

'Cubistic claptrap'? Erik Magnussen's *The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan* of 1927

SIMON BLISS

The major exhibition *Art Deco 1910–39*, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2003, opened with a section called 'the style and the age'. A few choice exhibits were put forward as key examples of the style. These items included the Danish designer Erik Magnussen's 'cubic' coffee service, known as *The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan*, made for the Gorham Manufacturing Company in 1927.[fig 1] It is a well-known piece and it occupies a unique position in American twentieth-century silver. The accompanying exhibition catalogue places Magnussen's 'dazzling' design firmly within the development of American modernism in the 1920s.¹

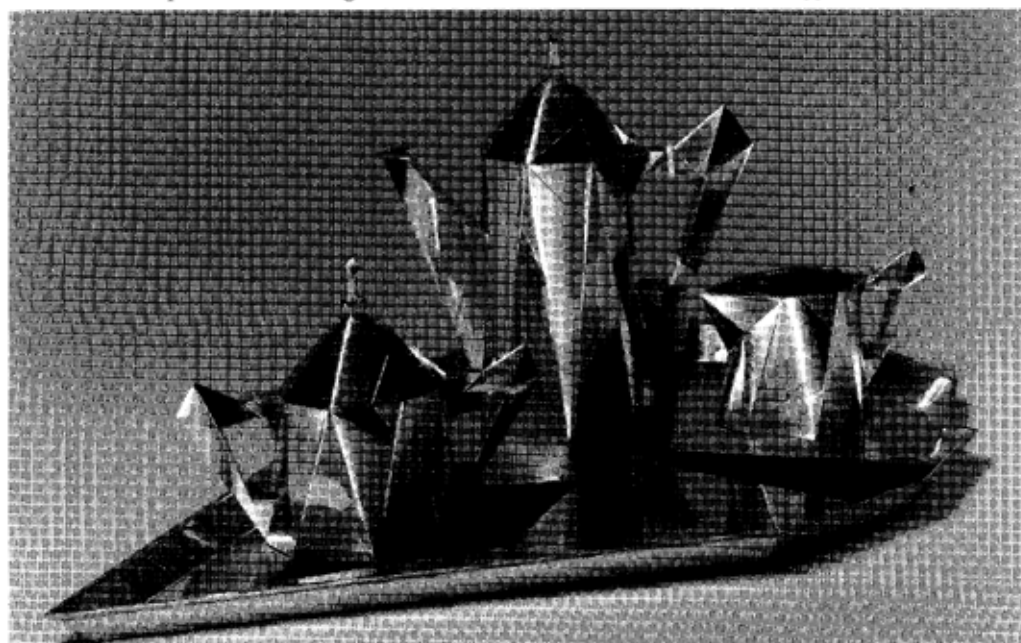
It is discussed as part of the development of the Gorham Company in Charles H. Carpenter's *Gorham Silver* and plays a significant part in Charles L. Venable's account of *Silver in America*.² Very recently, Jewel Stern's *Modernism in American Silver* devotes considerable space to a discussion of Magnussen's work for Gorham, including *The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan*.³ In addition, thanks to the efforts of the Rhode Island Silver Society, we can now access copies of some interesting documents held at the Gorham Archive at Brown University on CD-ROM. Although this archive material covers the period 1880–1909, it also includes some later material pertinent to Magnussen's time at Gorham.⁴

1 See W. Kaplan, 'The Filter of American Taste: Design in the USA in the 1920s', in C. Benton, T. Benton, and G. Wood (eds), *Art Deco 1910–39*, Victoria and Albert Museum 2003, pp335–43.

2 C.H. Carpenter, *Gorham Silver*, Alan Wofsy Fine Arts 1997, pp204–13. C.L. Venable, *Silver in America 1840–1940: A Century of Splendor*, Harry N. Abrams Inc 1997, pp276–91.

3 J. Stern, *Modernism in American Silver*, Yale University Press 2005, pp26–33.

4 CD-ROM: The Gorham Design Library, Gorham Annual Catalogues (1880–1909). Production by Newbook Inc. 2003. The complete set consists of eight CDs. CD5 also contains a reproduction of the 1928 flyer for Gorham's 'Modern American' range, referred to later in this article. At time of writing, there does not appear to be a copy available in any UK library. The copy consulted was kindly loaned to me by the library of the Newark Museum, NJ.



