Alexander Girard
A Designer’s Universe

Exhibition Concept
Raised in a cosmopolitan family with European and American roots, he grew up in Florence, studied architecture in London and launched his career as a designer in the USA, first working in New York, then moving to Michigan and eventually settling in Santa Fe. Practicing from the late 1920s until the late 1970s he created stunning interiors for restaurants, private clients and corporations, influential exhibitions on modern living and folk art, and more than 300 textile designs. Girard’s collection of folk art from Mexico, India, Egypt and other countries that he started early on eventually grew to more than 100,000 objects, many of which Girard frequently presented in exhibitions or used in his interior design projects. In his colorful and opulent designs and interiors, Girard elegantly combined styles and objects from different periods and cultural backgrounds, advocating a broader and more human concept of modernism that, in retrospect, appears as postmodern avant la lettre. During the period of the Cold War, Girard’s popular exhibitions of international folk art were seen as testimony to the universal human need for creative expression regardless of political backgrounds. Girard reached the peak of his career at a time when, fostered by the positive spirit of the economic postwar boom, designers felt capable of and responsible for designing all aspects of life: From the interior of the home to the rituals of eating, from restaurants and shops to corporate design, from typography and printed matter to the color scheme and graphic design of a whole city street. In the 1990s the Vitra Design Museum was entrusted with Alexander Girard’s personal archive, consisting of more than 5,000 project related drawings as well as many personal sketches heretofore never shown, more than 1,000 photographs and transparencies, several hundred samples of textiles, accessories, furniture, and folk art objects from Girard’s collection. On the basis of this archive, the Vitra Design Museum is currently organizing the first major retrospective in Alexander Girard’s work, accompanied by a major catalogue. The exhibition will cover the entire span of Girard’s work, from his early years in Europe until his work in postwar America and beyond, as well as his ground breaking work in the several disciplines, including interior design, typography, textile design, corporate design and furniture design. It will also analyze his collaborations and exchanges with a roster of well known architects, designers and artists, such as Charles Eames and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, George Nelson, Saul Steinberg, Georgia O’Keefe, I M Pei, Minoru Yamasaki, Dan Kiley, Richard Kelly, Emilio Pucci and Rudi Gernreich.

The exhibition will give a comprehensive overview of Alexander Girard’s life and work, based on the key areas in which Girard was active:

1. Interior Design
2. Colors, Patterns, Textiles
3. Communication and Corporate Design
4. Collecting and displaying

Alexander Girard (1907–1993) was one of the most prolific interior and textile designers of the 20th century.
Curating the home
Girard realized his first interior designs, while he was still studying architecture in Florence. His own apartment (1929) as well as the apartment for Guido Uzielli (1930), early interior design projects in Florence, still show influences of historicism. Like his Manhattan apartment furnished in 1935 they were published in contemporary interior design magazines. In the 1940s Girard moved to Grosse Pointe in Michigan where he was designing office and cafeteria interiors as well as radios and record players for the Detrola company. The Girard residence that he created out of two old houses featured ingenious lighting solutions, plywood furniture designed by Girard as well as first samples of wall displays that would become a constant feature of his interiors. Moving to Santa Fe in 1953, Alexander Girard and his wife Susan acquired an old adobe building from artist and color expert Hiler Hilaire. Settling in Santa Fe for the rest of his life, Girard established the town in New Mexico with its vibrant art community as a new American design epicenter besides New York and Los Angeles. The Girard residence in Santa Fe ingeniously blended the old with the new, detailed and colorful ornament with white washed walls, the abstract with the figurative and was published in numerous fashion and interior design magazines setting interior design trends for decades to follow. Photographs illustrating Girard’s work were often provided by his close friend and collaborator Charles Eames.

