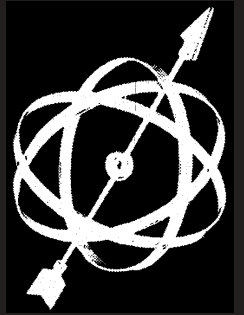


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Mark McDonald

By Philip Alvare

The New York Times dubbed him "Mr. Modernism" in an article that appeared in the Thursday Style section, June 20, 2002, titled: "Mr. Modernism Leaves Town." The article was referring to Mark McDonald who had recently closed Gansenvoort Gallery, successor to his first Manhattan gallery, the legendary Fifty/50, and opened a small gallery in Hudson, New York.

As one of three creators of Fifty/50 - the Manhattan venue still credited with creating "Mid-Century Modernism," McDonald has spent the last 25 years selling some of the finest examples of mid-century modern design.

His clients have included the likes of Robert Mapplethorpe, Francisco Clemente and Julian Schnabel. Terence Riley, the chief curator of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York credited McDonald and the team at Fifty/50 with having done nothing less than "...reinventing a love of modern furniture." (NY Times 20 June 2002)

McDonald's first gallery in Hudson was called 330 at 330 Warren Street, but in 2004 he acquired an early twentieth century landmark building - a former department store - located at 555 Warren Street, which bears the eponymous name: Mark McDonald.

Philip Alvaré interviewed McDonald for Northeast and was fortunate enough to catch this guru of Modernism presiding over his gallery from his third floor airy overlooking a central atrium with a view of what is,

The Pulse of Modernism Mark McDonald on the Record



Facade of Mark McDonald 555 Warren Street. Doors by Warren McArthur.



Tejo Remy for Droog, "You Can't Lay Down Your Memories" chest of drawers c.1990.

undoubtedly, one of the most important collections of Mid-century Modern on the East Coast. The interview took place on the main floor of the Gallery while McDonald iced a pulled ham-

string - the result of too much water-skiing over the weekend. He answered the questions with a disarmingly charming remnant of a Southern lilt in his voice, alluding to his Texas origin.

Philip Alvaré (PA): What's that you're sitting on?

Mark McDonald (MMcD): A pair of chairs with matching tables designed by Warren Platner, manufactured by Knoll International. These are from the late 1950s to early 60s, and are [Platner's] response to Knoll's desire to sell to a more corporate market. They're extremely comfortable, large and very much a counter to Barcelona chairs and the more ubiquitous things out there in the 50s produced by Knoll through licensing agreements for designs from the 1930s and the Bauhaus movement - like Corbu, Breuer, Meis and others designing specifically for Knoll. Warren Platner was hired by Knoll to produce designs in the late '50s and early '60s.

PA: How does it feel to be known as "Mr. Modernism?"

MMcD: Better than "The Old Man of Modernism," which is what I was referred to in another article. I'm flattered, but also [realize] it kind of fits. Along with my first two partners, we were the first ones to seriously consider design of the post-war era as something more than nostalgic kitsch. We tried to find "good design" by going back into old reference materials. That's what our research was early on. We were first to handle it in a serious way - in a scholarly academic way. We tried to present the best designs from that period, rather than what was then considered to be things from the '50s like driftwood lamps, amoeba shaped coffee tables - merely rip-offs of more interesting designs - but watered down. Scandinavian, or Danish Modern, has a bad reputation because so much of it was ripped off and watered down in the '60s and '70s.

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Third Floor Research Library, including several pieces of note: a Nana Dietzl modular sectional sofa, a Leza McVey handwoven rug, an Eames fiberglass rocker, an Eames LCW birch plywood chair, and a George Nelson Comprehensive Storage System.



The first floor gallery at 330. Pieces of note include a set of Mies van der Rohe chairs, Eva Hild hand built porcelain ceramic sculptures (contemporary), a Peter Superti dining table of African bubinga and mahogany (contemporary), a Poul Henningson copper "artichoke" chandelier, and a large early Finnish Rya rug.

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The initial influx of Danish and Swedish design into the United States – but also American Designs – were wonderful things done right after the war. America and Scandinavian countries were not destroyed by the war and were first to produce good design after the war for the baby-booming GI's returning, getting married, making families and building houses. The response by American manufacturers was immediate. Most of the best things were manufactured here or were imported and we were exposed to them. The initial, ground breaking work we did in the late '70s and early '80s gave us a jump start on everybody else in this field. We were the first ones.