1 Erik Magnussen for Gorham Manufacturing Company, 'Cubic' coffee service, 1927 ('*The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan*'). Silver with patinated, oxidised and gilt decoration. Height of coffee pot 24cm (9½in). (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. The Gorham Collection. Gift of Textron Inc. Photo: Cathy Carver)



2 Gorham window display, circa 1928, with 'The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan'. (Brown University Library)

This short paper is indebted to the above material, but its principal aim is to consider the wider artistic influences on Magnussen's design and to speculate on its relationship with aspects of design theory in the inter-war years. I have also included some thoughts on the meaning of reflection and the ability of Magnussen's work to express movement and the cubist painters' preoccupation with simultaneity. The application of the latter concept into silverware is particularly interesting, as attempts to incorporate the formal language of cubism into architecture and the decorative arts in the 1920s has been the subject of some debate. The following represents, principally, a discussion of one of the most complete expressions of the cubist sensibility in the applied arts, although the vicissitudes of Magnussen's modernistic work and his relationship with the Gorham Company are also important.

After apprenticeship and an early career in his native Denmark (where he also studied sculpture) Erik Magnussen (1884–1961) was engaged in 1925 by Gorham of Providence, Rhode Island, to design pieces in the modern style. He was given his own studio and resources for the production of what was hoped to be a groundbreaking series of designs which would help to improve the fortunes of the company after a recent reorganisation.⁵ Although his initial work for Gorham was in a familiar Scandinavian style, he quickly adopted a more radical aesthetic through the production of his 'cubic' ware.

The set consisted of a teapot, a coffee pot, a jug and tray.⁶ The pieces are based on an interplay between triangular facets, some of silver and some of silver-gilt (the 'lights' and 'shadows' respectively). This is carried through in the design and fabrication of the tray to produce an ensemble which, formally, is very consistent. Magnussen fabricated the piece himself and it was set up as a demonstration window display, probably in late 1927.⁷ [fig 2] The accompanying promotional stand (the architecture and typography of which is remarkably reminiscent of a German expressionist film set) bears the legend 'silver like this has never been seen before' and it is worth noting here the efforts that Gorham went to in the promotion of a one-off piece.

Magnussen's design certainly had a mixed critical reception. A photograph of the pieces was included in an article on home furnishings in a late 1927 edition of the *New York Times Magazine*. [fig 3] Here, Walter Rendell Storby draws attention to the 'modernistic' style of Magnussen's creation in the context of contemporary experiences of American architecture. He is at pains to point out how much more relevant its modern forms are to an American audience compared with modern work from Europe:

Taking its inspiration from the lights and shadows of the streets of New York and the architecture of its buildings, this new ware is more closely related to our everyday life than the forms of silver recently created in Paris by such men as Gustav Sandoz and Jean Puiforcat ... In the foreign silver, abstract geometrical forms are suggested, while in this American ware the simple planes of high buildings are brought to mind.⁸

Perhaps Storby's praise for Magnussen's design was based on the literalness of the title given to the set. The pieces which make up the set, though, are more abstract than any other attempt to suggest the experience of modernity by designers at this time who were busy popularising the so-called 'skyscraper style'.⁹

In marked contrast to the praise conferred on the piece by the *New*

5 Venable (as note 2) p278. Also important are the efforts on the part of the US Government to enhance the appreciation of modern design around the time of the 1925 Paris Exposition. See Stern (as note 3), pp22–26.

6 Magnussen also produced other 'cubic' style pieces for Gorham in 1927, including some serving pieces, a bonbon dish and a mirror. See Carpenter (as note 2), p210 and Stern (as note 3), p29.

7 This photograph is from the Gorham company archives at Brown University but few details are known about it.

However, it has been pointed out that the set was exhibited in Gorham's Fifth Avenue show window, so it is highly likely that this is a true record of the exhibit. See J. Stern, 'Striking the Modern Note in Metal', in J. Kardon (ed), *Craft in the Machine Age*, Harry N. Abrams Inc 1995, p126.

