar work for RCA (which converted to war production in 1941). It is a fitting era to conclude my analysis of Vassos's prewar career, as it drew upon his accumulated knowledge about new materials, about modular furniture's acceptability in the home, and about sales. It forced him to consider issues around the domestic and the machine. Vassos had to determine how to incorporate this huge machine into the existing living room and where it would be placed. It also forced him to use modernistic principles to design an innovative style for the hulking machine, which he did using the heat releasing louvers as its design motif. Vassos's design intersected with other issues related to the television including technological ones, such as its relationship to radio, and to the airplane, and to social issues, such as its meaning for a democratic society.

Vassos's "Musicorner" featured in the America at Home Pavilion of the World's Fair, discussed in Chapter three, forced him to grapple with the integration of the television into the living room area. He dealt with this challenge by building mobile cubes to hide the machinery of the television to create a seamless entertainment unit. Unlike the TV cube in the Musicorner however, the single free-standing "tele-receiver" was not as easily integrated into the modern living room. The

freestanding unit's large mechanical parts posed a design difficulty for Vassos since the machine could not simply be hidden by a "cube." Vassos sought to temper functionalism with the softness of streamlined ornamentation. His design for the TRK12 is considered a classic in streamlined design.² Its importance to RCA, which proudly promoted it, cannot be underestimated. It suggests an instance of a visionary design worthy of study despite its failure on the marketplace.³ Indeed, as is well known, it wasn't until the postwar period, long after Vassos was pulled off the television receiver design, that television found its style as well as its place in the living room.⁴

Most accounts of television history ignore television receivers. Even scholars of the World's Fair focus more on the large-scale automobile oriented events like Futurama and other areas designed by prominent industrial designers.⁵ There is virtually no scholarship on the massive Skidmore Owens designed radio tube-like Television pavilion, nor any work on the other television display at America's Home

² "The craze for streamlining continued throughout the thirties...[in] larger objects such as a desk by Paul Frankl and the first commercially available television console by John Vassos, RCA's TRK 12 of 1938-1939," Lisa Phillips, High Styles: Twentieth Century American Design, (NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985), p. 97.

³ Overall, only 15,000 television receivers were manufactured in total, by comparison in 1947, 196,955 receivers were produced. By 1950, the number was estimated at 7,500,000. Harold Becker, "1950 a Banner Year for Television," Radio and Television News, February 1951.

⁴ Vassos continued to design television products however including the first television camera, which is still the classic shape, consoles for studios using the module principle and a television recording device, possibly an early VCR with "TV, tape recorder and replay Industrial Design at RCA – A Report Covering 1932-1970," Vassos/Syracuse, Box 4, "Correspondence-Subject File, RCA, Reports," by Vassos, pp. 7-10.

⁵ see for example, Andrew Ross, Strange Weather, p.128-129; Warren Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century, (NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 184-210. Roland Marchand, "Designers Go the Fair I: Walter Dorwin Teague and the Professionalization of Corporate Industrial Exhibits, 1933-1940," Design History, An Anthology, Dennis Doordan, editor, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

of the Future.⁶ It is a curious omission on the part of media historians who have otherwise tracked the social and technological history of the medium quite thoroughly⁷ including its rise as a postwar tool of social containment, its role in producing the nuclear family, and its relationship to suburbia.⁸ Television history is often a story about technological evolution with little attention to the cultural influences on television design and development.⁹ Similarly, television museums that house the receivers make historical links between the televisions but not cultural ones, with the exception of a few examples.

One method of bridging the gap between the historians of technology and the cultural historians is to integrate the cultural history with the technological history as in the work of media historian Jonathan Sterne. His discussion about the development of the infrastructure of television, starting in 1934,¹⁰ shows the ideological and structural elements that forged television's growth. His work suggests a direction for

⁶ Carroll Gantz, an industrial designer, has recently written an entry on the TRK12, 100 Years of Design is a monthly installment of excerpts from the upcoming book, Significant Mass-Produced Products of the 20th Century, by Carroll M. Gantz, FIDSA, to be published by Schiffer Publishing in early 2006. <<http://new.idsa.org/webmodules/articles/annviewer.asp?a=288&z=6>>.

⁷ Jennifer Burton Bannister argues that television literature is limited in analyzing television in five ways; surveys, regularity histories, corporate histories and biographies, Jennifer Burton, "From Laboratory to Living Room: The Development of Television in the United States, 1920-1960," (Dissertation, Purdue University, 2001), pp. 17-18. On advertising and television see, Lawrence R. Samuel, Brought to You By: Postwar Television Advertising and the American Dream (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). For television and domesticity, see Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Ideal Family in American Culture, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann eds. Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

⁸ Television production was slowed by the war, but its functions were advanced by it as RCA developed new technologies that were applied to the consumer set. Brian Winston, Media Technology and Society, A History From the Telegraph to the Internet (NY: Routledge, 1998).

⁹ Joseph Udelson, The Great Television Race (University of Alabama Press, 1982). For television history which is technological but not analytical see Albert Abramson, The History of Television 1880-1941 (Jefferson, N.C.:McFarland Press, 1987); David Fisher and Marshall Jon Fisher, Tube: The Invention of Television (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996).

¹⁰ Jonathan Sterne, "Television Under Construction: American Television and the Problem of Distribution, 1926-1962," Media, Culture & Society, 21 (1999) 512.

television studies that takes into account the technological apparatus and its application while putting it in a social context, in this case regarding the formation of a national network. Given television's cultural and historical importance, it is time that the receiver is better understood, and one way to achieve this is through the records of its designer, which I discuss here.

The design of the television expressed social values about the new technology, particularly the cultural ambivalence towards new technologies. By studying television design, and how Vassos grappled with the need to show a futuristic sensibility while making the machine acceptable through his design, we view the history of the future from its past. Recent scholarship in the history of technology has argued that the study of failed technologies can be instructive. This is then a useful way to study the TRK12, which failed to captivate audiences in the 1930s or scholars of television history.¹¹ From a technological deterministic argument, which views technology from an evolutionary narrative, we can see that it was not the technology that led the television to flop, nor was it the set's design, but its timing on the market. Historian Kenneth Lipartito's study of the failed Bell Telephone Lab's video telephone, the "picturephone", reveals that the strength of the technology does not always serve as the best predictor of its future success. Rather, "what matters is more the meaning a technology can convey than the functions it can initially perform," so that initially, the look of a technology is more important than its function.¹² Using this perspective, it seems that the TRK12, unlike Vassos's small television screen in the "musicorner," was meant to herald the future and fit into the RCA pavilion's dramatic

¹¹ Lipartito, Kenneth, "Picturephone and the Information Age: The Social Meaning of Failure," 44 *Technology and Culture* January 2003: 50-81.

¹² Lipartito, p. 57.

architecture more than it was meant to function as a viewing device, its small screen was awkward to watch. This suggests that it was not the scope of the technology that matters, but its familiarity with the user, not the size of the screen, but its placement in relation to the viewer.

THE NEWEST RECEIVER ON THE MARKET

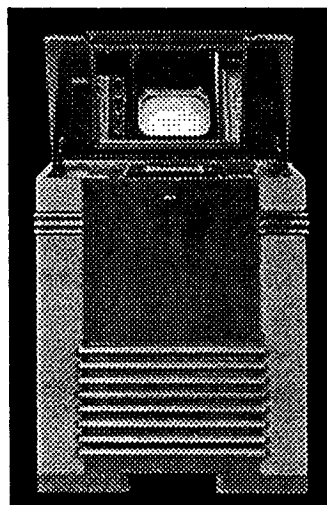


Figure 73; TRK12, lid opened.¹³

By the time Vassos started working on the television in 1935, it had rapidly progressed, a path that I briefly summarize here. In 1929, Soviet Scientist Vladimir Zworykin demonstrated an all-electronic television receiver using the kinescope. In 1930, television on a 6x8 foot screen was shown by RCA at RKO-Proctor Theater in New York.¹⁴ In 1931, the Empire State Building was selected as a site for RCA-NBC television transmitter. RCA had begun running field tests for television in 1932. The

¹³ Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian. The Machine Age in America, 1918-41. New York: The Brooklyn Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 1986, p. 337.

