

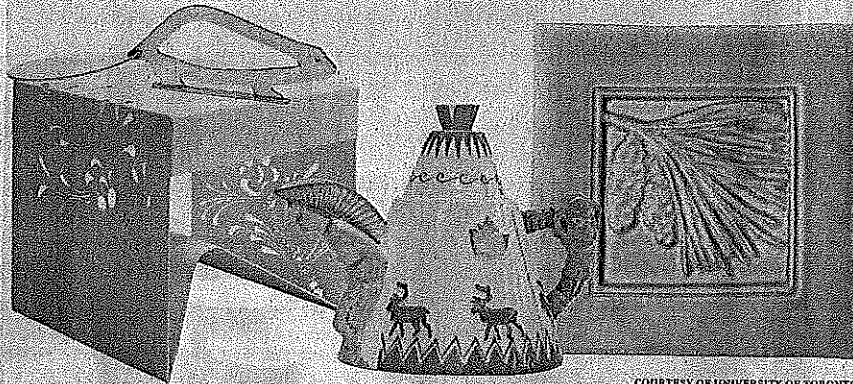
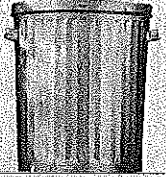
If you must have a bit of curb-side cast-off with your morning coffee ...

Now that autumn is here and nights are getting longer, curb-surfing is becoming a little easier to do without letting on to the neighbours you're out to collect their cast-offs. Sneaking out in the dark, early-morning hours in your bunny slippers and ratty housecoat to nab Ol' Man Edwards's rickety bar cart with a missing wheel may be just what you need to set a great day in motion, but

COOL KIJJI

— guess what — you don't have to be shy about your pre-dawn proclivity. So says a survey conducted by online classified site Kijji. It found that of 1,511 Canadians surveyed, 44% admit to curb-mining, while 45% said they know someone who does it. On the other hand, if you are

the one in six of us who thinks this rummaging is inappropriate, Kijji says you can get your "get-it-for-free" fix on its Web site, kijji.ca. And you don't have to worry about Ol' Man Edwards watching you through his blinds. *National Post*



The Beaver Tales exhibit at the University of Toronto Art Centre gives fringe designers their due.

COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

We need local design to claim differences



KELVIN BROWNE  
*Right Angles*

In Canada, it doesn't seem to matter whether we've lived in a city all our lives or have come to the country from a faraway place, nature resonates with us, be it in art or furniture, textile or ceramic design. It's at the core of our identity. Beaver Tales, an exhibition organized by the University of Toronto Art Centre, demonstrates how artists and craftspeople have been inspired by natural motifs, the flora and fauna of Canada, for more than two centuries. Guest curators Rachel Gottlieb and Martha Keller have assembled a thoughtful collection that shows serious designers can incorporate natural themes in their work and not create kitsch. More important, it demonstrates high style can be popular when it has themes we can revel in.

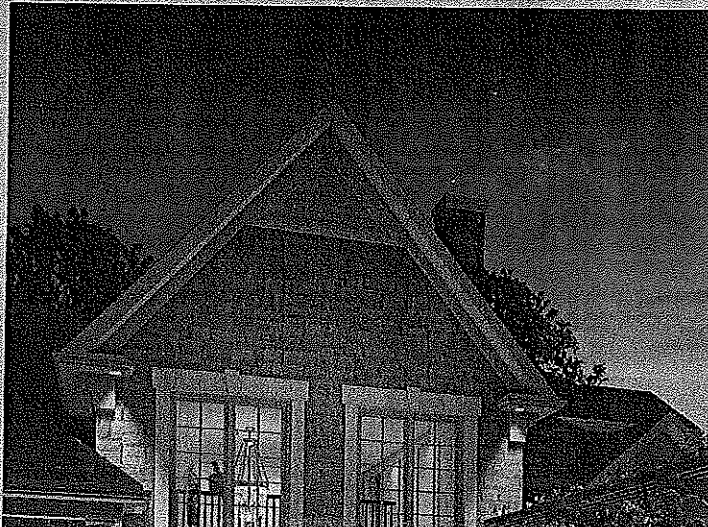
Works in the show range from those, for instance, by Emily Carr and Lawren Harris to Charlie Pachter, Heather Cooper and Frank Gehry. It's interesting that the dozens of creative people represented would be united by the influence nature has on their work. The curators quite correctly blur the lines between art and design; natural motifs overwhelm this distinction, and the inspiration for A.Y. Jackson seems no less profound than for those who create chairs or pots. I was particularly fascinated by the furniture and crafts, the things we might have in our homes. Seeing it reminded me what a bland world, furniture-wise, we choose to surround ourselves with and how obsessed we've become with sleek and neutral.

