



# THE GEORGE R. KRAVIS II COLLECTION

*Oklahoma State University Museum of Art*





Fig 1

*“Sharing my collection with others has always been a pleasure; more recently it has become my mission.”*

— George R. Kravis II, 2016

A gift of art in 2018 cemented the permanent collection focus of the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art on the modern and contemporary periods and expanded its holdings to include design. Numbering approximately 700 objects, this gift came through the generosity of the late Tulsa art collector George R. Kravis II, whose design collection was nationally renowned (Fig. 1).

Assembled over more than four decades, the Kravis Collection includes paintings, sculptures, and works on paper by iconic artists as well as milestone examples from the history of design. He started collecting in the late 1960s, initially for his home. Kravis educated himself about art through reading and firsthand study. During repeated trips and three years living in

New York, he visited museums and galleries, attended exhibition openings, and met artists. He reconnected with a college friend, Max Weitzenhoffer, from the University of Oklahoma. Founder and president of New York’s Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer gallery, Weitzenhoffer invited Kravis to the gallery where he acquired a number of artworks.

The Kravis Collection reflects his interest in both figurative and abstract art from the contemporary period. His is a personal collection, grounded in knowledge, but ultimately guided by his taste. Kravis gravitated toward figurative work inspired by popular culture. The collection is notably strong in Pop Art and Superrealism, with works by Roy Lichtenstein (Fig. 2), Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Robert Cottingham. These additions complement the Museum’s holdings of Robert Rauschenberg,



Fig 2

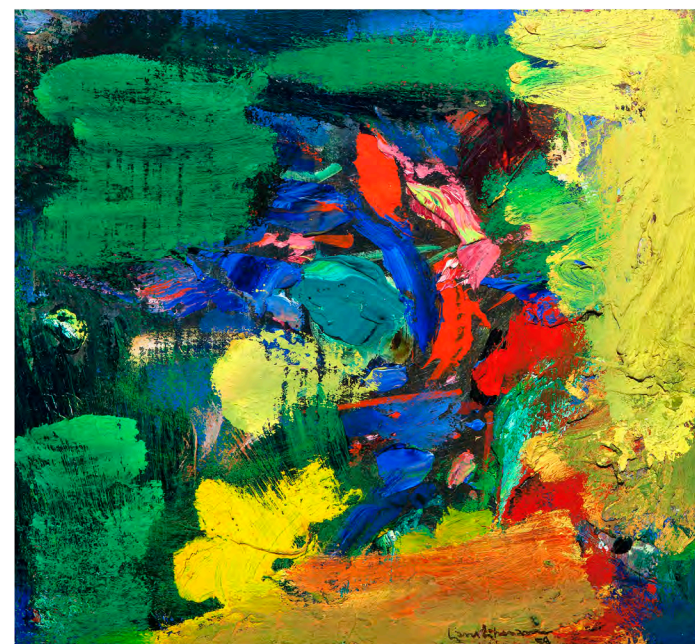


Fig 3

Jasper Johns, and Jim Dine prints. Abstraction held equal appeal, as seen in examples by British artists Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Albert Irvin, and Alan Davies and Americans Sam Francis, Hans Hofmann (Fig. 3), and Paul Jenkins. They also make a significant contribution to the Museum’s representation of contemporary art from the second half of the twentieth century. While the pace of his fine art collecting slowed, Kravis continued to make selective acquisitions such as works on paper by Suzanne Caporaël and Elyn Zimmerman, a kinetic sculpture by Tim Prentice, and a Brian Bress high-definition video (Fig. 13). Kravis also supported artists with Oklahoma ties, notably Otto Duecker (Fig. 4) and Joseph Glasco.

