Lively Selections at the Modern

By SUZANNE SLESIN

THE iridescent liqueur glasses (circa 1913) by Josef Hoffmann are empty; the multijointed architect's lamp (1927) by Edouard Wilfred Buquet is not turned on; the slim Bang & Olufsen microphone (1969) by Jakob Jensen is quiet; the quilted, slipcovered Ribbon chair (1975) by Niels S. Bendtsen is pristinely unoccupied.

What a relief! These are objects that, in this context at least, can only be looked at. They can't be touched, they don't have to perform; they need only *be*.

"Our interest is a visual one and primarily one of esthetics," said J. Stewart Johnson, curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art, where these and 36 other designs are being shown in the exhibition "Recent Acquisitions: Architecture and Design."

Included in the show, which ends Sept. 30, are design objects ranging from Louis Comfort Tiffany's own hanging lamp (circa 1905) with its ribbed glass shade, to "Cityscape #2" (1976), a shimmering wall hanging woven from strips of microfilm, paper, lurex, mylar and threads by Arturo Sandoval, and a monogrammed parasol handle (1909) designed by Hector Guimard for his wife.

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The objects, spanning nearly 100 years, were selected from the more than 250 objects accepted for inclusion in the museum's design collection during the last three years.

About a quarter of the pieces shown — industrial design objects, crafts, posters and architectural drawings — are contemporary. The rest are what Mr. Johnson terms "historical," an indication of the collection's more recent emphasis. "We're filling in gaps, and spotting the areas where things have been missing," he said.

In the case of contemporary objects, photographs of a particular object are submitted to the museum. "If the photograph looks good, we ask to see the actual piece," Mr. Johnson said, "if the object seems to hold up — we accept it." The museum looks for objects that are "well designed in every way," he said.

"If it's an object to be held in the hand, the heft must be right," Mr. Johnson said. "The graphics must be well-done. The quality of the materials used is important. And if it seems to be pointing in a new direction, that's more interesting than if it has been done before. But we're not Consumer Reports. We're not a testing service."

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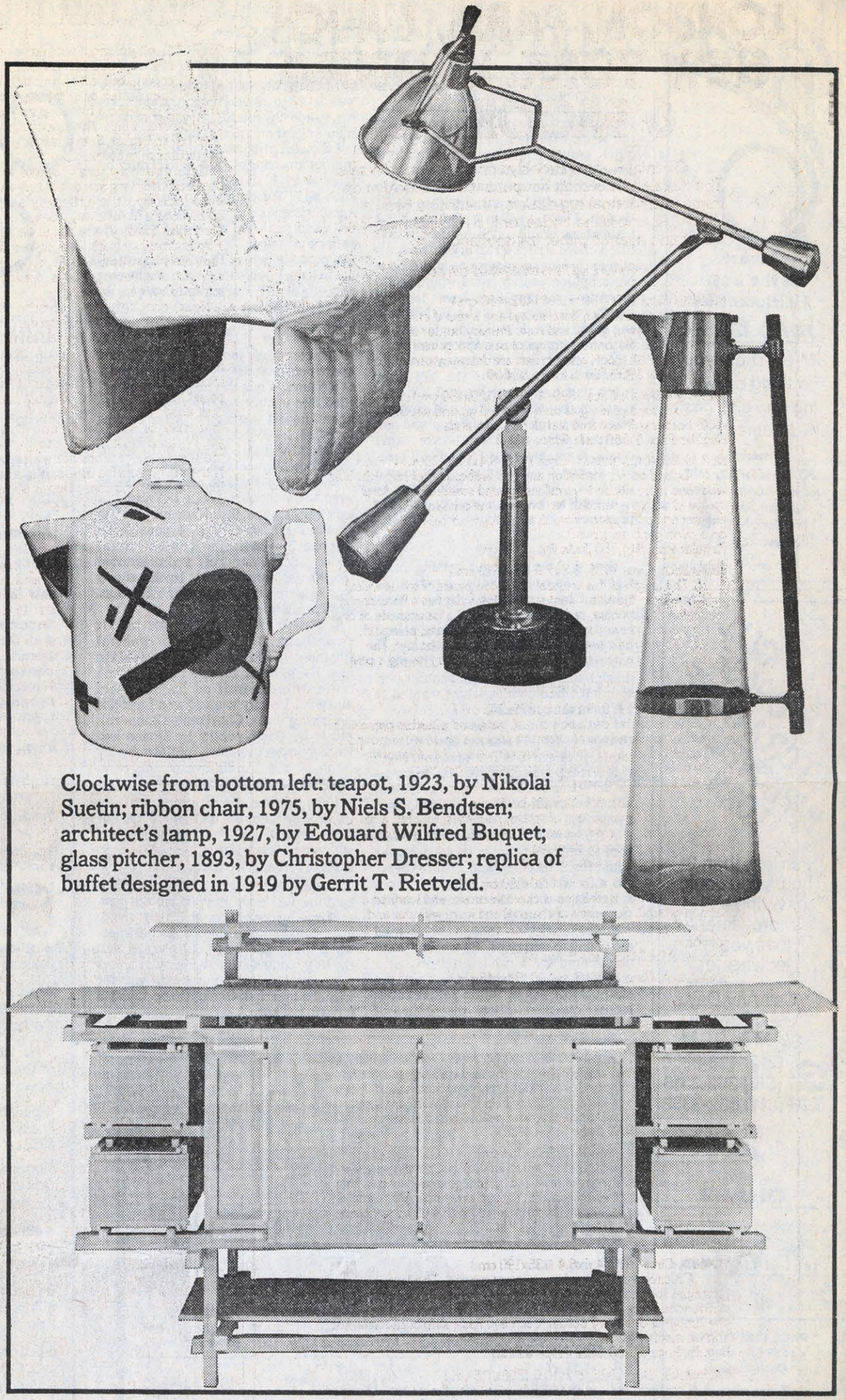
The Design Collection, which was started in 1933, now consists of about 3,000 objects. In the beginning, only a few mechanical appliances, and no television sets, refrigerators or telephones, were included. Today, there is at least one television, a couple of telephones, a hair dryer and a calculator. Manufacturers covet inclusion in the design collection, but the museum discourages the commercial exploitation of the distinction.

