

## Moholy-Nagy at the Guggenheim Museum: an Art-History view from Cincinnati

by

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Many art-historical strands have come neatly together in the current exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York: *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present* (May 27 to September 7, 2016), an exhibition that was meticulously and creatively assembled and is very beautifully displayed in the Museum's iconic Frank Lloyd Wright space. [figure one]

The first art-historical strand dates back to 1929. In that year, while Moholy was living in Berlin, one of his paintings, *T1*, of 1926, had been bought for the collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim (1891-1949). *T1* is included in the exhibition, see its catalogue: Matthew S. Witkovsky, Carol S. Eiel and Karole P. B. Vail, editors, *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present* (New Haven, Connecticut: The Art Institute of Chicago, Los Angeles County Museum of Art [and] Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, distributed by Yale University Press, 2016), plate 245 on page 207.

In 1930 Moholy and Hilla von Rebay, known through most of her life as Hilla Rebay (1890-1967), already acquainted with each other, spent some time together in Paris and Berlin. During his visit to Berlin, Moholy made portraits of her and of Solomon R. Guggenheim. [figure one]



figure one, László Moholy-Nagy, portraits of Hilla Rebay and Solomon R. Guggenheim, made in Berlin in 1930, gelatin silver prints, Witkovsky, Eiel and Vail, editors, *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, plates 250 and 251 on pages [304] and 307

While in Paris, Moholy worked as co-designer, along with Walter Gropius and Herbert Bayer, of the German Werkbund exhibition at the Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, exhibited as *Section Allemande* of the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs* and seen from May 14 through July 13. Rebay visited the Werkbund exhibition that had been configured as a carefully planned sequence of spaces on two levels through which the visitor was guided among the exhibited items. [figures two, three and four]



figure two, László Moholy-Nagy, Salle 2, *Section Allemande* of the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs*, Paris, 1930, Witkovsky, Eliel and Vail, editors, *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, plate 183 on page 160

figure three, László Moholy-Nagy, Salle 2, *Section Allemande* of the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs*, Paris, 1930, rendered by Rudolf Luderer, Witkovsky, Eliel and Vail, editors, *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, figure 3 on page 143



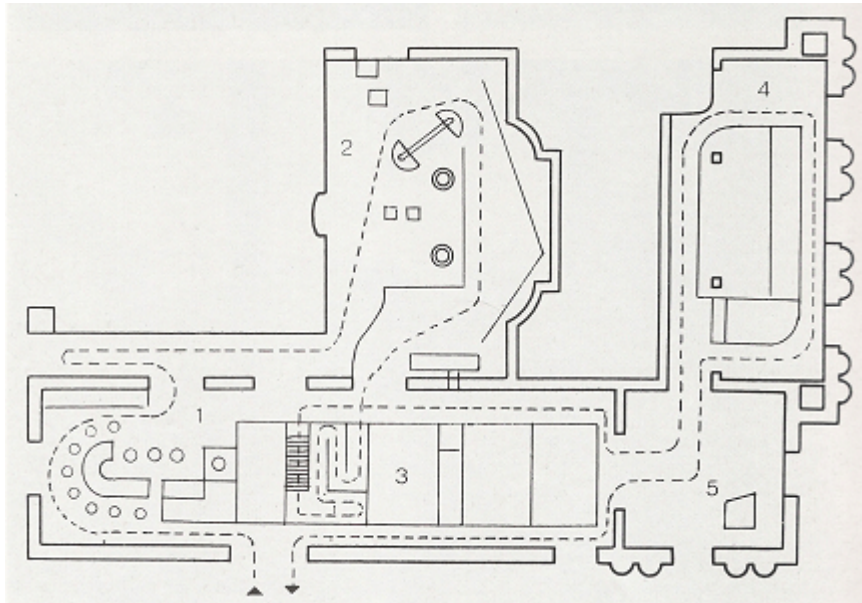


figure four, Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer,  
circulation plan of the  
*Section Allemande of the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs*, Paris, 1930

I would argue that her visit to the Werkbund exhibition, and her experience of its dramatically-configured sequence of spaces, helped to plant the germ of an idea for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, eventually erected from a design by Frank Lloyd Wright, but only after Rebay and Guggenheim had considered other architects. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that Hilla Rebay was herself a painter, and had an exhibition early in June, 1930, at the Bernheim Jeune Gallery in Paris. Moholy helped to hang her pictures, and returned to the Gallery several times with friends.

