Winold Reiss: A Pioneer of Modern American Design

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Cincinnati is especially fortunate in having not only one of Winold Reiss’s most ambitious commissions, but also one of the few that survives, for the nature of most of his work in commercial architecture and interior design was necessarily ephemeral. As a public building, Cincinnati’s Union Terminal is also exceptional in Reiss’s work, although the many restaurants, hotels, and shops which he designed were at one time a part of the daily lives of thousands of people. So prolific was Reiss, that by 1940, not counting the Cincinnati station, in any one day over 30,000 Americans lived, met, ate, drank, or were entertained in a Reiss designed interior. Today Cincinnatians are alone in this privilege. “Masterpieces” of architecture, landscape, and interior design too often lie outside the paths of ordinary people. Historians of vernacular and commercial architecture are now directing increasing attention to the transitory structures which constitute such an important part of our built environment, and which play significant roles in the quality of our lives. Although most of his work as an architect and interior designer has disappeared, during four decades of practice Winold Reiss set a course that in considerable measure contributed to and enlivened American design. This is an introduction to that largely unrecognized journey.

The Atlantic liner S. S. Imperator docked in Hoboken, New Jersey, on October 29, 1913, bringing with it from Hamburg three ambitious young men: Fritz Winold Reiss, Oscar Wentz, and Alfons Baumgarten; each of whom played a role in introducing modern design to the United States. One was a young, brash, energetic, and talented artist fresh out of Munich, then one of Europe’s thriving art centers. Fritz Winold Reiss (1886-1953) was well-prepared to make his mark in the New World. Trained by his father, the artist Fritz Reiss, and at both the Royal Academy of Art, under the famous painter and sculptor Franz von Stuck, and the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts), under the equally notable poster artist Juliez Diez. (Figure #1) Reiss studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts), under the notable poster artist Juliez Diez. (Figure #1)
It is useful to observe that Reiss’s education in Munich’s Kunstgewerbeschule reflected a turn-of-the-century optimism that artistic talent and energy could and should be productively channeled to the creation of the objects of everyday life; that the lives and work of artists, artisans, and workmen should be more connected; and that both commerce and the human spirit would profit from such association. Riding the crest of the Industrial Revolution, during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, study and training in the applied arts were the object of considerable attention in Great Britain, Europe, and, finally, in the United States, where industrial design ultimately emerged as an independent profession. The career of Winold Reiss was congruent with the birth of that profession from the seeds of the Arts and Crafts and Applied Arts movements. But it was more. Reiss brought to his work not just the principles and skills afforded by his excellent training, but his own artistic talent, allowing him to create works whose energy and imagination continue to speak to us today, bringing both pleasure and inspiration. The decorative vocabulary of Vienna’s Secession movement, the bold colors and forms of German Expressionism, and the conventions and abstractions of African art, all evident in Reiss’s early work, were to be transformed into something distinctly American.

From across the Hudson River, Reiss and his companions were greeted by the daring new skyscrapers of the world’s greatest city. Considerably less daring was New York’s attitude towards modern art, notably demonstrated several months earlier in its reaction to the famous Armory Show. American discomfort extended to the realm of commercial design as well, as they were soon to discover. Undaunted, perhaps even challenged by this unreceptive atmosphere, Reiss and one of his fellow passengers, Oscar Wentz, set out almost immediately to introduce the bold colors and daring forms of Modern Decorative Art to the land of the Puritans. Wentz possessed something that was completely at home on these shores: a keen entrepreneurial spirit which spurred him to develop a wide range of projects. The direct result was to provide Reiss with an immediate stimulus and patronage for his work, including graphic and interior design, launching his career and advancing Wentz’s.

Oscar Wentz served as an avid propagandist and promoter of modern commercial art. Within two years of his arrival he founded the Society of Modern Art and began to publish its official organ, the Modern Art Collector (M.A.C.) (1915-18). Unprecedented in the quality and style of its printing, as well as its subject matter, the M.A.C. served as the main tool to promote the goals of the Society of Modern Art and the work of its members. Wentz simultaneously attempted to popularize the Art Poster Stamp in this country and enlisted the support of executives in the infant motion picture industry interested in improving American poster design. He was described in 1929 as “a pioneer of modern art in this country and the first president of the Society of Modern Art, an early group of modern artists.”

