



fig.1 Portrait of Jeannette Meunier Bieler, 1930s, vintage photograph.
(Photo: Private collection)

JEANNETTE MEUNIER BIÉLER

Modern Interior Decorator

The professional career of Montreal decorator Jeannette Meunier Biéler (1900-1990) was brief; nevertheless, her work was exceptional in Canada because she promoted the most progressive design trends emerging from France and Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s (fig.1). Trained in art and design at the *École des beaux-arts de Montréal*, she developed her ideas through her studies, her working contacts and from international magazines. Biéler sought new directions by breaking with traditional approaches in design and drawing inspiration from European models. Although examples of her work are few and there are no archival records of her clients, her drawings and the furniture she designed for her family attest to the originality of her work in the field of Canadian interior decoration.

Jeannette Meunier was born on December 29, 1900 in Ste-Anne-de-Sabrevois in the Eastern Townships, south of Montreal. Earlier generations of her family had been prominent pioneers of this village which was established in the mid-nineteenth century.¹ As a child, she moved with her family to Montreal where her father ran a successful fire insurance company. From 1924 to 1928, she studied art at the *École des beaux-arts de Montréal* along with Jori Smith, Goodridge Roberts, and her long-time friend, Liliás Torrance Newton (fig.2). She took decoration and ornamental design classes with Maurice Félix (1895-1972), an artist from France who had been hired in 1925 by the school's director, Charles Maillard.² She also studied drawing from the antique with Edmond Dyonnet, still-life painting with Maillard and wood engraving with Edwin Holgate. She received prizes at the *École des beaux-arts* for her decorative compositions and still-life paintings.³ In 1928 Jeannette Meunier's work in the school's end-of-year annual exhibition was noticed by Émile Lemieux, the head of the design department at the T. Eaton Company store in Montreal and he offered her a position as an assistant.⁴ Against the advice of the *École's* director, Meunier accepted and did not complete her art school diploma.

The 1920s represented a period of great expansion and development for the T. Eaton Company; it enlarged its main operations in Toronto and opened up stores across Canada. In 1926 the company took over Goodwin's store in Montreal on the corner of Ste-Catherine and University streets and began



fig.2 Liliat Torrance Newton, **Portrait of Jeannette M. Biéler**,
c.1950, oil on canvas, 92 x 71 cm, private collection. (Photo: Christine
Guest, MMFA)

renovations. In 1930, in the spirit of the North-American boom to build bigger and higher, the company added three floors.⁵ The climax of this building program was the creation of the celebrated ninth-floor dining room designed by French architect Jacques Carlu and modelled after the glittering Art Deco interiors of French ocean liners.⁶

This interest in French design of the 1920s reflected Eaton's desire to keep in step with the latest decorating trends in Europe and to attract a sophisticated urban clientele. The company had a buying office in Paris since the early years of the century, and the Eaton family and members of its staff travelled regularly between the Continent and Canada. France had become the leader in design as a result of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925. The exhibition was a showcase for French furniture, glass, ceramics, metalwork, lighting and textiles, and was extensively covered in European and North-American journals. It was a huge success despite those critics who felt that France was offering only luxury furnishings for upper income levels and not addressing the opportunities offered by mass production and new materials for modern living. The exhibition promoted the French style that was termed "art moderne" by English reviewers of the time and has now become known as Art Deco.

Large Parisian department stores such as Magasins du Printemps, Galeries Lafayette, and Magasins du Louvre, also played a major role in popularizing Art Deco furnishings. By the early 1920s, they had set up interior decorating studios where clients could receive advice on every aspect of home decoration. Well-known designers were in charge of the studios; for example, at Galeries Lafayette, Maurice Dufrene ran "La Maîtrise," advertized as an "atelier d'art moderne," while Paul Follot was in charge of "La Pomone" for Bon Marché.⁷ Model rooms displayed complete ensembles of furniture, carpets, lamps, wall coverings, draperies and paintings. Art and design magazines, such as *Art et Décoration* and *Art et Industrie* from Paris, *Good Furniture* in the United States and *Canadian Homes and Gardens* in Canada, carried news and illustrations of design developments. As a result, American department stores such as Lord & Taylor and Macy's began to promote the new French trends in interior furnishings. In response to the enthusiasm for French Art Deco, the American Association of Museums organized an exhibition of selected works from the 1925 International Exhibition. In 1926 it travelled to museums across the United States.⁸