¹⁴ "Television Milestones," Radio Age, July 1948, p. 12-13.

second phase of RCA's development of television began in 1935. This same year the company started publicly testing its new media, "to bring the research results of the scientists and engineers out of the laboratory and into the field," announced David Sarnoff in his speech to RCA Stockholders on May 7, 1935.¹⁵ Vassos revealed his involvement in this phase of development writing that "Dr. Baker has asked me to develop designs for the experimental sets of television and I must admit that working on this gives me a great thrill."¹⁶ Vassos observed, with his typical optimism, that it also "offered a most unique problem"¹⁷ mainly because of the size of the tubes. Progress on television transmission continued in 1936, when television outdoor pickups were demonstrated by RCA at Camden, N.J. on a 6-meter wave across a distance of a mile. RCA ran experimental programs from a station on top of Empire State building by remote control for NBC. These experiments were observed in homes by RCA engineers in the suburbs at a distance of as far as 45 miles from the transmission site.¹⁸

Vassos faced a number of design challenges in creating the cabinetry for the TRK12 television (figure 73), so named for its twelve-inch screen. These challenges were both structural and ideological. They included dealing with the bulky machinery inside the cabinet, the unification of the receiver with other RCA units, and the creation of a cabinet that was right for television's emergence at the 1939 World's Fair. The new machine was multifarious, combining both radio and television – it

¹⁵ Speech to RCA Stockholders on May 7, 1935, AAA, Box 1, one page.

¹⁶ Letter from John Vassos to G.K. Throckmorton, RCA, June 1, 1935 from John Vassos, AAA, Box 8, folder "Miscellaneous," p. 1.

¹⁷ Letter from John Vassos to G.K. Throckmorton, RCA, June 1, 1935 from John Vassos, AAA, Box 8, folder "Miscellaneous," p. 1.

¹⁸ David Sarnoff, "Three Decades of Radio," RCA Review, October 1936, p. 14.

provided audio and visual pleasure. Vassos had some design precedents to work as the receiver form, with its flip top lid, a design that was already an accepted in British television manufacturing which started in 1929. Thus, working around the technological aspects, Vassos's intervention in the design was in the exterior cabinet. He made decisions about where to put the heat releasing grills, where to place the control knobs, how to build the legs, what materials to use, and finally, how to style the machine.¹⁹

The first challenge was the size of the machine, which weighed 200 lbs.²⁰ This was an issue that Vassos could do nothing about except try and compensate for the machine's bulk through an elegant design that would fit into the home. As he wrote, "You [had] to put the tubes from the floor up and down and then you can see a reflection in the mirror because the tube was so long. The tube was about 3'4" high; imagine that in the living room."²¹ Vassos paid careful attention to the veneer of the cabinet, making sure that it was acceptable as a piece of furniture when the television was not in use. The TRK12 was enveloped in a range of expensive woods, creating a rich and complex patina of light and dark. The contrasting tones of the woods added depth and substantiality. As the accompanying brochure noted, "[T]he lid center section is heart walnut veneer, with side rails of striped walnut veneer. The front is center matched butt walnut with end rails of horizontal striped walnut."²² Indeed, the wood gave the television a heavy look making it appear as if it weighed much more

¹⁹ For more on the mechanical components and technical details of the receiver, see Vladimir Zworykin, "Iconoscopes and Kinescopes in Television, RCA Review, July 1936, p. 60 which describes the importance of the kinescope in the console type flip top receiver.

²⁰ RCA Victor Service Notes, Volume II, Complete Index to RCA Victor Service Notes, 1923-1942, p. 251-C, David Sarnoff Library.

²¹ Syracuse University speech, p. 12.

²² From Folder 79, Television TRK12, in Acc. 2069, Records of the Company Historian, Series TV Model Files, Box 7, Hagley Museum and Library, Delaware.

than it actually did. Thus, as a substantial piece of furniture, stylish and streamlined, the TRK12 could stand on its own as an elegant radio, regardless of the poverty of the televisual image.

The beauty of the machine, one of its strongest selling points, helped RCA justify the massive price tag of the receiver. The affluent consumers appealed to television advertisers who anticipated the sales rewards from the buying power of viewers, when they paid a premium to advertise on the new medium. They hoped that the “high initial cost would be neutralized by the quality of the audience.”²³ This premier set was indeed “Designed for those who demand the best,” as it contained within the unit RCA’s top of the line audio system. This was a high fidelity three band broadcast radio receiver, with all wave FM radio and nine electric push buttons for tuning.”²⁴ The machine cost \$600 in June 1939, but was reduced to \$450.00 by the end of the war, since all sets were recalled for a complete realignment to conform to revised specifications issued by the FCC.²⁵

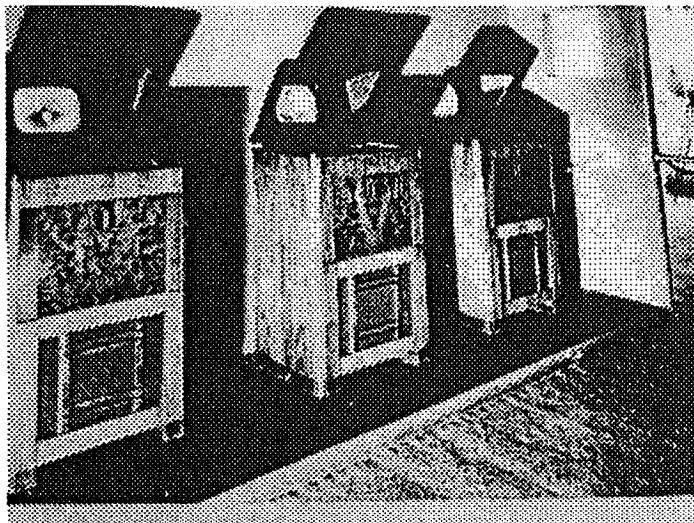
It was his approach to the issue of ventilation that marked Vassos’s most innovative and significant design change. To deal with the extreme heat, Vassos tried to integrate the vents, rather than trying to hide them. The louver coverage became the motif for the design of the set, following Vassos’s concern to design in accordance with the function of the machine. As he explained, “the necessity for ventilating this highly heated device resulted in the louver theme at the top of the set,

²³ O. Fred Rost, “Television as Seen from Business Side,” *Printer’s Ink*, June 8, 1939, p. 11.

²⁴ “TRK-12: First Deluxe Television Receiver” from Folder 79, Television TRK 12 in Acc. 2069, Records of the Company Historian series, TV-Model files, Box 7, Hagley Museum.

²⁵ Prices were reduced by 33 percent in 1940 following the FCC decision to allow advertising, what some consider a first step toward completely commercial television, J.Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network Television*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 18.

which gave it identity and functionalism at the same time.”²⁶ More than a design solution, Vassos viewed this aspect of his design as expressing a “form that reflects television principles” and was therefore truly modern. In a letter to Louise Bonney, Director of the “America at Home”, Vassos attempted to convince her that the television deserved a Jury prize for excellence in design, he emphasized its modern design with no extraneous decoration “whatsoever, even the louvers at the very top of the cabinet functionally are for a purpose – to let the extreme heat escape.”²⁷ He indeed received an award for the TRK12 late that year. In addition to the functionality, the heat ventilating “louvers” had both a mechanical function as a place where heat escaped and an explanatory one, to tell viewers this was a place from where the sound emerged. They integrated the receiver’s explicit function as a televisual device with the hidden aspects of the machine.



²⁶ Letter to Miss Bernice L. Maguire, Lord & Taylor, March 29, 1941, from John Vassos, page 4, AAA, Box 8.

²⁷ He eventually won the Jury award for the TRK12 in 1940. Letter to Louise Bonney Leicester, May 1, 1940, NYPL, Box 363.

Fig. 74: 1936 RCA prototype television receiver (the RR359 Field Test set) being tested at RCA, notice the grills at the base of the television, covered with mesh and “bars” to suggest safety from the sounds emitted, from AAA, Box 2.

