

***‘The Decorator Works for the World!’ Edgar Miller and early Twentieth Century Ideologies of the Artist-Designer***  
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In 1984, Chicago artist-designer Edgar Miller, then aged eighty-five, wrangled hundreds of pages of handwritten text and almost as many hand-drawn diagrams into a neatly typed manuscript of some 200 pages and 43 illustrations, placing the entire work into a manila envelope and mailing it to Harper and Row.<sup>1</sup> The famed New York publishing house passed on the opportunity. Over the succeeding decades, Miller’s manuscript slipped deeper into obscurity, his esoteric arguments seeming to have little relevance to contemporary art discourse. “Oh, that’s just Edgar,” the artist’s friends observed years later, when asked to explain what Miller might have been after with his manuscript.

What Miller was after, I argue in this essay, is far from a mystery. His manuscript, entitled *Art, the Intuitive Control of Space by a Modular System*, was intended as nothing less than a revelation of certain fixed principles of design that, because they are grasped intuitively by artists, underpin all of the history of material cultural expression. Miller’s key ideas—that line is the basic structure of art; that all art begins with a personally-pleasing abstraction; and, that an analysis of lines in a successful artistic composition will, by extension, reveal their convergence (this last point comes from the classical geometer Euclid’s second postulate, that “any straight line segment can be extended indefinitely in a straight line”)—were presented visually, in the form of diagrammatic analyses of cave art, Renaissance painting, modern advertisements, traditional crafts, industrial design, and more. These demonstration pieces, drawn by hand over readily available reproductions, are generously deployed by the artist in sprawling, doctrinal chapters on “The Function of Line,” “The Module” (by which Miller meant certain standardized units of measurement that occurred intuitively in an artist’s work), “The Impact of the Eye” (in which Miller describes the open eye as “evidence of Life’s presence,” along with his belief that the circularity of the field of vision provides fixed points that unify a composition), “The Web of Space,” and “Tension.”

It is perhaps unsurprising that Miller would be convinced of first principles connecting all the arts; his own, multi-disciplinary artistic practice included not only the traditionally “fine” arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also the whole of the graphic arts and decorative design. Over the course of a career spanning some eight decades, Miller was a painter, a muralist, a plasterer, a woodworker, a maker of stained glass and batik wall-hangings, a ceramicist, a printmaker, a sculptor, an illustrator, and a designer of advertisements, commercial displays, interior decorations, and new and

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<sup>1</sup> Handwritten and typed drafts of Miller’s manuscript, and the returned envelope from Harper and Row, may be found in the Edgar Miller papers, 1868-1989, Series 4, Boxes 53-54, Research Collections, Chicago History Museum Research Center, Chicago, IL.

repurposed buildings—often all these things at the same time. In sensibility he tended towards simplified, even schematic figures and animal forms, elaborate ornamental elements, brilliant coloration, and historical styles associated with times and places in which handicraft was dominant.

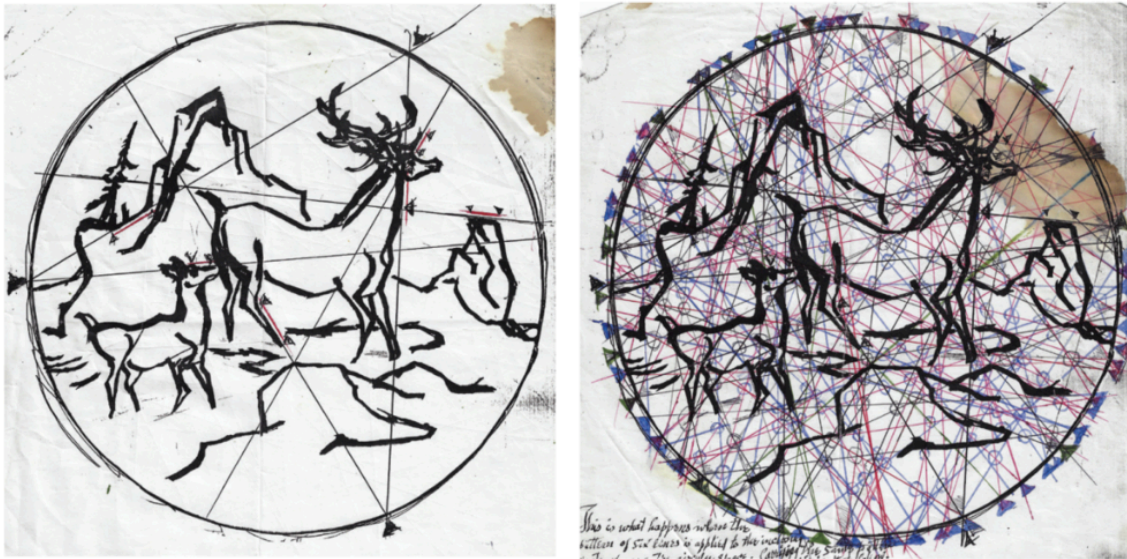
An exceptionally productive artist, Miller is nevertheless representative of his historical circumstances. He came of age as an artist just as national debates over what was (or what should be) an authentic American art had begun to coalesce around the primacy of “decoration,” a civic-minded art that would contribute to larger, public ensembles—as in a mural that is an integrated part of an architectural program. Many American artists of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries received their training in schools that styled themselves on the pragmatic model of mechanics institutes and technical schools—art “institutes” as the more successful ones described themselves—where, in the pursuit of a useful, public role for the arts in daily life, students learned to deploy a surprising range of formulaic shortcuts to representation.<sup>2</sup> When expansion of the industrial and commercial art fields brought increased enrollments to art schools starting in the 1890s, even the more traditionally-oriented academies embraced the mechanics of decorative designing along with the disciplinary rigors of figure study.

It is time for Edgar Miller’s manuscript to be recognized as part of a pedagogical enterprise that was widespread when the artist was young, one dedicated to the idea that the integration of the separate practices of the fine and the applied arts (that is, of painting and sculpture on the one hand, and decoration, ornamentation, craft, and design on the other) would be crucial to the development of a national style in art. In support of this conviction, I offer the case of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago [SAIC], where Miller was a student between 1917-1919 and where he returned to teach in 1923 and again from 1927-1929. As the following will demonstrate, the SAIC was an early leader in integrated art and design education, as was the city of Chicago at large—even before the arrival in 1937 of Hungarian émigré László Moholy-Nagy and the opening of the New Bauhaus (an American iteration of the famed German design school founded in

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<sup>2</sup> This is the subject of my book-length manuscript, *Diagrammatics: Industrialism and the Modernizing of American Art* (in progress, University of Chicago Press). Some early art and design institutes that continue in prominence today include the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, NY (founded in 1859 and known informally in its early years as the Cooper Institute), the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA (founded in 1876 as the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Applied Art), the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI (founded in 1877), the Art Institute of Chicago and its School (founded in 1879 as the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, the name was changed in 1882), the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH (founded in 1882 as the Western Reserve School of Design for Women), and the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY (founded in 1887).