Reiss played a key role in the production of the early issues of the M.A.C., so much so that one wonders when he had time to sleep or eat during its first six months of publication. This work drew upon his experience in creating the first issue of a periodical entitled Jungvolk while still in Germany. From September to December of 1915, he designed three of the M.A.C.’s first four covers, much of what was inside, and in large part established its graphic identity. Particularly Reissian were the undulating vertical and horizontal lines employed in borders and the slanting or falling letter “S,” which later became hallmarks of his architectural and graphic design projects. It is revealing to compare Reiss’s first M.A.C. cover to a poster designed in 1908 by Julius Diez, his professor at Munich’s Kunstgewerbeschule, to promote an important applied arts exhibition Diez silhouettes a bold
symbol of the genius of the arts applied to the tools of industrial production against the outline of Munich’s Frauenkirche, while Reiss places a colorful parrot and abstracted flower vases against a bright pink background into which they partially blend. Both employ bold lettering and simplified forms, large expanses of flat and contrasting colors; and strong lines: the distinctive attributes of the German Poster Style. While the first M.A.C. cover was self-consciously sophisticated and represented a tour-de-force of the lithographic art, the tenth (ca. 1917) shows us another, quite different side of his artistic personality, the love of primitive natural motifs and the ability to reduce and simplify them to essential patterns of form, line, and color. The bird and flower motif becomes a signature in much of Reiss’s later work. The pages of the M.A.C. also are useful in providing evidence of the diversity and success of his beginnings. The start of a long career as an educator is signaled by a witty promotion for the Winold Reiss School in which an artistic cherub armed with a dripping brush tames a bucking tube of tempera. A more restrained presentation of the importance of good lettering in advertising was clearly designed to appeal to a different audience of conservative businessmen. Reiss’s first architectural commission, the Busy Lady Bakery of 1915 (described in 1939 as the first modern store in New York) is covered at length. Emphasis is given to the involvement of the artist in every aspect of the store’s design, from its interior and exterior architecture, to its advertising and bold blue and white packaging, all illustrated in the M.A.C. Reiss worked out the spare but elegant essentials of the interior design scheme for the Busy Lady in a small design sketch whose strong lines, squarish grids, and punctuation of broad flat surfaces with simplified decorations recall the work of Josef Hoffmann and the Vienna Secession and at the same time establish a recurring theme in his own work.

The look of the M.A.C. was dramatic, bold, colorful, self-consciously modern, and German. This augured both good and ill for the fate of the publication, for Germany, and Munich in particular, led the world in printing technology and graphic design. The pages of the M.A.C. are filled with the advertisements of printing firms and suppliers throughout the United States with German origins: the Stockinger, A. Bielenberg, and Zeese-Wilkinson Companies of New York; Berger and Wirth of Brooklyn, Charles Hellmuth of New York and Chicago; the Manternach Engraving Company of Hartford; F. Weber & Co. of Philadelphia; the Meinzinger Studios in Detroit; Frank B. Nuderscher of St. Louis; and the
Barnhart Brothers of Chicago, St. Louis, Washington, Dallas, Omaha, Kansas City, Saint Paul, and Seattle; among others. Chicago’s Society of Poster Art styled itself as specializing in the “Munich System” of designing and printing. None of this commercial goodwill, however, was to prove equal to the rising tide of anti-German feeling related to the First World War (1914-1918), which the United States entered in its last year. Modern German Art had no place in a nation whose army grew from 160,000 to 3,500,000 between 1916 and 1918 and was rationing meat and sugar in order to stop another sort of Teutonic offensive.11 The final issue of the M.A.C., published in 1918, put forward its brand of Modern Art as European rather than heavily German, and promoted the third Liberty Loan and the patriotic involvement of all artists, but it was to prove too little, too late.

To return to the last of our Atlantic voyagers, Alfons L. Baumgarten was important primarily for providing Reiss with an introduction to his brother, Otto, already well on his way to becoming one of New York’s leading restauranteurs. Within a decade after his arrival in New York, Otto J. Baumgarten came to preside over a small empire of the city’s finest restaurants, including the Voisin, the Crillon, the Esplanade, and the Elysée.12 Initially trained at his father’s restaurant in Vienna, the hearth of the modern movement in architecture, Baumgarten was not blind to the commercial advantages of good design, and saw the wisdom of using his eating establishments as a proving ground for Reiss’s work in interior decoration, for which they provided a highly visible and suitable stage. The first Restaurant Crillon of 1919-20, located at 15 East 48th Street, caused a sensation referred to repeatedly over the next two decades.13 Called the “first modernistic interior in America,”14 it featured flat, starkly delineated wall surfaces; prismatic hues; and large, simplified decorations, presaging the “super-graphics” of our own time. All are evident in one of Reiss’s small design sketches, where the bird-and-flower theme of the decorative wall panels recall the second cover of the M.A.C. and the avant-garde furnishings are right out of Vienna. Another Baumgarten enterprise, the manufacture of chocolates, led to the creation of establishments such as the Baumgarten Café Viennois and Baumgarten Viennese Bonbonnière, for which, in addition to architecture, Reiss designed packaging and even the delivery truck,15 continuing a pattern begun with the Busy Lady Bakery and extending throughout his career.16 Otto Baumgarten also collaborated with Reiss as a consultant in restaurant management, bringing his expertise to many other American restaurant projects.17