8 W.R. Storby, 'Lamps That Lend Harmony to the Home', *New York Times Magazine*, 11 December 1927.

9 For a brief discussion of the influence of skyscrapers, see Stern (as note 3), pp73–77.

York Times, a scathing attack on *The Lights and Shadows* was published in *The New Republic* for 4 January 1928, where the architectural pretensions of the design are summarily dismissed:

Our skyscraper worship has produced some pretty sad results; but I think this cubistic claptrap in silver is about the worst I have seen.¹⁰

In the context of the contemporary fad for applying 'modernistic' features (including an architectural sensibility) to silver objects, this reaction is perhaps understandable. However, the writer goes on to say that the overall effect of the design is 'painful because the designer had applied a cubistic technique to surfaces that, in the sheer nature of things, cannot be treated cubistically'.¹¹

This is clearly an invitation to consider the relationship between cubism and the applied arts. Given that the development of cubism is primarily associated with developments in painting and sculpture, is it really impossible to apply the cubist language of form to a three-dimensional object designed for use as the above reviewer suggests? In order to do this, it is necessary to consider the relationship between the language of cubism and the experience of modernity.

Famously, Erik Magnussen was inspired to create *The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan* by a flight taken above New York where he noted that 'the entire city made a picture of triangular patches of sun and shadow'.¹² This is an archetypal experience for the early modern artist for, from the Futurists to Le Corbusier, the impact of the aeroplane was crucial in the development of the modernist outlook.

However, the resulting pieces were never meant to be literal interpretations of the architectural features of a city seen from above. With the exception of the finials on the top of the two pots, all the architectural qualities of the pieces are based on an experiential approach. The 'lights and shadows' are expressed by the colouring of the metal, but the faceting and lack of literalness put the pieces firmly in the domain of the cubist sensibility, as the development of cubism in painting and sculpture was primarily about expressing notions of time, changing conceptions of space and of using material to suggest, ironically, the inter-relatedness of forms rather than their closed separateness from one another. Thus it is possible to consider the pieces in relation to influences from both European and American modernism where, for some, the experience of modernity was brought about by the transformatory qualities of the machine.

Historians have described how views of the ground from the air formed part of the development of modernist practice in the arts and this is an interesting aspect of the development of Magnussen's pieces.¹³ In her 1938 account of Picasso's work, the American writer and Paris-based cubist patron Gertrude Stein described her early experiences of flight and noted that:

When I was in America I for the first time travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane.¹⁴

This experience may be usefully compared to that of the young Le Corbusier who, in 1909, craned his neck out of the window of his 'student's garret' to witness the Comte de Lambert, who:



3 *The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan*, illustrated in the *New York Times Magazine*, 11 December 1927.

10 Quoted in D.H. Pilgrim, 'Design for the Machine' in R.C. Wilson, D.H. Pilgrim, and D. Tashjian, *The Machine Age in America*, Harry N. Abrams Inc 2001, p294.

11 As note 10.

12 As note 1, p. 343.

13 See for example, M. Chan, 'The Conquest of the Air', in J. Elderfield, P. Reed, M. Chan and M. González (eds), *Modern Starts: People, Places, Things*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1999, pp253-57.

14 See G. Stein, *Picasso*, Batsford 1938, p50.

... having succeeded in 'taking off' at Juvisy, had descended towards Paris and circled the Eiffel Tower at a height of 300 metres. It was miraculous, it was mad! Our dreams could turn into reality, however daring they might be.¹⁵

The technology of flight, aerial photography and other legacies of the First World War created a new-found relationship between the viewer and the environment which offered not only new insights into the relationship between people and the earth below, but offered the promise of a new kind of experience brought on by the machine. For the modernists, the airplane was the ultimate symbol of this through the experience of shifting perspectives allied to the 'new' experiences of speed and motion. Given Erik Magnussen's familiarity with the European *avant garde* both prior to and during his sojourn in New York, he would certainly have been susceptible to these influences.¹⁶ Further, he has clearly expressed, through the faceted forms, a shifting restlessness brought about by the way that both the silver and gilt facets reflect surrounding spaces in varying degrees of depth and intensity.