Early versions of a similar receiver, a template produced at RCA, placed the “grill” where heat emerged at the base of the radio. As seen in Figure 74, this was a boxy grill was decorated by a geometric steel pattern.²⁸ While this machine is attractive, the placement of the grill at the base has the effect of creating too many boxy shapes on the front, drawing attention away from the screen. In addition, this design split the machine into two parts, with the image on top and the machinery on the bottom. The split between the top half and the bottom half are reinforced by the marbleized wood in the middle of the television. Vassos shifted this arrangement, using horizontal lines over the grill near the top, a design that he repeated on the lower part of the receiver, to signify the “release” of sound throughout the machine. In doing so, Vassos created a new design idiom for the new television that integrated the top and the bottom, sound and image. His elegant, unified, luxurious cabinet thus merged two RCA products, the radio and the television. Vassos integrated the by knobs placing them underneath the top and away from the front of the cabinet as in the older model. This created the body that modernists found aesthetically pleasing while retaining the decorative piping. As a result, the cabinet makes the television look less like a mechanical device and simply like a cube yet sculptured and elegant. Vassos created continuity throughout RCA’s brand of well-styled radios by matching their well-placed controls. RCA was as appreciative of his work here, as in other

²⁸ Photograph from AAA, Box 2, 1936 RCA prototype television receiver (the RR359 Field Test set).

areas. As a colleague commented, Vassos's televisions, like his radios, expressed "honesty, functionalism, reliability, [and] appeal."²⁹

By 1939, RCA had receivers on sale at major department stores, accompanied by ad campaigns in major magazines and newspapers. In addition to the TRK12, which was equipped with video and audio consoles and a mirror inside the lid from which the picture was viewed, the line of receivers included the TRK9, the direct-view console with video and audio, the TRK5, a console-type direct view model with audio and video, and the TT-5, a 17-tube vision only tabletop model.³⁰ (See Fig. 72 for an advertisement featuring three models). The RCA sets were offered for sale in Macy's, Bloomingdale's, and Wanamaker's department stores in the New York Metropolitan area. Although shoppers were curious, television sales right up until the beginning of World War II were disappointing. Most of the unsold 1939-41 televisions were put into storage and sold after the war.³¹



Fig. 75 and 76: on the left, brochure accompanying the TRK12, David Sarnoff Corporate Library. On the right, this publicity still from the David Sarnoff Library was also used in an ad for RCA, detailing the models features including the possibility for "a large group of people to view a

²⁹ Letter to Vassos from J.P. Taylor, RCA stationary, November 13, 1970, Vassos/Syracuse University, Box 4, "memorabilia."

³⁰ RCA Victor Service Notes, Volume II, Complete Index to RCA Victor Service Notes, 1923-1942, Model TRK-5 and Model TT-5, p. 93-C, David Sarnoff Library.

³¹ His only postwar set was released in 1946 along with the ten-inch model 630. RCA announced the 621 in October, 1946, along with the ten-inch model 630. In November both sets were advertised for sale in five cities. Very few (about 17,000) of the 621 were made, since the public preferred the larger 630.

program with ease" (Box 2, TV History, Folder 8, RCA Corporation, PR Collection, David Sarnoff Library)³²

The print ads for this first television receiver were educational.³³ These early ads are humorous in that they are strikingly wrong about how television would be received and used. Not coach potatoes, these elegant viewers inherited the formality of radio, discussed in chapter four. Early ads for the TRK12 featured elegant people dressed as if they were attending the theater, that is to say, in public. The presence of stars in the backdrops of both the brochure and the ad above suggest that these scenes take place in a dream or in another world. In the brochure accompanying the television, a woman in an evening gown watches men in tuxedos on the set as the TRK12 floats in a sky of stars. The formality of early television may have been a reflection of its high cost, its modernistic design, and of its status as a new technology with roots in the status conscious radio world, which sought to view itself as an elite medium, as I show in the previous chapter.

Cultural anthropologist Orvar Lofgren suggests a way of understanding the formality of the television that considers its status as a new technology. Lofgren suggests that the formality of the devices is entirely to be expected with the introduction of the new technologies, which create awkward experiences for everyone. As he writes:

"both the introduction of radio and television [which] at first meant a period of happy experimentation and a multitude of utopian schemes. As the new

³² This photograph is also include din the brochure of the TRK-12, from folder 79, "Television TRK12" in Acc. 2069, Records of the company historian, Series TV, model file Box 7, Hagley library. A copy of this ad is also reproduced in the book, *High Style*, p.98. This book draws attention to the streamlined features of the television, without mention of its use as a sound and image receiver, AAA, Box 1, "printed matter."

³³ Ad from *Printer's Ink*, "RCA and NBC Present Television to New York" tearsheet, David Sarnoff Library.

commodities reached the homes they were surrounded by a sacred and formal aura, which was also evident in the marketing. People remember the solemn atmosphere and the intense concentration in early radio listening or the ways in which you dressed up for television evenings, hushing both grandma and the kids. Both the radio and the TV set were given a prominent position in the best room, rather like home altars. Gradually the media became routine, people learned how to listen with half an ear or having the television on as background screen for conversation. The radio moved into the kitchen and the bedroom. Commodities pass through a life cycle of socialization to routinization or trivialization and then on to a process of cultural ageing which is often more rapid than the actually physical wear and tear.”³⁴

Lofgren argues that television’s newness brought reverence to the machine. In this sense, despite the fancy dress, early televisions ads then were not out of sync with the formality with which new consumers experienced their television. Lofgren’s insight enables us to go beyond the limited notion that the radio and television appeared fancy merely because they were expensive or looked elegant. He suggests that this was an aspect of their newness, revealing a way in which new technologies are folding into daily lives. Once we are comfortable with new technologies we can become more relaxed in their presence. Certainly, television’s formality was encouraged by the manufacturer suggesting that the television was more than a relaxing place, it was a site of education and stimulation, its design a reflection of its association with the supposedly sophisticated values of modernism.

Another example of early television’s shaky status within the home is the fact that its ads had not yet been fully gendered. They don’t express the extreme gendered division of labor typical of post-war television advertising.³⁵ For example, the men and women are united while viewing in the living room, although the man actively

³⁴ Orvar Lofgren, “Consuming Interests,” 7 Culture and History 1990, (Copenhagen, Denmark, Akademisk Forlag), p. 15.

³⁵ See Spigel for a comprehensive discussion of how television shaped and was defined by gendered division of labor in the home, which she covers in Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America.

tunes the machine in the image while the two women lounge on the couch. In the brochure image, some confusion about the role of television is expressed as the screen image features two male entertainers while the woman turns the dial. On the back of the brochure, in the image to the left, the same woman appears on the television screen! It is clear from these confusing placements that the manufacturer was unsure how to present the receiver and people's relationship to it. According to the visuals, the television was a device for viewing, for tuning, and for being on television.³⁶ In addition, the television experience was fraught with technological problems and annoyances that interfered with viewing pleasure. As A.T. Murray, President of the United American Radio Corporation wrote, there was an interference problem with cars. They disrupted signals and created static each time they passed the home, another major problem that television encountered in the home, in the beginning.³⁷

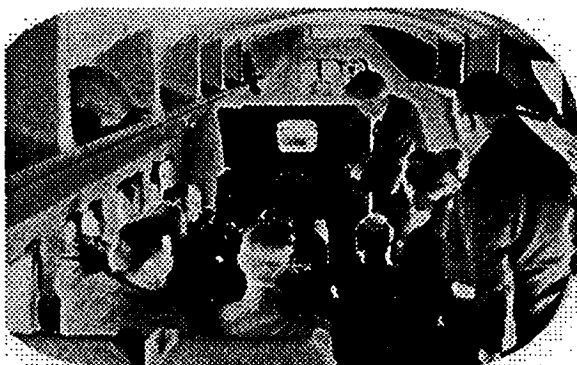


³⁶ This confusion between watching television and being on it was expressed also at the RCA Pavilion at the World's Fair where, as part of the promotion, visitors were televised and placed on screen following which they received a certificate which announced that they had been televised, see <http://www.earlytelevision.org/1939_visitors.html>.

³⁷ "Looking Ahead: Radio Industrialists Foresee Prosperity – They Discuss the Television Outlook" New York Times, August 1, 1937, p. 146. Problems with television reception are also recorded in the records from the New York World's Fair, NYPL, Box 421, letter to engineer building the pavilion August 10, 1938, relates to the issue of poor reception due to interference from cars.

Figure 77: The television was again associated with the airplane, whose horizontal wings and promise of a new destination mirrored the television's greatest aspiration appearing in an actual mirror, which reflected the screen. This reads "television's first year." From Television's First Year, (New York: National Broadcasting Corporation, 1940), David Sarnoff Library.