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Reiss's first architectural commission, the Busy Lady Bakery of 1915 (described in 1939 as the first modern store in New York) is covered at length. The artist was involved in every aspect of the store's design. He designed its interior and exterior architecture, as well as its advertising and bold blue and white packaging. (Figures #7 and 8)
The Crillon Restaurant, called the "first modernistic interior in America," featured flat, starkly delineated wall surfaces; prismatic hues; and large, simplified decorations, presaging the "super-graphics" of our own time. All are evident in one of Reiss's small design sketches. (Figure #9)
Wentz’s M.A.C. and Baumgarten’s Crillon commissions were key factors in the first decade of Reiss’s design career in America, paving the way for increasing success during the 1920s, out of which he emerged as a well known figure in American interior decoration and textile and furniture design. It was a decade framed by design commissions for two important hotels, the Alamac and the St. George.

Harry Latz, the developer of the Hotel Alamac, gave Reiss considerable artistic and financial freedom in its decorating scheme, to notable effect. The public rooms of the building were conceived in two very different styles. In her 1925 article for the International Studio, the critic Margaret Breuning wrote: “One realizes the emphasis of decoration in modern murals in the work of Winold Reiss, who has done a number of restaurants and most recently the Alamac Hotel. The Hotel Alamac has many motifs in its decorations varying with the intended use of the rooms as well as their shape and size. The mediaeval room is one of the most effective. Its panels represent picturesque figures of the Middle Ages. The huntsman, the lady fair and the valiant knight alternating with rich metal panels elaborately carved. The Congo Room makes use of the motifs of primitive African sculpture and ornament, not only in its murals but also in its furnishings down to the most trivial detail. The effect is remarkably impressive.”

Writing almost a decade later about the use of decorative metalwork in Rockefeller Center, Eugene Clute identified Reiss’s work at the Alamac as the first and best of its type: “Perhaps the first notable example of this kind of metal work was the series of large decorative wall panels that were designed by Winold Reiss for the Hotel Alamac, New York City, and installed in the grill room when that hotel was built, ten years or more ago. They were executed in a combination of metals worked in repoussé, including wrought iron, copper, brass, steel and aluminum. The craftsmanship was executed by Julius Ormos and Charles Bardosy. The work represented scenes of the chase, rendered with an admirable sense of decorative values and a feeling for the technique employed.”

The Architect and Building News compared the decorative metal panels with the work of Edgar Brandt, one of the leading artists of the period. Far removed in both style and distance from its medieval grill room was the Alamac’s daringly conceived Congo Roof, which represented Reiss’s and New York’s first treatment of a tropical theme. Drawing on his knowledge of both Cubism and African Art, the commission allowed Reiss to begin to develop a decorative vocabulary that became a key part of his own repertoire and has remained a popular sub-theme of American restaurants and nightclub decoration to the present day. Its stylistically advanced, Cubist-related ideas, are described in New York 1930: “The Congo Room was part of a rooftop restaurant known as the South African Garden that, according to Architecture and Building, was destined to appeal to those craving ‘an unusual and garish setting for their meals.’ Elevators whisked diners to a rooftop entrance vestibule with grass flooring and a straw-covered ceiling. Entered through the jaws of a vividly painted mask, the restaurant itself resembled an African village. The theme was carried out in the chairs and tables and the murals of leopards, chimpanzees, and snakes. Diners seeking privacy could take their meals seated at booths made to resemble thatched huts, which lined the walls and focused on a native ‘council chamber’ from which an orchestra blared its jazz. Each chair back simulated a tribal mask, and the general lighting emanated from idol masks suspended from the ceilings.”

The decoration of the Alamac’s rooms, suites and corridors were also a part of Reiss’s commission, and they allowed him to draw upon the principles of Modern Decorative Art as they applied to residential interiors. In a sketch for a sitting room in one of the hotel’s suites we can see its similarities to a domestic interior published in the first issue of the M.A.C., part of a feature on the work of E. H. and G. G. Aschermann, a Viennese team designing American interiors in the spirit of the Wiener Werkstätten. Mr. Aschermann was described as having studied with Josef Hoffmann, and nothing shown belies this. The simple lines of the furniture are emphasized by their black finish, echoing the strong outlines of the baseboard, carpet, French doors, and window. Wall panels bordered in bright blue with bright yellow accents complete the ensemble. Both the Aschermanns’ and Reiss’s interiors were unprecedented in American residential architecture of the period, and would have appeared strikingly modern in the 1930s, as they do, indeed, today. Whereas the Aschermanns’ was advanced, Reiss’s interior was more daring and original in the studied informality of its furniture arrangement, the use of brilliantly colored accessories to accent an abstract painting over the mantel, and simplified graphic elements punctuating the door and wall planes. All of these potentially jarring and clearly stimulating elements are harmoniously combined to create a unified effect. Both embody precisely the characteristics of modern German decoration observed by French designers between 1908 and 1910 and...
The decoration of the Alamac's rooms, suites and corridors were also a part of Reiss's commission, and they allowed him to draw upon the principles of Modern Decorative Art as they applied to residential interiors. In a sketch for a sitting room in one of hotel's suites (Figure #10) we can see its similarities to a domestic interior (Figure #11) published in the first issue of the M.A.C.
used to define and create their own unique and modern style.  

