

ALEXANDER GIRARD: HOW HIS FOLK ART COLLECTION INFLUENCED HIS PRACTICE

Notes by Barb Kaplan

When I first submitted to be a specialist for this show I mentioned that my love of folk art was a driving factor for tossing my name into the ring. Although I understood, and was reminded, that this exhibit is not a folk art show and is specifically about Girard's practice, I felt strongly that it's impossible to discuss his practice without examining the direct influence that his folk art collection had on his designs. I've limited most of my examples to folk art pieces (in the permanent collection of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe NM) which are directly related to Alexander Girard's objects and textiles.

As we tour, we can reference these collectibles to the amazing designs that Alexander Girard developed.

Alexander Girard and his wife Susan collected over 100,000 objects of folk art which are in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. They actively collected folk art from all over the world although work from Mexico and Central America dominate the collection.

I've focused most of these notes on objects from Mexico and Central America as we have so many guests and students with ties to those countries. I thought many would be excited to see objects of their cultural heritage incorporated into one of America's iconic modernist practices.

THE SUN (see photos 1-3 on pages 4-5)

A universal image that is well represented throughout the world but is dominant in Hispanic cultures.

The sun represents light in Hispanic (and other) cultures and is a positive image associated with life, nature, spring and regrowth.

Girard referenced the sun frequently from his yellow airplane for Braniff (photo 1) to his sun textiles (photo 3) and many many other objects. Here are several examples of how this ancient image was used in his practice.

Designed as a wall sculpture for both The Compound restaurant in Santa Fe as well as for his own home (photo 2.)

Sun images reimagined in textiles, matchbooks etc. for the NY restaurant La Fonda del Sol, 1960

THE MOON conversely represents night and darkness. It is sometimes associated with death and degeneration. (See photos 4-5 on page 6.)

As used by Girard as an ornament and designed as a wall sculpture in The Compound restaurant in Santa Fe (photo 4.)

From Girard's Folk Art Collection-Germany circa 1960 Museum of International Folk Art Santa Fe NM (photo 5.)

SNAKES (see photos 6-7 on page 7)

Sacred to the Aztecs, snakes were the symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the serpent god. Snakes are also a recurring theme in Native American culture. We frequently see them represented in the coiled form that Girard appropriated from NA baskets (as seen in our own PSAM collection), pots, and other ceramics. Snakes theoretically protected edibles (seeds, grains, etc.) from rodents and insects.

Snakes are also a classic New Mexican theme for locally carved wooden folk art.

A coiled snake from Girard's Folk Art Collection is displayed on one of his coiled snake textiles displayed at The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM (photo 6.)

A snake ceiling sculpture is present at The Compound Restaurant in Santa Fe, NM (see photo 7.)

TREE OF LIFE (see photos 8-11 on pages 8-9)

Girard's trees reference Scandinavian, Eastern European and Mexican folk art, which are all based on the biblical Tree of Life.

An image of one of Girard's textile "Daisy Face" from 1971, another of his Enrichment Panels for Herman Miller, is pictured with folk art objects from his collection (see photo 9.) The trees pictured at the bottom in this image are from Mexico circa 1960.

Similar elements are seen on a Polish textile circa 1960 from Girard's folk art collection (see photo 10.)

Another Girard Tree of Life based print along with a Mexican Tree of Life from his folk art collection is also pictured (see photo 11.) The Fruit Tree at the bottom left is from 1961.

EYES (see photo 12 on page 10)

Originally released in 1972, the eyes were another of the 40 silkscreen screens for Girard's open plan furniture system called Action Office. They were designed to add an element of fun to previously sterile workspaces.

The concept of an "evil eye" goes back to antiquity and multiple cultures throughout the world. An eye is worn as a protectorate against another evil eye

which could be cast upon the wearer. Girard's version is a playful and benevolent one.

In ancient Egypt the eye of Ra represented the Sun while the eye of Horus represented the moon, again possibly referencing the frequently used Girard images of the sun and the moon.

(Apologies but I could not find an evil eye example in Girard's folk art collection to show but felt that his eye panels were too important not to include in these touring notes.)

STRIPES (see photos 13-14 on page 11)

Alexander Girard loved stripes and used many different patterns and colorations for his textiles. He credits Marimekko, the Finnish textile house, as a source for inspiration, yet we can see the vibrant striped textiles of Latin America and other countries of the world as other sources of inspiration.

A Girard Millerstripe textile 1973 is seen in photo13.

A striped textile from the Girard folk art collection at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM is seen in photo 14.

DOLLS and TOYS (see photos 15-17 on pages 12-13)

Girard first envisioned his folk art collection as a toy museum. In his own words, "Toys represent a microcosm of man's world and dreams; they exhibit fantasy, imagination, humor and love. They are an invaluable record and expression of man's ingenious unsophisticated imagination." — *Alexander Girard as reprinted by the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM.*

Girard dolls (photos 15-16) and a Mexican Village Scene (photo 17) are seen on pages 12-13.