The current show exemplifies Mr. Johnson's sprightly and surprising, if temperate, choices. "One of my favorites," he said, pointing out a silver and wooden ladle (circa 1880) by Christopher Dresser, the English designer who traveled to the Orient in the late 19th century and whose subsequent work was influenced by Japanese rural crafts. Looking over another Dresser piece, he said: "The only recognizably 19th century detail is in the bottom of the pitcher, and even then, it's pretty discreet. The rest is so pure."

"Very elegant, very thin, and yet completely comtemporary" was how Mr. Johnson described a white ceramic vase (1975) by Mary Rogers, which reflects the museum's increased interest in porcelain design and in the hand-crafted object. A laminated glass vase (1978) by Thomas J. Patti is the newest object in the show.



Clockwise from bottom left: teapot, 1923, by Nikolai Suetin; ribbon chair, 1975, by Niels S. Bendtsen; architect's lamp, 1927, by Edouard Wilfred Buquet; glass pitcher, 1893, by Christopher Dresser; replica of buffet designed in 1919 by Gerrit T. Rietveld.

It is in the rediscovery and celebration of early 20th century furniture that the exhibition excels. The extraordinary black lacquer screen composed of pivoting plaques (1922) by Eileen Gray, the Irish designer, has never been shown before. An armchair (1899) by Richard Riemershmid, discovered last spring in Amsterdam by Mr. Johnson, is shown with Edward J. Wormley's design, the latter having been copied in 1946 from a photograph of the former.

The labels that accompany the objects in the show are well written, lively and informative. One only wishes the museum could find a way to reproduce them so that they could be taken home for study.

The museum is investigating the sale of replicas of industrial pieces that are no longer available. A Gebruder Thonet bentwood stool (1904), stained beech with aluminum fittings by Otto Wagner, the Viennese designer, is being considered for reproduction. The show's replica of Miss Gray's adjustable chromed tubular steel table (circa 1927) can be ordered through the museum's shop for $320.

The steamed beechwood buffet in the show is a replica of the piece that Gerrit T. Rietveld designed in 1919. Cassina, the Italian manufacturer, is reproducing it following the Rietveld drawings in the Stedelyk Museum in Amsterdam. "Each piece will be custommade and sent directly to the purchaser," Mr. Johnson said. The buffets will cost about $6,000 each.