Reiss's work in residential interiors during the 1920s ranged from hotels and apartment buildings to individual apartments and furniture and fabrics for the domestic market. Much of it was highly experimental and innovative in character — including the use of many new materials: in metal, aluminum and chromium; in fabrics, synthetic products such as rayon and Du Pont’s Fabrikoid and Nemoursa; and paints and wall coverings like Duco and Muralart, an early type of Formica. The new types of finishes, effects (including air-brushing), and colors which these materials allowed were further extended by the use of new lighting techniques and fixtures. In addition to working as a color consultant for Du Pont’s Fabrikoid and Muralart product lines, during this period Reiss designed new products for many companies: fabrics for Mallinson, Schumacher, Mosse, Martex, and Shelton Looms; furniture for Thonet and General Fireproofing; lighting fixtures for Egli; and packaging and advertising for a wide range of clients. His work was featured in various exhibitions sponsored by New York’s leading department stores as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1928 he joined a number of leading designers in forming their own design showcase, the American Designers Gallery, whose first exhibition was organized by Ely Jacques Kahn and Joseph Urban. Reiss, Paul Frankl, and Donald Deskey were credited with presenting the designs most likely to make “a practical contribution to an evolving Modernism.”

A few examples illustrate a less practical but equally sophisticated aspect of Reiss’s work in these areas, the distinctive brand of “zig-zag” modernism which he evolved during the 1920s, drawing inspiration from native American motifs. Although a boyhood fascination with native Americans drew him to this country, the artist’s first Western trip, including Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, and Mexico, did not take place until 1920, followed by a second and longer stay in Montana in 1927. Reiss’s academic training in the use of pattern and color made him highly receptive to native American motifs, which increasingly found their way into his graphic and commercial design work. The use of either a zig-zag line (chevron) or row of linked triangles, commonly used in the art of the Blackfoot and Sioux nations, became a signature of Reiss’s work from the late 1920s onward. American, European, and modern sources all come together in the jagged composition of angles and bright colors which characterized his 1928 design for the elevator cab of the Seelig and Finkelstein’s Shellball Apartments. Although its interior no doubt rendered vertical travel more stimulating than most residents of the building ever desired, the design would have made any one of Prague’s Cubist architects proud. Sketches of metalwork designs, also related to the Shellball Apartments, demonstrate Reiss’s continuing experiments in the decorative uses of metalwork and the effects of combining different metals in a single composition. His eager quest to introduce lively colors and imaginative ideas into American furniture design is represented by a sketch for a dressing-table and bench of complex angles and contrasting shades of bright yellow, red, blue, and black, which echo the vocabulary of the De Stijl movement and challenge any preconceptions concerning their form.

The 1920s also marked Reiss’s first commissions outside of the New York area, significantly in the great mid-western metropolis of Chicago. Holabird and Root, one of that city’s most progressive architectural firms, was linked to three of these, beginning with murals for the Apollo Theatre (1922-23) and ending with the Walden Bookshop in the Michigan Square Building (1930). Reiss’s 1928 interiors for one of Chicago’s leading clubs, the Tavern, which occupied the twenty-fifth floor of a Holabird and Root skyscraper at 333 N. Michigan Avenue, were widely praised and publicized, winning him...
which, with the addition of a thirty-one-story tower by architect Emery Roth, became the nation’s second largest. As many as 3,500 guests could occupy its 2,632 rooms, and its many dining facilities were capable of serving up to 9,000 patrons at any one time. Winold Reiss Studios conceived and designed most of the public spaces in the new Tower Building, which “included the largest indoor swimming pool in the metropolis and the most expensive one ever built; the largest and most costly banquet facilities in the world, embracing sixteen magnificent rooms; the largest hotel ballroom in the world.” The architect and historian Robert A. M. Stern has sung the praises of its ballroom, designed to hold over 3,000 people, in the prose style of Tom Wolfe: “the single most startling interior public space of the time in New York...as completed, with its myriad of colored lights articulating every facet, the ballroom was a brilliant tour-de-force, a real life version of movie-modern, a last blaring wail of jazz-age stylishness at its very best.”