Celebrating the art of dining
Girard took a strong interest in food and the rituals of dining. At a time when food became increasingly industrialized he celebrated it as an art in its own right. The kitchens in his own houses in Grosse Pointe in Santa Fe had nothing in common with the sanitary, built-in modular kitchens of the future promoted by appliance manufacturers at the time but were a feast for dinners and food lovers addressing all senses. Commissioned by Georg Jensen, Girard created colorful tableware and staged an exhibition on the art of setting the table for different occasions at Jensen’s New York showroom. In 1960, the La Fonda Del Sol restaurant opened its doors in New York’s Time Life Building. Girard designed not only the interior down to the tableware, matches and napkins but also the menus as well as the typography and imagery for La Fonda Del Sol, based on a stylized symbol of the sun. For the outfits of the restaurant staff Girard collaborated with fashion designer Rudi Gernreich. While La Fonda Del Sol offered a colorful feast, the interior of his next restaurant L’Etoile in the Sherry Netherlands Hotel next to Central Park was kept in black and white with reminiscences to Art Deco and French culture. At L’Etoile the names of French artists, architects and authors etched on glass presented the only decoration. It was one of a number of examples of Girard’s ingenious blending of typography and architecture.
»What I like to call 'aesthetic functionalism' is indispensable in any surrounding where the average individual is to live – not like a human machine merely sleeping, eating, drinking – but also seeing, touching and remembering familiar associations; all of which I believe are of far greater importance than our purely practical functions in life.«
In 1952, Girard became the director of Herman Miller’s textile division. Together with Charles and Ray Eames and George Nelson, he strongly influenced the look of Herman Miller’s products in the decades to follow. Until 1973 Girard created more than 300 different textile designs and wallpapers ranging from figurative and organic designs to abstract geometric patterns particularly well suited for upholstery. Textile design was a major part of Girard’s design practice from early on. Having designed a number of textiles for interior design projects in the 1930s and 1940s, Girard participated in a textile competition of the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, alone and in collaboration with Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen, winning two honorable mentions. Subsequently several designs were manufactured by Knoll textiles. Girard’s design approach was strongly influenced by his interest in folk art. Repetition and variation, two essential aspects of folk art, form a red thread that runs through all of his textile designs, many of which appear as playful improvisations on certain key themes. Wonderful sketches and collages illustrate Girard’s design process and the tools he used to arrive at an enormous variety of different designs, all of which exemplify his ingenious sensibility for color and color combinations. Particularly Girard’s use of strong, bold colours, completely new in the field at the time, was yet again inspired by Folk Art.

In subsequent collaborative projects with Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen or George Nelson, Girard served as the expert on textile and color design. With a strong interest in typography Girard designed his own lettering not only for textiles and corporate designs but also in interior design, elegantly blending architecture and typography. In 1961, Girard conceived the Textiles and Objects shop for Herman Miller in New York, a revolutionary new concept to promote the importance of textile design and an attempt to establish a new object division for accessories for the home. The T&O shop presented not only the complete collection of Girard’s textile designs but also folk art objects that he had selected. In 1971 Girard and Herman Miller introduced the environmental enrichment panels, featuring bold and colorful motifs to decorate and humanize the open office landscape.
»Textiles are a building material, as much a part of a room as are the conventional building materials of brick, glass, wood and plaster.«
Among Girard's first corporate design jobs was his work for the Michigan based Detrola company in the 1940s, a manufacturer of radios and record players, where Girard made the acquaintance of Charles Eames. At that time, Girard also created the corporate design for the No-Sag-Spring company. In 1965 Braniff International commissioned Girard to completely redesign the airline. With a scheme of seven different colors Girard announced the end of the plain plane, designing not only typography and logo of the Braniff International but also aircraft exteriors and interiors, tableware, tickets, luggage labels and the passenger lounges including the furniture. Among Girard’s greatest talents was the creation of complete worlds by means of design, which is also exemplified by his restaurant interiors for La Fonda de Sol and L’Etoile, both in New York. Another all encompassing commission was given to Girard in Columbus Indiana, today one of the main American showcases of modern architecture, a development originally spurred by Girard’s client the philanthropist Irwin Miller, CEO of the Cummins company, then the largest American manufacturer of Diesel engines. Girard’s contribution was a cohesive color scheme for all buildings on Washington Street, the main shopping street, including shop signs and logos. While George Nelson and other designers in the 1960s deplored the degrading urban landscape caused by unlimited commercialism, and while artists like Ed Ruscha documented it, Girard took a positive approach designing the urban landscape in an aesthetically appealing way. On Washington Street Girard also refurbished and furnished Irwin Miller’s office as well as the offices of the Cummins Company. Lastly Girard also collaborated with Eero Saarinen for the interior design of the North Christian Church in Columbus. Architects like Eero Saarinen or Skidmore Owings and Merrill also commissioned Girard as color consultant on building projects.
Alexander Girard started collecting folk art at the age of sixteen, while he was still living in Italy and his grandfather gave him an Italian nativity scene from the 17th century. In the decades to follow his cosmopolitan life and his many travels were triggered by and nurtured his passion for collecting. His friend Charles Eames was quoted of saying: He is part magpie – and a Florentine one at that. Until the end of his life Girard collected more than 100,000 folk art objects from more than 100 countries, the majority of which he donated to the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe in 1978. In the Girard wing, the Museum still presents the exhibition «Multiple Visions: A Common Bond» that Girard himself installed in 1982. Apart from using folk art objects in his interior design projects, Girard also presented them in exhibitions from early on. For the exhibition «Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India» presented in at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, Girard helped to select exhibits and created a stunning display reminiscent of an Indian Bazar. His Nativity exhibition, shown in Santa Fe and the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, featured more than 170 nativity scenes from Mexico, the United States, Peru, Poland, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Haiti, Sweden, Panama and many other countries. At the Hemisfair in San Antonio Texas in 1968 large crowds flocked to see Girard’s exhibition «The Magic of a People», presenting folk art was a nourishment for the creative spirit of the present (Girard). For Girard’s own designs Folk Art was an endless source of inspiration regarding his use of color, certain motifs and patterns as well, on a more general level, design approaches.

