

The Uno Chair Rocks

by Roger Yee

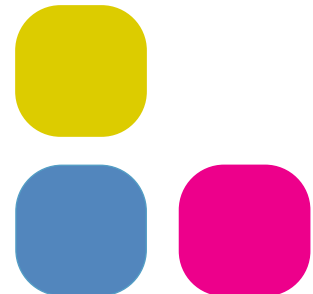
MoMA

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine depicted a stylish young woman in a phone booth inquiring, "Museum of Modern Art? I'm about to go shopping. What's the right toaster to buy?" Such is the stature of New York's Museum of Modern Art (fondly called "MoMA") in industrial design. This year marks an interesting milestone for MoMA, Charles O. Perry, a sculptor and industrial designer, and Steelcase. As shoppers who turn to page 33 of *MoMA's Holiday 2003 Gift Catalog* will discover, MoMA can ship Perry's graceful Uno™ Chair, from the Turnstone® brand of Steelcase, in time for the holidays. It's the first product by Steelcase featured at the museum's retail store, as well as the second piece of furniture designed by Perry to be so honored.



Charles O. Perry

Can everyday
objects be
works of art?



Roger Yee is currently a senior editor for architecture at Visual Reference Publications, a publisher of books on design. In addition, he provides editorial, public relations, and marketing services for various publications and other organizations in the design community. He is a graduate of Yale University School of Architecture.

The Uno Chair Rocks MoMA, continued

How did a museum of art become an arbiter of consumer taste? Why did Perry's Uno Chair find a place in MoMA's retail store and gift catalog? And what's the significance of MoMA's acceptance of the Uno Chair? The story traces the increasing importance of modern design in American life, a journey vividly portrayed in a new exhibit, "Ode to the Museum of Modern Art," currently on display in the lobby of Steelcase New York. The success of such consumer products as Target®'s Michael Graves kitchen appliances, BMW®'s Mini Cooper® subcompact car and Apple's iPod™ portable MP3 music player, the growing coverage of design in *Business Week*, *Time* and other media, and the use of design as a marketing strategy by national retailers like Target, IKEA® and Pottery Barn® illustrate the power of design to stir dreams and spur sales. Public recognition of design has been inconsistent, nonetheless. Though businesses increasingly employ design to differentiate products and consumers embrace design as a means of self expression, design is still widely misunderstood as styling.

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Consequently, teaching the public to see industrial design as art has been a passion for MoMA. In her new book, *Objects of Design* from the

Museum of Modern Art, current curator of architecture and design Paola Antonelli chronicles how the museum championed all the contemporary arts since founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. conceived of MoMA in 1929. In 1933 MoMA launched the pivotal exhibit "Objects: 1900 and Today."



Eclipse

Continuing to educate the public MoMA forged ahead. The impact of its shows can be gauged by their names. "Machine Art" (1934) displayed industrial, technological and scientific objects which had never been exhibited in museums, "Useful Objects" (1937-1940) annually featured

The Uno Chair Rocks MoMA, continued

Good design is increasingly employed to differentiate products.

well-designed items available in stores, and "Good Design" (1950-1955), showcased objects available for sale with MoMA's own "Good Design" tags.

Veteran industrial designer George Corrin, Jr., creator of the "Ode," recalls his excitement as a young man viewing the museum's early design exhibitions. "I discovered industrial design when I saw a MoMA exhibition at Rockefeller Center," he says. "It blew my mind."

The thrill of discovery is evident in Corrin's display at Steelcase New York. "I felt that since Uno was now selling at the MoMA store, an exhibit about Charles Perry and MoMA's design collection would be appropriate," he continues. "I wanted to show what a life force design could be."



