

BERNARD RUDOFSKY

LESSONS FROM

MARCH II–JUNE 8, 2008

Bernard Rudofsky

“If I can open your eyes a little wider than their accustomed aperture; if I can make you observe without ethnic bias. . . you will look at your own environment with a more critical awareness.”

Bernard Rudofsky (Austrian-American, 1905–1988) was an architect, curator, critic, exhibition designer, and fashion designer whose entire oeuvre was influenced by his lifelong interest in concepts about the body and the use of our senses. He is best known for his controversial exhibitions and accompanying catalogs, including *Are Clothes Modern?* (MoMA, 1944), *Architecture without Architects* (MoMA, 1964), and *Now I Lay Me Down to Eat* (Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1980). He was also famous for his mid-twentieth-century Bernardo sandal designs, which are popular again today. Drawn primarily from the Bernard Rudofsky papers at the Getty Research Institute, *Lessons from Bernard Rudofsky* analyzes his contributions to architecture, anthropology, fashion, and design, and illustrates his thinking through a diverse presentation

of sketches, architectural models, travel notebooks, photographs, sculptures, fabrics, and footwear. Rudofsky’s first design efforts were in the field of architecture. Trained as an architect at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna, he left for southern Italy immediately after his graduation. There, in collaboration with the Neapolitan architect Luigi Cosenza (1905–1984), he built the stunningly beautiful Casa Oro (1935–1937; fig. 1.) on a cliff overlooking the Bay of Naples. Situated on a narrow lot between two retaining walls, the long and slender structure follows the topography of the land, allowing the house to open up completely to the bay and capture as much sun and wind as possible. The front of the house is composed as a play of projecting and receding volumes that diffuse the transition between inside and out and provide shade for the terraces and



fig. 1. Bernard Rudofsky and Luigi Cosenza, architects, Casa Oro as Seen from Below, Naples, Italy, 1935–1937

gardens. Houses subsequently designed by Rudofsky in São Paulo, Brazil (Casa Arnstein and Casa Frontini, both 1939–1941), display the same orderly arrangement of precisely defined volumes set within a firmly defined perimeter. Lushly landscaped patios adjacent to each room encourage free interaction between the domestic chambers and their natural surroundings. Lacking an American architecture license, Rudofsky built very little after his move to the United States in 1941. Instead, he channeled his creative energies into the development and design of a series of pioneering exhibitions and books that challenged the field of architecture’s traditional boundaries. The interests expressed in Rudofsky’s books and exhibitions resulted from his direct experience with the Mediterranean lifestyle on the Greek islands and his readings about Japanese culture. Rudofsky concluded early on that people in Western society had lost their spontaneity and innate ability to design houses, clothing, and shoes that liberated, rather than restricted, the body. He believed this cultural inertia had profoundly negative sociological and physical consequences. As a result, he devoted his life to exposing the West to foreign architectural paradigms, unfamiliar customs, and evolving attitudes about the body, fashion, architecture, and design. Utilizing surprising visual juxtapositions and engaging commentaries, Rudofsky’s popular exhibitions and books were designed to provoke audiences into challenging the status quo. Rudofsky was captivated by the extreme methods of body manipulation practiced by non-Western cultures in the

pursuit of beauty. His books acquainted large international audiences with the concepts of neck rings, cranial deformation boards, and foot binding. Some of his finest illustrated comparisons document how European society unknowingly imitated the physical alterations of foreign cultures by using corsets, bustles, heels, and codpieces. One wonders how Rudofsky would have responded to the ease with which we can now sculpt and carve our bodies into nearly any desired shape or proportion. Using an image of leg tattoos from the Marquesas Islands (fig. 2) as a comparison to an illustration of patterned stockings from 1902 (fig. 3), Rudofsky observed in *Are Clothes Modern?* (1947) that “civilized people are anxious to avoid any permanent decoration; it would interfere with the rotation of fashions” (p. 111). He would undoubtedly be surprised by the fact that today tattoos are as likely to be found under the shirt collar of a corporate executive as they are on the back of a rock star. Together with his wife, Berta (Austrian-American, 1910–2006), Rudofsky worked to promote a universal lifestyle of comfort through his clothing designs. He abhorred the fashionable tendency to cram fragile feet into what he considered

personal torture devices masked by colorful leather patterns and alluringly shaped heels. In his book *Prodigious Builders* (1977), Rudofsky remarked: “With today’s know-how we are no doubt able to cultivate peanuts on Mars, but nobody knows, or cares to know, how to make shoes for human feet” (p. 113). His Bernardo sandals reintroduced designs that had been tested and approved over thousands of years by civilizations more concerned with comfort and survival than fashion runways. Rudofsky’s sandals became extremely popular during the 1950s and 60s. Thanks to the current emphasis on stylish comfort in walking and athletic shoes, they have become coveted accessories once again. Rudofsky understood that he could reach a broader audience through exhibitions than through books. His provocative displays attracted a significant amount of attention and controversy during his lifetime. Risqué themes of bodily comfort, sensuality, modesty, and intimacy accompanied by explicit visuals, often generated lively debate among people shocked by such unfamiliar material. Rudofsky called his approach “exhibition design with a sting, [which] pricks our complacency [and] puts doubts into