Promoting Modernism and Good Design
Alexander Girard was also among the pioneers who promoted and advocated modern design by means of exhibitions. In 1949 Girard organized the seminal show «For Modern Living» at the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts, 1949, creating a living landscape and garden in the large gallery space of the institute and inviting fellow designers George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames, Florence Knoll, Harry Weese and Jens Risom to each contribute an interior. The exhibition that also presented everyday items and a mural by Saul Steinberg was a predecessor to the Good Design shows at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, taking place annually from 1950 until 1955, in which Girard also played a major role as exhibition designer and jury member. At the same time Girard established his own shop at different locations in Grosse Point, not only to sell Good Design products but also to stage small exhibitions of painting, sculpture, and jewelry. Like the Textile and Object store that Girard conceived and designed for Herman Miller in New York in 1961 to present his textiles along with items from his folk art collection, they can be regarded as precursors to today’s design concept stores. Years ahead of its time, Textiles and Objects was only short lived and closed its doors in 1964.
»Seeing how each people, and each individual artist, depicts the same theme is an education in itself, one which cannot help but lead to greater understanding of the world.«
The exhibition is structured by four main sections. Inspired by the colorful storage and display walls that Girard created for domestic interiors, the first section will offer visitors an introduction to his life and work by means of a chronological assemblage of drawings, small objects, photos and archival documents. Here the focus is on Girard’s little known early work, created during his time in New York (1932 – 1937) and the years in Detroit and Grosse Pointe Michigan (1937 – 1953) where Girard founded one of the first design shops in the US, where he became acquainted with other designers such as the Eames and Eero Saarinen, and where he made a name of himself as a design curator. The center of this introductory installation is devoted to drawings and documents from Girard’s Republic of Fife, an imaginary country that he created and designed as a teenager and student, including maps, flags, currency, stamps and secret languages.

The second part of the exhibition presents Girard as a textile architect. A lavish installation of textiles will be accompanied by samples from the archive, samples of folk art textiles that Girard collected, design sketches and collages that show his design approach as well as tools he used for printing. While the work for Herman Miller plays a key role, earlier and lesser known textile designs are also shown.

The third section of the exhibition is devoted to Girard’s theatrical concept of interior design as a stage and presents his most important projects in this realm: The Miller House in Columbus, the Girard residence in Santa Fe, and two restaurants, La Fonda Del Sol and L’Etoile, both in New York. The projects are presented by projections of photos by Charles Eames, Ezra Stoller, and Baltazar Korab and others as well as by drawings, furniture, decorative items, dinnerware, and printed matter. Taking its inspirations from Girard’s 3-D mural for the John Deere headquarters in Moline, Illinois – a project that is also on display – a giant 3-D mural also presents a selection of the most interesting archival objects of lesser known but important projects created between the 1950s and 1970s. A separate cabinet shows Girard’s work for Braniff International, including film projections, super graphics, textiles, posters, luggage labels and a flight attendant uniform by Emilio Pucci.

The closing section of the exhibition puts a spotlight on Girard’s folk art collection, with an installation of more than 300 objects on loan from the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Sorted by main themes in the collection, such as toys, buildings and market scenes from Mexico and the Day of the Dead festivities, the collected objects are enhanced by films of Charles and Ray Eames, slide shows of Girard’s travel images and posters and drawings related to the exhibitions that Girard created with his folk art collection. The installation design for the exhibition that presents more than 700 exhibits was created by the London based design studio Raw Edges.
»Design should create a climate which makes it possible for people to see new things, should create a mood, and allow the viewer an opportunity to associate with the objects. Like a painting, it uses emphasis, repetition, juxtaposition and color to do that.«
**Facts**

**Exhibition floor space**
700 – 1000 m²

**Exhibits**
70 textiles, 250 folk art objects, 50 drawings, 50 design objects, films, photographs

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**Dates**
Vitra Design Museum: 11 Mar 2016 – 22 Jan 2017
Cranbrook Art Museum: 16 June – 8 Oct 2017
Hangaram Art Museum: 22 Dec 2017 – 4 Mar 2018
Museum of International Folk Art: 3 May – 27 Oct 2019

The exhibition will be shown in other museums around the world until approx. 2021.

**Exhibition tour**
From autumn 2019 onwards, the exhibition will be available to further international venues. The exhibition will travel including all exhibits, exhibition architecture/designs and all media equipment.

**Publication**
The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive publication published by the Vitra Design Museum.

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**Directors**
Mateo Kries, Marc Zehntner
"To me, nothing could be worse than an exhibition in which a number of objects are just lined up in cases. I believe that if you put objects into a world which is ostensibly their own, the whole thing begins to breathe. It’s creating a slice of life in a way. Then the exhibit becomes alive; it becomes theatre." – Alexander Girard