

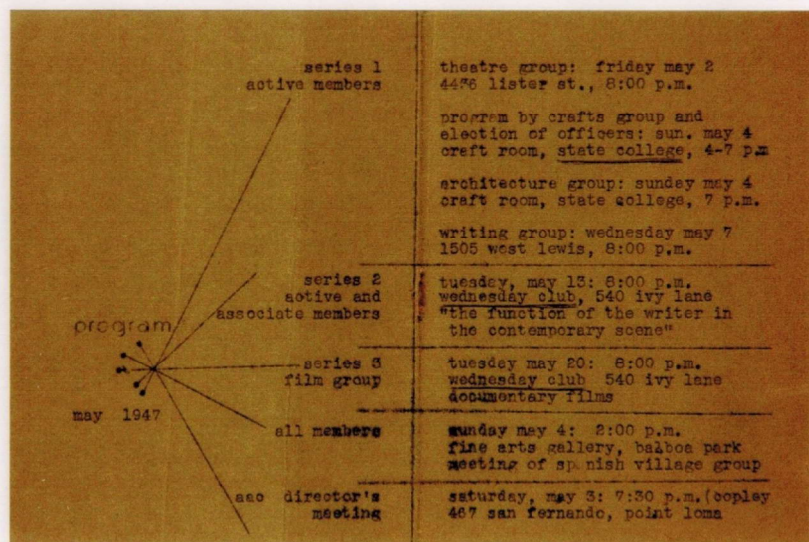


San Diego's

FROM POST-WAR
MODERN TO
CALIFORNIA DESIGN

Craft
Revolution

NGEI INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM

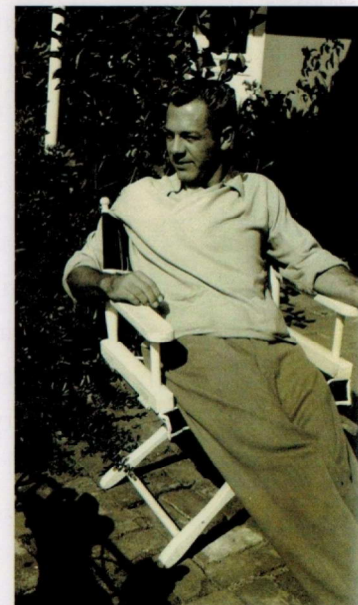


appreciated nor understood and that the artists themselves had no intention or strength as a body here in the city.²⁵

The Council certainly managed to stir things up while it lasted. A member of the writing group, Thor Ole Svenson, mentioned Eisenstein, Man Ray and Dada films being shown ("probably for the first time in San Diego"), a "highly experimental" presentation of *The Glass Menagerie*, Friday-night chamber music concerts in Old Town and a performance by scientist/folk singer Sam Hinton, as well as often raucous gatherings at the homes of Bill Copley, Donal Hord and Belle Baranceanu, among others.²⁶ Author Aldous Huxley is also said to have visited San Diego as a guest of the AAC.²⁷ On a copy of Margaret Price's obituary in the archive at the San Diego Museum of Art Library, this detail has been added by an anonymous hand: "At her kitchen counter, Man Ray demonstrated his image-light-sensitized paper works. Here for an Allied Artists' Council meeting, sponsored by Bill Copley."²⁸

above:
Detail from the May 1947 Allied Artists' Council program, including the first exhibition of the Council's craft group, the body that became the Allied Craftsmen.

Credit for the some of the group's dynamic programs goes to John W. Olsen, a native of Brooklyn, New York, who lived in the area with his wife, Flora, a ceramist, from 1944 to 1948 and again from 1973 until his death in 1992. As director of visual development for the University of California Division of War Research at the Navy Radio and Sound Laboratory on Point Loma (later known as the Navy Electronics Laboratory, or NEL), Olsen led a group of scientists, writers and artists whose "job was to take scientific jargon and make it understandable to the average person through words and pictures."²⁹ In 1946 he had a one-man show at the Art Center in La Jolla, and in 1947 he was "in charge" of a group that managed to preserve the Spanish Village in Balboa Park as a complex for arts groups.³⁰ At the time it was uncertain whether "artists would