Sculpture

Equinox

A sculptor who can't stop making chairs

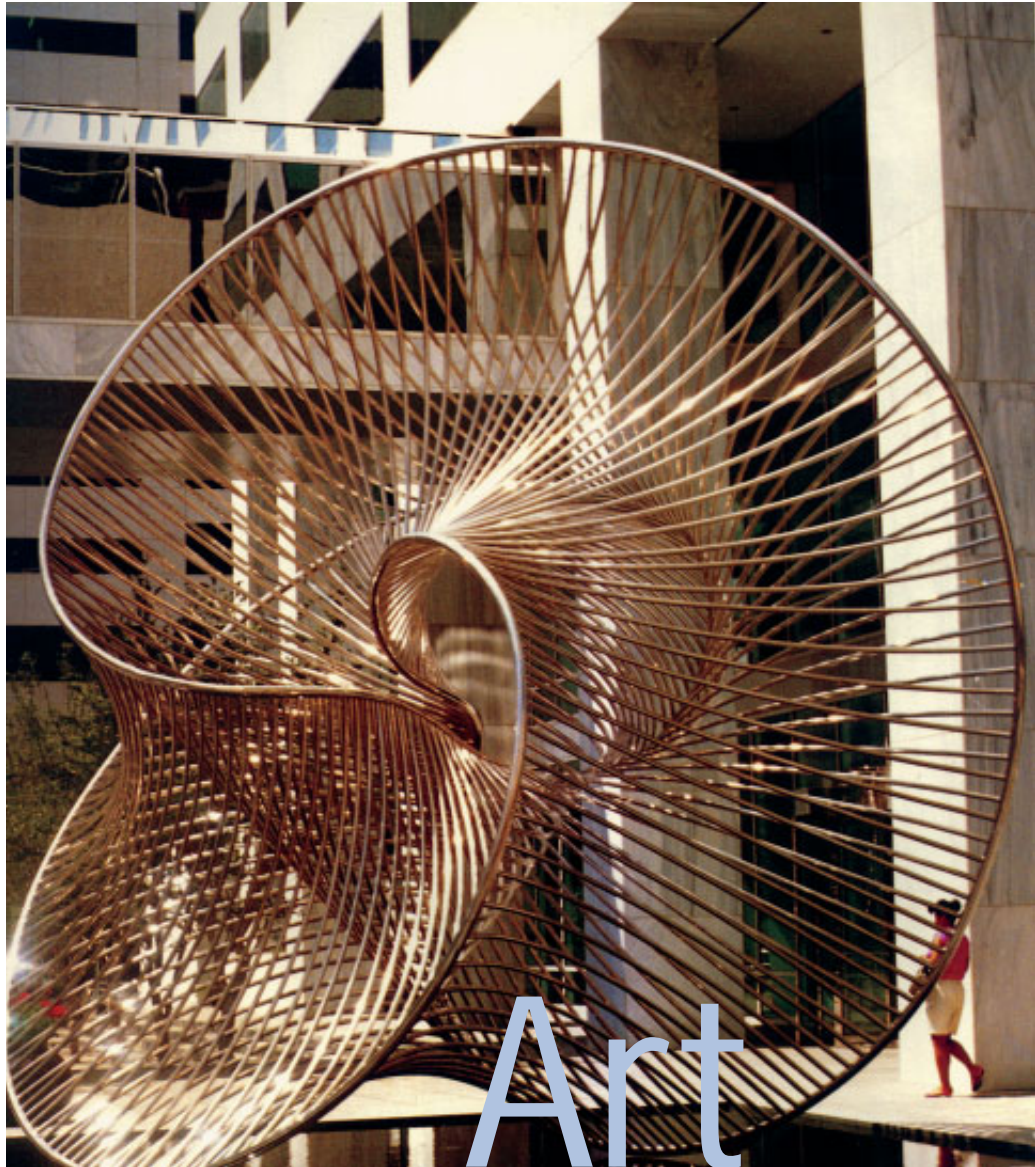
Where do the Uno Chair and Charles O. Perry fit in this picture? MoMA's gift catalog describes the appeal of the chair and its creator succinctly: "Designed by a sculptor, the Uno Chair is exquisitely simple and blissfully comfortable with a minimum of parts and pieces."

Chair making has been irresistible to Perry since childhood. "In second grade at a grammar school in Berkeley, California," he explains, "I was required to take a woodworking shop taught by a real carpenter using real tools. I was dyslexic, and the class was a revelation for me. I took home wood boxes from the local supermarket, took them apart, straightened the nails and built chairs from them."

The Uno Chair Rocks MoMA, continued

Curiosity about chairs stayed with Perry through his years at Yale School of Architecture, the architecture firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and a family sojourn in Rome, when he won the prestigious Prix de Rome award. Though Perry now devotes most of his career to sculpture, often developing his much admired, space-enveloping, curving forms in collaboration with leading architects, he has never stopped tinkering with chairs.

Eager to test the resilience of steel bars and the pivot point of chairs, Perry experimented repeatedly before arriving at the prototype for the Uno Chair. A design incorporating a single steel bar as a pivot under the arm required elaborate counterweights, so he added a second bar, placing the front bar in tension when the back one is in compression. "I woke up one morning at 5," he confesses, "and aha!—it hit me."



Solstice



Once Turnstone was up and running with the Uno Chair, which Perry perfected with his son Marco, an engineer and industrial designer, Perry set his sights on MoMA, which sells his puzzles, jewelry and a chess set that is part of the museum's permanent collection. Having brought the chair along

with other product samples, Perry left it overnight. "I felt the best way to sell Uno was to let people sit in it," he observes. MoMA loved Perry's design.

MoMA can send the chair almost anywhere – but customers must provide their own gift wrapping.