This unease about how to market television was also reflected in its early promotions and in its design. In using streamlining, wood and airplane imagery, its design was both backwards and forward looking. It was associated with the progressive new technology of the airplane for its social meaning and looked backwards to the radio for nostalgia. Undoubtedly, it was not a far stretch to relate television to the airplane, as both technologies suggested travel, advanced technology, and mobility. Vassos's decisions to edge the body of the unit with bands of dark wood come directly from the plane, as the edging crosses the body of the receiver like wings of a plane. Promotional materials like the one above also encouraged the link, using a plane to announce "television's first year." RCA installed the TRK12 on planes in an early public television broadcast, an event that RCA heavily publicized. A telecast beamed up from NBC New York was picked up in a plane 20,000 feet above Washington D.C. a 200 mile distance.³⁸



³⁸ "Television Milestones," Radio Age, July 1948, p. 12. Television has frequently been compared to travel, see Anne Friedberg who writes new modalities, produced by changes in transportation, architecture and urban planning; photography brought a virtual gaze that brought the past to the present, machines of visual transport virtual mobility. Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

Figure 78: image of a TRK12 television broadcast in an airplane, Broadcast News, October 1939, David Sarnoff Library.

The television was also linked stylistically and thematically to radio in its design and in its marketing. The radio was literally, absorbed, into the television receiver, which was also acted as a radio (see figure 75). By the postwar era when television took off as a medium in its own right, it became disassociated with radio's limited sphere. Early on, radio's relationship to television was very much part of television's discourse. This was due not only to the technological links and the inclusion of radio in the design, but also to the regulatory issues. RCA sought to gain the FCC's generous approvals that they received for radio. By associating radio and television, they tried to limit the scope of the new media by making it seem similar in use and value. RCA repeated the connection at every opportunity. In one example, while speaking at RCA Exhibit Building of the New York World's Fair, April 20, 1939, RCA President Sarnoff declared the birth of its newest medium in terms of its older one.

"Television again bids fair to follow in its youthful parent's footsteps and to inherit its vigor initiative. When it does, it will become an important factor in American economic life. Also, as an entertainment adjunct, television will supplement sound broadcasting by bringing in the home the visual images of scenes and events which up to now have come there as a mind pictures conjured up by the human void."³⁹

Radio's actual relationship to television is of course more complex, as media historian Jonathan Sterne warns us. He suggests that the history of television must be seen as having its own contours and is not simply an "epiphenomenon of that of radio." Sterne argues that the TV infrastructure was a development that related to a

³⁹ David Sarnoff, "The Birth of an Industry" p. 41 in David Sarnoff, Pioneering in Television: Prophecy and Fulfillment, Microfilm, Columbia University Periodical department, #96-83311-4.

set of ideas circulating “among technicians, industry executives, programmers, congress people and audience members.”⁴⁰ However, the relationship between radio and television has been blurred by RCA itself, most clearly in its presentation of television in a building shaped like a giant radio tube at the World’s Fair.

⁴⁰ Sterne, “Television Under Construction: American Television and the problem of distribution, 1926-1962,” Media, Culture & Society, Vol. 21, No. 4, 503-530 (1999). Garth Joewtt argues that television was made possible by advances made in national distribution systems for radio, see “Dangling the Dream? The Presentation of Television to the American Public, 1928-1952,” 14 Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, (1994): 127.

Was the association of television with radio a way of making the new media seem less dangerous? Or was it truly how television was viewed, as an adjunct to radio? One answer is that RCA wedded their television business and the birth of the new medium to RCA's other blockbuster technology, radio, which had grown to nearly 90% saturation by 1940. It was a marker of their success, in technology and in design. RCA maintained the themes of radio's social benefit. Its democratizing effect, as Sarnoff boasted, "shin[ing] like a torch of hope in a troubled world. It is a creative force which we must learn to utilize for the benefit of all mankind."⁴¹ Television would expand this mission of social improvement, but in a new way, as "the most glamorous of industry's children preparing to deliver its programs with the speed of light into the center of every home. Perfect distribution."⁴² In reality, there were other reasons to associate radio with RCA's benevolence. By stressing its status as a good citizen, the company hoped it would help it achieve the regulatory clearances it needed to standardize the receiver design and technology.⁴³

At the Fair: Radio Gives Birth to Television

⁴¹ "Dedication of RCA Seen on Television," April 21, 1939, New York Times, p. 16.

⁴² Sarnoff, "Three Decades of Radio," RCA Review, October 1936.

⁴³ For more on the regulatory history of television, see Hugh R. Slotten, Radio and Television Regulation: Broadcast Technology in the United States, 1920-1960 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Lawrence W. Lichty, "The Impact of FRC and FCC Commissioners Backgrounds on the regulation of Broadcasting," Journal of Broadcasting 6 (1961): 97-207. For the RCA perspective, see David Sarnoff, "The Future of Radio and Public Interest, Convenience and Necessity" Statement Presented before the Federal Communications Commission, Washington D.C. June 15, 1936, RCA Review: A Quarterly, Journal of Radio Progress, Volume 1, July 1936, pp. 7-11.



Figure 79: Spectators gather around the TRK12 Phantom Television, Broadcast News, October 1939 David Sarnoff Library.

The presentation of the first television can also reveal a lot about how it was conceived and marketed. In many ways, the World's Fair was the ideal place to unveil a new technology. The exhibit, like the fair as a whole, was meant to express the values of freedom from scarcity and hope for a future saved by technology and administered by big business. The timing was right for a look at the future, since the country had endured a decade of depression, and was on the verge of a war that had already erupted in Europe. These fears and hopes were expressed succinctly by President Roosevelt's opening address to the fair as he declared, "the eyes of the United States are fixed on the future."⁴⁴ This was literally the case as thousands of people (figure 79) at the Fair and at department stores around New York City watched his address on the new medium of television.

⁴⁴ Larry Zim, Mel Lerner, and Herbert Rolfes. The World of Tomorrow: The 1939 New York World's Fair. New York: Harper and Row, 1988, p. 9.

**New York Gives its Approval to
RCA TELEVISION**

RCA Victor Television Receivers show in unexcelled as demonstrated the wonder effects with world's most sophisticated public.

A "New York Times" Special Edition A. B. Shaw has said in a special edition of the "New York Times" that the RCA Victor Television Receiver is the most important development in the history of the radio since the invention of the radio itself.

delight you as well as every other in your home.

You may observe these great models of complete television receivers, as the RCA Victor Television Receiver, which you can be able to see with your personal eyes. To see the television receiver in action, the great portion of the television program is found through your eyes. All RCA Victor Television Receivers when being your first television receiver.

Also RCA Victor television dealer will be glad to demonstrate these new receivers. You will be interested in looking at them and discovering how easily you can begin to enjoy the beauty of television pictures.

FREE! Literature booklet for RCA Victor Television Receiver, RCA Victor Co., Inc.

RADIO ADDS A PICTURE SECTION

Great! Now you can see the pictures that are broadcast by RCA Victor. Picture material is received in a direct way in nature. This receiver can be used for radio and for picture material. RCA Victor Television Receiver is a 12-inch set with a 12-inch screen. RCA Victor Co., Inc.

The new RCA Victor Television Receiver, the 12-inch set, is a great new addition to your home.

RCA Victor TELEVISION RECEIVERS
A SERVICE OF THE RADIO CORPORATION OF AMERICA

Figure 80: ad for RCA television; Broadcast News, July 1939.

At the 1939 World's Fair, television was displayed in two ways. At the RCA pavilion at the World's Fair, it was presented in relation to radio, displayed along wide corridors as an object of art. At the America at Home Pavilion, it was part of a multi-unit functional display cabinet, including a radio, television, record player and record recorder, as discussed in Chapter three. RCA's pavilion was located in the Communications Zone in the Land of Tomorrow at the Fair.⁴⁵ It included seven sections: the hall of television, a television laboratory, a Radio Living Room of Tomorrow, a roving Telemobile unit, a Television camera set-up and television

⁴⁵ Vassos also designed the theme and concept of the RCA pavilion at the World's Fair according to Carroll Gantz, <<http://new.idsa.org/webmodules/articles/annviewer.asp?a=288&z=62>>.

transportation, and a flash type TV receiver called the Phantom.⁴⁶ The major event at the Pavilion was the opening speech by FDR on April 30, 1939, the first live television broadcast in the United States. It was aired on W2XBS. The ceremony was televised and watched by several hundred viewers on TV receivers inside the RCA Pavilion at the fair grounds as well as on receivers installed on the 62nd floor of Radio City. Visitors were promised to see for the “first time how moving images are projected through space and splashed on the home screen by the electronic system of television.”⁴⁷ Ten hours of programming, including shows from the NBC studio in Radio City, which were played on the multiple receivers housed in the RCA Pavilion.