In any case, in May, 1943, while Rebay was serving as curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, she asked Moholy's advice on choosing an architect to design a building for the Foundation's collection, which already included a number of his paintings. Moholy replied by including his name on a list of potential architects, along with Le Corbusier, Gropius, Richard Neutra, Marcel Breuer, George Fred Keck, Alvar Aalto and William Edmond Lascaze. (I should explain that although Moholy had never been involved with the design of a building that was constructed, in 1939 he had collaborated with architects to submit what turned out to be unsuccessful entries for two competitions for art buildings on college campuses.)

Nevertheless, in July, 1943, after Wright had been selected as architect, Moholy congratulated Rebay on her choice, and added, "He is certainly a grand architect." However in late May of 1944, at a time when Rebay, having reviewed Wright's first set of sketches, was having second

thoughts, she and Moholy conferred in New York, and Moholy had his own criticism of the sketches, which Rebay conveyed to Wright. Wright went on to make some critical comments about Moholy, comments that Moholy was never made aware of. After some design modifications by Wright, seen in his lengthy series of preserved sketches, the building was eventually erected from his design, and opened in 1959. So, in short, the marvelous exhibition at the Guggenheim is seen in a space that Moholy himself had envisioned.

As a venue for *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present* (October 2, 2016, to January 3, 2017) the Art Institute of Chicago provides still another art-historical strand. Moholy had been among the first secondary-school students to have art history included in his curriculum. This took place in his eight-year secondary school in Szeged, Hungary, where he studied from 1905 to 1913. Vienna had been the birthplace of art history, and during the joint Austro-Hungarian Monarchy students in schools in Szeged and other Hungarian cities benefitted from this enlightened Viennese innovation. Thus it should come as no surprise that during his first visit to the Art Institute of Chicago, soon after he had arrived in the Illinois metropolis in 1937, Moholy-Nagy spent three-and-a-half hours surveying the works on view and wrote about his visit to his second wife Sibyl, then still in their previous home in London:

Yesterday afternoon I visited the Art Institute (museum). An entirely extraordinary collection of porcelain, ceramics, glass, furniture, sculpture and pictures. China and Japan and remarkable American and European paintings. [Works] from the Middle Ages to Picasso, with splendid French Impressionists. After 3 ½ hours of study (I wanted to see what could be useful for [our] school) I went home with a headache, disabled by art.

A singular achievement of *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present* is its celebration of his many facets. He created work in traditional fine-arts fields during most of his adult life, all the while excelling as an innovative designer, photographer and film maker. No previous exhibition has done as thorough a job in displaying the range and quality of his work, unmatched by any creative figure in the twentieth century. Putting together such a fine exhibition from these diverse strands was clearly a labor of love.

Finally, on to Cincinnati. No Cincinnati venue for the *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present* was planned, but Cincinnati was an important place for establishing Moholy's legacy. The most extensive showing of his work in the United States during his lifetime, *Paintings, Sculptures, Photograms and Photographs by L. Moholy-Nagy . . .*, was organized by the Cincinnati Modern Art Society, precursor of the Contemporary Arts Center, and held in the Schmidlapp Gallery of the Cincinnati Art Museum early in 1946. A total of sixty-six works was shown, and the exhibition was not limited to works made while he lived in Chicago but rather included work from as early as 1916, so it constituted a major retrospective showing of Moholy's entire career as an artist. Thus while it was not the largest showing of his work during his lifetime, it was the most extensive in terms of the range of dates of the works on display.