In Canada, the T.Eaton Company was also quick to react to the fashion for Art Deco, hiring French designer René Cera to take charge of its decorating department in Toronto. Cera had worked at the Atelier Martine, the interior decoration workshop of the fashion couturier Paul Poiret.⁹ In Eaton's Montreal

store, Émile Lemieux (1889-1967) was responsible for the interior decoration and display department. Born in Montreal, he took art classes at night at Montreal's Monument National school from 1904 to 1906, but was largely self-taught through travels to New York, Chicago, London and Paris.¹⁰ From 1913 until 1951 Lemieux occasionally exhibited landscape scenes at the Art Association of Montreal's Spring Exhibition and at the Royal Canadian Academy annual shows, although he was not a member of the R.C.A.¹¹ He began his decorating career in 1911 at Goodwin's store, and when it was purchased by Eaton's, he became their chief "étalagiste" or designer of displays and was made head of decoration in 1927. He also acted as the artistic director of the store's fifth-floor art gallery where, in 1927, he organized Eaton's first exhibition of Quebec painters which included works by Adrien and Henri Hébert, Alfred Laliberté, Marc-Aurèle Fortin, and Mabel May, as well as his own paintings.¹² Lemieux retired from Eaton's in 1949 to devote himself to painting and freelance decorating commissions.¹³

Jeannette Meunier Biéler regarded Lemieux as her mentor and in later years spoke highly of his talent. In her reminiscences she recalled that Lemieux went regularly to Europe, especially to France and Germany and that he was clearly aware of the latest developments in interior design.¹⁴ Lemieux was also a friend of the Montreal architect Ernest Cormier, who would have encouraged his interest in French design.¹⁵ From about 1928 to 1931, Jeannette served as Lemieux's assistant at Eaton's and helped him create the store's studio, "L'Intérieur Moderne," modelled after the decorating studios of the large Paris department stores.

Mounted in large letters, "L'Intérieur Moderne" announced the entrance to Eaton's display of rooms fashioned in Art Deco style (fig.3).¹⁶ Vintage photographs feature the showrooms arranged around a central gallery with an impressive, high ceiling, octagonal double columns and a grand piano as the focus. Triangular mirrors, vitrines of ceramic objects and lamps in the shape of glowing spheres completed the gallery. Adjoining rooms represented the major areas of a house, including the "modern man's reading or rest room," a teenager's room with a bookcase set into the wall, and a girl's room with "pistache stippled walls" and a corner window, deemed "a feature of modern architecture" (fig.4).¹⁷ The master bedroom had a large bed theatrically placed on a podium and inset into its own decorative alcove (fig.5). Nearby was the dressing table or *coiffeuse*, the quintessential piece of Art Deco furniture for which all great French designers produced a model.¹⁸ Every aspect of the interior decor was considered in these model rooms, from place settings to bedspreads. The furnishings reflected the taste for Art Deco geometric shapes, bold patterns, polished surfaces, fine wood veneers, rich materials



fig.3 "L'Intérieur Moderne" display rooms, Eaton's, Montreal, 1928-1929, vintage photograph. (Photo: Private collection)



fig.4 Girl's Room display in "l'Intérieur Moderne," vintage photograph. (Photo: Private collection)



fig.5 Master Bedroom display in "l'Intérieur Moderne," vintage photograph. (Photo: Private collection)

and the fashionable colours silver, beige and green. Diffused or recessed lighting was a major modern feature and high ceilings increased the dramatic effect and elegance of the decor. The furniture in Eaton's showrooms was sometimes imported but because expensive luxury furniture made by Paris designers was not within reach of the average budget, the rooms also included American or Canadian versions by manufacturers such as the Michigan Chair Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan, which made reproductions of French Art Deco models.¹⁹