Kravis’s radio career, first as one of the earliest broadcasters on a stand-alone FM station



Fig 4

and then as owner of two Tulsa radio stations, presented another opportunity to acquire. His desire to have art in his radio station offices led him to posters. As he began working in radio in 1962, posters were becoming the rage. They ranged from psychedelic designs for rock concerts and counterculture protest graphics to parodies and quotations of historic



styles like comic book art and Art Deco. Kravis embraced posters as an affordable alternative to fine art originals but opted for another vein of the poster craze—those featuring images of renowned artworks. He hung posters by artists whose originals he would later acquire like Roy Lichtenstein, some of which have become collectibles (Fig. 5).

Kravis's keen interest in design dated back to his childhood and re-emerged in the 1960s as he began to acquire modern consumer products such as radios and electronic equipment. Like his fine art collection, his early design acquisitions were guided by his personal taste. In 2006, after seeing an exhibition of modern design from 1925 to 1940, Kravis became more strategic and focused on this interwar period. Wanting to "make sense of what he had," he scheduled an appointment with decorative arts curator David Hanks. What started as a brief meeting continued for several hours and led to Hanks advising Kravis in acquiring "the best of industrial design."

The Museum's design gift of approximately 200 objects represents a founding collection of design that retains the overall character of Kravis's, which numbered around 4,000. The holdings are anchored in furniture and extend from the early 1900s into the current century. Focal areas include modernist design of the 1930s and mid-century, radios, pop design, and architect designs along with tools and machinery.

Kravis's Collection was weighted heavily in the early era of modernist design, which was inspired by aerodynamic forms. The United States' industrial design profession developed in



Fig 5

the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression. Manufacturers honed in on appearance as a means of product differentiation to increase sales. The profession drew practitioners from the fields of theatre design, architecture, and advertising, and their creations range from transportation and communication to furnishings and decorative accessories. The designer as celebrity and the modernist Streamline Style subsequently evolved.



Fig 6

Kravis's childhood home instilled an awareness of modern design from the 1930s into the 1950s. The family's dinnerware—American Modern by Russel Wright, a major designer emerging in the 1930s, seems to have made a deep impression (Fig. 6). Kravis subsequently collected Wright's ceramics and aluminum ware in great depth. The Museum's holdings feature Wright's svelte American Modern pitcher forms and serving pieces in the revolutionizing spun aluminum. Reflecting his personal connection, radios from the 1930s and 1940s, in rainbow colors and new materials like Bakelite and Catalin, is another significant area of his collection represented in the Museum's holdings. Other notable examples include cocktail shakers, glasses, and soda siphons that serviced the new cocktail trend of entertaining after Prohibition ended. While he sought works by headliners like Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Dreyfuss, and Norman Bel Geddes, Kravis was also drawn to objects created by lesser known or unidentified designers. He liked the challenge of selecting objects by these designers, relying on his eye and knowledge of the period to guide his choices. Among examples the Museum acquired are Hannah Porter's aluminum ice tea set, a pair of black-and-white ceramic pitchers produced



Fig 7

by Cowan, and a spiral-dasher washing machine agitator from Apex Electrical Manufacturing Company (Fig. 7).

Design once again became an important area of commerce following World War II for both the victors and the defeated. The United States saw the infusion of European varieties of modernism: the offspring of German architects Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, who had immigrated to this country before the war, French architect-designer Le Corbusier, and Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen.





Fig 15



Fig 16

Under the umbrella of the International Style or Mid-Century Modernism, these styles reigned as poster children of the “Good Design” initiative for both residential and commercial buildings but was especially identified with American corporate culture. This vein of modernism favored pared-down forms, alternately geometric or organic, manufactured materials like glass and stainless steel, and a palette limited to neutrals and primary colors.