It was an appropriate way to open the fair; a celebration of the future with a glimpse of one of its newest technologies. While most historians accept that American broadcast television history started with the event, there are debates about the actual historical importance of this event, beyond its promotional value. Historian, Catherine Celebrezze, argues that although it is tempting to see Sarnoff’s speech akin to Prometheus delivering fire to Olympus, it was really the culmination of a long power struggle involving huge legal battles. RCA’s legal triumph allowed Zworykin’s Iconoscope to define the technological definition of scanable space and relay-instantaneous time over Philo Taylor Farnsworth’s Image Dissector, which was owned by rival company, Philco.⁴⁸ The event did mark the first public broadcast,

⁴⁶ NYPL, Box 132, New York World’s Fair, Memo dated April 27, 1939, pl.44. Also see “Fair Radio Exhibit to be in a Huge Tube,” New York Times, February 7, 1938, p. 32.

⁴⁷ NYPL, Box 132, 1939 New York World’s Fair Collection, pl. 44-1.50.

⁴⁸ Celebrezze, Catherine, Television Time and Space: A Social History of the Present. American Television: From the Fair to the Family 1939-1989, Anne McCarthy similarly criticizes the narrative of television history represented by this title that television moved from the fair to the family, preferring to think that it moved from the department store to the home. See Anne McCarthy, “Outer Spaces: Public Viewing in American Television History,” (Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1995), p. 38.

freeing the televised image from RCA's control and making the consumer owned receiver the locus of the transmission as opposed to an RCA-controlled presentation. RCA released the TRK12 for sale that day and screens were mobbed with bystanders, an image that would be replicated again and again, that of the televised crowd watching television. (see figure 81).

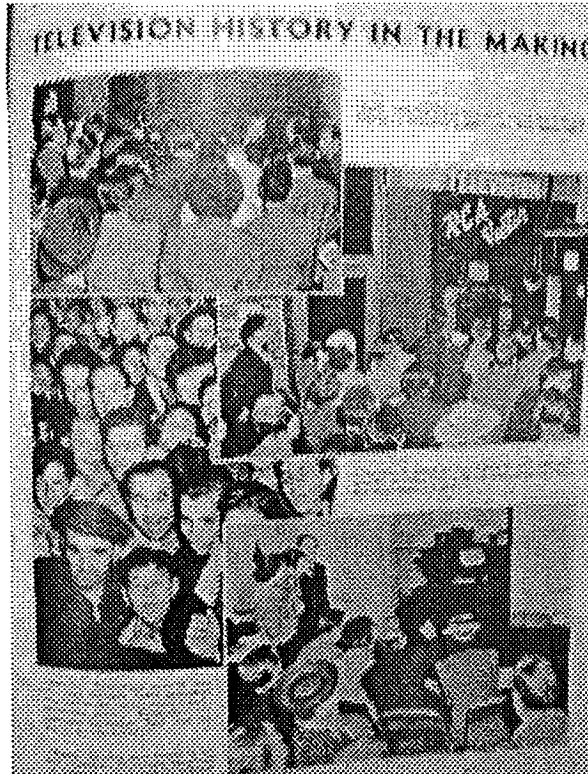


Figure 81: The mob scene at television's debut, *Broadcast News*, October, 1939.

The display was truly spectacular. With the Vassos-designed TRK-12 and a pavilion designed by the renowned U.S. Modernist architectural firm of Skidmore & Owings, RCA arranged to use the fair as a springboard to promote itself as the leader in television production and manufacturing. The Hall of Television at the intersection of the Avenue of Patriots and Hamilton Place was an educational display showing "visitors for the first time how moving images are projected through space and

splashed on the home screen by the electronic system of TV.”⁴⁹ Throughout the exhibition there were reminders of television’s relationship to radio and also its difference, most fully expressed in Lucite “phantom” television. This Lucite television used clear material to demonstrate that television was real and not magic. In doing so, the “spectacular” box inverted the typical function of the receiver, which was to hide the interior workings of the machine.

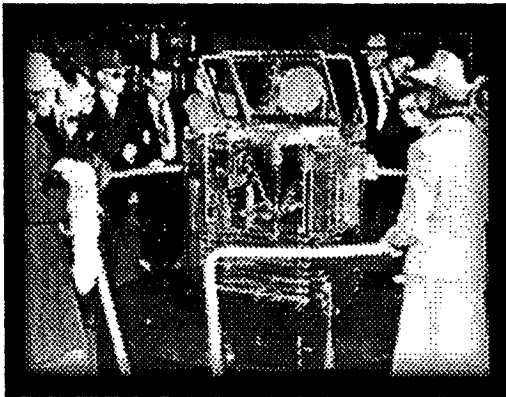


Figure 82: Original publicity still for the TRK12 “phantom television.” Caption on the back reads, “this 8x10 inch screen television receiver which has a clear glass cabinet attracted a great deal of attention at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, Box 2, TV History, Folder 8, RCA Corporation, PR Collection, David Sarnoff Library.

This striking receiver was the first thing that visitors saw upon entering the RCA pavilion along with Stuart Davis’s wall mural as a backdrop and illuminated by natural light from a spectacular glass curtain. Almost every reporter at the event remarked on the receiver and interestingly thought it was made of a glass. In actuality, this was a lie promulgated by RCA’s publicity material, as it was really

⁴⁹ David Sarnoff, Pioneering in Television: Prophecy and Fulfillment, “The Birth of an Industry” p. 41.

made of Dupont's newly renamed synthetic material, Lucite, a clear non-shattering plastic.⁵⁰ As television journalist Orin Dunlap reported:

"by inspecting a special television set built in a glass cabinet visitors at Flushing have the opportunity to observe the complexity of the radio-sight chassis and why the multiuse be machines are priced from \$200 to \$1,000. To see this gleaming glass encased instrument is to realize what a trick it is ahead to swing such an intricate outfit into mass production. It is evidence that the manufacturer as well as the showman has been tossed a challenge by the research experts who now anxiously watch to see what artistry can do with the new giant long-range eyes."⁵¹

Dunlap picks up on the main theme of the display, that being to impress visitors by the technology that produced it while assuring them that the image produced was real, not trickery. Like the "magic brain" campaign, the Phantom television extends RCA's association of technology with magic and scientific genius, seemingly unrelated forces. The eerie "phantom" retains all of the streamlined design features of the actual receiver, suggesting that only the color has been drained out of the television for a theatrical display. This magical display trick would have certainly delighted visitors as it had an uncanny resemblance to the "real sets" they would have seen moments earlier in the exhibition hall.

Roland Barthes suggests that artificial materials that seem to copy nature with more verisimilitude than the original also tend to have the effect of making them more real than reality and sometimes in a ghostly or "phantom" like way. Barthes specifically describes the beauty of the Citroen, a car in which artifice is an emblem of luxury because it transcends naturalism while evoking it. The use of artifice makes it similar to the Phantom's eerie beauty. Barthes explains the process:

⁵⁰ For more on the history of Lucite, see Jeffrey Mickle, *American Plastic*, pp. 86-88.

⁵¹ Orrin E. Dunlap, "Act One Revised: Television's First Week at World's Fair Teaches No End of Lessons" May 7, 1939, *New York Times*, p. x12.

“For the first time, artifice aims at something common, not rare. And as an immediate consequence, the age-old function of nature is modified: it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be gained or imitated: an artificial matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits is about to replace her and to determine the very invention of forms. A luxurious object is still of this earth, it still recalls, albeit in a precious mode, its mineral or animal origin, the natural theme of which it is but one actualization.”⁵²

With the Phantom TRK 12 mounted on a circular stage and surrounded by smooth curving metal bars, the object is indeed like an exotic, beautiful and perhaps dangerous animal.

Despite the fabulous display, the press was not greatly impressed by television technology. They complained about the difficulty of seeing a flickering image of a man standing just fifty feet away on the tiny screen. As one reviewer argued, more would have to be:

“necessary to attract and hold the attention of unseen audiences. It is not enough to flash an image of the Present of the US for fifteen minutes...some plan will have to be worked out if television is to survive on a 9x12 screen. The pictures for the home must be blown up.”⁵³

The size of the screen continued to be a problem until after the war, when they grew larger and perhaps, not surprisingly, television grew more popular. However, for the television, RCA had invested, “at the cost of at least \$10,000,000, spent since 1925 on the great push that finally brought it out in the open on April 30, 1939.”⁵⁴ Nonetheless, RCA would have to wait longer in order to fully reap the benefits of the new television audience they helped create. Due to regulations concerning the

⁵² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 66.