Moholy himself designed the exhibition [figures five through nine], which required extensive temporary alterations to the Museum's Schmidlapp Gallery. The results were photographed by

Cincinnati photographer F.V. Raymond, a specialist in photographing museum galleries and individual works of art; Moholy was among those who admired his work.

As seen in figure eight, in a note on his drawing reading “suspended plastic sculpture,” Moholy called for a piece of his plastic sculpture to be placed at a marked spot that was in front of the partition at the entrance to the gallery. The piece suspended there, illustrated here as figure ten, was *Leda and the Swan* of 1946 (Witkovsky, Eliel and Vail, editors, *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, figure 305 on page 272).

Thus *Leda and the Swan* ends my discussion of Cincinnati’s art-historical strand as being among those that have come together in *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*.



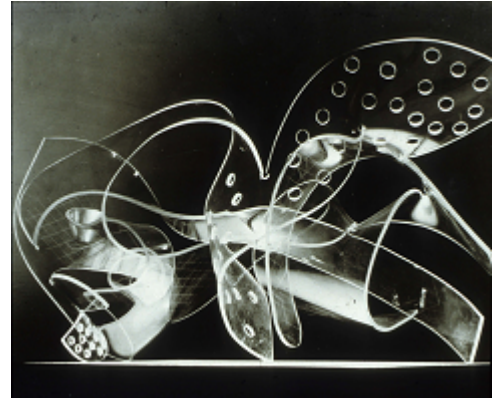


figure seven, *Rays*, Plexiglas,  
1945 (photograph by F.V.  
Raymond)

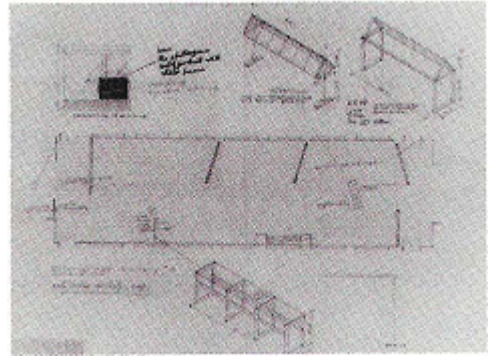
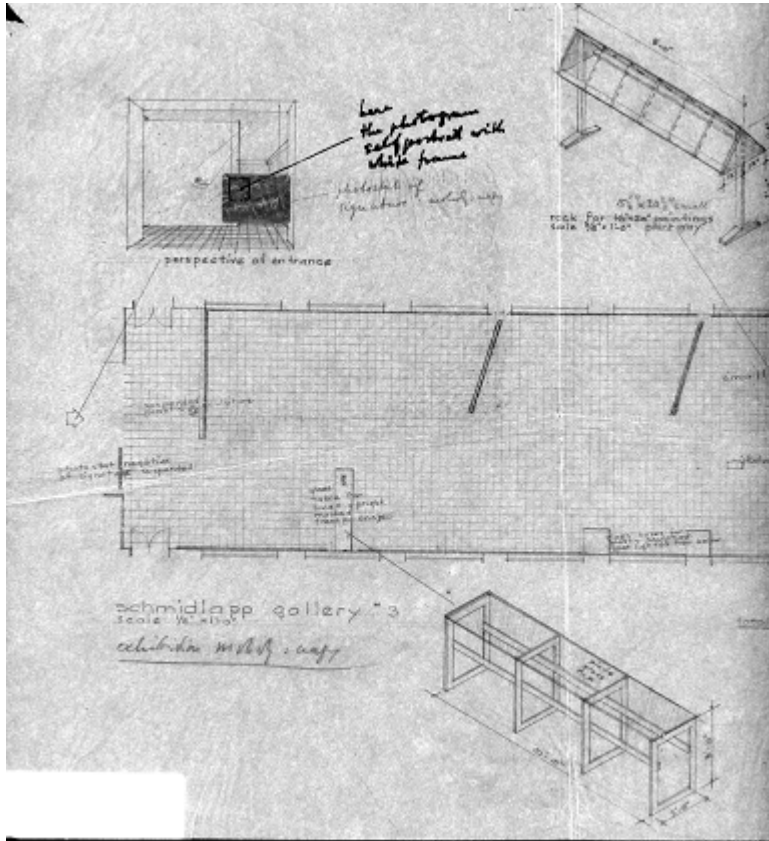
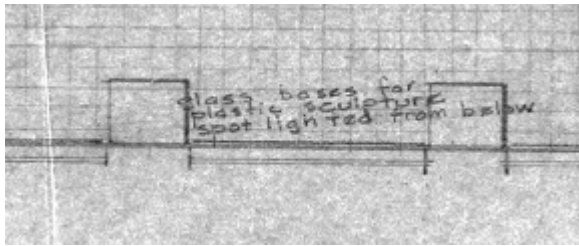