Furniture by Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, George Nelson & Associates, and Florence Knoll represent this period in the Museum’s collection. Described by one author as exemplifying “the pragmatic engineering aesthetic” for their exposed mechanical parts, the Eameses innovative chairs relied on their new methods of molding plywood and use of the recently developed fiberglass. After collaborating with the Eameses, Saarinen went on to create his own distinctive sculptural furniture in wood, and plastic like the Museum’s Grasshopper Chair (Fig. 15). Other examples from this period in the collection favored the geometric vocabulary of Mid-Century Modernism as seen in the minimalist bench forms of Knoll and Nelson & Associates. A folding chair by the Danish Hans Wegner, lamp by Dutch designer Louis Kalff (Fig. 16), and combination radio/record player by the German team of Dieter Rams/Hans Gugelot enrich the Museum’s international story of Mid-Century Modernism.

Kravis’s design collection echoed his fondness for popular culture witnessed in his fine art holdings in Pop Art and the Postmodern movement that followed. Both developments grew out of a rejection of Modernism—its anti-historical



Fig 17

stance, minimalist aesthetic, and rationalist foundation. Assuming an oppositional stance, their designers found inspiration in popular culture and the history of art, which translated into figurative forms, color, ornament, and a sense of play and/or irony. As seen in the Kravis gift, Marilyn Monroe’s lips are turned into a bright red sofa (Fig. 17), a tribute to the popular film idol as well as to Salvador Dalí’s earlier sofas memorializing the lips of movie star Mae West. The Easy Edges line of furniture by renowned Postmodernist Frank Gehry offered an affordable avenue for architect-designed seating. The series upended the use of high-end materials in favor of corrugated cardboard and Masonite. A signature example in the Kravis Collection is the playful Wiggle Chair with its ribbon-candy form (Fig. 18).

The Memphis Group’s riotous colors, forms, and patterns of furnishings embody the radical



Fig 18



Fig 19

spirit of Postmodernism. One critic reviewing their debut showing in 1981 described Memphis designs as “a shotgun wedding between the Bauhaus and Fisher-Price.” Kravis embraced this in-your-face design and acquired a number of examples. The Kravis holdings include the brilliant red Adesso Pero Bookcase by the Memphis leader Ettore Sottsass, who nested inverted pyramids to form the three-column structure. Tilted vertical supports give Javier Mariscal’s wheeled Hilton Serving Cart the comical appearance of a runaway vehicle speeding through a strong headwind (Fig. 19).

The Tulsa collector also had a deep affection for architecture, which is reflected in his selection of homes, support of the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, and his design collection. Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, architects have turned to alternative expressions to showcase their aesthetics, furniture being one of the most common. The Kravis gift to the Museum includes examples by Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, Bruce Goff,

and Philippe Starck as well as the previously mentioned Frank Gehry, Eero Saarinen, and Ettore Sottsass. Peter Behrens’ Electric Kettle, Zaha Hadid’s Crevasse Flower Vases, and Sottsass’s Valentine Portable Typewriter (Fig. 20) represent architects in the collection who worked in other areas of product design.

Tools and machines, another of Kravis’s collecting interests, had fascinated him long before he consciously considered them in the context of design. Kravis reminisced that as a child “I liked anything that had a motor, a plug, a cord, a battery—that moved and made noise.” Among the Museum’s holdings, plum bobs, a headlamp light meter (Fig. 21), pipe cutter, and welder’s mask attest to Kravis’s discerning eye for their beauty. As he explained, at times he was more strategic in his acquisitions, “trying to fill a hole.” In other instances he let his eye take over: “Sometimes, I just see something and it jumps



Fig 20



Fig 21

out at me. It speaks to me. I know it’s the right thing.” Kravis’s intuition and visual experience would seem to be at work in these selections, where so often designers are unidentified.

While Kravis experienced great pleasure in looking at and acquiring works, collecting was never an end in itself but served a larger purpose. Of design, Kravis said, “We can actually improve our prospects for the future with our understanding and recognition of the importance of design.” With that vision in mind, he established the Kravis Design Center in his hometown for education and research in 2014, a culmination of his many years of supporting Tulsa arts.