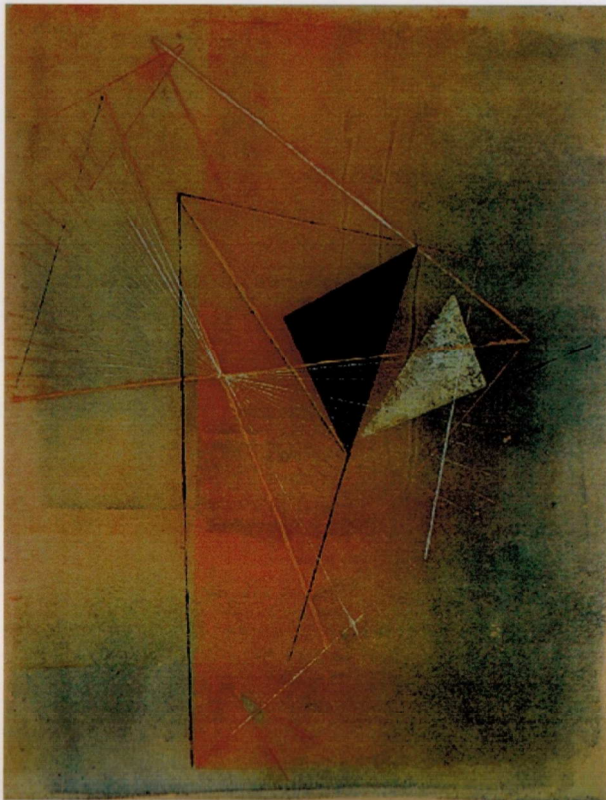
'get their village back,' after its rough usage by the Army during the war years."³¹ Olsen later engaged many top Southern California artists and craftspeople as he developed art programs at the State Colleges at Long Beach and Fullerton. He served as chairman of the art department at both institutions and was on the board of the Long Beach Museum of Art from 1956 to 1965.

Harry Bertoia was among the artists Olsen hired to work for the Navy, and Olsen's successor was Barney M. Reid, a distinguished member of the Allied Craftsmen who became director of the graphic design branch at NEL. Bertoia, who had designed chairs at the Eames Office in Venice, California, moved with his wife, Brigitta, to San Diego in 1947. The former Cranbrook instructor (whose monoprints had been exhibited at

above:
John Olsen.

Harry Bertoia, *Untitled Monotype*, late 1940s, 8½ x 11 in. Formerly in the collection of John and Flora Olsen. Bertoia worked for John Olsen at the Navy Electronics Laboratory in San Diego for about two years, and Flora Olsen has said that both their families lived for a time in Rudolf Schindler's Pueblo Ribera Court near Windansea Beach. Collection: Bill Perrine

the Guggenheim in 1943) was described in May 1948 as a “newcomer” to the Allied Craftsmen, and his job title was “head training and publications illustrator at NEL.”³² He lived in La Jolla during this time, while making jewelry, paintings, monoprints and sculpture.³³ In June 1948 Bertoia had an exhibition of his jewelry and paintings at the Fine Arts Gallery. His paintings—large and small works on canvas and on paper—were considered “extremely original” efforts in which “the methods of the print-maker are combined with those of the painter.”³⁴ Bertoia also served on a jury for the 1948 San Diego Art Guild annual exhibition that awarded first prize to abstract painter John McLaughlin’s biomorphic painting *Hope Deferred*. This choice caused a furor that made headlines for two days running—a storm of angry comments from the public and con-



servative artists alike, indicative of San Diego’s almost complete lack of exposure to nonobjective art.³⁵

Just before moving to San Diego, Bertoia was part of the 1946 Modern Handmade Jewelry exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and his work was said to have “admirable logic,” according to *Arts & Architecture*.³⁶ But his highly sculptural shapes must have seemed pretty avant-garde to San Diegans at the time. In writing about the April 1950 exhibition of the Allied Craftsmen at the Fine Arts Gallery, Naomi Baker said of Bertoia: “His jewelry designs are abstract and the materials sometimes are such unusual combinations as ebony and silk with silver.”³⁷ A member of the Allied Craftsmen while the group was still part of the Allied Artists’ Council, Bertoia was offered the chance to experiment with furniture design for a year at the expense of Hans and Florence Knoll. The Bertoias left for Pennsylvania in late 1950, where Harry developed an iconic collection of modern chairs for Knoll Associates and was recognized as a major American sculptor. Even though Bertoia’s work for the Navy was not particularly fulfilling, he liked being in La Jolla. When the Knolls’ offer came, he said, “I hesitated for a while because I really do love the Pacific Ocean. It was marvelous where we were.”³⁸

Coincidentally, Bertoia’s departure corresponds roughly with the collapse of the Allied Artists’ Council, which dissolved in the 1949–50 season. Thor Ole Svenson observed:

To those who recall the days of the AAC it doesn’t seem that there were many nights when there was not something being done by one of the groups. It doesn’t seem that there were many hours when one was not involved in discussion, argument or an activity. There