Could a coffee set, then, be a repository of ideas about dynamism, movement, technology and the city in the same way that, for example, the cubo-futurist paintings of Boccioni or Delaunay were? In Czechoslovakia a number of architects and designers had introduced fragmentation and the faceting of form into the design of architecture, furniture and interiors before the First World War in an attempt to bridge the gap between cubist painting, sculpture and architecture. Earlier, Raymond Duchamp-Villon's *maison cubiste* (exhibited in model form at the 1912 Salon d'Automne in Paris) had managed to introduce little more than a vague adaptation of the painters' language onto certain traditional decorative features of a façade. The Czech examples were more successful and, for a while, made an impact in *avant garde* circles in central Europe and Paris.¹⁷

The Czech experiments with the faceting of surfaces can be seen in furniture, applied arts, industrial design as well as buildings. The relationship between cubist painting and three-dimensional form is, however, an uneasy one and has been treated with scepticism by some who have preferred to label the style 'cubistic' rather than 'cubist'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, however one might wish to view this relationship, the Czech architect and designer Josef Gočár's work perhaps best illustrates the early modern tendency towards cubism in design. His brass clock of 1913 uses a regular series of facets to produce an effect whereby the actual solidity and heaviness of the material from which it is made is to some extent undermined visually. [fig 4] Though the faceting of forms is clearly ordered (unlike in Magnussen's pieces, which are more irregular) the effect does create some spatial ambiguities and a sense that the object is shifting and evolving, belying its bulk. As Ivan Margolius has pointed out, works like these 'clearly foreshadowed asym-

metrical compositions of geometrical forms in the applied art of the 1920s and '30s'.¹⁹ The ability to consider a design for a building, or indeed a clock, as a relation of volumes rather than as a closed mass was a significant development in modernist design, leading to an emphasis on the organisation of volume (rather than mass) in later modernist design. It is possible that Magnussen would have known these works from his training and his exhibiting career in Europe before moving to America.

Since the cubist approach to the faceting of form is usually considered to be an anti-rational tendency, it could be argued that Magnussen's pieces, in allowing for the introduction of a restless shifting surface, produce an effect which is achieved by exploiting both the qualities of movement and, crucially, reflection. Here, the characteristics of silver become significant.

The potential of silver to exploit qualities of reflection, plasticity of rapid movement and fragmentation may not be unique to the material, but it is significant that Magnussen's use of silver and gilt helps him to express his idea more successfully.

In the design, there are degrees of reflection as well as the potential for distortion (brought about by the angles and slight imperfections of the hand-made surfaces) and the expression of movement and time. The last two concerns are those we can find in cubist painting – simultaneity. The cubist technique allowed the artist to move away from the fixed artificial perspective systems of the renaissance to one which made it possible to indicate a number of viewpoints of the same object(s) simultaneously. Arnold Hauser described this very effectively when considering how the experience of simultaneity was crucial to modern man's search for the topical and contemporary:

He experiences the greatness of his cities, the miracles of his technics, the wealth of his ideas, the hidden depths of his psychology in the contiguity, the interconnections and dovetailing of things and processes

adding that:

The fascination of 'simultaneity' ... is perhaps the real source of the new conception of time and of the whole abruptness with which modern art describes life.²⁰

Surely it is not too far-fetched to map this characterisation of modernist experience on to the faceted and 'contiguous' forms of Magnussen's pieces? Each facet not only literally reflects different views of the surroundings, disrupting the conventional way that the surface of a silver object 'draws in' the surrounding space, but this disruption actually serves to bring the objects to a point of contiguity with their surroundings, to become part of the space and not a mirror to it.

Though expressed in a form designed to fulfill a specific function, Magnussen has cleverly used every opportunity to exploit the possibilities of reflection. The

effect of this in three dimensions, aided by the qualities of reflection inherent in the materials, made it possible for Magnussen to use surfaces in quite a complex way.