1919).<sup>3</sup> As his diverse output suggests, Edgar Miller learned the lesson of interdisciplinarity offered to him at SAIC very well. Yet this is difficult for us to recognize today, not least because of Miller’s somewhat disdainful recollections of his time as a student. But also because historians have long propagated a narrative of American art as trailing a more progressive European avant-garde, and of Chicago in particular as a cultural backwater in the early twentieth century. These outmoded yet entrenched ideas challenge us to rethink the impact on Miller of his experiences as a student and, later, a teacher at SAIC, and also to rethink the significance to the history of American art of integrated approaches to art and design exemplified by Miller and others.



Examples of studies of compositional structure from Edgar Miller’s personal manuscripts (unpublished). Chicago History Museum

Consider, for example, that, in 1928, the Carnegie Corporation of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was reporting with real excitement on an emergent “American Renaissance,” one that would be characterized by its integration of the fine arts with industrial design (what Carnegie investigators called an art “equal parts poetry and pragmatism”), and about to issue from Chicago’s Art Institute and its School:

To make the commercial arts finer and the fine arts, if not more commercial then more practical [ , i]n this direction, if anywhere, must lie our approach toward an American Renaissance—the birth of a new national art. For it means that the artist will come out of the most powerful forces of his own time. Such, one feels, is the vision taking form at

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss this context in detail in my essay, “Before the New Bauhaus: From Industrial Drawing to Art and Design Education in Chicago,” *Design Issues* 21:1 (Winter 2005): 41-62.

Chicago. The Art Institute is, at all events, in a good position to train just such artists.<sup>4</sup>

Although today's reader will recognize here a familiar emphasis on Chicago as a dynamic center of industrial production and distribution, the report's characterization of the education and training artists received at the SAIC may seem more curious to us than convincing.

How is it that the Art Institute had a reputation in 1928 as a center for industrial art education? Was its reputation deserved? If so, what was the impact of this milieu on Edgar Miller? And why don't we know more about these circumstances today? To answer these questions, I propose a fresh look at the history of SAIC, one focused on the diversity of the School's offerings in the early twentieth-century and, especially, on the impact of educator George W. Eggers, a long-forgotten figure who was director of the Institute during the years of Edgar Miller's attendance. We'll follow Miller as he moves beyond his school experience, to see how well he fit into both Chicago's artistic mainstream and its more bohemian margins. Based on this contextualization, we will return to Miller's manuscript in hopes of determining its deep embeddedness within a network of ideas that were animating discussions of modern American art in the first-half of the twentieth century—the ideologies of the artist-designer.



Edgar Miller at work in his studio workshop.

### *Out of the Ashes*

The Art Institute of Chicago and its School were founded in 1879 out of the ashes of an older, artist-run organization. In contrast with its predecessor, the new Institute was the project of a group of businessmen convinced that arts education was vital to the

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<sup>4</sup> R. L. Duffus, *The American Renaissance* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1928).

commercial success of their city. They were not alone in this conviction. In 1852 the British had responded to concerns over the poor reception of their applied arts at the previous year's Great Exhibition (the first of a long series of fiercely competitive World's Fairs) by establishing South Kensington—a complex of art schools and teaching collections emphasizing historic design and the decorative arts that forms the nucleus of today's Victoria and Albert Museum.

South Kensington marked the beginning of the design reform movement known as Arts and Crafts, aimed at raising the quality and status of British decorative arts—and its precepts represented a clear contrast with the tradition of freehand drawing and figure study long associated with the renowned French Academy's School of Fine Arts, founded in the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> South Kensington style—the flattening of natural forms based on geometric convention—would become by the 1870s the basis of compulsory public school drawing education in Boston, Massachusetts, satisfying the desire of prominent local industrialists there to provide drawing education for industry by exploiting popular and patriotic belief in drawing's less tangible qualities: that its practice cultivated habits of neatness and accuracy, taste and imagination, and the powers of invention.<sup>6</sup>

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and institutions like it across the United States were somewhat more eclectic in their approach.<sup>7</sup> The SAIC, for example, emphasized such traditionally fine arts offerings as figure drawing and anatomy study in its day school but with a South Kensington-inspired component on Saturdays and evenings: classes in ornamental design, woodcarving, frescoing, mosaic, and stained glass attended mainly by men engaged in decorative arts and design and in Chicago's vast commercial lithography industry. Yet the division of the SAIC into elite academy by day and working-class technical school by night (and weekend) failed to satisfy for long.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the academic tradition of art education, see Carl Goldstein, *Teaching Art: Academies and Schools from Vasari to Albers* (Cambridge, England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). On the South Kensington approach, see Stuart Macdonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (New York: Elsevier Publishing Company, Inc., 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Paul E. Bolin, "The Massachusetts Drawing Act of 1870: Industrial Mandate or Democratic Maneuver?" pp59-68 in *Framing the Past: Essays on Art Education*, Donald Soucy and Mary Ann Stankiewicz, eds. (Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> According to Nancy Austin, even schools founded specifically to train students for trade and manufacture in actual practice also combined fine arts with their design curricula. Nancy Austin, "Educating American Designers for Industry, 1853-1903," pp187-206 in Georgia Brady Barnhill, Diana Korzenik, and Caroline F. Sloat, eds., *The Cultivation of Artists in Nineteenth-Century America* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1997).

In 1886, SAIC professor Louis J. Millet, who trained in Paris alongside his friend, the architect Louis Sullivan as both an architect and a decorator, launched the School's first Department of Decorative Designing, in order, as he described it, "to unite sculptors and painters in the practical endeavor of decorating buildings and to effect a closer rapport between artists and artisans."<sup>8</sup> Three years later, Millet would add a course in architectural design, the basis of what would become, in 1893, the Chicago School of Architecture in association with the Armour Institute of Technology (today's Illinois Institute of Technology). Soon, educational leaders across the country were advocating for the integration of traditional aesthetics with industrial art education.<sup>9</sup>

This is the vision that came to spectacular fruition in Chicago at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: the shift is embodied nowhere more tangibly than in the physical structure still occupied by the Art Institute today. Built in the French, fine arts style to house educational and religious congresses at the Exposition, the Art Institute of Chicago sits proudly on the remains of the former exhibit hall of the Chicago Interstate Industrial Exposition. The Exposition Hall was erected in 1872, one year after the Great Chicago Fire in order to demonstrate to the outside world that business would continue as usual in the devastated city. Applied arts courses at SAIC would be fully integrated with the academic day program by 1897, the year that programs in what were described as the "modern arts" of illustration and advertising were introduced as well.<sup>10</sup> But, even as schools like the SAIC moved to modernize their curricula, with an eye towards streamlining the production of art, public debate was encouraging the association of art with the ideological work of nation-building.

