

Secundum Artem:

Selected works of art and design from the University collections



A Latin phrase literally meaning “according to the art or practice,” *secundum artem* often refers to doing something in the accepted manner of a skill or trade. In medicine, it can mean “employing skill and judgment” or “to make favorably with skill;” in pharmacy, preparations made *secundum artem* ensure they are pure and unadulterated, but the phrase also encompasses the apothecary’s obligation to provide good advice to customers who request over the counter drugs.

Through the display of over 100 objects related to the history of pharmacy and science, this exhibition explores the products of various skilled scientists, artists, craftsmen, and designers active primarily in Europe and the United States during the last 300 years. What links these objects is that they were manufactured according to the specific art or practice, or *secundum artem*, of their makers. The wide media – prints, photographs, manuscripts, paintings, ceramics, glass, wood, and metal – and categories of objects – instruments, advertising and packaging, natural science, etc. – attest to the broad holdings of the Marvin Samson Center for the History of Pharmacy. In each instance, an object was conceived with a particular function in mind, which ranged from the purely utilitarian to the purely decorative, but very often with the boundary between the two being blurred.

Frequently an object’s elegant design or the addition of applied decoration is sufficient to elevate it to the status of veritable art object. The 1930s Remington typewriter on display in the gallery is an example of the former: a well-thought-out and restrained form in keeping with the philosophy expressed by Camillo Olivetti, a designer at one of Remington’s competing firms, who remarked “a typewriter should not be a geegaw for the drawing room, ornate or in questionable taste. It should have

an appearance that is serious and elegant at the same time.” At the other end of the spectrum is the pair of late-17th-century Italian blue-and-white ceramic apothecary jars. Ostensibly made as containers for the drugs named on their labels (theriaca and hyacinth), their large, bold form (with twisted snake handles) and finely-painted decoration eclipse their utilitarian function and thus distinguish them as notable works of ceramic art.

The significance of a sizeable group of objects in the exhibition lies with their didactic function. For example, the twelve late-19th-century German botanical panels displayed in the galley niches were produced as teaching aids, but their appeal and interest today as artistic prints is undeniable. In a similar way, our interest in crystal and rock specimens and in animal skeletons goes beyond their classification as, respectively, accidental products of geologic activity or products of evolutionary biology: they are examples of nature as art and as good design.

To be sure, many of the innovative art movements of the twentieth century resulted in a redefining or broadening of what constitutes “art.” (One need only think of Marcel Duchamp’s Dadaist “ready mades” of the 1910s, Jackson Pollack’s drip paintings of the 1950s, or Andy Warhol’s Pop Art creations of the 1960s and 70s.) Visitors to this exhibition are invited to view in new light a series of diverse artifacts made *secundum artem* and (primarily) for utilitarian purposes, to discover how, beyond their value as historical documents, such products of creative minds relate and compare to standard and accepted concepts of the art object. What makes an object beautiful? How can design transcend function?

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