fig. 2

our heads” (Lecture, Tokyo, 1958, p. 3). Many architects believed that the exhibition *Architecture without Architects* (1964)—an installation at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York of photographs of anonymous architecture around the world—promoted the notion that their profession was superfluous to the building trade. The president of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects protested against the exhibition before it even opened. A professor at the University of Michigan condemned it in print as “subversive.” The dean of Yale University’s School of Architecture vetoed Rudofsky’s invitation to lecture on campus because he felt non-pedigreed architecture was too “controversial” (Lecture, Provincetown, p. 7). Despite the uproar, the show traveled for eleven years to nearly eighty venues, an unheard-of accomplishment. Rudofsky’s notorious installations for the American Pavilion at the Brussels International and Universal Exposition of 1958 even caused President Eisenhower to launch a special investigation into his unconventional methodologies. In his *Face of America* exhibition, Rudofsky sought to “ban the grimmer aspects of progress; the satellites and robots and machined entertainment, and to concentrate on human matters” (Lecture, Tokyo, 1958, p. 13). To achieve this goal, he created an

fig. 3

assemblage of whimsical and unexpected items representing each state in the Union. New York was represented with a display of all 500 pages of the *Sunday New York Times*. Alaska was highlighted by the exhibition’s smallest object: a facsimile of the cancelled \$7,200 check used to purchase the territory. The most captivating component of the show for foreigners was a display of tumbleweed. While European audiences declared Rudofsky’s pavilion a great success, American visitors fumed at its lack of patriotic bravado. While piqued by these responses, Rudofsky did not alter his radical approach. As he declared in a lecture in Tokyo later that year: “The principles underlying the design of such an exhibition are . . . to distract and intrigue the visitor with optical illusions and to display the objects out of context; to pamper his eye with shapes and colors. In the child, the response to this sort of environment is spontaneous; unfortunately, not so in the average adult who tries too hard to stay aloof” (p. 9).

fig. 2. Detail of *Tattooed Legs, Marquesan Islands*, from Bernard Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern?* (Chicago, 1947), p. 110

fig. 3. Detail of *American Stockings, 1902*, from Bernard Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern?* (Chicago, 1947), p. 111

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BERTA RUDOFSKY Berta Doctor was born on May 9, 1910, in Vienna. Influenced by her parents, she studied musicology at Universität Wien. In 1934, Berta met Bernard Rudofsky on Ischia during a trip to Italy, and in 1935 they moved into an apartment together on the island of Procida. They married in November of the same year at New York City Hall. The couple’s only child, Peter, was born in 1936 and died in Como two years later. More than wife and eyewitness, Berta participated anonymously in the work of her husband in a wide variety of ways: as coworker, traveling companion, manager, driver, translator, sandal-producer, teacher, editor, model, muse, and administrator of his estate. After Bernard Rudofsky died in 1988, Berta lived alternately in Vienna, New York, and Frigiliana. She died on June 22, 2006, in Vienna.

RELATED EVENTS

- Learning from Bernard Rudofsky**
Saturday, April 5, 2008
4:00–6:30 p.m.
Museum Lecture Hall, The Getty Center
Specialists in the fields of fashion, architecture, and plastic surgery explore Rudofsky’s ideas about architectural design, the body, comfort, and sensuality, and discuss their relevance for contemporary culture. The panel includes Dr. Valerie Steele, director, the Museum at FIT, New York; Steven Ehrlich, principal, Steven Ehrlich Architects, Los Angeles; and Dennis Comeau, designer, Bernardo Footwear L.L.C., Houston. Exhibition curator Wim de Wit is the panel moderator.
- Exhibition Tours with Curators Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander**
Wednesday, March 12, 11:00 a.m.
Tuesday, March 18, 3:00 p.m.
Wednesday, April 2, 11:00 a.m.
Thursday, April 10, 1:00 p.m.

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www.getty.edu

EXHIBITION CATALOG *Lessons from Bernard Rudofsky, Life as a Voyage* (Basel, 2006) is on sale in the Museum bookstore.

BROCHURE **Fold** and **Stand** the brochure to create the gallery space. Fold lines are on opposite side.

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Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York | 1987 Exhibition *Sparta/Sybaris*, MAX, Vienna | 1988 Dies March 12, New York

the Organic Design Competition (MoMA); moves to New York | 1944 Exhibition *Are Clothes Modern?* (MoMA, New York)

“Life as a voyage, travel as a lifestyle.”

“Surely all Japanese houses look humble to people who regard ostentation a civic virtue.”

“Civilized people are anxious to avoid any permanent decoration; it would interfere with the rotation of fashions.”

“Coloration and ornament are chiefly stimulants to sexual selection.”

“We live in a shrinking world. Traditions are withering fast, customs are being displaced.”

“There is no proper model of shoe for all varieties of feet, unless we revert to the loosely fitting moccassin or sandal.”

“Wearing tight-fitting apparel has not only deformed our bodies, but has obscured our knowledge of them.”