*"The Decorator Works for the World!"*

In 1901, Will H. Low, a mural painter who got his start in Chicago at the Columbian Exposition, exhorted his fellow artists to move outside of what he called the "hothouse" studio—away, in other words, from an elite, private patronage—in order to have an effect on the larger society. "The Decorator Works for the World!" was Low's impassioned plea, made in the pages of *International Monthly*, a self-described

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<sup>8</sup> *The Art Institute of Chicago, Circular of Instruction for the School [...] for 1886-1887* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1886).

<sup>9</sup> According to influential educator Henry Turner Bailey, State Agent for the Promotion of Industrial Drawing for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts from 1888-1901 and, later, editor of *School Arts Magazine*, "any exercise which tends to develop a finer perception of beauty, a more discriminating taste has an industrial value." In Henry T. Bailey, "Report," in *Fifty-Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Education [...] 1889-90* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., State Printers, 1891), 201-213.

<sup>10</sup> *The Art Institute of Chicago, Circular of Instruction for the School [...] for 1898-1899* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1898).

“magazine of contemporary thought.”<sup>11</sup> Low made his rallying cry in the context of a national debate in the early twentieth century over the issue of what was (or what should be) an authentic American art. For Low, and others, this meant an art that did not withdraw into private experience. A privatized art was created primarily for exhibition or as a marker of social distinction. An authentically American art, by contrast, should be for the public: it should enter into daily life; and be a democratic art for a democratic society. Mural painting, a practice that got a huge boost in Chicago when extensive mural commissions were executed for the public spaces of the Columbian Exposition, was one model of what a democratic art could be.<sup>12</sup> The overarching idea, according to Low, was that American art was best when it was “decorative”—that is, a recognized part of a larger ensemble, the way a mural is integrated into an architectural program.



Muralist Will H. Low in his Bronxville, NY studio, c. 1897 (left). Edgar Miller with mural project in his studio, c. 1952 (right).

The fact that we, today, often hear the term “decoration” as pejorative—as something lesser than the elite arts of painting and sculpture—demonstrates how far removed we have become from this earlier, idealistic paradigm. But Low’s championship of a public, or decorative role for art won the day in the United States, at least in the first half of the twentieth century. It became an imperative of educators and industrial leaders that art schools train “decorators” (artist-designers) capable of producing the artistic

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<sup>11</sup> Will H. Low, “National Expression in American Art,” *The International Monthly, A Magazine of Contemporary Thought* 3:2 (March 1901): 231-251.

<sup>12</sup> Another was the popular entertainment known as the Cyclorama. According to museum historian Gene Meier, Chicago had six of these structures in 1893, designed for in-the-round viewing of spectacular painted illusions.

ensembles that an industrial democracy demanded. Increasingly, Americans would understand the process of educational reform and the emergence of a national expression in art as wholly interconnected.<sup>13</sup>

Sensational new pedagogies dominated the SAIC in the early twentieth century, including those mass-marketed by educational specialists such as Arthur Wesley Dow of Pratt Institute, a design and applied arts school in the Brooklyn borough of New York (and later of Columbia University Teachers College) and Denman Waldo Ross, a popular lecturer on the theory of design at Harvard University's graduate schools of architecture and the fine arts (today's Graduate School of Design).<sup>14</sup> According to Dow, a pedagogical focus on composition (to use the somewhat more elevated term he preferred) would level past hierarchies of art: "Composition," Dow wrote, "is made the basis of all work in drawing, painting, designing, and modeling—of house decoration and industrial arts—of normal courses and of art training for children." Under Ross's system, nature's own "essence," distilled through scrupulously objective observations, was offered as the true source of all knowledge of design. By 1911, the SAIC had so enthusiastically embraced these latest trends in pedagogy that, upon the death that year of its renowned figure drawing instructor John Vanderpoel, Art Institute Director William M. R. French was moved to observe that, in line with the trend of the time, the School of the Art Institute had become "a modern school of color and composition."<sup>15</sup>

It appears that, in his first year as a student at SAIC in 1917, Edgar Miller worked with several instructors associated with this progressive approach to education, including muralist John W. Norton, who became close friends with Miller, book designer Ralph Fletcher Seymour (a publisher of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, Seymour donated an early print by Miller to the Art Institute in 1941), the illustrators Allen Phillbrick and Elmer Forsberg (the latter perhaps best-known as the teacher of Grant Wood), decorative designer and sculptor Albin Polasek, painting instructor Enella Benedict (she was founder in 1892 of the art school at Hull House, the celebrated west side Settlement House started by social reformer Jane Addams and a center for Arts and Crafts practice in Chicago), and Frank Dillon and Jessie P. Lacey, both associated with the Art Institute's heavily

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<sup>13</sup> Low addressed this educational aspect as well. W. H. Low, "The Education of the Artist, Here and Now," *Scribner's Magazine* 25 (June 1899): 766-767.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur W. Dow, *Composition, A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education* (Boston, MA, Joseph Bowles Company, 1899). Dow's book was still in print some ten years after his death in 1922. In 1997, the University of California Press reissued the 13th edition, first published by Doubleday, Garden City, NY, in 1920. Denman W. Ross's *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony, Balance, Rhythm* (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907), returned to print in 2010.

<sup>15</sup> W.M.R. French, in *The Art Institute of Chicago, Thirty-Third Annual Report for the Year 1911-1912* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1912).



Dow-influenced teacher-training program.<sup>16</sup> The distance is great, however, between these instructors' essentially romantic notion of what it meant to be part of a modern school (as Director French had described SAIC) and the increasingly systematic vision of art education that was soon to emerge.