In 1930 Reiss completed extensive designs for the vast interiors of Brooklyn’s Hotel St. George, a whole new list of admirers and clients from many parts of the country. A contemporary article in The Chicagoan described his achievement in glowing terms: “Winold Reiss, a leader in the profession of interior decoration, was given the commission. He was also given carte blanche, with John Root, of the building committee, exercising the power of veto over the designs as they were submitted. The result speaks for itself. The rooms of The Tavern are the most brilliant example of modern decorative style in the country. There is gayety and originality, without eccentric affectation, in every detail. The Tavern, in its physical aspect, is a work of art. And being modern art, it has a dynamic quality; it refreshes and stimulates. The visitor to this Tavern drops down to the street and to everyday life, a better workman, at whatever craft he practices, than he was before, because the colors and forms of these rooms have put a new beat into his pulse and a new vibrancy into his nerves.”

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His eager quest to introduce lively colors and imaginative ideas into American furniture design is represented by a sketch for a dressing table and bench of complex angles and contrasting shades of bright yellow, red, blue, and black. (Figure #14)
Reiss's stylish treatment of the entrance to the ballroom: “Leading to this room is a huge foyer, the feeling of space in a measure imparted by the ‘scaping’ of the carpet in three tones of red with diagonal lines suggesting broad vistas. This same treatment is reflected in the cream ceiling with bands of red and gold. Indirect light is softly diffused from the ceiling and columns, casting its warm glow on the gold and vermilion Muralart walls ornamented at intervals with metal grill work.”

The St. George constituted a city within a city, a great public arena rivaled only by Cincinnati’s Union Terminal among Reiss’s works.

The great building boom of the 1920s, which had provided Reiss with so many design opportunities and commissions, came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the Depression. During the 1930s Reiss’s work was more restricted in range and harder to find. Among his papers is a portfolio containing dozens of elegant designs proposed to the Barracini candy company, which Tjark Reiss says represent his father’s attempts to obtain commissions during this period. His prospects improved following the repeal of Prohibition in December, 1933, and a series of commissions from Henry Lustig for his Longchamps restaurants provided Reiss’s career with renewed stimulus and visibility after 1935.

In addition to their famous culinary offerings, the second generation of Longchamps restaurants enjoyed some of New York’s best locations and represented the height of stylishness: “Longchamps is not naive; its is daring and sumptuous,” declared the critic Talbot Hamlin in 1939. Lavish features introduced by the Longchamps chain included the extensive use of mirrored wall surfaces and indirect lighting, complex floor and ceiling levels, table telephone and twenty-four-hour service, and receding plate glass windows which turned the restaurants into outdoor cafes in good weather. The first (1935) occupied the ground floor corner of the Chanin Building diagonally across from the Chrysler Building, with lobby entrances from both 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, while the largest and most successful (1938) was ingeniously arranged on five levels of that icon of American architec-

Figure 15

Winold Reiss Studios conceived and designed most of the public spaces in the new Tower Building including the largest ballroom in the world which was designed to hold over 3,000 people.
(Figure #15)
The exterior of Reiss’s 1941 proposal for a new bar and roof garden at the 49th Street and Madison Avenue Longchamps displays the chain’s trademark vermillion coloring and lettering, including the falling “S,” while the undulating lines which enliven its canopy and bronze wall panels recall the early borders of the M.A.C. The entire effect is not dissimilar to that of the Barracini candy box already illustrated: the name or sign identifying the product or establishment has been completely integrated into its design; it has become a sign rather than simply providing a place for one.

The care given to the smallest details in the Longchamps projects, as well as a willingness to experiment with the decorative possibilities of new materials, is demonstrated in a design sketch for the inlaid formica top of a bar table. A Longchamps lobby card of the period is a brilliant exercise in graphic design, exhibiting the same qualities. It announces “Cocktail Time” in a colorful and inviting display with lettering punctuated by the same motif of linked triangles which Reiss had used to architectural effect in the ballroom of the Hotel St. George. The bold treatment of the interiors of the Longchamps can be observed in a 1946 sketch for the new retail shops of the 57th Street branch. Reiss visibly moves the patron through a gauntlet of shop windows by means of an undulating floor pattern and rhythmic frieze in which he returns to his roots for inspiration, employing motifs almost identical to those introduced a half-century earlier by Kolomon Moser, the great Viennese Secession designer, in his own house.

The success of Lustig’s and Reiss’s collaboration has been summed-up in this way: “The Longchamps restaurants
brought to a middle-class audience the glittery glamor of such highly exclusive haunts of New York’s cafe society as the Stork Club and El Morocco...[and] represented the culmination of a decade’s search for an opulent and even playful modern language of form.”