⁵³ Orin Dunlap, “Act 1 Reviewed: Televisions’ First Week at World’s Fair Teaches No end of Lessons,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1939, p. x12. Also see Alice Marquis Goldfarb, *Hope and Ashes: The Birth of Modern Times*. New York: Free Press, 1986, p. 191 on the poor reception of opening day.

⁵⁴ Dunlap, p. x12.

standardization of the televisions, and also because of technological advances during the war, neither the TRK12 nor any of the other flip-top lid televisions would be produced again.

Was the TRK12 a failure? Not if it is taken in context with the design idiom of the fair, where everything was streamlined. However, in designing the television to appear as the convergence between the radio and the airplane, I think that Vassos limited his creativity and capacity to visualize something truly unique for the box. He, undeniably made the unit more modernistic by folding the knobs into the body and by using cubist, still, chunky legs, but I think the television that he displayed at America's Home of the Future was much more in keeping with his capacity for using innovative modular solutions to the domestication of technology. I would look at John Vassos's earliest modern radio designs to shed light on the TRK12 design. Not knowing how to visualize the new media, Vassos stuck with an older concept, one that was updated by the addition of streamlined features.⁵⁵ Another way of looking at the design would be through the consumer consciousness rather than the design idiom. For the TRK12, it may have been neither of these since the receiver was priced out of the most people's budgets or perhaps the concept was so new to consumers that they didn't have time to respond to its design.

Streamlining was out of style by the postwar period. At this time, the society's newest technologies, atomic power, and space travel informed the look of consumer

⁵⁵ Indeed, in the early age of television, before content was controlled, Vassos even influenced what was on television. As an article in *Variety* noted, "5,000 at Silvermine for Guid Concert according to the New York Times....Before the concert, Vassos, president of the guild spoke briefly to welcome the group." *Variety*, August 24, 1938, in the Billy Rose Collection, memorabilia files at the NYPL, "Silvermine" file.

products, in a style which Thomas Hines calls “populuxe.”⁵⁶ To be fair to Vassos, it must be revealed that he actually wanted to do away with the box altogether, preferring to design television as a flat screen or part of an integrated unit, as the living room of the future showed. Vassos did continue designing the “console” systems that he had worked on through his concept of modular electronics, expressed most clearly in RCA’s postwar high quality Berkshire line. Indeed, Vassos advocated an integrated electronics suite idea throughout his career. For example, in a letter regarding the formation of an Advance Design Center, he advocated developing “a entertainment multi-nit approach to both our HiFi system inclusive of color TV... a phase inactive since I designed the “Room of Tomorrow” for the “America at Home pavilion” at the World’s Fair.”⁵⁷

Besides the unit concept, he had another idea for a dream TV which would hang on the wall, totally discarding the receiver. As Vassos explained in a letter in 1958: “We must conceive of this new set in a totally different approach from the old-fashioned cumbersome box...”⁵⁸ Undoubtedly, he was right in foreseeing the supremacy of the screen over the box, which increasingly diminished as consumers grew accustomed to having the glassy presence of television in their home. It was no longer necessary to hide it in a box, or transform it into something other than what it was, a telereceiver with magical properties. Years later, the radio became forever

⁵⁶ Thomas Hine, Populuxe: From Tailfins and TV Dinners to Barbie Dolls and Fallout Shelters (New York, MJF, 1986). See also Cynthia Henthorne, “Commercial Fallout: The Image of Progress and the Feminine Consumer from World War II to the Atomic Age.” in The Writing on the Cloud: American Culture Confronts the Atomic Bomb, edited by Alison Scott and Chris Geist. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997).

⁵⁷ Letter to Mr. W.W. Watts, from John Vassos, June 26, 1954, p. 4, Vassos/Syracuse University, Box 3, RCA folder.

⁵⁸ Col. W.W. Watts, VP, RCA, May 30, 1958, Vassos/Syracuse University, “RCA Correspondence,” Box 3.

separated from the television as the hifi system, the integrated unit, became Vassos's primary focus at RCA. He continued to design the "Berkshire" series for the company, an integrated wall unit concept that evoked the modular solutions he had developed in the "Living Room of the Future."⁵⁹ The TRK12 was never to be discussed much again in his papers, as is fitting for a design that was so greatly ignored and so universally misunderstood.

⁵⁹ Marvin Hobbs, "The Berkshire: A Radio-Phonograph Built to Transmitting Equipment Standards," Broadcast News, April 1949, p. 78.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the prewar career of John Vassos in relation to the rise of the profession of industrial design and his unique trajectory through this field.¹ As I have discussed, one of Vassos's strengths was his ability to apply the aesthetic of modernism in design for mass production.² Like other stylists in the vanguard of industrial design, he was part snob and part populist, willing to temper functionalism with ornamentation. He educated others on the principles of modernist art and architecture when modernist ideas were just being introduced in the United States in the late 1920s.

In his designs and in his interiors, Vassos adhered to modernist principles of functionality, modularity, and form following function, although he Americanized them, using the design cliché of streamlining. This "softening" of modernism contributed to a uniquely American vernacular that has, until recently, been overlooked or written off by design historians. Indeed, the RCA style was not limited to the streamline modern. RCA's styles include a full line of merchandise representing the major periods in interior decoration for the majority of people who still insisted on traditional furniture.³ Vassos conceded that the vast majority of Americans wanted radios to fit in with their existing decor. This traditionalist turn in modernist radio appliances did not betray Vassos's preference for modernism; rather, it expressed the full range of design coherence that saturates every artifact in a time.

¹ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, p. 35.

² For more on Bauhaus's disconnection from behavioral, social, and cultural needs, see Dietmar R. Winkler, "Modernist Paradigms Never Die, They Just Fade Away," 17 *Design Issues*, (2000): 54-66.

³ Vassos Report – RCA Radiotrone Co. Camden, AAA, Box 8, "Misc. 1933," p. 2.

Styling was indeed determined consciously: a Georgian cabinet here and a Victorian one there that did not undermine the functioning of the product showed the efforts undertaken towards its integration for a range of customers.

Vassos was aware of the complexity of modern life created by the machine age. An urbanite, immigrant, and artist, he was sensitive to the world around him, with an intuitive sense of perception that shaped his use of lighting and awareness of detail beyond his commitment to modernism.⁴ It is clear that he responded viscerally to mass culture with both shock and horror, as revealed in his books *Phobia* and *Contempo*, and also with admiration and awe, as revealed in his advertising and mural design. His illustrations were not the measured response of the businessman but the emotional reply of the artist. His design philosophy emerged from this ambivalent response to consumer society, and throughout his career, he sought to respond to the discomforts of modern life through design solutions. However, he was no Luddite; rather, he was excited by technical advancements, especially when applied to design. Thus, he offered solutions to the “phobias” caused by mechanistic society, paying close attention to the psychological needs and physical abilities of the user. For example, in his design for the turnstile, he removed sharp edges. Similarly, his entertainment unit, featured at the World’s Fair, used principles of modularity to make the “musicorner” a more simplified, integrated machine for living while introducing the very machines that made it more complex.⁵

⁴ Alan Findeli argues that the idea of design as part intuition and part training shaped Moholy-Nagy’s pedagogical approach at the Bauhaus. Alan Findeli, “The Methodological and Philosophical Foundations of Moholy-Nagy’s Design Pedagogy in Chicago (1937-1946),” *7.1 Design Issues* 7 (1990): 4-19.