BLACK AND WHITE GEOMETRIC TEXTILES (see photos 18-19 on page 14)

Alexander Girard lived in Santa Fe, NM from 1953 until his death in 1993. He collected Navajo weavings and Pueblo pottery, incorporating their geometric designs into many of his textiles.

See Navajo weaving and Girard textile (photo 18) on page 14.

See Girard rug (photo 19) from 1965 on page 14.

From the above examples we can see how directly Alexander Girard incorporated his folk art collection into his iconic designs.

(Photos that follow were done by Barb Kaplan at The Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM except for where noted.)



1 - Sun (photo by Braniff)



2 - Sun



3 - Sun



4 - Moon



5 - Moon



6 - Snakes



7 - Snakes



8 - Tree of Life (photo by Vitra)



9 - Tree of Life



Paper cut (Wycinanka)
Skarżyska Bogocz
Krowiec, Poland, ca. 1960
Paper
Museum of International Folk Art, Seattle
Gift of the David Foundation Collection
1985.10.1

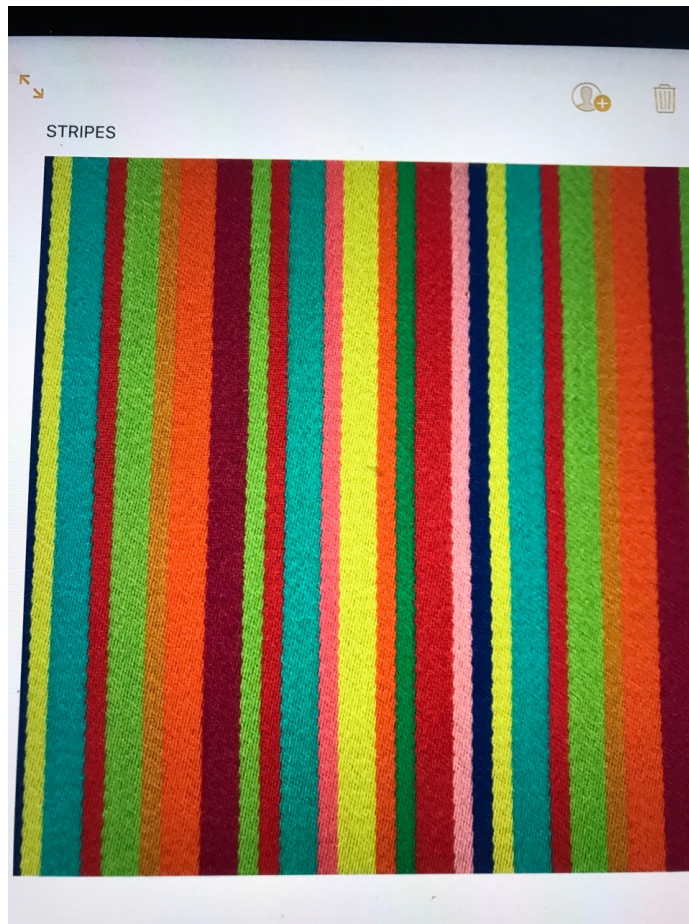
10 - Tree of Life



11 - Tree of Life



12 - Eyes (photo by Vitra)



13 - Stripes (photo by Maharam)