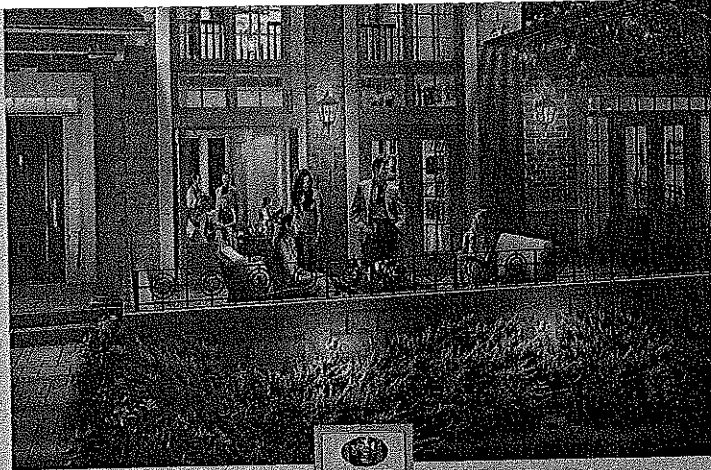
While the exhibition covers 200 years, the "modern" pieces are most intriguing, less stark than the austere style we associate with the most prominent designers of the 1930s, 40s and '50s.

"It's the other side of modernism," Ms. Gottlieb says. "You might call it

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"It's the other side of modernism," Ms. Gottlieb says. "You might call it grassroots modernism because it's accessible to a broad public."

It's obvious, in the items designed for domestic use, that their creators were very familiar with the then current unadorned orthodoxy of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe. But these grassroots modernists were contemporary in their time in a different manner. They combined a modern sensibility with images of nature. The result is lovely.

What was the reward these pioneering designers received for reconciling high concept and intuitive beauty? "They were mostly marginalized by their peers," Ms. Gottlieb says, "even though they were popular with the public."

Sound familiar? If too many of the wrong people like something, then it can't be good, or at least can't be exclusive enough for the "in" group of the moment. One reason this show is important is that it begins to give these designers their due. Those who write books and teach design courses have edited out many of these skilled creators in their histories of design in Canada.

Ms. Gottlieb explains that there's an international movement that is reacting against the sameness of contemporary design today. This view doesn't believe that a chair made in Canada, for instance, should be like a chair made in Egypt. This anti-global brand belief has a basis in this show. We have trilliums, we have mountains, we have animals that live in our north. We love where we live and this makes the products we produce reflect our locality. This isn't being provincial, it's being unique.

While I know Canadians are creative, I was also pleasantly surprised to see we have a sense of humour. In fact, we can be eccentric.

As I was entering the exhibition, a distinguished professor of design was leaving. After we nodded hello, he gave me his assessment of the show without slowing his step for a moment. "Pretty strange stuff," he pronounced as he walked away. Indeed. We need more strange stuff, and more of it in our homes. Enough of the timidity that forces people to surround themselves with the things everyone else has, with the objects you can't be faulted for because they are bona fide, design-magazine approved. You can have brilliant design, and you can make references to trees and rocks, too. In a world of mass production and conformity, sophisticated designers who make beautiful furniture, fabric and art — with references — are what will give our world meaning.

National Post