There were three of us – ambitious, energetic, not particularly savvy – but entrenched in the antiques business. We had a wonderful, big store on Broadway between 10th and 11th across from The Grace Cathedral named, Fifty/50. My other two partners died in the 1990s, and that's when I closed Fifty/50 and opened my store in the meatpacking district. At this point I'm certainly not the leading [Midcentury Modern] dealer in the world, but I'm regarded as one of the old masters and I have a very good reputation. I've always worked to maintain the integrity of what I do and say. My recommendations to people are based on what I feel is right, not monetary gain. I think people trust me. I'm still asked by museums, curators, or collectors what I think. I've always been protective of my reputation. I find it's easier to tell the truth. There's a good reason why I still have a certain amount of status in the period.

PA: How did Mr. Modernism decide to land in Hudson, New York?

MMcD: Oh it's very simple: I had a weekend house here for 25 years. Also just a little bit of dissatisfaction with the business in Manhattan – wear and tear and physical drain of keeping a shop going as a single proprietor. At Fifty/50 I had two partners. At Gansvoort, I was the single owner. It got to be more of a job than I ever wanted. After 9/11 things changed. Ultimately the biggest change was the

nature of the business – through the Internet, auctions and things like eBay. The information highway opened up with an entrance ramp for everyone to get on the highway and find out everything they wanted to know. I felt it was easier to have a business and not be right in the middle of New York. It was time to make a change and to be in my garden more days out of the year and treat my house as a full time residence. Hudson had become a viable destination – a nice alternative to New York. I love the town of Hudson. I've always been enamored with the architecture. I [found] a nice place where I could open a store – although most of my business is still with clients in the city.

PA: Why Modernism? What was it about these now archetypal examples of modern design that originally spoke to you?

MMcD: Basic availability. When I first moved to New York, I was interested in Arts and Crafts for a while. Art Nouveau and Art Deco was available in the '70s, and I was especially interested in Art Deco. But the really great Art Deco things were already quite pricey and beyond the means of someone entering the business. I worked at Lillian Nassau on 57th street – she was the Doyen of Art Nouveau. I learned the idea of trying to be one step ahead there – what will be “the next thing.”

It seemed obvious things from the '40s and '50s would be. I started getting reference materials. I'd buy books from the '50s, catalogues from manufacturers, Domus magazines, Arts and Interiors magazines and see what they thought was the best. I'd either find something out on the street, or in a thrift shop and buy it because I liked it and knew it was '50s. Then I'd go home, research it and find out through reference materials what it was. Reference material is the basis of our business. Now people can go on the Internet. Back then, we had to go to books. If we went to a house people said: “I bought Dunbar,” we'd think, “What the hell is Dunbar?” I didn't know who Ed Wormley was (a designer for Dunbar). Ultimately I got to know Ed [Wiener/Wormley], Noguchi and Eames. The lines were clean – designed for mass production. Herman Miller, Knoll and the other firms were selling to regular people, working with the idea of bringing good design to as many people as possible.

A lot [of modern design] came down from the Bauhaus, because those guys came to the States in the '30s and '40s – like Gropius, Breuer, Aalto and other people throughout the world trying this new approach to make furniture less expensive. We could find it, buy it and sell it for a reasonable price.

PA: Can you address early days, when you first opened Fifty/50? What was the design climate about then? What was hot? What was not?

MMcD: What we presented was up to us and based on what we found. Luckily we were all well schooled in Art Nouveau and Art Deco and understood the progression and history of furniture. We were able to look at something and make a judgment call on it. It was kind of a committee deciding about things we were presenting in the store. There wasn't an established market.

We had a lot of information. We could go to designers – go to Ray Eames and say: “How and when was this made?” We could call Noguchi and say: “When and why did you make this furniture? When did you stop making furniture?” We had verbal history from a lot of people, and recommendations. We were also in contact with designers and people who had things who could evaluate how the furniture worked; if it was successful, either from a design standpoint or living with it.



Mark McDonald, with Stuyvesant, on Warren Platner chair.

PA: So you established a curatorial context?

MMcD: Yeah. There were also people in museums who were watching what we were doing. We had contact with some old guys, like Drexler. (He) used to come into the store and say, “We don't think much about that, but we like this and that.” Stanley Marcus came into the store all the time, along with Jack Morrison and others who had been at it all their lives and who were really refreshed to see it coming back. It was really analyzing and synthesizing all this information, then deciding what to present to the public. No one else had that chance. We had the golden opportunity. Our timing was way ahead. We had the facility, the physical plant, the money to buy the things we needed to buy and the clients to sell the stuff to. We had a 10-year jump on anybody else in the business.

PA: I hate it when people ask me what my favorite color is and you probably hate it when people ask you who your favorite designer is. Who would you cite as primary in the canon of Modern Designers?

MMcD: No, I hate it more when people ask what's hot and what's not. I just say you be the judge. I'm doing what I like to do and I'm enjoying what I'm doing right now and I buy the things I like to buy. I don't mind talking about what I think is my favorite. I guess I like Noguchi without any qualifications. (The designs he) did for furniture were very few. Maybe that's one reason I like him, because he narrowed it down to sculptural things that were very on the mark.