⁵ Peter Fuller, *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, (London: Writers and Readers, 1980): 127. Fuller covers two distinct periods in the machine age: the first, in which there was a romantic faith in speed and the roar of machines, from 1890 to 1920; and the second, in which there was a belief in science and technology

Vassos's career uses modernism as a way of bringing machinery into the home, softening the effects of an alienating society through humanistic design solutions and corporate image production that spoke to consumer fears. He recognized that both the home and the office needed to have unique spaces carved out for the new technologies and that these new technologies needed special casements. His responses to consumer culture and the ravages of an alienating society were very different from those of the Frankfurt school, which encouraged distance from mass culture or from the avant-garde that rejected it. Indeed, Vassos embraced mass culture and then furnished its newest structures: the department store, the radio studio, and the mass-produced home. At Vassos's retirement from RCA, in perhaps the ultimate ironic accolade for the critic of alienating machinery, the company presented him with a plaque that called him "the magic brain" behind RCA design for 38 years.⁶

The introduction of modern style in consumer products and in interior design was not a simple process or, as some historians of consumerism would have us think, one great march towards the perpetuation of planned obsolescence. Rather, it was a negotiated response to the needs of consumers on one hand and manufacturers on the other. Surely, the redesign of products and services in the 1930s was meant to stimulate sales, but advances in sales techniques notwithstanding, these new corridors of urban life, from the curving counter of the fast-food restaurant to the skyscraper office, were significantly new locations and justly deserved a style that suited urban life. This suggests that innovative design was not merely a product of corporate ruthlessness but also a project that engaged creative people like Vassos. Their role

and rational planning, of the 1920 to 1960 period. Vassos belonged to the latter. It informed his design practice, alongside a healthy skepticism about technological society.

⁶ Tearsheet from awards ceremony honoring Vassos, Vassos/AAA, Box 1.

was to harness their awareness of the market and their observations about human desires alongside more qualitative measures of market analysis, such as interviews, polls, and observation.

It is significant that these developments were spawned in boogie-woogie Manhattan, where novelty was embraced and encouraged. The development of entirely new product forms reveals the changing infrastructures of society, like the Coke dispenser serving beverages at the newly renovated counters, the TRK12, or even the turnstile. The turnstile responded to the new needs of urban transportation management to allow the rapid passage of people into the subway with the oiled loop of a rotating metal arm cased in a streamlined form. New needs were not the only stimuli of design improvement, however. Social values about urban design also shaped the public acceptance of streamlined design. Did it really matter that Vassos's turnstile was cased in an elegant box? For the Perey company, style was indeed linked to their success, at least in the 1930s, when the winning contractor often had the best styled product, reflecting a philosophy of urban design and public space as the transportation infrastructure expanded. Similarly, the restaurants that Vassos designed reflected new ideas about restaurant design, urban life, and hygiene.

There were some design issues that Vassos grappled with throughout his career, including the problem of the living room, a place he concentrated on at the World's Fair and for years following with his designs for "HiFi" stereo equipment. Even into the 1960s, Vassos complained that technology had still not found a proper place in the home:

Nobody has told the public where the television should be placed in the living room or where HiFi and other concepts are affecting acoustically and all the

other pertinent details which deal with comfort and scientific arrangement. The living room is truly the center of entertainment and happiness and not a decorator's notion of some gimmick sugared with the aura of "gracious living" pushing further and further back the electronic ... contributions of our era.⁷

Vassos did retain his regard for the living room as the centerpiece of the electronic home, which he had prophesized in the 1930s.⁸ I am not sure that he was satisfied with the solution, although his designs for Berkshire radio cabinets and HiFi equipment did make headway in that direction. Vassos shifted his perspective on other aspects of design into the post-war era. His enthusiasm for certain materials like Bakelite or tubular steel had waned, for instance, when he realized the limitations in application of these materials and also the decline of their popularity.⁹

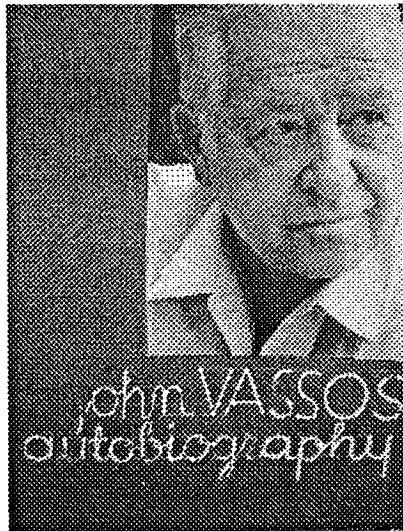


Figure 83: Dummy copy of layout cover for never published autobiography, AAA, Box 12.

⁷ Letter to John L. Burns, President, RCA, February 6, 1960, Vassos/Syracuse University, Box 3, "Correspondence," p. 2.

⁸ Brochure, "Why Not All Electric Living Units?" from Electrical Manufacturing, October 1940, AAA, Box 2, "RCA Misc."

⁹ For more on the history of materials used by industrial designers, including ones that failed, in the 1930s, see Dennis Doordan, "On Materials," 19 Design Issues, (2003): 3-8.

One aspect of Vassos's career that remained unchanging was his desire to be immortalized. This pursuit of fame, perhaps a trait left over from his early days as a modernist publisher, was certainly a trait of industrial designers who were heavily skilled in display and sales techniques, which they naturally applied to themselves.¹⁰ Indeed, Vassos always referred to himself as the celebrated modernist designer, even after that period was firmly over. In the outline for his never published but thoughtfully written and planned autobiography (figure 82), Vassos continues to promote himself heavily, despite the fact that he was at the end of his career. The pitch letter to the publisher below reveals the value in his career as he looked back years later, particularly his prestige, brushes with fame, and national importance. Industrial designers, in a profession that became a myth before it reached maturity, often made themselves out to be heroes of society, perhaps out of insecurity at having had to create their profession from scratch. Vassos certainly sounds boastful in the heavy-handed introduction to his autobiography:

A famous industrial designer and author-illustrator presents his life story in the most intimate, warm, and courageous style, in a book filled with adventure, action, and bold observation of our rapidly changing society and the complete upheaval of values and standards ... in the area of science, ... in the arts, in industry, in the military ... We are dealing here with a creative man who outside of his profession as a designer and artist was able to develop, raise the money, and build the largest independent Art Center in the United States.¹¹

The book was never published, although Vassos did write about 60 pages of the autobiography, which he tentatively titled badly, "From Bosphorus to Plymouth

¹⁰ Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p. 44.

¹¹ Vassos, unpublished autobiography, AAA, Box 12.

Rock.” The inflated writing in the autobiography suggests that even at the end of his career, Vassos was missing the acclaim that he sought. As the importance of industrial designers declined in the 1960s and 1970s, he must have felt a sense of loss.¹² Perhaps as an insecure immigrant outsider, he was never able to establish himself as a heroic, independent figure outside of a large institution. His career never achieved levels of fame comparable to those of other designers. Having decided to stay at RCA, a large institution, Vassos chose to remain outside of the mainstream designer path, moving more towards smaller projects and also investing more energy into the American Design Institute. His deep ties with the profession were expressed here, as he was elected the first president of the American Design Institute in 1938 and continued his involvement in the organization until his death.¹³ This role and his involvement in civic affairs brought him enormous satisfaction and professional security.

In some ways, like modernist architect William Lescaze, Vassos’s style was associated with the past, an image Vassos tried to shed up until his retirement when he was actively involved in designing the newest technologies like the home computer.¹⁴ In Vassos’s activity with RCA’s graphic design department, however, his ideas about graphic design were rooted in the 1930s.¹⁵ In particular, Vassos’s ideas for RCA’s new logo, as the company searched for a new image in the 1960s, revealed

¹² Vassos worked out problems through his designs, however, rather than in his writing, as is often the case for artists, so there is more work to be done on his drawings housed at the Smithsonian and at the Syracuse Library in the oversize design files, materials I did not interpret in great length.

¹³ Pulos, *American Design Adventure*, p. 197. The organization was established when the American Furniture Mart expanded to include specialization among members in many design areas.

¹⁴ See Dennis Doordan, “William Lescaze and CBS: A Case Study in Corporate Modernism” on the decline of Lescaze’s career due to his outmoded style.

