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Marxism

FROM DESIGNING TO COLLECTING, SAMUEL MARX DID IT WITH FLAIR. DOUGLAS BRENNER REPORTS.

In a letter to his pal Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the Chicago architect Samuel Marx wrote in 1951, "Frank Lloyd Wright once told me, impressively, that it was of paramount importance to the creative urge never to become a slave of routine or habit." Mies probably chuckled, because no one lived out Wright's credo more impressively than Marx himself.

A genial master of many styles — traditional and up-to-the-minute, indulgent and understated, erudite and whimsical — he often sprung aesthetic surprises on clients, friends and anyone within reach. Happily for those of us who didn't get to enjoy his company (Marx died in 1964 and his reputation faded into obscurity), a belated surprise package has just arrived: "Ultramodern: Samuel Marx, Architect, Designer, Art Collector" (Pointed Leaf Press), an insightful, profusely illustrated new book by the decorative arts dealer Liz O'Brien.

At first glance, the images are so diverse th they seem to depict the work of several hand: Here's just a small sampling: a Byzantine-domed stone synagogue; a mansard-roofed brick chateau; a flat-topped International-style villa of concrete and glass; an end table w a crackled lacquer finish reminiscent of Song dynasty porcelain; brushed-nickel andirons a austere as Cycladic figurines; a black patent-leather side chair chic enough for Audrey Hepburn to perch on; a stairway runner of clipped fur; faux swagged curtains cast in plaster; a Picasso nude hung above a fossil-sto mantel. The book's biggest surprise, though, isn't the range of Marx's accomplishments bu

Samuel Marx and his wife, Florene, at home in Chicago in 1952. Their apartment, which Marx designed, was filled with examples of their formidable collection of paintings and sculpture.

Clockwise from top: Marx designed this house in Los Angeles for his brother-in-law, Tom May; the powder room of an Illinois house that Marx designed in 1930; the rotunda of the Pierre hotel in New York; an andiron Marx designed in the 1950s.

rather the steady vision that unites them all: a modernity that combines a bon vivant's delight in the moment with a connoisseur's passion for the best of the past.

That label "ultramodern" might have given Marx pause, because he personified a gentleman of the old school. He always retained the courtly manners of Natchez, Miss., where he was born in 1885 — not only in later nods to gracious antebellum staircases and parlors but also in an impeccable sense of appropriateness. Whether designing a boudoir or a bachelor pad, an urban supper club or a suburban laboratory, he took infinite pains to strike a note of confident ease. Marx neither forgot nor belittled his turn-of-the-century Beaux-Arts training (capped off, no less, by two years at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris), even after academic classicism fell out of fashion.

MARX'S **SCORN FOR OSTENTATION** PRODUCED A QUINTESSENTIALLY MODERN LUXURY.

Young Sam Marx climbed a conventional ladder to success, precociously winning a design competition for an art museum in New Orleans; moving to Chicago, the national hub of his profession; marrying a socially well-connected heiress; and hobnobbing with local plutocrats who could, and did, commission a string of Gold Coast apartments and lakeside country places. But life at the top only broadened his aesthetic reach. Marx's 1933 portfolio, for example, includes a Chinese-inspired wood-paneled study for a collector of antique jades as well as a futuristic aluminum railroad car for Chicago's "Century of Progress" exhibition. In 1941 he juggled the completion of the streamlined art moderne décor of the Los Angeles department store the May Company (Florene Marx, his third wife, was a May), with a romantically baroque rotunda at the Pierre hotel in New York (owned by his loyal client J. Paul Getty) and the remodeling of the actor Edward G. Robinson's Tudor revival home in Los Angeles, which also included the display of an extensive art collection.

By then, Sam and Florene Marx had begun to furnish their own Chicago apartment with sculpture and paintings by the likes of Brancusi, Braque and Picasso. Robinson pronounced their acquisitions "wild and radical," but James Thrall Soby, a trustee of New York's Museum of Modern Art (which eventually inherited many of their pieces), likened the couple's discernment to "the rapt concentration of diamond cutters." A Matisse homage to a still life by a Dutch Old Master rested on a dining-room cabinet. It epitomized the architect's own delight in crossing temporal and cultural boundaries. And like Matisse's "Luxe, Calme et Volupté," Marx's designs possessed all three qualities.

In an era that glorified mass production, Marx stayed true to Arts and Crafts ideals, specifying custom details for every project, from garden trellises to sconces to wastebaskets. His scorn for mere ostentation produced a restrained luxury that is quintessentially modern, regardless of the stylistic sources behind a particular room or piece. History enthralled Marx, but line-for-line pastiche bored him silly. The templelike New Orleans Museum of Art was, he said, "inspired by the Greek but sufficiently modified to give a subtropical appearance." Rather than copy a Georgian settee line by line, he would gently bend its curves and stretch its arms to suit the physique and posture of a 20th-century American. By the same token he had no qualms about altering a contemporary prototype for greater comfort, as when he replaced the perforated-metal seat and back of a Donald Deskey chair with tufted upholstery. And he handled Lucite and innovative vinyl laminates as reverently as he did crystal and tooled leather. (Such

exquisite craftsmanship has never come cheap. On today's market, at shops like Liz O'Brien's Manhattan design gallery, a Marx side chair might fetch $7,000; a pair of andirons, $24,000; and a chest of drawers, $30,000.)

A sublime calm emanates from nearly everything Marx touched. It's partly a reflection of the self-confidence that kept him above the fray of competing architectural ideologies. But it also stems from his early grounding in classical equilibrium. While dipping into an eclectic palette of motifs and materials, Marx managed to maintain unity through geometry and harmonious proportions. Chaste stone rectangles frame broad, low mantelpieces that extend like a prairie horizon; the floating planes of cantilevered balconies are firmly underscored by the parallel lines of terraces and pools. The arc of an archway, a circular window, an elliptical rotunda echo in the contours of sofas and lamp bases. House Beautiful magazine wrote in 1948 that Marx's

WHETHER HE WAS DESIGNING A SUPPER CLUB OR A SUBURBAN LABORATORY, MARX TOOK INFINITE PAINS TO STRIKE A NOTE OF CONFIDENT EASE.

rooms "have so satisfying a feeling of oneness that it's frequently hard to say where the architecture ends and the furniture begins."

This perfectionist order might have seemed overbearing or cold without the voluptuous finishes and decorative flourishes that Marx reveled in. A purist but never a puritan, he swathed hefty lounge chairs in fabric woven with metallic yarn, sheathed walls until they shimmered like paillettes on an evening gown, and frosted rococo ceilings worthy of a Viennese pastry chef. Marx's wit sparkles in unexpected places: one store's maternity department featured a mural of birds and bees; he "planted" plaster cactuses in a drinking club founded during Prohibition and put stately obelisks topped by marble balls on the library mantel of a billiard equipment tycoon. This same effervescent spirit greeted guests at the birthday party Marx held for himself every August at his summer house, in a garden with a Marino Marini bronze horseman at its center. (Marx quipped to Mies that the steed's posterior might remind him of an irksome client.) O'Brien's irresistible book extends an invitation to join in the fun. But there's a P.S.: Sam, we miss you. ■