Following Lustig’s sale of the restaurants in 1946, commissions followed for three more Longchamps, completed between 1950 and 1952. The first, in New York’s Manhattan House, employed Reiss’s life-long mastery of tropical themes to good effect; another, in Washington, D. C., featured native American murals and decorations; and the last and least, in Philadelphia, was carried out in a watered-down Colonial style which clearly indicates a reduction in Reiss’s activity following a stroke in 1951. Taken as a whole, the Longchamps commissions served a critical role for Reiss providing him with new design opportunities and placing his work squarely in the public eye. During the last two decades of his career, the Longchamps work led to many other new commissions, large and small, for the “stylings” of restaurants, hotels, and commercial establishments in many parts of the country.

By the mid-1940s at least six Reiss-designed establishments, including the Steuben Tavern, the famous Lindy’s Restaurant, and four of the nine Longchamps, were within walking distance from Times Square and New York’s Theater district. The average Longchamps was capable of serving an average of 800 patrons at a time, while one employed fifty bartenders. Beginning with the Crillon of 1919-20, for three decades anyone dining well in the world’s greatest metropolis, including thousands of visitors, would have been familiar with, if not aware of, Reiss’s designs. This was also true to a lesser degree in Chicago, with Reiss interiors at the Tavern Club, the Palmer House, and the Sherman Hotel; in Los Angeles, with Mike Lyman’s; and in cities such as Holyoke, Massachusetts, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. In 1949 Reiss received a commission for Montreal’s Chic-N-Coop Restaurant, conceived, in spite of its name, very much in

During the 1930s Reiss’s work was more restricted in range and harder to find. Among his papers is a portfolio containing dozens of elegant designs proposed to the Barracini candy company. 
(Figure #17)
The exterior of Reiss’s 1941 proposal for a new bar and roof garden at the 49th Street and Madison Avenue Longchamps displays the chain’s trademark vermilion coloring and lettering, including the falling ‘S’, while the undulating lines which enliven its canopy and bronze wall panels recall the early borders of the M.A.C. (Figure #18)

A willingness to experiment with the decorative possibilities of new materials, is demonstrated in a design sketch for the inlaid formica top of a bar table. (Figure #19)
the elegant spirit of his Longchamps works. At the age of sixty-four he proved himself to be as creative and imaginative as ever, producing stacks of sketches and drawings in many variant schemes for its exterior, interiors, and graphic identity.

1. Winold Reiss came to be much better known for his work as a portraitist and muralist. This has been partly responsible for obscuring his reputation as a commercial artist, to which this analysis attempts to provide a brief introduction. The stigma which continued to attach itself to commercial art work in this country often threatened and sometimes compromised the artist's non-commercial career.

Figure 20

This brief overview is not the place to attempt any final evaluation of Reiss's contributions to American design, but has tried to bring some of them to more general attention. His introduction of entirely new uses and types of color; experimentation with new forms and materials; incorporation of poster-like graphic elements; and integration of native American decorative motifs represent some of the most promising areas for further study and analysis. It is appropriate to close with a recent statement by the architect Morris Lapidus, whose own work is currently the object of renewed appreciation. His credentials include the practice of architecture in New York City from 1927 until the early 1960s, providing him a thirty-year perspective of developments in American design. Earlier this year, following his return from a lecture at Yale's School of Architecture, I asked Lapidus if he remembered Reiss's work and if it had had any effect on his own. Without hesitation, he admitted instances of his influence and recalled that, as the preceding pages have attempted to show: "Reiss was way ahead of all of us."

2. The cause of Modern Decorative Art is cited repeatedly in the manifestos published by Reiss and Wentz in the M.A.C. and elsewhere during the next two decades. See "A Word About Modern Decorative Art," M.A.C., vol. 1, no. 1 (September, 1915): At no time

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The bold treatment of the interiors of the Longchamps can be observed in a 1946 sketch for the new retail shops of the 57th Street branch. (Figure #21)

Between 1950 and 1952 Reiss designed three more Longchamps, the first, in New York's Manhattan House. (Figure #22)
What matters, is the broad and simple feeling which finds its expression in the general effect. If there are many details, they must be subordinated to the effect in such a way that they do not weaken or disturb it. In a subsequent article in the same issue, "Modern Decorative Art for the Advertiser," by Raymond Cavanaugh, the author insists that "the claims of Modern Decorative Art for commercial recognition must be given the fullest consideration," exhorting the reader with the confidence of the newly converted: "Let him [the advertiser] turn to a poster of today, executed in the true spirit of Modern Decorative Art, and he will find positive virtues only.