Looking to the future, Kravis made generous donations from his design collection to museums around the country. Not the least of these is his gift to the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Now and in the years to come, the George R. Kravis II Collection will be recognized as a turning point in the Museum’s history—an enduring legacy that guarantees the Museum’s ability to educate and offers visitors opportunities to learn.

- Arlette Klaric, Ph.D.  
Associate Chief Curator | Curator of Collections

Cover: Designer Unidentified, Motorola Aero-Vane Radio, Model 51x15, ca. 1941, Catalin, electronic components, paperboard, and fabric, 6 1/2 x 9 3/4 x 6 1/2 inches, made by Motorola, Chicago, Illinois, 2018.016.102.

Fig. 1: George R. Kravis II, *Beyond Oklahoma: Selections from the George R. Kravis Collection*, Oklahoma State University Museum of Art, March 3, 2017. Photograph by Richard Phillips.

Fig. 2: Roy Lichtenstein (American, 1923-1997), *The Melody Haunts My Reverie*, 1965, screen print, A.P. 27 1/4 x 22 7/8 inches, 2018.012.130. Photo by Shane Culpepper, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Fig. 3: Hans Hofmann (American, b. Germany, 1880-1966), *Intimacy*, 1959, oil on plywood, 11 7/8 x 12 3/4 inches, 2018.012.016. Photo by Shane Culpepper, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Fig. 4: Otto Duecker (American, b. 1948), *George’s Trench Coat*, 1986, oil on panel, 56 1/4 x 18 1/4 inches, 2018.012.021. Photo by Shane Culpepper, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Fig. 5: Roy Lichtenstein (American, 1923-1997), *I Love Liberty*, 1982, offset lithograph, 39 1/8 x 23 1/2 inches, 2018.012.356.

Fig. 6: Russel Wright (American, 1904-1976), American Modern Dinnerware: Carafe, Creamer, Covered Pitcher, Water Pitcher, and Carafe, 1939-1959, glazed earthenware, various dimensions, made by Steubenville Pottery, Steubenville, Ohio, 2018.016.037, .038.2, .115, .035, .036.

Fig. 7: James B. Kirby (American, 1884-1971), Spiral-Dasher Washing Machine Agitator, ca. 1937, cast aluminum, 12 x 10 3/8 x 9 1/4 inches, Made by Apex Electrical Manufacturing Company, Cleveland, Ohio, 2018.016.173. Photo by Edward C. Robison III.

Fig. 8: Paul Jenkins (American, 1923-2012), *Phenomena Kendo Cut Plan*, 1973, watercolor on paper, 30 1/8 x 22 3/8 inches, 2018.012.026.

Fig. 9: Robert Indiana (American, 1928-2018), *Love, Red/Blue*, 1991, etching on paper, 26 x 26 inches, 2018.012.117.

Fig. 10: Robert Cottingham (American, b. 1935), *An American Alphabet: H*, 2009, lithograph on paper, ed. 1/40, 24 x 15 7/8 inches, 2018.012.26. Courtesy Tandem Press, Madison, Wisconsin.

Fig. 11: Sam Francis (American, 1923-1994), *Tokyo*, 1964, acrylic on paper, 16 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches, 2018.012.030.

Fig. 12: Suzanne Caporael (American, 1949), *Moose Point, Alaska, No. 2*, 2001, photochemical monoprint and gouache on paper, 32 1/2 x 28 inches, 2018.012.141. Shane Culpepper, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Fig. 13: Brian Bress (American, b. 1975), *Whitewalker I*, 2012, high-definition, single-channel color video; high-definition monitor and player; 9-minute, 18-second loop, 60 x 35 x 4 inches. 2018.012.483. © Brian Bress, #brianbress. Photo courtesy Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

Fig. 14: Albert Irvin (British, 1922-2015), *Longston II*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 122 inches, 2018.012.002. Photo by Shane Culpepper, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Fig. 15: Eero Saarinen (American, b. Finland, 1910-1961), Grasshopper Lounge Chair, 1946, laminated birch and upholstery, 26 3/4 x 33 x 34 1/4 inches, made by Knoll Associates, Inc., East Greenville, Pennsylvania, 2018.016.088.