### *A New Curriculum*

Two developments at the Art Institute in 1916 are indicative of the changes to come. First was the addition of Gunsaulus Hall. Spanning the railroad tracks and named for the longtime Art Institute trustee who was also founder and first president of the Armour Institute, Gunsaulus Hall was built as a gallery for the permanent display of decorative and industrial art.<sup>17</sup> The second change was the hiring of a new director, George Eggers, past head of the art department at Chicago Normal, a teacher-training school. The opening of a gallery for industrial art and the hiring of a progressive educator as director reflect a growing recognition at the Art Institute that the arts were to be judged on their social utility.<sup>18</sup> When George Eggers took the reins in October 1916 as only the second-ever director of the Art Institute (the position was filled temporarily by Institute Secretary Newton H. Carpenter following Director French's death in 1914), it must have seemed to him that he had a mandate to reorganize the School's curriculum. He immediately added two classes—elementary decorative design and elementary picture design—to the courses required of beginning students in the School's core academic program.



Chicago's Lakefront, c1917. The Art Institute's new Gunsaulus Hall is in foreground.

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<sup>16</sup> See *The Art Institute of Chicago, Circular of Instruction of the School [...] for 1917-1918* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1917).

<sup>17</sup> "Hall of Industrial Art," *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 9:8 (December, 1915), 112.

<sup>18</sup> Art Institute *director pro tem* Newton Carpenter, the man who hired George Eggers, discussed "How the Art Institute of Chicago Has Increased its Usefulness," before a meeting of the American Association of Museums in Washington, D.C., May 16, 1916.

Eggers' pedagogical vision emerged in full force in SAIC's catalogue for 1918-1919, which outlines a new curriculum based on a division into three parts: an introductory program, called the Lower School, which offered basic courses in drawing and design (including color) to all untrained students; a Middle School, in which design, normal and commercial art, illustration, and crafts were studied side-by-side with elementary painting and sculpture; and an Upper School, in which advanced students pursued painting and sculpture in an Atelier (or studio) system with recognized masters. Eggers also consolidated the School's various design courses into a single Department of Design. "This reorganization," Eggers wrote, "recognizes not only the responsibility which the art school owes to American industry, but takes full cognizance of the responsibility of the school to the individual whose vocation must render him a livelihood."<sup>19</sup>

Eggers's most radical change by far was the introduction of a first-year program of general studies. Students enrolling at the Art Institute could now expect a full year of training in the formal elements of art, including line, shape, color, and their harmonious arrangement before advancing into specialist study. In fact, Eggers would refashion the SAIC into a center for the very latest developments in scientific pedagogy—including the wildly successful *Dynamic Symmetry*, promoted vigorously in the 1920s by its Canadian inventor, the illustrator Jay Hambidge.<sup>20</sup> A compositional system based on the mathematical theory of proportion known variously as the logarithmic spiral, the Golden Section, or the Fibonacci series, *Dynamic Symmetry* deployed an infinitely flexible sequence of diagonals, the so-called "whirling squares," the "laws" of which, according to Hambidge, had been distilled by the ancient Egyptians and Greeks (from their observations of the organic growth of shells and the sequence of leaf distribution in plants) and rediscovered by him. *Dynamic Symmetry* was, Hambidge insisted, a system for generating ideal proportions that applied equally as well to furniture design, architectural decoration, page-layout, and to the composition of paintings.

Controversial among archeologists, *Dynamic Symmetry* was an unqualified success with designers and artists. Perhaps the first painters to embrace Hambidge's theories, which they encountered in informal discourse around 1916 or 1917, were the Ashcan school realists George Bellows and his friends, including mentor Robert Henri.<sup>21</sup> George Eggers would bring George Bellows to the SAIC as visiting instructor in conjunction with a major exhibition of the painter's work he was organizing for the Art

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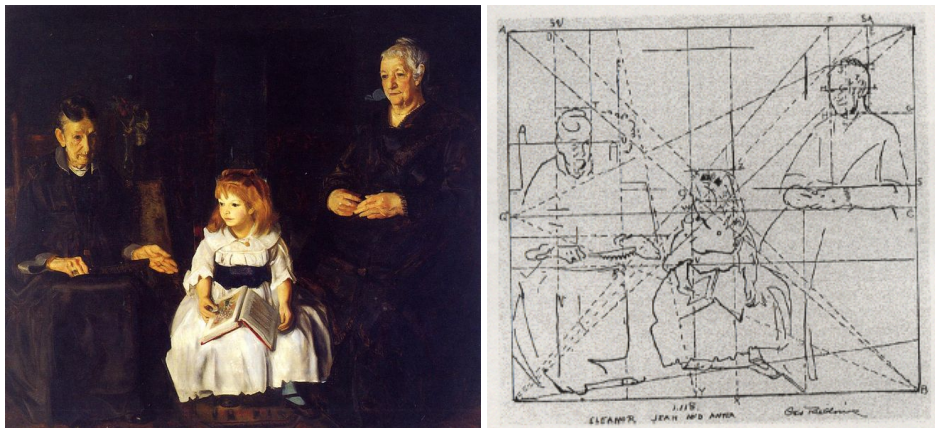
<sup>19</sup> *The Art Institute of Chicago, Circular of Instruction for the School [...] for 1918-1919* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1918).

<sup>20</sup> Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1920).

<sup>21</sup> Hambidge's *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition as Used by the Artists* (Cambridge, MA: The author, 1923) includes a retrospective sketch made by Bellows that illustrates his use of the system in the painting, *Elinor, Jean, and Anna*, 1920.

Institute in 1919. During the three months that Bellows spent teaching and painting in Chicago, *Dynamic Symmetry* was the basis of his practice. Before he left, Bellows even convinced Eggers that Hambidge should deliver the Institute’s prestigious Scammon Lectures for 1920—a visit delayed until April 1921, when Hambidge delivered six lectures on the general topic of “*Dynamic Symmetry* in Design.”<sup>22</sup>

We don’t know whether Edgar Miller attended these talks by Hambidge. However, we do know that Miller encountered the ideology of *Dynamic Symmetry* at SAIC—and that it made quite an impression on him. Miller had already demonstrated his allegiance to the artist-designer ideal, as evidenced by the decorative works he exhibited in Spring 1918 as part of the Institute’s chapter of the Art Students League.<sup>23</sup> Then, in Summer or Fall 1919, Miller had a brief but transformative encounter in the hallways of SAIC with George Bellows. Demanding the older artist enlighten him as to the true meaning of art, Miller was rewarded with a demonstration by Bellows of the “invisible structure” underlying all painting. This was, of course, *Dynamic Symmetry*. And, though later in life Miller would dismiss *Dynamic Symmetry* as “too rigid,” we know from his manuscript that he maintained a lifelong fascination with analytical approaches to composition—and the concomitant belief that general principles connected the fine and the applied arts.