There are no negative qualities in Modern Decorative Art. To put it slangily, it has the "punch." Its color is a joy. Its general suggestive-impession on of strength, force and character."
Reiss is called in to design a restaurant, he usually also designs the furniture and even the menu cards and meal check, for he believes that all of these combinations are instrumental in expressing the character of the establishment.

17. "Let the Motif be Modern, Advises Expert," An Interview with Winold Reiss, *The Restaurant Man* (April, 1931), 15: "The Crillon's owner, Mr. Baumgartner [sic], incidentally, is a partner of Mr. Reiss in the restaurant decorating division of the latter's studios. An unusually effective combination they make — Mr. Reiss the artist and decorator and Mr. Baumgartner being a successful restaurateur."

18. "Winold Reiss Co. Doing Decorations for Alamac," *The Restauranteur* (August 11, 1923), p. 8, stated that the upper Broadway Building, nearing completion, was decorated by "the Winold Reiss Decorating Company, of which Otto J. Baumgarten, the noted restaurateur, is the business manager." Baumgarten was identified as a partner as well as business manager of the Reiss firm, and as the "proprietor of the famous Crillon Restaurant...one of the most beautiful examples of decorating to be found anywhere....When it is taken into consideration that Mr. Baumgarten is an experienced hotel and restaurant man who thoroughly understands this business, his position as general business manager for the Winold Reiss Decorating Company makes this company especially fitted to handle satisfactorily all hotel and restaurant work."


23. Yvonne Brunhammer and Suzanne Tise, *The Decorative Arts in France: La Société des artistes décorateurs, 1900-1942* (New York, 1990): 26: "A dramatic change in the style of the works exhibited in the salons of the Société came about as the result of a second manifestation of the Munich Werkstätten — their appearance in Paris at the Salon d'Automne in 1910. Since 1900 the growing artistic and commercial success of the Werkstätten had been a cause for alarm in France. There was even more concern after an important applied arts exhibition in Munich in 1908, when the French delegation, which included one of the founders of the Société des artistes décorateurs, Rupert Carabin, returned to report that the German exhibition represented for France an "artistic and commercial Sedan." The delegation later reported to a conference on the decorative arts in Nancy that the long-sought-after modern style had not been born in France, but

at the age of sixty-four he proved himself to be as creative and imaginative as ever, producing stacks of sketches and drawings in many variant schemes for the exterior, graphic identity, and interiors of Chic-N-Coop in Montreal. (Figure #24)
in Germany: “The ruling principle that inspires the young German school is to create harmonious ensembles through a collaboration of sculpture, painting and architecture, and the group has endeavored to realize this by reforming the aesthetics of the home to make the modern house a combined work of art, a practical construction of simple and dignified beauty...Thanks to the simplicity which they intentionally seek, they have succeeded in creating furniture designs of good quality and irreproachable form that may be executed entirely by machine, so that they are within the reach of modest budgets. It was after the delegation returned from Munich in 1908 that Franz Jourdain...invited the Munich Werkstätten to exhibit in Paris in 1910... When the Salon opened in October, the Munich group...filled eighteen rooms with the finest products of modern German decorative artists organized on the theme of the ‘House of an Art Lover’...the interiors were not particularly innovative, but they demonstrated a sobriety, unity of design and sophistication that completely surprised the French public. The color schemes were equally unexpected: bright oranges, cobalt blue and brilliant greens — hues virtually unknown in French decoration.”


25. “A Modern Decorator in New York,” Architect and Building News (November 26, 1926), pp. 632-34: “For the inspiration of his decorative motifs, however, Mr. Reiss has paid a good deal of attention to the work of the American Indian and Aztec sculpture. Probably as a foreigner he surveys the field of American inspirational sources with a fresh eye, and, like one or two other artists, has been astonished at the richness of Aztec art which can not only be considered an indigenous but which contain boundless suggestions for development...Winold Reiss works in his New York studio in conjunction with his brother, who is a sculptor, and who shares enthusiasm for Mexican and Indian work. Both brothers feel that native art has been neglected in favour of imported details, and that in Indian work is revealed a sense of pattern which is in itself an inspiration. Certainly some of the vermillion, yellow and green interiors of the Crillon restaurants in New York show a strong Indian suggestion.”


27. Stern, New York 1930, pp. 283-84: In 1920 Reiss had pioneered a less scenographic restaurant design in New York at the Crillon Restaurant at 15 East Forty-eighth Street, which he decorated in what Edwin Avery Park described seven years later as a “decidedly modern and thoroughly American taste, using flat surfaces, broad and colorful painted decoration, based on the patterns found in Navajo blankets and Indian pottery.” The zig-zag or chevron motif first appears commonly throughout Reiss’s designs for the interiors of the Alamac Hotel, insinuating itself successfully into both his medieval and African themes. After the middle twenties it occurs increasingly in the distinctive advertisements for the Restaurant Crillon and later in those for the Longchamps chain. (fig. 20).