Fig. 16: Louis Christiaan Kalfff (Dutch, 1897-1976), Grey Table Lamp, Model NB100, ca. 1957, 14 1/8 x 12 inches, Made by Philips, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2018.016.052.

Fig. 17: Franco Audrito for Studio 65, Bocca Sofa, 1971, stretch jersey fabric over polyurethane foam, 36 x 83 x 32 inches, made by Gufram, Barolo, Italy, 2018.016.135. Courtesy of Wright.

Fig. 18: Frank O. Gehry (American, b. Canada, 1929), Wiggle Side Chair from Easy Edges series, 1972, corrugated cardboard, fiberboard, and round timber, 33 1/2 x 24 x 16 3/4 inches, made by Easy Edges, New York City, 2018.016.158. Photo by Ardfern, GNU, The Art Minute <http://www.the-art-minute.com/pure-freedom/>, accessed February 3, 2017, courtesy of Wright.

Fig. 19: Javier Mariscal (Spanish, b. 1950) and Pepe Cortés (Spanish, b. 1946), for Memphis, Hilton Serving Cart, 1981, enameled metal, glass, and rubber, 31 1/2 x 56 1/4 x 17 3/4 inches, made by Memphis-Milano, Italy, 2018.016.125.

Fig. 20: Ettore Sottsass (Italian, 1917-2007), Perry A. King (British, b. 1938), Valentine Portable Typewriter, 1969, ABS plastic, enameled metal, and other materials, case: 13 13/16 x 13 1/2 x 4 9/16 inches, typewriter: 4 5/8 x 13 1/2 x 13 7/8 inches, made by Ing. C. Olivetti & C. S.p.A., Ivrea, Italy, 2018.016.119.

Fig. 21: Robert Newton Falge (American, 1892-1981), Guide Output Meter, ca. 1935, steel, enamel, Bakelite, glass, and chrome, 12 5/8 x 13 x 9 3/8 inches, 2018.016.097, made by Guide Lamp Corporation, Division of General Motors, Anderson, Indiana. Photo by Shane Culpepper, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

All photos taken by Phil Shockley unless otherwise indicated.





Fig 8



Fig 9

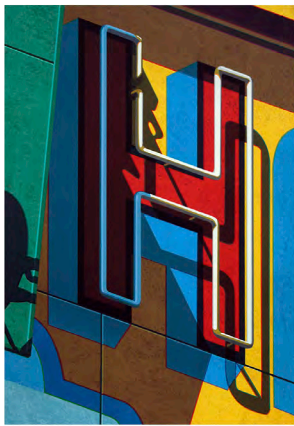


Fig 10

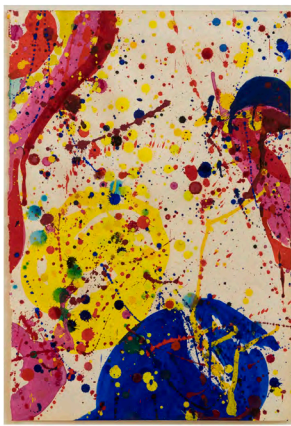


Fig 11

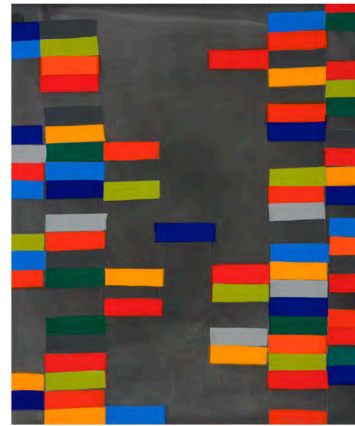


Fig 12



Fig 13



Fig 14