George Bellows, *Eleanor, Jean, and Anna*, 1920, final oil painting (left) and preparatory sketch (right).

### *Towards the Artistic Establishment*

The circumstances under which Miller severed his student relationship with the SAIC are unclear. Miller describes these as less than optimal, though his selection for the Art Students League exhibition in 1918 by a veritable *Who’s Who* of School faculty and

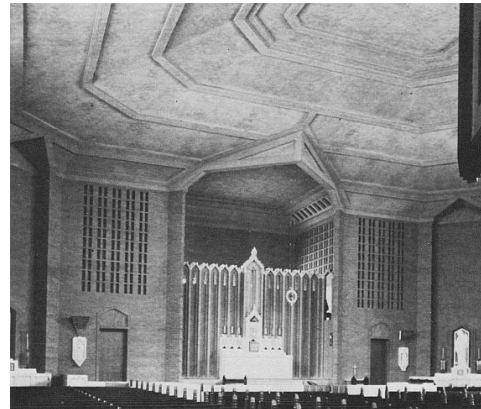
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<sup>22</sup> “The Scammon Lectures,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 15:3 (March 1921): 130.

<sup>23</sup> *Catalogue of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Exhibition of the Art Students’ League of Chicago* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1918).

administrators *and* his receipt in the Fall of 1919 of a coveted Logan Prize for the batik wall-hangings he entered into the Institute’s *Eighteenth Annual Applied Arts Exhibition* suggest otherwise.<sup>24</sup> It was not unusual at this time for a student to leave art school without a certificate—let alone a diploma or degree, neither of which was offered by the SAIC prior to 1929. Nor is it entirely clear what Miller did immediately subsequent to leaving school: his autobiographical accounts in the archives of the Edgar Miller Legacy describe a period of time spent in New York, working in the film animation studio of a former architect and friend who, in 1916, had designed the Arts and Crafts-style high school Miller attended in Idaho Falls.

Presumably Miller forged an important link in this period with fellow SAIC student Sol Kogen, with whom he would collaborate on the Carl Street and Kogen-Miller studio buildings in the late 1920s. Miller spoke as well of his preference at this time for the art studios at Hull-House, a place with which Kogen had a long affiliation. We know that Miller takes several important steps towards legitimacy and the artistic establishment in Chicago in the 1920s. By 1921, Miller appears to have been working for the married couple, sculptor Alfonso Iannelli and illustrator Margaret Spaulding Iannelli.<sup>25</sup> The Iannellis had come to Chicago in 1914 at the invitation of Frank Lloyd Wright, in order for Alfonso to work on Wright’s Midway Gardens; Alfonso subsequently produced a number of sculptural decorations in collaboration with architects including George Elmslie and Barry Byrne.



Alfonso Iannelli works on ornamentals for the façade of the Adler Planetarium, Chicago, 1930 (left). Interior of St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church in Racine, WI, 1925. Architect: Barry Byrne (with ornamentals by Alfonso Iannelli) (right).

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<sup>24</sup> “Current and Past Exhibitions,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 13:8 (November, 1919): 123.

<sup>25</sup> The exhibition, “Modernism’s Messengers: The Art of Alfonso and Margaret Iannelli,” curated by Tim Samuelson and on view May 18 – August 17, 2013 at the Chicago Cultural Center, explored the productive relationship between the designers.

According to the catalog of a special exhibition of Alfonso Iannelli's work at the Art Institute in 1921, it was through association with these "architects of radical tendencies" that the sculptor moved closer to the artist-designer paradigm:

Mr. Iannelli's desire to get away from the conventional idea of sculpture as such and to adapt it to some utilitarian purpose has led him to become interested in producing other forms of decoration for use in the home, such as lighting fixtures, rugs, and decorative paintings. His early training as a silver-smith has given him an ease in working in wood and ceramics as well as in metal.<sup>26</sup>

This suggests that, in addition to the contacts Miller gained with important commercial employers like Marshall Field's department store while in the employ of the Iannellis, he also found a role model—in terms both of his practice as an artist-designer and of his aesthetic preferences (according to the architectural historian Vince Michael, Iannelli defined modern design based on a trip he made with Byrne to Europe in the early summer of 1924, as "a curvilinear and colorful expressionism" rather than the emerging rectilinear purism that will be identified, after 1932, as characteristic of the European avant-garde).<sup>27</sup> Iannelli taught at SAIC throughout the 1920s, eventually becoming chair of the Design Department in 1928. Presumably, then, it was Iannelli who brought Miller back to SAIC in 1923-1924, to teach classes in Historical Ornament and Decorative Designing in the still-developing program.<sup>28</sup>

The renewal of his SAIC connection led Miller to his first documented encounter with the innovative Chicago architect Andrew Rebori, with whom he would collaborate fruitfully on a wide variety of projects in the 1930s including: the Madonna della Strada chapel at Loyola University Chicago in 1931; the "Streets of Paris," for the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933; the Cascades and the 885 nightclubs of 1934-1935; the Fisher Studios and the Ernest Kuhn House in 1936; and the Weintraub House of 1940-1941. The occasion of Miller and Rebori's initial encounter was the Second Annual Batik Ball, a 1923 fund-raiser held in support of a proposed Art Institute School of Industrial Art. Rebori was general director of what was described in newspaper accounts as a fantastical pageant, with decorations designed by Miller.<sup>29</sup> Miller was awarded a second Logan Prize the following fall, at the 1924 applied arts annual (or "Modern Decorative Arts Annual" as the show was renamed that year), which brought him to the attention of juror Howard Van Doren Shaw, a society architect working in the craftsman style with

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<sup>26</sup> *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 15:6 (Nov-Dec 1921), 177.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent L. Michael, "Expressing the Modern: Barry Byrne in 1920s Europe," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 69:4 (December 2010).

<sup>28</sup> *Art School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Catalogue for 1923-1924* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1923).

<sup>29</sup> "Batik Ball, True to Its Symbol, Affair of Youth, Beauty, Color," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 1, 1923, 19.

whom Miller renovated the interior of a guesthouse at the Texas ranch of a prominent Chicago family in 1925.<sup>30</sup>

*At the Center of Bohemian Life*

Miller also moved in Chicago's more rarified bohemian circles in the 1920s, a period in which designers, craftsmen, artists, dancers, architects, writers, and performers co-mingled. The U.S. Census for 1920 shows Miller living as one of several artists and performers who boarded in the South side home of sculptor and experimental dancer Louise Wall Moore (known to her many admirers as "Princess Lou").<sup>31</sup> City of Chicago telephone directories from 1922 through 1924 show Miller living on East Chicago Avenue, in the North side neighborhood of "Tower Town," known as much for its politically and aesthetically radical inhabitants as for its prominently positioned Water Tower (a fanciful survivor of the Great Chicago Fire).