Furniture designers; probably Eames would be the one I think made the most important progress in furniture design and I think are the best things done in America after World War II. Although I have that certain affinity for Noguchi, I think Eames was most important. So I can't really say who my favorite would be, but those two certainly fit in the high category.

PA: This is probably an unfair question because it's far too complex, but what is this stuff all about? Without getting too phenomenologically high falutin', can you give us a sense of the moment, the climate, the context of the birth of modernism?

MMcD: From a pure design standpoint and time frame – it was designers trying to figure out ways to use the new materials developed around World War II – plastics, fiberglass, laminates – to develop ways of production to bring what they thought of as good design to a lot more people at an affordable price. From a collector's, or buyer's standpoint: How has it played out over time? How do you evaluate it in a 30-50 year retrospective look. I respond to things that are reduced. The form is following the function. I like the view of an architect who has a sense that something should not be too much – things don't need to be fussy.

PA: Wasn't it Meis who said: “Less is more?”

MMcD: He pounded that into everyone's brain because of the Barcelona Pavilion in 1929. They sell the T-shirt in Barcelona now with the slogan: “Less is more.”



Polaroid Lamp, Walter Dorwin Teague c. 1940.



Poul Henningson PH Lamp c. 1928, green enameled metal shade, brass.



First floor book selling area, with a Donald Judd table, a 1960s Rya Rug from Finland, and contemporary bookcases by Peter Superti.

PA: Who would you consider an undervalued designer just waiting to come into their own?

MMcD: I think they've all pretty much reached way beyond what they're worth. (Laughter) That's not a great thing to say for the market, but there are very few people who haven't been discovered at this point, with all the information there is. I can't say there's anyone who's undervalued - maybe certain areas of certain designer's work are undervalued.

PA: The competition to obtain superb examples of modern design is fierce if not impossible. Where would you steer the earnest neophyte Mid-century Modern Aficionado itching to acquire?

MMcD: Come to Hudson (smiles)! To Mark McDonald (Laughs).

Books! Educate yourself by looking through auction catalogues - not necessarily buying at auction. Auction catalogues especially. There's so much presented at so many different levels and so many different venues. I do it myself, just to educate myself and to keep up with the market. What's presenting? Richard Wright, Chicago, LA, Modern Auctions, Bonhomie & Butterfields, Tremblay - there's about seven besides the main houses - Christie's and Sotheby's - that present really good examples of modern design three or four times a year in very thick catalogues and that's a great education. You can look online, but it's very difficult to buy at auction unless you know the auctioneer personally, because so much of the value of a 40-50 year old piece is based on condition.

PA: It's "mint."

MMcD: Right. In our period you can find things that are practically mint. They have a 50-year old patina, but they've never been abused and sometimes rarely used. That can happen, but it's very hard to tell that from a photograph.

PA: Can you tell me a little bit about current design trends and where you think we're heading design wise? How would you characterize the design moment?

MMcD: I can't. I don't pay any attention - I mean I love to go look at things and I love to go to Moss and I love to go to some of the other galleries in Manhattan - but I really don't divert my attention to those things.

PA: Can you cite any contemporary, or current young designers you think will eventually be collected?

MMcD: No.

PA: Of all the extraordinary pieces in this gallery, is there a particular one you find especially beautiful and why?

MMcD: Well, I love one I have on the third floor, which is the Donald Judd table, designed by Donald Judd and made by him, that belongs to his daughter that I have strictly in storage - maybe it's the one thing I can't own - so it's very desirable to me. The table was given to her upon her father's death. There were two in the furniture design building in MARFA where pieces were designed and constructed. It has a wonderful kind of "furniture for furniture's sake" feel from a great artist who made furniture and is known for having made art that looks like furniture - but also making furniture that is art.

PA: What is it you hope to achieve most in your work.?

MMcD: Introducing people to things they've never seen before and having people respond positively to good designs that are significant in the world of design. Sparking curiosity. I've achieved what I wanted career wise - went deeply into the area of Modernism. I'll always be considered one of the first. I don't regret anything except losing my partners.

PA: What's the next frontier?

MMcD: You decide.

Mark McDonald will be setting up at Sanford Smith's Modernism, in New York City, on November 10-13. For more information, on the show, call (212) 777-5218 or go online to www.sanfordsmithshows.com.

Mark McDonald, Ltd., is located at 555 Warren Street in Hudson, NY.

Gallery hours are Thursday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Other times by appointment or chance. For more information, call (518) 828-6320.

www.markmcdonald.biz

Photos by Dwayne Resnick.



A collection of Eames from McDonald's showroom in Hudson. Seen here are a Charles and Ray Eames CSU Unit with bubble doors, an Eames child's chair, an Eames splint and an Eames bikini chair with early "Eiffel Tower" base.

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