The use of reflection in Magnussen's piece is, therefore, crucial to its success. As Jonathan Miller writes:

... when a surface approximates to the condition of a perfect mirror it is no longer to be seen as a surface. Nevertheless, as long as observers have good reason to identify what they see as a reflection, they 'see' the surface notwithstanding the fact that there is nothing visible to justify such a perception.²¹

Miller's observations are interesting because in Magnussen's piece we are, obviously, intended to read the surfaces as reflections and the success of the piece is dependent on our ability to judge the way reflections occur. The value of this approach in a series of objects which were meant to be held, tipped and passed around is clear. In use, the service could become an obvious demonstration of refraction and dynamic movement – in effect, an embodiment of simultaneity and a celebration of the machine age. One is tempted, then, to imagine how the pieces may have reflected the movements of vehicles and passers-by when on display in Fifth Avenue.

It is interesting, if not ironic, to note that some of the great essays in movement and the 'new vision' produced by the cubist artists were not always expressed through radically modern subject-matter, but were rather worked out through fairly traditional subjects – the still-life, for example, where often ubiquitous objects (bottles, glasses, pipes, chairs, tables) were the ciphers through which cubism's epoch-making contribution to the conceptualisation of space took place. In the more openly commercial arena of the applied arts, it is also worth noting that this small collection of silver containers, dazzling though they may be, became a very strong expression of what many would refer to as the dynamism of modern life.

It has been noted in all the accounts of *The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan* that the pieces were a commercial failure yet gave rise to a number of derivative 'cubic' designs produced by American manufacturers.²² There is clearly much evidence to support the idea that Magnussen's 'cubic' designs were never really intended to be put into production on any meaningful level. What the pieces did do, however, was to draw attention to the attempts by Gorham drastically to up-date its design direction. Although this was partly achieved (whether intentionally or not) by the adverse reaction to the display on Fifth Avenue, there is an interesting postscript to the saga of the pieces in the form of Magnussen's 'Modern American' range of silver, first produced in 1928.

Gorham produced a flyer for this new range. In it, the company is keen to point out the experimental nature of Magnussen's previous work, as well as some of its practical shortcomings:

His original creations for this company were received with acclaim . . . one was an impressionistic tea set called "Lights and Shadows of Manhattan" based on tall buildings seen from various perspectives and from sun shadows on set-back skyscrapers ... if you have seen the set you have sensed the fact that it was intended merely for exhibition ... a piece of Fine Art ... Everyone quickly sensed the fact that this set was a significant contribution to modern art ... but as for the fact that it was intended for exhibition not for daily use ... that was harder to grasp ... Erik Magnussen smiled to himself ... he had long been busy on something more vital.²³



4 Josef Gočár, 'Cubist' clock in brass, 1913.
(Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague)

15 Le Corbusier, *Aircraft*, Trefoil 1987, p6. (First published 1935).

16 Between 1901 and 1922, Magnussen had exhibited in Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris (Salon d'Automne 1922) and Rio de Janeiro. See Carpenter (as note 2), p208.

17 For an account in English of Czech cubism, see I. Margolius, *Cubism in Architecture and the Applied Arts*, David and Charles 1979.

18 See Yve-Alain Bois, 'Cubistic, Cubic and

Cubist', in E. Blau (ed), *Architecture and Cubism*, MIT Press 1997, pp187-94.

19 As note 17, p82

20 A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol 4: 'Naturalism, Impressionism, The Film Age', Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962, p231.