29. As late as 1941 his earlier work on the Tavern Club led to a commission from the architectural firm of Nevile & Sharp to design a new bar and dining room for Kansas City’s Hotel President. One of the architects wrote to Reiss, recalling: “I remember having seen the murals you did for the Tavern Club in the 333 Michigan Avenue Building in Chicago, some years ago...” Nevile & Sharp to Reiss, February 12, 1941, Collection of Tjark and Renate Reiss.


31. New York 1930, pp. 214-15: The 11,000-square-foot, thirty-one-foot high ballroom, was reputedly the largest in the United States, capable of holding more than 3,000 people.


33. Stern, New York 1930, pp. 283-84: “After Prohibition’s repeal Reiss designed a white, blue, and black cocktail lounge for the Crillon that was highly regarded by Lewis Mumford, who found it conducive to drinking...for less to know that you would get drunk at the first smell of a Martini. Moreover, the Crillon demonstrates what the more vital modern architects, like Wright and Oud, always knew: that architecture designed for our present style of living does not need to seek its exponents and admirers among the color blind.”

34. The New York city chain grew from six locations in 1935 to at least ten in 1946. Fred Braun, “Winold Reiss,” pp. 48-54, 70, has carefully detailed this evolution.

35. The respected critic and historian Talbot Hamlin drew attention to Reiss’s achievements in the Longchamps restaurants in an article entitled “Some Restaurants and Recent Shops” in the widely-read architectural periodical Pencil Points (later Progressive Architecture) 20 (August, 1939), pp. 488-508. Hamlin described the problem of designing a modern restaurant as a difficult one: “to provide the maximum seating accommodation within a limited area, and also surround the patrons with an atmosphere which will make them forget the small amount of space they occupy and give the illusion, if not of privacy, at least of intimacy, in surroundings which are gay and cheerful...the idea is to furnish lots of color, to break up the greater number of surfaces so as to produce an agreeable sense of complexity, and to use mirrors to create the illusion of increased size” concluding that the more recent Longchamps, designed by Reiss, “have attained, it seems to me, a remarkable success.”

36. Except for its beginnings in the M.A.C., it has been beyond the scope of this analysis to present in any depth Reiss’s work in the area of graphic design. He contributed to a number of leading American periodicals, including Scribner’s and Fortune, in addition to popular illustrations, and was a fine printmaker. His most influential work, however, was in interior design and packaging.

37. According to Tjark Reiss, the Longchamps colors of vermilion, black, and gold, used here, were the same as those in the silks designed by Reiss for Henry Lustig’s racing stable. Braun, “Winold Reiss,” p. 48, repeats this.


41. Telephone interview, February, 1993, prompted by similarities observed between Reiss’s design for the Empire State Building Longchamps (1938) and the interiors of Miami’s Hotel Fontainebleau, designed by Lapidus.
Illustrations:

Figure #1. Julius Diez. München 1908 Ausstellung. Poster. Color lithograph. Poster Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Figure #2. Winold Reiss. Cover, Modern Art Collector (M.A.C.) (New York), vol. 1, no. 1, (September, 1915).

Figure #3. Winold Reiss. Cover, Modern Art Collector (M.A.C.) (New York), vol. 1, no. 10, (ca. 1917).

Figure #4. Winold Reiss. Student Supplement, Modern Art Collector (M.A.C.) (New York), vol. 1, no. 4, (December, 1915).


Figure #7. Winold Reiss. Interior Design Supplement, Modern Art Collector (M.A.C.) (New York), vol. 1, no. 2, (October, 1915).

Figure #8. Winold Reiss. A Modern Bakery, Modern Art Collector (M.A.C.) (New York), vol. 1, no. 4, (December, 1915).


Figure #10. Winold Reiss. Alamac Hotel. Graphite and tempera on paper, ca. 1923. Prints and Photograph Division, Library of Congress. Gift of Tjark and Renate Reiss.


Figure #13. Winold Reiss. Ironwork. Graphite and tempera on paper, 1920s. Prints and Photograph Division, Library of Congress. Gift of Tjark and Renate Reiss.

Figure #14. Winold Reiss. Dressing table. Graphite and tempera on paper, 1920s. Collection of Tjark and Renate Reiss.

Figure #15. Winold Reiss. Ballroom, Hotel St. George, Brooklyn. Photograph, ca. 1930. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Gift of Tjark and Renate Reiss.


Figure #17. Winold Reiss. Barricini candy box. Graphite and tempera on paper, 1930s. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Deposit of Tjark and Renate Reiss.