Miller was evidently at the very center of the unconventional artistic life of Tower Town. In a poster advertising the Second Annual Exhibition of the No-Jury Society, 1923, Miller is described as "The Blond Boy Michelangelo," who "sculpts, paints, batiks, decorates china, [and] makes drawings, woodcuts, etchings, [and] lithographs" (the No-Jury movement harkened back to the series of defiantly unofficial exhibitions mounted by the Parisian avant-garde starting in the 1860s—or to a century earlier, during the French Revolution, when the conservative nature of selection juries was first recognized). The young journalist Ben Hecht, who would go on to write screenplays for Hollywood, co-edited a weekly broadsheet he called the *Chicago Literary Times*, which, in October 1923, published a series of articles extolling the antics of the No-Jury Society. Miller is featured on almost every page of the issue, identified in one instance as "the piquantly unbarbered gentleman asleep on the pink couch, one of the star exhibits of the [bohemian] district" and as "one of the outstanding Primitives. His work is naïve and nude, and in his right lapel Mr. Miller wears a button with a photo of [French artist Henri] Matisse on it." "Were we to wait until daylight, little bourgeoisie," the author

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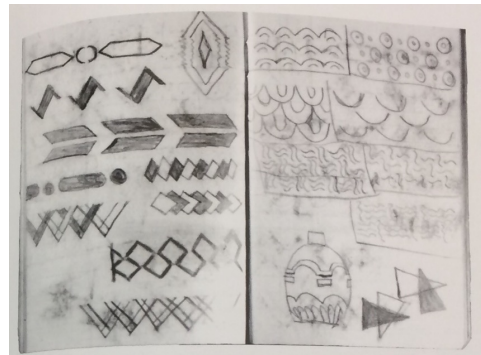
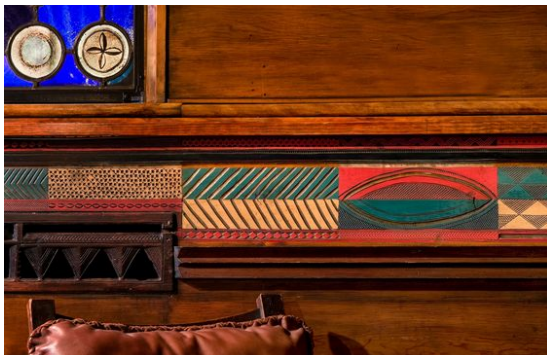
<sup>30</sup> For notice of Miller's award, see *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 19:2 (February 1925): 23. Miller's work in Texas is documented in biographical materials held by the Edgar Miller Legacy.

<sup>31</sup> *Census for 1920, Cook County, Illinois*, January 1, 1920, shows Miller, age 21, living at 5476 South Ridgewood Court, as a "roomer" with the widowed Louise Moore, sculptor. Also listed as roomers at that address were artists Lucille Hyde, age 23, and Lester Luther, an actor and member of the Chicago Little Theater in 1914 (as was Moore). Lucille Hyde, identified as a widow, is likely Lucille Miller, born 1897, Edgar's sister. Mrs. Louise Wall Moore graduated from SAIC as part of the class of 1901-1902, a group that included Miller's instructors John Norton, Allen Philbrick, and Albert Krehbiel. On Louise Moore's career as "Princess Lou," see Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (New York: Covici-Friede, Inc., 1933).

continues, “we would see Mr. Miller journey forth with a pail and a brush to do his bit in the evolution of the town as a plasterer.”

Miller lived in several Tower Town locations, among them a carriage house or barn behind 825 North Dearborn in 1925, a place he dubbed The House at the End of the Street (it had its own address, 19 West Pearson). There, or in the space he occupied in 1926 above the Dill Pickle Club, a literal hole-in-the-wall behind 867 North Dearborn (also known as 18 West Tooker Alley) and frequented by a radical clientele, Miller hosted exhibitions of his own work and that of the occasional international avant-garde passing through Chicago, including the expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn, who visited New York, Buffalo, Detroit, and Chicago in 1924—and published a photographic memoir of his experience, and Albert Bloch, the only American to exhibit as part of *Der Blaue Reiter*, the artists group organized in Munich, Germany in the 1910s by the abstract painter Vasily Kandinsky (Bloch lived in Germany from 1909-1921, returning to the United States to teach at SAIC for one year before accepting a permanent teaching position at the University of Kansas in 1923).

Moving in quick succession between semi-public spaces of his own devising surely earned Miller a reputation as someone who knew how to transform a tired old place into something magical. When he teamed up in 1927 with his former SAIC classmate Sol Kogen, magic, indeed, ensued. With Kogen handling the business end of the collaboration, Miller redesigned and renovated a number of older buildings into live-work studio-residences for use by artists. Perhaps the best known of these are the two multi-unit dwellings still extant in Chicago’s Old Town neighborhood, the Carl Street Studios, part of what is now the West Burton Place Historic District, and the Kogen-Miller and Glasner Studio-complex on Wells Street. Both projects were developed with the principle of community uppermost in mind: beautifully wrought, original artworks created in wood, glass, metal, and plaster combine with scavenged treasures and creatively repurposed brick, tile, and other building materials to create unusual spaces, indoors and out, meant to inspire their occupants.



Decorative patterns at Kogen-Miller Studios (1929) made by Edgar Miller, Jesus Torres and collaborators (left). Page from Jesus Torres notebook showing Best-Maugard diagrams, *date unknown* (right).