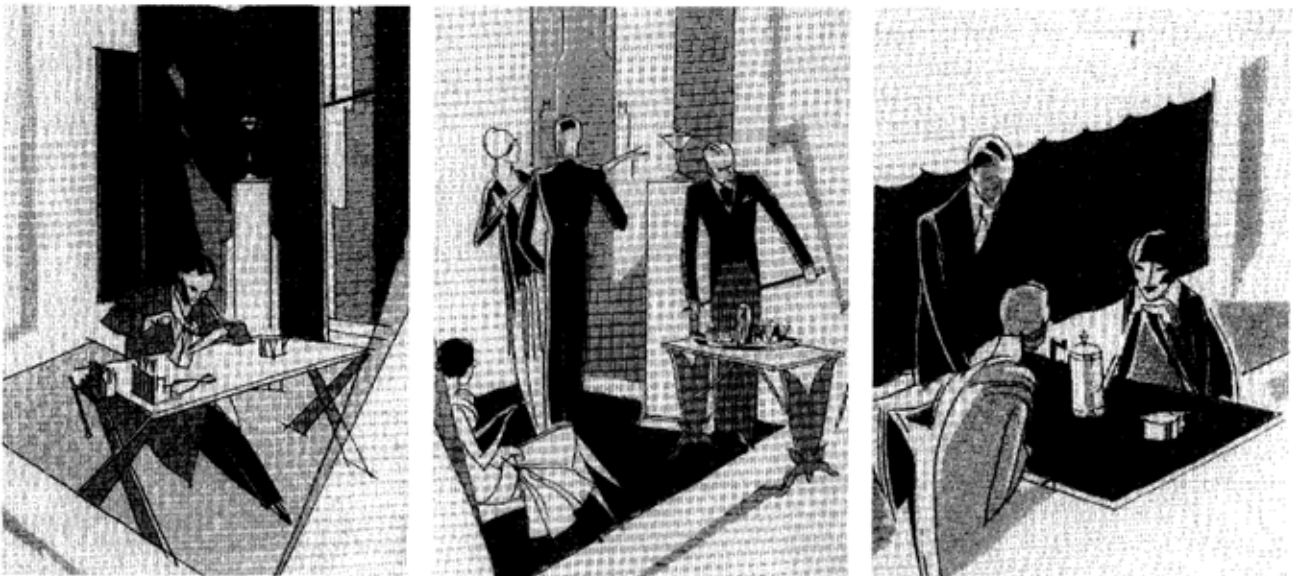
21 J. Miller, *On Reflection*, National Gallery Publications 1998, p9.

22 See Stern (as note 3), pp70-77.

23 Gorham Manufacturing Company flyer *The Modern American*, 1928 (see note 4).

The new range of wares was easier on the eye, more in tune with the rational aesthetic of the times and, frankly, easier to manufacture. The name for the new range, as well as the description of its conception, also indicated that a certain distance was being put between European-inspired modernist forms (ie cubist/cubic) and a new 'American' aesthetic, intended to assuage the critics of Magnussen and to give fresh impetus to Gorham's attempts to produce a truly popular range of silverware in an acceptable modern idiom. Indeed, the impact of early modernism in America was viewed suspiciously in some quarters. Dianne Pilgrim has pointed out that 'Americans rejected a good deal of early modernism because it was not functional, straightforward, or simple – characteristics that had appealed to Americans since the seventeenth century'.²⁴ This is an acute observation and is backed up by a description of the new range in the flyer:

... it is the silver of the age ... it is the silver of America ... not of Europe ... it goes with all fine American things ... Magnussen could not have designed it when he came to America ... it took three years of study and travel and life in America to give him the American tradition ... We see in it clean straight lines and soft restful curves.²⁵



5–7 Gorham Manufacturing Company, flyer for the 'Modern American' range of silverware, 1928 (details).

The illustrations for the flyer also tell an interesting story. One of them clearly shows Magnussen's cubic ware being made [fig 5] and, in another, being admired.[fig 6] In both illustrations, one of Erik Magnussen's first designs for Gorham (a sweet jar of 1926) can be seen on a plinth in the background. A further illustration shows the cleaner lines of the 'Modern American' being appreciated.[fig 7] These illustrations neatly tell the story of the rapid changes in Magnussen's work since joining the company in 1925. An overview of the new range reveals that apart from a triangular spout, all traces of the cubic forms have disappeared.[fig 8] The designer (Magnussen himself?) is portrayed as a serious creator, working steadily towards the creation of pieces which exhibit a clear, rational aesthetic rather than the more daringly intellectual forms of the cubic ware.[fig 9] More River Rouge than rive gauche.

