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Off the Cuff with Monica Obniski

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Off the Cuff with Monica Obniski, MAM's new curator of 20th and 21st century design

By Curtis L. Carter
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Courtesy of Milwaukee Magazine

Monica Obniski joined the Milwaukee Art Museum staff in January 2015 as the Demmer Curator of 20th and 21st Century Design. She arrived at the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) in the midst of a major gallery reinstatement of its entire collections in newly reshaped spaces.

How do you foresee your role as the new curator of modern and contemporary design at this challenging moment?

The scope and vision behind the reinstatement efforts that are currently in process are challenging but also exciting. I look forward to working with my Milwaukee Art Museum colleagues to bring into focus design objects in relation to other parts of the collection. By placing design in proximity to modern and contemporary art, we can invite the visitors to make connections across the multiple collections within the museum.

This seems like a big task. What experiences will you bring to the job?

Before moving to Milwaukee this January, I served as the Menco Assistant Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago from 2011 to 2014. During my seven-year tenure there I also held positions of research associate and exhibition coordinator. Before that, I was a research assistant in American decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. My education includes an MA degree from Bard Graduate Center in New York and I just defended my dissertation at the University of Illinois-Chicago with a project that examines folk art and modern design in the postwar American projects of Alexander H. Girard.

How are craft and design different from the other fine arts in the museum?

Design and craft are appreciated for both beauty and function. They include

handmade craft objects and manufactured objects such as furniture and table wear, fashion items such as clothing and jewelry, and industrial products such as airplanes and ships.

What is distinctive about MAM's collections in your area?

First, the museum has an extraordinary collection of American modern design, which includes the Brooks Stevens archive and many works of industrial design. I also think that the museum has real strength in studio craft, particularly glass. I look forward to reintroducing visitors to these areas, among others, in the reinstallation of the design galleries.

What are the unique contributions of design to the museum visitor's experience?

In the words of designer Bruno Munari, design is a "bridge between art and life." Design offers experiences that are closest to the visitor's everyday life experiences. A viewer may be surprised to learn that the art museum offers more than just paintings. I believe that designed objects are the most accessible part of a museum's collections.

What will be your main focus in the coming days?

My aim is to put a new face on design in the context of the museum's new installation plans that will excite the imagination of the visitors and increase their knowledge and appreciation of the art of design. I look forward to getting to know the community and its appetite for design!