Innovation exploded when manufacturers, artisans joined forces

By Jacqueline Hall
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Gas pumps, scales, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, pots and pans — unlikely objects for an art show — are in the spotlight at the Riffe Gallery.

The Alliance of Art and Industry: Toledo Designs for a Modern America" was organized by the Toledo Museum of Art to celebrate its centennial. The exhibit explores connections between the museum and business communities in northwest Ohio. It demonstrates how, during the first half of the 20th century, the collaboration between the museum and the city's industries stimulated the development of good industrial designs that sold products and improved Americans' daily lives.

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By 1915, an active alliance between the city's art community and its industries was underway and in 1918 the Toledo Museum School of Design was created. At first, the school offered courses in the theory of design, dress design, needlework, weaving, batik, lettering, printmaking and toymaking. New courses were added through the years to answer the demands of industry. Courses emphasized industrial art and encouraged the use of works in the museum collection as inspiration.

By 1928, courses reflecting the development of a true machine aesthetic were established. Manufacturers were beginning to understand the importance of quality design as a selling tool and as a way to improve the human environment.

The exhibit's progression is like a trip through time. Most of the objects date from the 1920s, '30s and '40s; a few date from the first decade of the 20th century. Visitors first enter an area titled "Designer as Planner," which features sketches, drawings, blueprints and models. Featured is the maquette for John Gordon Rideout's Folding Wheelchair and the shape drawing for 6 oz. Saucer Champagne by Donald Deskey.

The exhibit's second area, "Everyday Products," ranges from pots and pans to vacuum cleaners and a 1933 "Midget Radio," one of the first to have a cabinet made from the new plastic molding compound called Plaskon. Also on view: two elegant side chairs — a nickel-plated metal, plastic and wood chair (circa 1910) by Philip Uhl and a "Pedestal or Tulp Armchair" by internationally acclaimed designer Eero Saarinen. At the center of the area is an attractive display of a child's bike, a racer and a velocipede designed by Van Doren and Rideout.

The third and final area is "Toledo Designs," in which the delicacy of glass is contrasted with the monumentality of scales. The Toledo Scale Co. understood the importance of design and marketing in the 1920s and hired New York stage designer Norman Bel Geddes, who eventually put the company on the map for its architectonic forms. Also in the 1920s, the DeVilbiss Manufacturing Co. brought to Toledo Frederic Vuillemenot, a graduate of the prestigious Ecole des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. Vuillemenot led the company's decorating department in creating elegant and innovative containers for cosmetics.

During the 1930s, the (renamed) Libbey Glass Manufacturing Co. worked with Van Doren and Rideout to create graceful, stylish contemporary stemware. The exhibit is a reduced version of one presented at the Toledo museum and does not have, among other things, the vintage automobiles from that show. Nevertheless, it is an enlightening display that tells much about the industrial revolution in Ohio.