

**CRITICAL SHOPPER**

# A Trip to the Gift Shop Is Like a Day at the Museum



**GALLERY HOPPING** At the MoMA Design Store, buying and browsing go hand in hand.

Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

By Mike Albo

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I HAVE a friend who used to work at the MoMA Design Store in the early '90s. I remember him telling me that sometimes people would walk in the store, mistake it for Museum of Modern Art itself and stroll around peering at things as if it were a gallery.

One day he'd finally had enough. When someone walked in, looked around and asked, "Can you tell me where the *main* museum is?" my friend shrugged and answered, "I don't know, Maine?"



An IQ light by Holger Strom (1973).

Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

I bet that doesn't happen anymore. MoMA has been renovated into glassy, glossy precision and has two sleek, comprehensive stores at street level: the original MoMA Design Store and the MoMA Design and Book Store across the street on the museum's first floor.

The spaces look savvy, and so do the shoppers. We do not crave Impressionism posters here; there is no inflatable Munch "Scream." This is a hub of elevated taste that matches our Age of Enlightened Design, when everyone reads Dwell magazine, knows Ray Eames was a woman and has father-figure fantasies about Tim Gunn.

The stores are clean and airy, like Danish train stations, laid out with the same meticulousness as their parent institution, with well-apportioned islands and shelves set apart retrospective style. You feel as if it is your duty to walk through the entire space to fully comprehend the artwork — I mean, merchandise.



A citrus juicer by Polly George (2003).  
Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

The newer MoMA Design and Book Store opened along with the renovated museum in 2004. The interior was designed by Richard Gluckman and includes two additional shops within the museum: one is dedicated to temporary exhibitions, the other to MoMA books. Walk through the entrance of the bookstore and you end up in a passageway of shelves with huge tomes ready to be displayed on your chrome coffee table. This section jettisons you to the wall of tote bags, T-shirts and mugs, manufactured in artsy black with minimal graphics. The requisite museum umbrella opens to reveal a blue sky on the underside. “Isn’t that cute,” a charmed woman next to me said with a sigh, caressing the blue clouds.

Next to this display are two islands of irresistible desk accessories, like the bright blue leather Amigo (\$45), a piggy bank that snaps together, and the Music Mug (\$42), which plays tunes through your MP3 player while you sip your coffee. I couldn’t stop touching the Troika compact speakers (\$28) — I stood there opening and closing the black clamshell-like shape.

Like the umbrella woman, I fell into a reverie of high-design wonder, walking around touching everything I could put my hands on. A sliver of society can buy and sell Rothkos for \$40 million or more, while we mini-Rothschilds can spend three-plus hours among the untouchable modern masterworks, then acquire some smaller symbols of take-home modernity. This makes for a lot of smaller translatable objects that can rest prominently on our Ikea shelving units, like the Kissing Candle Holders (\$79), or bring refinement to a kid’s room, like the Calder-esque Elephant Party Mobile (\$28).



Nesting tables by Josef Albers (1926).  
Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Many items whispered “future wedding gifts” to me, such as the Black Lace Cake Stand (\$60) with a beautiful lace pattern, designed by Yvonne Lam and Gloria Law in 2006. I know this because most of the products are accompanied by little placards that include the title, description and year. The red Washing Up Bowl (\$75), for example, was designed by Ole Jensen, is made of Santoprene rubber, and was the “winner of the International Design Plus award in 2002.” This is all very satisfying and further heals our status anxiety, We the People Who Can’t Afford to Go to Biennials.

There are still some old-school museum gift shop items: a wall of postcards (95 cents each) and a big selection of posters given a curatorial twist; they are numbered in red in the bottom right-hand corner. This way, you can indulge a fantasy that your paper edition of Jasper Johns’s “Map” will one day appreciate in value.

The south annex, which had been the main store since 1989, has been refocused on home furnishings. It repeats some of the gifty tote bag and candleholder items from the sister store, but this is where you can get your hands on an authentic reproduction of an Eames lounge chair (\$4,695) or a Bauhaus table lamp (\$850; \$265 for a replacement globe). More affordable is the Tord Boontje Until Dawn curtain (\$110), popular with friends of mine who need to cover up grotty pigeon munge outside the airshaft window of their studio apartments.



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Altogether, the stores offer a generous range of prices, from a \$14 dollar ceramic version of the “We Are Happy to Serve You” coffee cup to a Patricia von Musulin necklace of rock crystal for \$1,500, so you can find impressive gifts for any social sphere. I ended up buying a pair of Riedel wineglasses (\$26) for myself so at least I can drink like Julian Schnabel. Still in the midst of an unusually wet and dreary April, I bought \$5.95 blue-sky gift paper and an umbrella for my mom, who, if I brought her here, would be so excited she might have a seizure.

Knowing that most of these items were curated, I did sort of forget where I was and mistake the store for the museum, which I guess says something about the way we treat art these days. If I were more of a theory-head, I would be able to articulate it, but somewhere in the books section they probably have the “Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping,” a book of essays that examines how shopping has become synonymous with modernization. It includes a piece by the artist Sze Tsung Leong, in which he says ominously: “In the end, there will be little else for us to do but shop.”

The curators should make an exhibition about this in the store. Or maybe put a store in an exhibition space and curate the objects. Oh, wait, they already did.