figure eight, drawing and  
 details of its left side for the  
 Moholy-Nagy exhibition staged  
 by the Cincinnati Modern Art  
 Society, 1946, Archives & Rare  
 Books, University of Cincinnati  
 Libraries





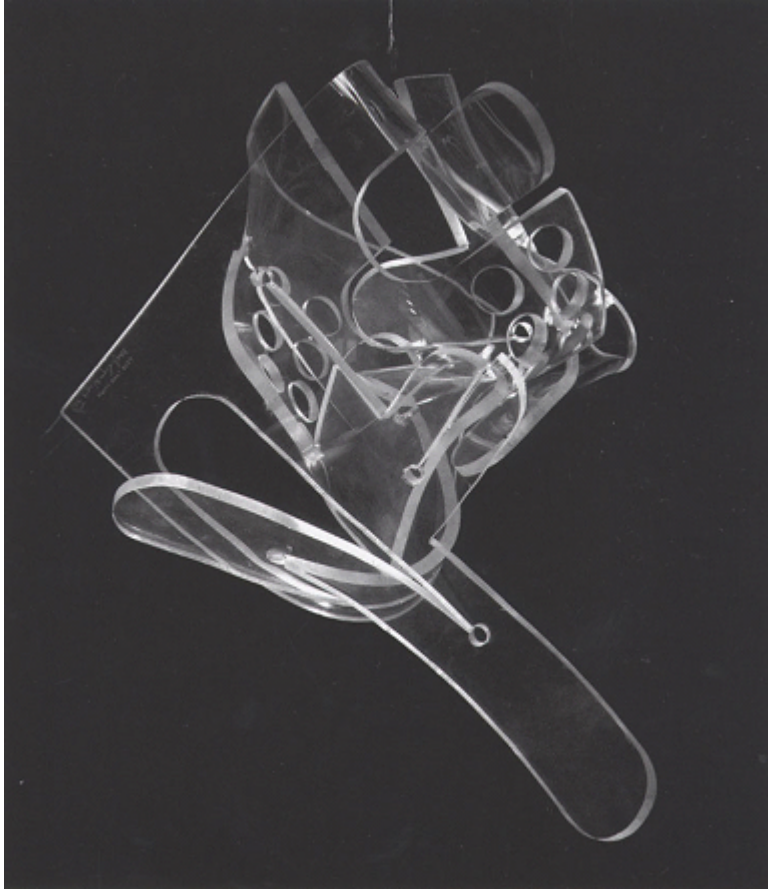


figure ten, *Leda and the Swan*,  
Plexiglas, 1946, as  
photographed in Cincinnati in  
1946 by F.V. Raymond,  
*Institut Valencià d'Art Modern*  
(the original photograph is in  
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Raymond, in: Witkovsky, Eliel  
and Vail, editors, *Moholy-  
Nagy: Future Present*, figure  
305 on page 272