Integral to this process were the contributions of Jesus Torres, whom Miller hired to assist him as work began on Carl Street. Torres, who has been described as one of the most successful artist-designers to emerge from the studios at Hull-House, was a former agricultural worker born in Mexico in 1898 (making him just a year or so older than Miller). Torres had made his way to Hull-House upon arrival in Chicago in 1924, initially to learn English. Fortunately for Torres—and for us—1924 was also the year SAIC ceramicist Myrtle Merritt French began teaching pottery classes at Hull-House, in response to the urging of her colleague Enella Benedict. French taught her students using what might be described as a southern variant of *Dynamic Symmetry*—the new design technique developed in the early 1920s by the Mexican artist and educator Adolfo Best Maugard. As a young man, Best, as he was known, was commissioned by the pioneering cultural anthropologist Franz Boas to provide illustrations of pre-Hispanic materials being excavated from the Valley of Mexico. From this experience and his own, subsequent research, Best became convinced that a small number of essential forms or patterns, present in all indigenous art, could be used to generate any conceivable figurative or naturalistic representation.<sup>32</sup>

#### *A Non-Hierarchical View of Cultures*

The cultural relativism, or non-hierarchical view of cultures that led Myrtle French to adopt the theories of Best Maugard was an important component of the educational program at SAIC. In 1928, the School's catalogue gave the collections of Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History a status equivalent to those of the Art Institute, describing both as a constant source of reference for students in connection with their design courses.<sup>33</sup> This was the same year the Carnegie Corporation identified SAIC as the site of a renaissance in American design. Forceful language in the School's catalogue supports the claim:

The demand for fine designing is stronger in America today than ever before. An urgent need exists for competent designers and it is the province of this department to produce designers of ability. The courses are based upon the work of the Lower School. The department offers comprehensive courses in Architectural Decoration, Interior Decoration,

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<sup>32</sup> Torres, Merritt French, Hull House Kilns, and the design theories of Adolfo Best Maugard are discussed by Cheryl Ganz in her essay, "Shaping Clay, Shaping Lives: The Hull-House Kilns," in *Pots of Promise: Mexicans and Pottery at Hull-House, 1920-1940*, Cheryl R. Ganz and Margaret Strobel, eds. (Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> *The Art School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Catalog of Courses [...] 1928-1929* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1928). According to inventory records at the Field Museum, Miller donated a robe of Moro origin in 1927, suggesting he was spending time in their collections—with students, or perhaps on his own.



Textiles, Ceramics, and various articles for practical use; Advertising Design, Lettering, Fashion Illustration and the Printing Arts.<sup>34</sup>

Edgar Miller was right in the middle of these developments at SAIC between 1927 and 1929, not coincidentally the years that Alfonso Iannelli was head of the design department. Miller taught drawing and composition to beginning students in the Lower School and also Interior Decoration in the evening, in a class populated mostly by professionals (described in the School's 1928-1929 catalog as "a course in original design for the arrangement, decoration and color scheme of interiors, with attention given to such decorative elements as furniture, wall papers, fabrics, rugs, lighting fixtures and other accessories. A working course—not a lecture course—which requires preparation in drawing and design").

Miller's broad interest in culture makes it highly likely he crossed paths at SAIC with Helen Gardner, instructor of art history from 1920-1946 and author of the perennially popular art history survey text, *Art Through the Ages* (based on her classes, which were required of all first-year students).<sup>35</sup> Like Miller, Gardner insisted students look beneath the surfaces of artworks to find underlying, universal principles of design, and she frequently used their diagrams to illustrate the several editions of her book. Gardner's unified art history survey—which, atypically for the time, covered the globe and touched upon a wide range of cultural expression—was introduced at SAIC in 1920 as part of the efforts made by Director Eggers to rationalize the curriculum. As with the introductory composition courses, the art history survey was intended to provide students with a foundation for what had become a highly fragmented pursuit. The SAIC catalog of 1926-1927 made this goal explicit, describing art history in unabashedly compensatory

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<sup>34</sup> *Catalog of Courses*, 1928.

<sup>35</sup> First published by Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, in 1926, Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* was, if not the first single-volume history of art in the United States, then the first to achieve widespread popularity. According to Gardner's devoted student, photographer Harold Allen, who penned her entry in Edward T. James, Janet W. James, Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, Volume 2* (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974), 13-15, the book went through three editions and thirty-nine printings between 1926 and 1948 for a total of 446,479 copies, of which 97,196 were sold in bookstores and the rest, 349,283 as textbooks. Following the author's death in 1946, the book's title became the more familiar *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* for the fourth edition, revised by Sumner McKnight Crosby and the Yale Department of Art History and published in 1959. Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey collaborated on the next five editions of the book, 1970–1990, with contributions to the ninth edition made by Diane Kirkpatrick. A tenth edition appeared in 1995, revised by Tansey and Fred S. Kleiner; Kleiner has been author or coauthor of the five editions published since 2000.

terms: as “an intensive study of certain phases of art so presented as to be of particular value to students as their training becomes more specialized.”

The 1948 edition of Gardner’s book represents the fullest expression of both the integrated fine and industrial arts ideal at SAIC *and* the benefits of cross-cultural appropriation: “Because today and only today, the concept of one total world inescapably thrusts itself forward,” Gardner wrote, “I have been motivated in preparing this third edition of *Art Through the Ages*, both in the incorporation of new material and in the reorganization of the old, by a desire to present a world panorama of art.” The challenge for Gardner was to correct what she called the “Europo-centrism” of art history (Gardner’s use predates the more familiar term, *Eurocentrism*, which emerges out of Marxist economic models in the 1970s). Gardner’s ingenious solution was to treat world history as horizontal rather than vertical—a device many find difficult to implement successfully even today.<sup>36</sup> True to her word, she took the historical scheme then in favor—the four great periods of Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern—and used them against their narrative grain as hefty cross-sections of simultaneous activity. In Gardner’s inclusive vision, Medieval Chinese artifacts commingled with the Renaissance art of Northwest Coast Indians, the whole culminating optimistically in a chapter devoted to the utopian internationalism of the modern industrial arts.

440 RENAISSANCE AND POST-RENAISSANCE ART



Fig. 577. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece, Adoration of the Lamb. Central Panel. W. 8 ft. 1415-32. Church of St. Bavo, Ghent.

Suddenly, in the early fifteenth century, painting on a major scale appeared in the work of the Van Eyck brothers, Hubert (about 1370-1426) and Jan (about 1385-1449). Not that miniature-painting ceased. In fact the Flemings, Pol de Limbourg and his brother, at the court of the Duke of Burgundy, were producing such books as the *Très Riches Heures* (Fig. 455) at just about the time that the Van Eyck brothers were painting the *Ghent Altarpiece* (Fig. 577).<sup>1</sup> This altarpiece is a good example of the folding altarpiece typical of the North. When closed it

<sup>1</sup> This was commissioned of Hubert in 1415, left unfinished at his death in 1426, and completed by Jan in 1432. It seems impossible to disentangle the work of the two brothers.