¹⁵ However, Vassos did in fact work on the design of RCA’s first solid state computer, the 501, for which he proposed a “system of development” that was eclipsed by the success of the IBM Spectra. See “Industrial design at RCA -- A Report Covering 1932 – 1970,” AAA, Box 2, pp. 7-10.

ultimately that he was not in keeping with the times. By 1965, Robert Sarnoff became President of RCA, and he was looking to change the meatball design -- the circle logo with the lightning bolt -- to something more contemporary. Vassos came up with the idea to keep the circle with the letters inside but to make the letters more clear. This idea was more modernistic, with its continued interest in the circle, a graphic expression of modernity, progress, and totality.¹⁶ His update kept the "lightning device ... as a little 'star' or symbol of electronic experience (it could also be expressed in color)."¹⁷ His other idea was for an electronic symbol called Magic-Tron, which extended the magic brain theme. The Magic-Tron was a gold-winged creature, like a trophy or a statue of a Greek god. It was a typical Vassos graphic design: visual and textual, emotional and graphic. This symbol, he argued, "personifies the spirit of progress in electronics as an identifying symbol along with the traditional RCA trademark."¹⁸

Sadly for Vassos, the company rejected both ideas. Instead, they chose a logo designed by graphic design firm Lippencott and Margulies. This new logo, with a computerized font featuring three hard-looking sans serif letters standing like a fortress on a blank page, looked a lot like IBM's impersonal lettering. It revealed the new electronic spirit of the company as it moved into the computer era, in the newest idiom of futurism. Vassos didn't realize that the company no longer required the

¹⁶ Memo to Chairman, Corporate Identification Committee, "A Proposal For Modernizing the RCA Trade Mark," February 25, 1967, Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, "Designs-trademark," pp. 1-3. Also, see Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, Design Writing Research, p. 194; Walter Dorwin Teague, Design this Day (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1940), p. 172. On corporate logos, see Dennis Doordan, "Design at CBS," 6 Design Issues, (1990): 4-17.

¹⁷ From Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, "Designs-Trademark," RCA, p. 2.

¹⁸ From Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, "Designs-Trademark," RCA, p. 3.

unified circle to show its strength, which it had well established. Rather, the new logo, autonomous and cold, signified the company's distance from the past.

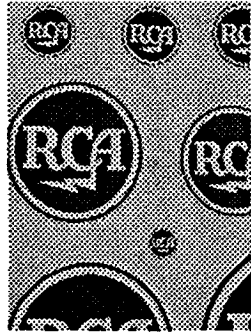


Figure 84: "New" logo designs proposed by Vassos and rejected by the company in favor of the more familiar computerized image. From Vassos/Syracuse, Box 3, "Correspondence," RCA.

As I have shown, Vassos's career was not a transcendently successful one: it was a constant interaction of individual practice and constraining and enabling factors. I showed how Vassos' individuality was both produced in various constructs as a value and restrained in others as a possible limitation. In all of his relationships with publishers and manufacturers, he had to negotiate, treading the border between individualistic artist and corporate man and shifting identities quickly over the intensely short period of time this thesis covers. With the end of my thesis at the World's Fair, we leave Vassos at his "corporate man" phase, where he is ensconced in the RCA Corporation, on hold for wartime production, and right before he is about to join the military. I decided to stop here, short of the "decisive decade," right before the time when industrial designers reached prominence as society's visionaries.¹⁹ I could have continued to discuss Vassos's contributions in the Industrial Design Society of America, in continued television transmitter design at RCA, in his graphic

¹⁹ This is Russell Flinchum's term; see "The 1940s: The Decisive Decade," *Man in the Brown Suit*, pp. 77-108.

art for the military, and in the pavilions at more World's Fairs. I stop when the profession allows me; when industrial design had found its place in consumer society, reaching a new height of acceptance and fame; and when Vassos's identity as an artist-designer was firmly in place.²⁰

Throughout my thesis, I have called Vassos an industrial designer, a term which Vassos hated. "As for us, we are belabored with a lousy name. Industrial design doesn't belong to us. It's a misnomer. Somebody said these people design for industry, so what are they -- industrial designers. We ought to change that name ..."²¹ If he were to have changed that name, he would probably have called the person an artist-designer. This person Vassos described as "a polytechnic We are interested in people and in people's massive enjoyment, that's why we call it mass production. We love human beings and we love all of them to enjoy these things. Not the few and the rich."²² This side of Vassos revealed a man who was committed to a democracy of goods, fascinated with mass production yet also frustrated with mass society.

John Vassos's early career offers a way of viewing the emergence of a new aesthetic sensibility and a way of thinking about style that transcended sales figures. Through his career, I got the opportunity to understand the emergence of the industrial design profession. His career allowed me to analyze multiple formats, books, interior designs, and appliances in an era when these products were just being developed. I'm glad I met him all those years ago at the Cooper-Hewitt when the image from his book *Phobia* was being considered for the show on industrial design

²⁰ Henry Dreyfuss appeared on the cover of *Forbes* magazine, May 1, 1951; Raymond Loewy was on the cover of *Time* magazine on October 31, 1949.

²¹ Speech, Syracuse University, p. 1.

²² Syracuse University Speech, p. 2.

and, in a way symptomatic of his unheralded career, was eventually left out of the exhibition. Hopefully, my study has contributed to the memory of this uniquely important designer and to the ongoing chronicle of modernism's contribution to American mass culture.

Appendix:

John Vassos (1898-1985) was born on October 23, 1898, to Apostolos and Iphigenia Vassocopoulos (deceased 1919 from pneumonia).²³ His birthplace was Louline, Romania,²⁴ although he spent his early childhood in Constantinople, where his father was the publisher of one of the city's most influential newspapers.²⁵ He attended private elementary school in Constantinople and following that a Gymnasium School (college preparatory) until 1913, after which he attended Robert College in Constantinople. He also attended the Art Students League, the Fenway Art School, and the American School of Design.²⁶ He arrived in Boston in 1919 and moved to New York in 1921, where he was a member of the Art Students League (1921-1922).²⁷ He married Ruth Carriere (1893-1965) a fashion writer and employee of Saks Fifth Avenue, who was originally from Albany, New York, in March 1923. He was naturalized in 1924.²⁸ According to his passport, he had gray eyes and black hair, standing at 5 feet 4 ½.²⁹ He and Ruth lived at 116 East 36th Street, according to their lease, from April 1, 1926.³⁰ They later moved to 38th Street between Lexington and Park then to a Penthouse on Riverside Drive, which Vassos designed in 1930.³¹ They resided in New York City until 1933, when he and Ruth moved to Norwalk, Connecticut, where they lived until their deaths.

He noted that his religion was Greek Orthodox.³² His major awards prior to 1942 included: Certificate of Award – Bronze Medal, All American Package Competition (for Remington Dupont) in 1936; Major Award, Modern Plastics Competition (RCA Victor) 1939; Gold Seal Award, New York World's Fair, Television Set (RCA Victor) 1940; Gold Seal Award, New York World's Fair, Cutlery (Remington Dupont) 1940; Gold Seal Award, New York World's Fair, Plastic Radio (RCA Victor) 1940. He was twice selected by *Electrical Manufacturing* as producing the Design of the Month -- television transmitter and television receiver (RCA Victor).³³ Vassos entered the armed forces as staff camoufleur, Engineer Section, 3rd Air Force, where he became a Captain of the Headquarters. Vassos died on December 6, 1985, leaving his estate to Paul Johnes, his nephew.³⁴

²³ This information comes from a form filled out for "Who's Who," from Vassos/AAA, Box 23.

²⁴ Passport from 1924, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

²⁵ Speech honoring Vassos at Rismont restaurant, p. 11.

²⁶ Typewritten bio, not denoted for "Who's Who," Vassos/AAA, Box 23, probably in 1942. (notes that he was at present a Captain of the Headquarters, 3rd Air force).

²⁷ Ibid. This form also states that his brother, Alex Vassos, and sister Ivi also resided in New York.

²⁸ "Who's Who," Vassos/AAA, Box 23.

²⁹ For his 1950 passport, he put his height at 5 feet 5 ½ inches, with grey hair and grey eyes, Vassos/AAA, Box 5.

³⁰ Vassos/AAA, Box 12, autobiographical, "Contracts."

³¹ Vassos, unpublished autobiography, Vassos/AAA, Box 12, p. 31.

³² Typewritten bio, Vassos/AAA, Box 23.

³³ Letter from John Vassos, March 29, 1941, Vassos/AAA, Box 8, p. 5.

³⁴ Obituary, "John Vassos," New York Times, February 21, 1965, p. 77.

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Note: This bibliography excludes materials which come specifically from archival sources, including articles that appeared in Broadcast News, Radio News or in newspapers or journal which were exclusively located in the archival sources and are noted as such in the footnotes. Broadcast News and Radio News articles come from the David Sarnoff Library, which holds a complete set of these sources. Similarly, materials from clippings files, such as the numerous reviews of Vassos's books, are included only in the footnotes and subsumed here under the listing of the archive itself. RCA Review is located in the McGill University Schulich Science & Engineering Library and included in the list. Architectural periodicals were found at the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University. A collection of speeches by David Sarnoff are held on microfiche at the Butler Library, also at Columbia University.

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