14 - Stripes



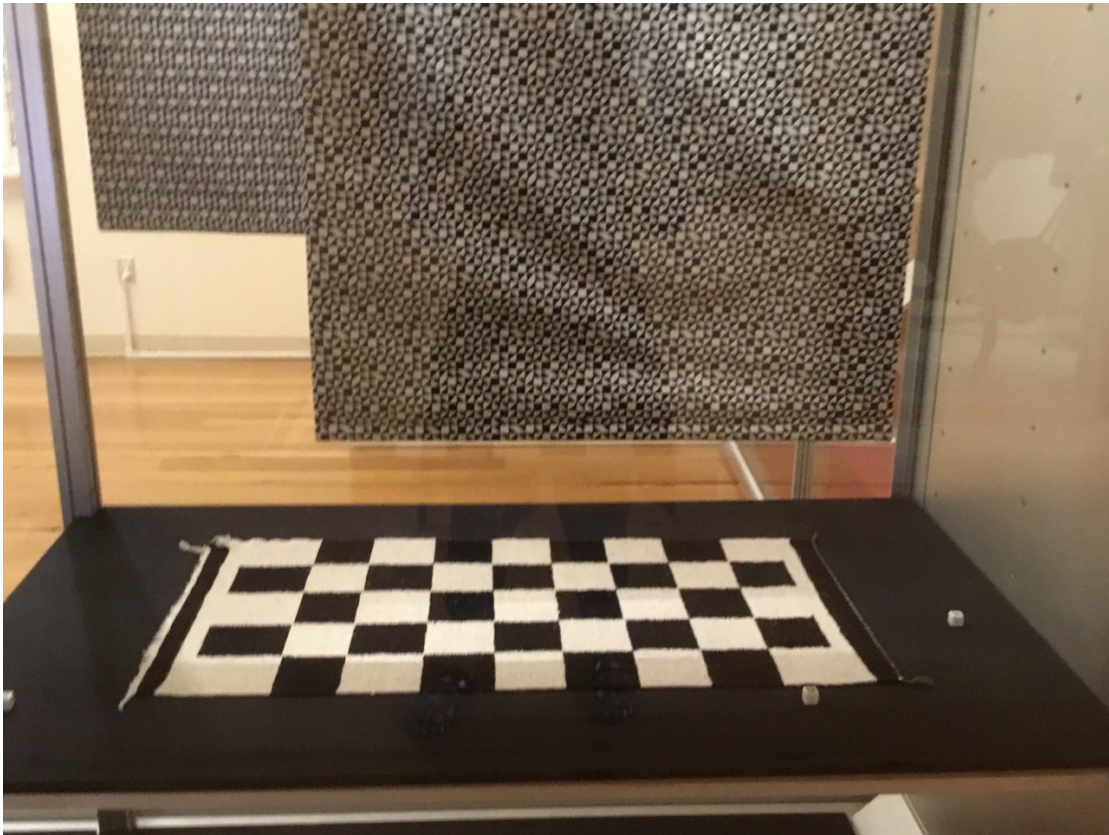
15 - Dolls and Toys



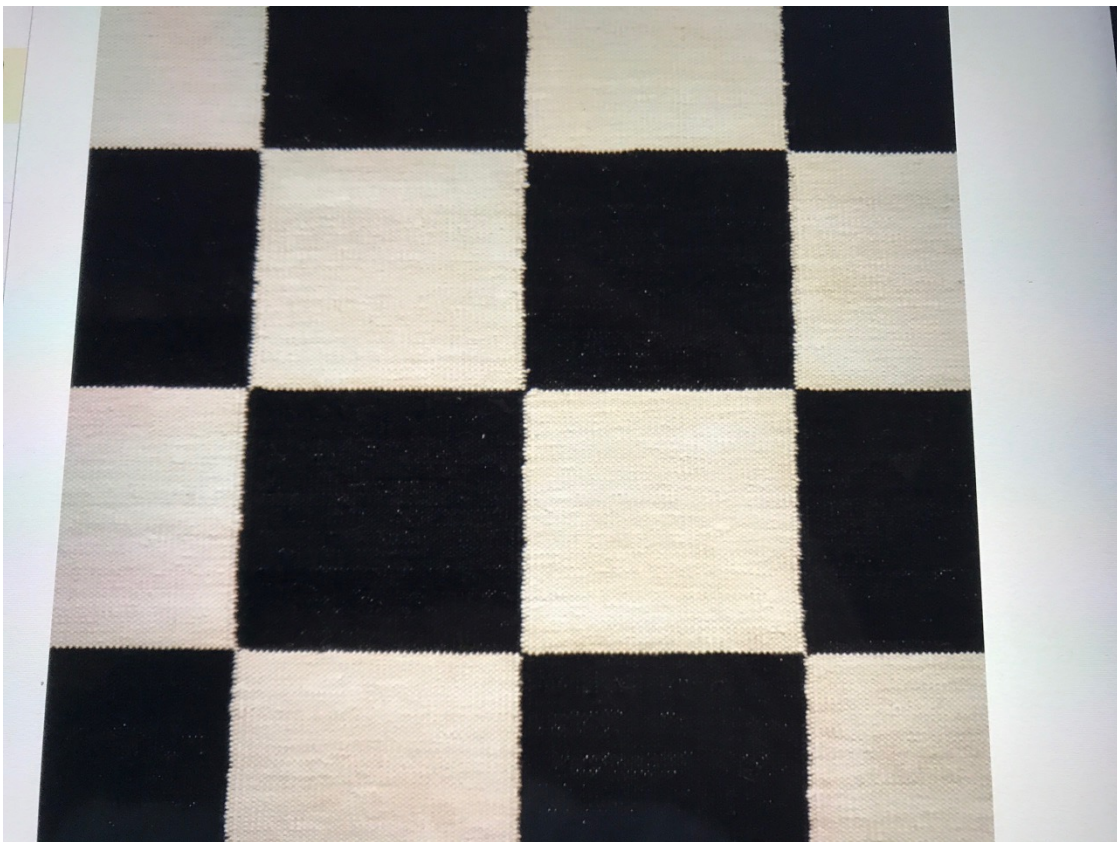
16 - Dolls and Toys (photo by Vitra)



17 - Dolls and Toys



18 - Black and White Geometric Textiles



19 - Black and White Geometric Textiles (photo by Maharam)