C. PAINTING

In northern Europe no great wall surfaces offered the painter an opportunity to develop a monumental kind of wall decoration such as the Italians produced in their mosaics and frescoes. For the evolution of the Gothic aimed ever to eliminate the wall by reducing the structure to a framework of piers and vaulting and by filling the open spaces with glass, the great mural decoration of the North. Hence the Northern painter’s activity in the Gothic age was confined chiefly to painting miniatures and illuminations, unless one includes also the making of windows, which is handling of color, though not with the brush. In fact the windows in their colors, the composition, backgrounds, and drawing bear close relation to the miniatures despite the difference of medium.

ART IN FLANDERS 441

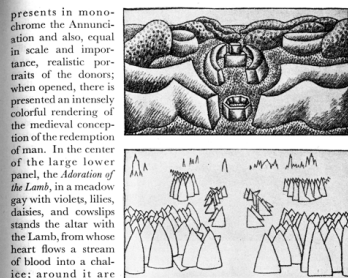


Fig. 577 (a). Analysis of the Adoration of the Lamb to show: (a) the organization of depth and the play upon texture; (b) the use of a sharp triangle as a basic unit shape.

presents in monochrome the Annunciation and also, equal in scale and importance, realistic portraits of the donors; when opened, there is presented an intensely colorful rendering of the medieval conception of the redemption of man. In the center of the large lower panel, the *Adoration of the Lamb*, in a meadow gay with violets, lilies, daisies, and cowslips stands the altar with the Lamb, from whose heart flows a stream of blood into a chalice; around it are kneeling angels; in front is the fountain of life surrounded by kneeling Apostles. Toward the center from the four corners great throngs of people approach, clad in rich robes, through a country where rosebushes and vines are laden with flowers; in the background stretches a varied landscape with richly wooded hills, rivers, and towns, and above this an early-morning sky. Over the altar appears a dove from which rays descend to all the groups below. Above are the majestic figures of God the Father, John the Baptist, and the Virgin, who sits tranquilly, reading a book. Her hair falls loose over her shoulders; her elaborate crown is decorated with rubies, topaz, and pearls, with roses, lilies, and harebells, symbols of her virtues; seven shining stars scattered over the inscriptions of the arch form a supercrown. Her robe of blue is trimmed with an elaborately jeweled panel of gold and black brocade. The soft texture of the hair, the luster of the pearls, the gleam of the other jewels, in fact all the details, are indicated with extraordinary realism. But despite these realistic renderings of the detail, the *Adoration* scene is subordinate to a simple symmetrical organization with the Lamb as a focal point. The altar is placed on the vertical axis and about it swing two con-

Student diagrams featured in Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 1936

<sup>36</sup> For more on Helen Gardner and art history at SAIC, see my “Art History’s Other Global Moment – Chicago, 1948,” *Panorama* 2:2 (Fall 2016). Available at <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/tag/barbara-jaffee/>.

Miller's own unpublished manuscript shows how deeply he, too, was steeped in theories of the unity of the arts. In 1935, Edgar Miller was one of several speakers engaged to give the SAIC's annual Scammon Fund Lectures. His topic, "The Meaning of Art to the Artist—Its Motivating Force, Intention, and Identity" was, on the one hand, the culmination of the problem that had preoccupied him since he cornered George Bellows in the hallways of SAIC in 1919 and, on the other, the beginning of Miller's conviction that he could—and should—articulate his own analytical system. Miller's notebooks from the 1970s are brimming with ideas, building from the insight that the invention of line was the beginning of art—"more significant than the wheel, the bow, and the lever" he maintained. In its final form, the manuscript exhibits all the elements common to early-twentieth century ideologies of the artist-designer, but in an original combination—nods to standardization and efficiency (albeit achieved intuitively rather than derived from a mathematical formula as in *Dynamic Symmetry* or Denman Ross's *Pure Design*), and also to the artistic originality and spontaneity we know were championed by Arthur Dow in 1899. Miller's cultural relativism is evident throughout the manuscript as well, with examples chosen to be representative of World Art and not just Europe.

### *Against the Grain*

As we honor Edgar Miller today for his virtuosic versatility, we wonder, how could such a pivotal figure have been forgotten? Edgar Miller, artist-designer, did not fit narratives about the history of American art that were written starting primarily at mid-twentieth century, in the context of the Cold War that developed in the 1950s between, on the one side, the United States and its allies and, on the other, the Soviet Union. It is no coincidence that these histories emphasized an individual's freedom of expression, a crucial element of the ideology of liberal internationalism, along with the idea that the United States was ready to assume the mantle of cultural progress once associated Europe. A generation of art historians writing in the aftermath of World War II assumed that it was the responsibility of the United States to continue the pursuit of artistic progress that had characterized European art in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, we use a term borrowed from French military history, *avant-garde* (or *vanguard*, in English) to describe the most adventurous and experimental artists of the period. Abstract art was at the apex of this project, and, not surprisingly, it was abstraction in American art that received the lion's share of critical attention. In practical terms this has meant the promotion above all of a movement in painting and sculpture based in New York, Abstract Expressionism, against which other regional arts movements have been judged.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> As in, for example, Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). The politics of this cultural moment are discussed in Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).



Diagrams from Edgar Miller's  
unpublished manuscript, c1984

In post-World War II Chicago, the school of architecture associated with German refugee architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his students at the Illinois Institute of Technology was celebrated for its minimalism and rejection of historical styles; more importantly, for our purposes, because this school seemed to be the culmination of a continuous march towards abstraction in architecture that began here in the 1870s, it lifted architecture in Chicago to the very center of international attention.<sup>38</sup> By contrast,

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<sup>38</sup> Beginning with Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

Chicago's post-war painters and sculptors, most of them associated as students or through their teaching with the School of the Art Institute, were perceived by East coast champions of Abstract Expressionism as clinging, counter-productively, to out-dated forms of figuration.<sup>39</sup> The polarization created by these generalized narratives opened wide fissures in our understanding of twentieth century American art and design history. Edgar Miller, quite simply, slipped between these cracks.

It is no coincidence that we are rediscovering Edgar Miller now, as we experience the breakdown of these older historical paradigms. But it is equally important to recognize that the dominant ideology of the artist-designer in the early twentieth-century—in a word, Formalism—was never meant for its own sake, as idealized exercises in shape and color (as many mid-century critics later would insist), but was indicative instead of a deeply held belief: that the elements of form and their arrangement are unifying principles of all artistic practice, across media, through time, and around the globe. Edgar Miller's extraordinary range of artworks were made for public use and enjoyment; his art, as intended, entered into daily life and transformed social experience in very positive ways. Edgar Miller most certainly worked for the world.

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<sup>39</sup> The strong association of Chicago with figurative expressionism is explored by Franz Schulze, *Fantastic Images, Chicago Art Since 1945* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1972).