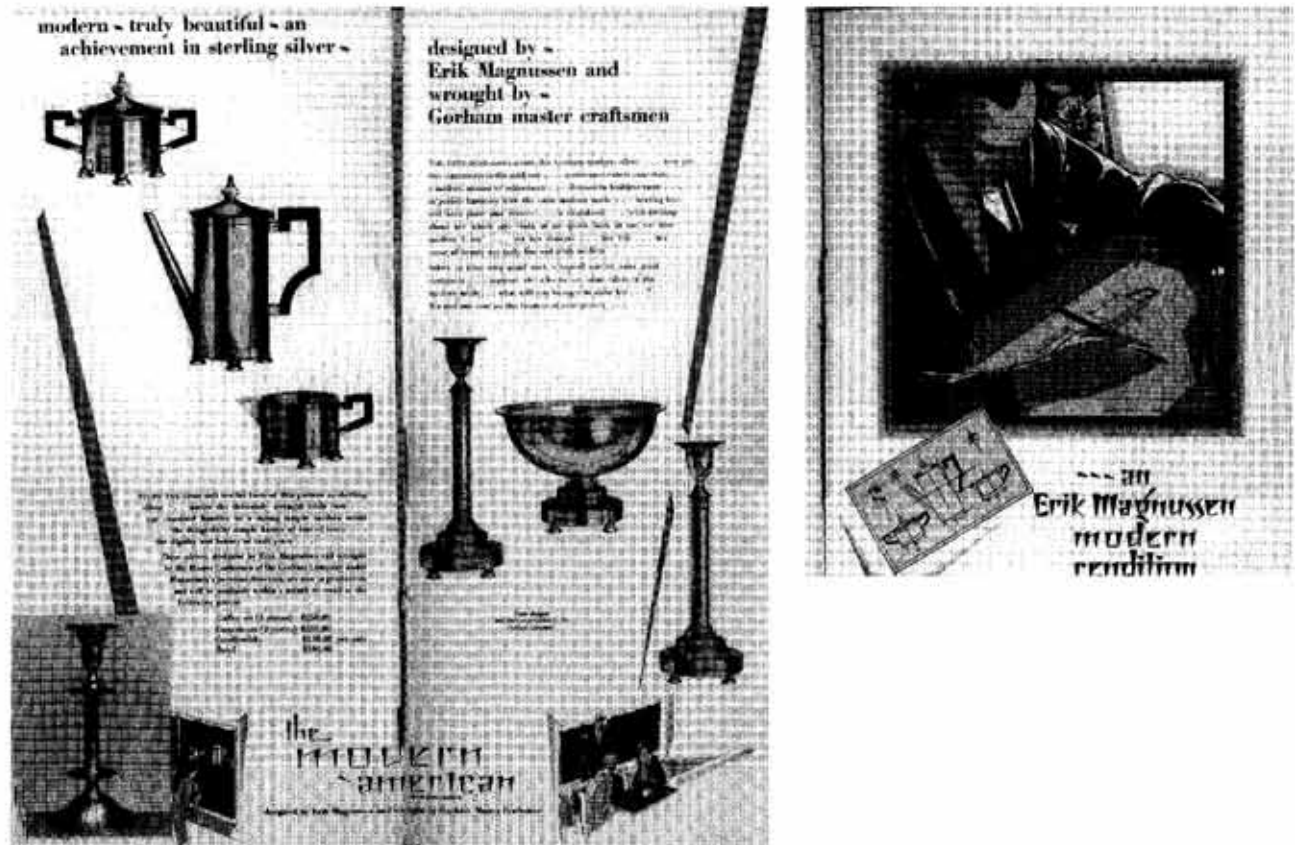
²⁴ As note 10, p293.

²⁵ As note 23.

Although Erik Magnussen's association with Gorham was short-lived (he left Gorham in 1929 and returned to Denmark a decade later) he is, arguably, best remembered for *The Lights and Shadows* than anything else even though, at the time, Gorham's promotion of the piece was clearly something of a *débâcle*. It is clear, now, that these pieces can be appreciated as being more than just a spectacular evocation of a spurious 'jazz-age' aesthetic, for in its evocation of movement, simultaneity and the contrasting and shifting perspectives of the modern city it is hard to think of any other piece of applied art from the period which surpasses it in its ambition. There are far more spatial ambiguities present here than in any other piece of design or applied art from the twenties which claimed to be influenced by cubism. In recognising this, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of silver in achieving such remarkable results.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lucy Hannaford (Subject Librarian, University College for the Creative Arts at Rochester), Holly Snyder (Brown University) and Alena Zapletalová (Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague) for their assistance in the preparation of this article. Thanks, also, to Sam Hough (Rhode Island Silver Society) for allowing me to reproduce pages from Gorham's 'Modern American' flyer.



8 & 9 (right) Gorham Manufacturing Company, flyer for the 'Modern American' range of silverware, 1928.