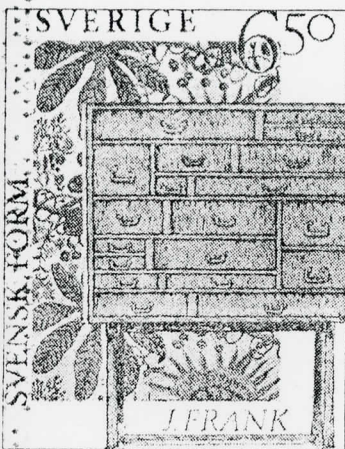


## DESIGN NOTEBOOK

# A Modernist Banished For His Human Touch



Svenski Tenn, Stockholm

A Swedish stamp with a Frank cabinet and his "Aralia" linen.

By MITCHELL OWENS

HENRY JAMES said that the two most beautiful words in the English language were "summer afternoon." Arguably, the two most dreaded words must be "Swedish modern."

Whatever blondly bland images that style brings to mind, however the perfect antidote will be "Josef Frank, Architect and Designer: An Alternative Vision of the Modern Home," a captivating new show through July 21 at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 West 86th Street, (212) 501-3000.

And if parts of the exhibition seem more like a potential shopping spree than a scholarly salute, that is what is so alluring about this long overdue retrospective. More than Mies van der Rohe, more than Corbusier it is Josef Frank (1885-1957) who ends up looking the most modern, most truly up-to-date. People, not robots, live in houses, Frank said, and people will always want exuberance in their lives.

Here is an early star of the modernist movement who dared to produce an apple-green desk, a neo-Egyptian stool, a Biedermeier-inspired vitrine (right) that anticipated Michael Graves by generations, a rug designed to resemble zebra and a side chair inspired by Pilgrim antiques.

Frank's output was in a mixture of styles, shades and finishes that, when combined in a home, were designed to look as if they had evolved over time. As he wrote in 1919, "A living room is never unfinished, just as it is never finished; it lives together with those who dwell in it."

Materials that failed to soothe the soul and embrace the body — especially tubular steel for chairs — he loathed. So he shunned them in favor of painted or natural wood, particularly teak and walnut. His fabrics were assertively colored, cleanly printed and almost always naturalistic (like "Rox and Fix" from 1943, right, based on the rhythmic landscape of mountains and fig trees in Chinese scrolls).

The reputation of Josef Frank, who was born in Baden, near Vienna, and died in Stockholm, has for the most part languished in obscurity outside Scandinavia. Standard reference books give him scant attention, and though he was a leading light of the modernist movement in the 1920's, Frank has been persona non grata in curtain-wall circles ever since.

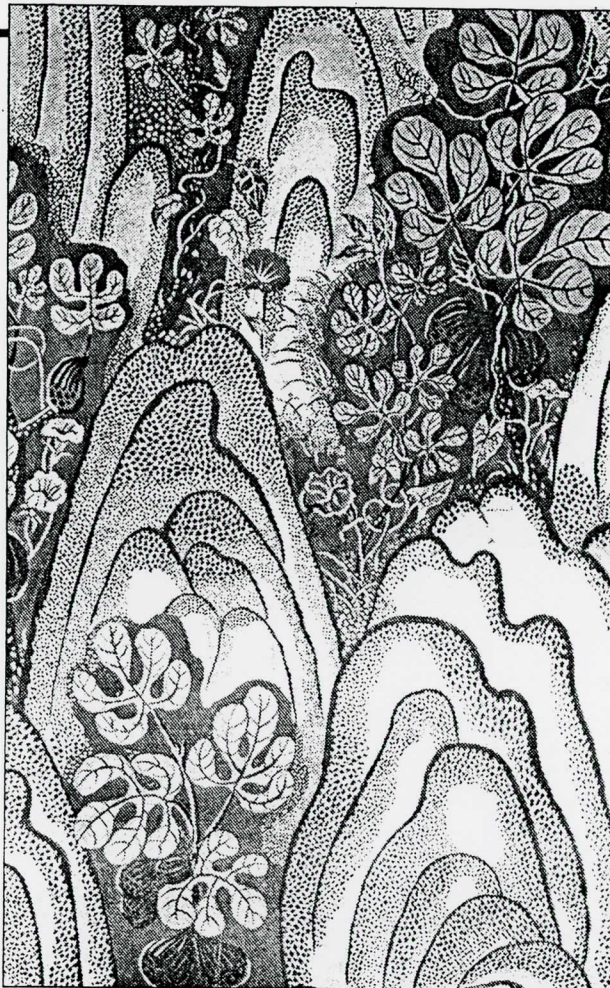
His crimes? According to the Bard show, organized by Nina Stritzler-Levine, they included love of ornament, an appreciation of folk art and — most heinous of all — an overriding sense of humanity.