“[The older generation’s] disjointed feet and egg-sized bunions [are] nothing but a joyous tribute to the fashions of diabolical footwear.”

“I believe that in the arts and in architecture, the sensuous pleasures should come before the intellectual ones.”



Bernard Rudofsky in Kimono, from *Domus* (June 1956), p. 319



Floor Plan, Casa Arnstein, São Paulo, Brazil, 1939–1941



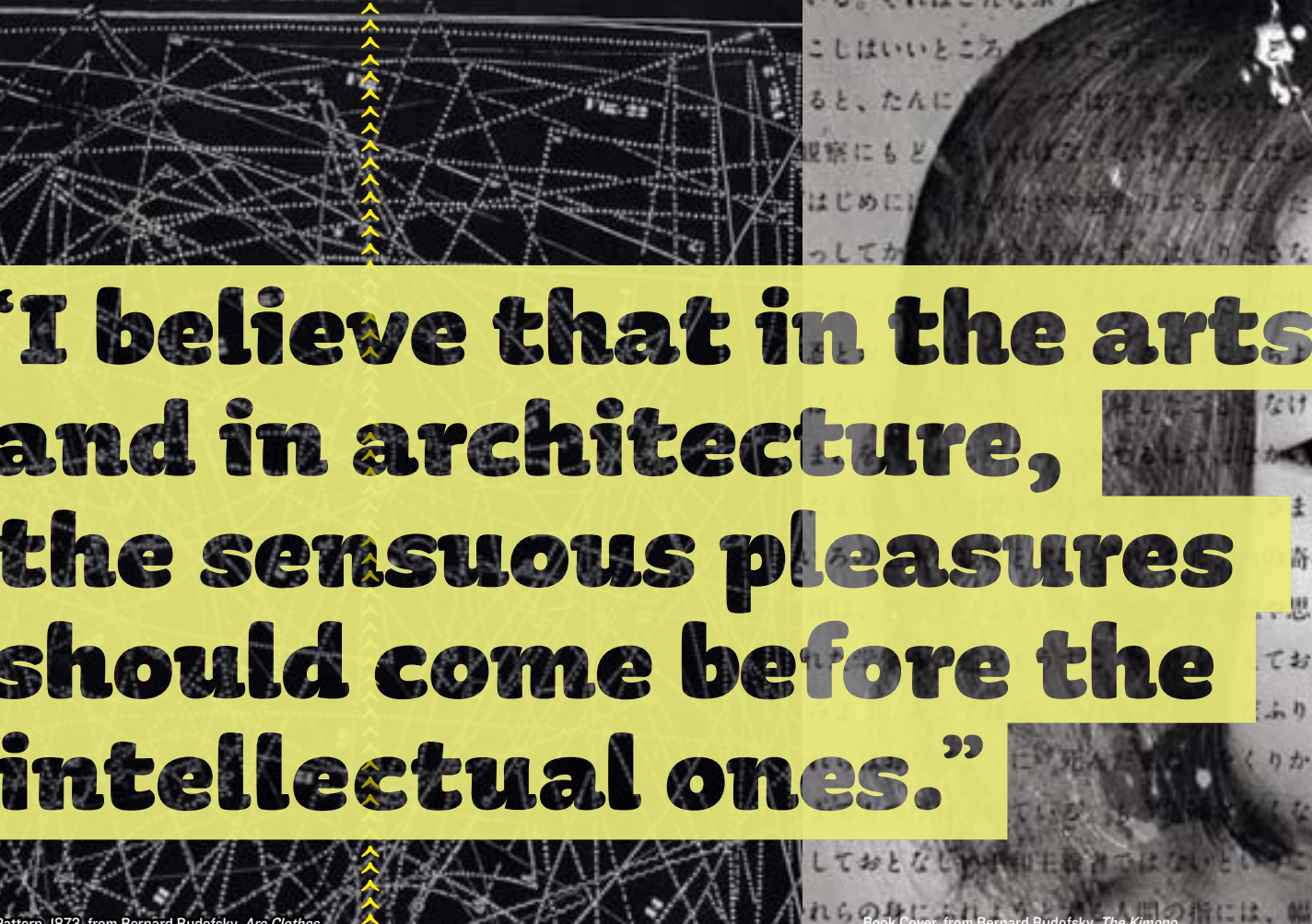
Hand Ornament, Ahmedabad, India, from *The Unfashionable Human Body* (Garden City, New York, 1971), p. 218. Courtesy Musée de l’Homme, Paris



Architecture without Architects Exhibition Installation, MoMA, New York, November 11, 1964–February 7, 1965. Courtesy Jane and Benjamin Thompson, Thompson Design Group Inc., Boston



Foot from a Classical Sculpture (detail). Photo: Bernard Rudofsky. Courtesy MAK—Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst/Gegenwartskunst Wien



“Si, No” Fabric, 1949, Stimulus Collection, designed by Bernard Rudofsky for Schiffer Prints
Dress Pattern, 1873, from Bernard Rudofsky, *Are Clothes Modern?* (Chicago, 1947), p. 146
Book Cover, from Bernard Rudofsky, *The Kimono Mind* (Garden City, New York, 1965)