The modernists turned on Frank in 1927, when he was invited by Mies van der Rohe to build a model home for the celebrated Weissenhof Housing exhibition near Stuttgart. Frank delivered a praiseworthy, properly mechanistic exterior. But what was behind the cool white walls and big picture windows caused a furor.

In defiance of modernism's creed of function over form, Frank installed colorful cretonne curtains, cheerful carpets and upholstered furniture, all of which were designed by him for Haus und Garten, a popular Vienna home-furnishings shop of which he was a co-owner.

His peers, predictably, were outraged and went to almost rabid lengths to denounce him in print and in speech as a rank sentimentalist with a middle-class, insufficiently macho approach to decoration. "Feminine" was a common rebuke thrown in his face at the time.

Frank, unbowed, pointed out that modernism failed to accommodate the basic human need for comfort and color. "Every human needs a certain degree of sentimentality to be free," he wrote later in life. "This will be taken from him if he is forced to make moral demands of every object, one of which is the esthetic demand. What we need is variety."



Svenski Tenn, Stockholm

The chrome-and-glass crowd paid no attention to his defense and froze him out. A few years later, as Hitler and the Anschluss loomed, Frank, who was Jewish, emigrated from Vienna to Sweden, his wife's homeland, where modernism was allowed a more human face. There, he was prolific but quickly forgotten by the international design world. Until now.

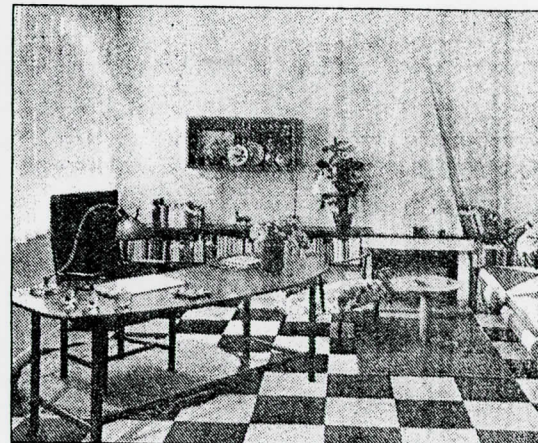
It was his insistence on the validity of individual choice over obedience to dogma that helped fuel the success of Svenski Tenn, then and now Sweden's leading design store, where Frank served as chief designer from 1934 until 1966. Many of the objects in this show — furniture, fabrics, rugs — remain in production, though they are available only in Stockholm.

Yesterday, however, Brunschwig & Fils signed an agreement to reproduce seven Frank fabrics included in the show. They will be available starting next January. But to the trade only: one wonders if the populist Frank would have approved.

Above, Chinese art inspired Frank's "Rox and Fix," a 1943 fabric with mountains and fig trees.

Top right, Frank's room at the 1939 World's Fair introduced Swedish modern to America.

Right, 1910 post-modernism: among Frank's earliest furniture was a rosewood vitrine for his sister



Svenski Tenn, Stockholm