Meunier remembered that for many months the rooms of Eaton's "L'Intérieur Moderne" drew crowds,²⁰ although the "art moderne" designs were considered more acceptable for swimming pool decor or hair salons than for the home where Canadians felt more comfortable with traditional furnishings. Eaton's showrooms were discussed by the Montreal journalist Henri Girard in an article "À Propos d'Art Moderne" in the February 1929 issue of *La Revue Moderne*. Here he criticized historical revival furniture and promoted the use of modern materials and forms for architecture and interior design, praising the work of Le Corbusier and Montreal architect Ernest Cormier. In his article Girard described Eaton's showrooms as good examples of modern design, noting that "Furniture can only be fully appreciated within a harmonious setting. Furniture is dressed up by its decor." He ended his article by saying, "Let us be confident that modern art will one day be the rule in Montreal, and we will thank those who dared to forge ahead of popular taste."²¹

In this same periodical and perhaps encouraged by Girard, Jeannette Meunier subsequently wrote an article on "La décoration, intérieure moderne," published in May 1929. Here she discussed the role of the modern decorator who "by his constant attention to line and proportion succeeds in creating harmony – the first condition of a well-conceived decoration. He balances tones, values, colours; he has to coordinate the decorative elements: one is at the service of the other."²² She promoted the idea of the designer as an *ensembleur* who would be in charge of every aspect of interior decoration: "The decorator should be responsible for the design of the carpet and the textile furnishings."²³ These ideas were current in France at the time where decorators had taken on the role of *ensembliers*, as critics referred to them. Instead of bringing together existing furnishings, the *ensemblier* would commission or design everything from the lights to the wallpaper. He was the master of works, supervising all the details of the decoration. In her article, Jeannette Meunier referred to some of the great French decorators/*ensembliers* such as Ruhlmann, Leleu, Dominique, Joubert and Petit, who exhibited every year in Paris at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs and whose work was frequently illustrated in magazines.

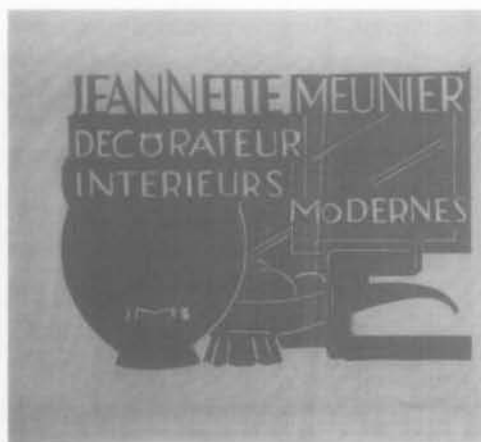


fig.6 Prototype for
Jeannette Meunier's
business card, undated.
(Photo: Private collection)

Another Montrealer who was a major proponent of French Art Deco design was Jean-Marie Gauvreau (1903-1970), a contemporary of Jeannette Meunier. After spending four years in Paris from 1926 to 1929 at the École Boulle, the celebrated school of cabinetmaking, he returned to Montreal to teach furniture design at the École Technique de Montréal. He wrote an account of French modern interior decoration in his book, *Nos intérieurs de demain* (Montreal: Librairie d'action canadienne-française, 1929). An energetic educator and communicator with important social and political connections in Quebec and Montreal, Gauvreau became the first director of the École du Meuble, which was officially established in 1935, and served in that position for twenty-three years. The main purpose of the school was to train young craftsmen in fine cabinetmaking and furniture design, following the example of the École Boulle. Both students and staff emulated French Art Deco forms and materials.²⁴ Jeannette Meunier certainly knew Jean-Marie Gauvreau, but she was not part of his circle of friends.²⁵ Gauvreau's promotion of traditional craftsmanship, his admiration for early Quebec furniture, and his criticism of modern industrial design were not in keeping with her interest in modern materials and methods of furniture production.

Jeannette Meunier was drawn more to artistic circles in Montreal, and while working with Émile Lemieux at Eaton's she helped to organize the second exhibition of Canadian art held in the store's art gallery from May 6-18, 1929. During this project she began a friendship with her future husband, André Biéler (1896-1989) who participated in the show.²⁶ A native of Switzerland, he had moved to Montreal with his parents at the age of twelve.²⁷ His dynamic personality made him a major figure in Montreal's art community, gaining attention for his paintings of the Quebec countryside and its people. The couple married on April 27, 1931 and travelled to France and Switzerland for their honeymoon. It was Meunier's first trip to Europe, and it was at this time that she became interested in German modern design and metal furniture in particular. Upon their return to Montreal the couple set up independent studios on separate floors of their residence at 2039 Peel Street.²⁸

After her marriage she left Eaton's and set out on her own as an interior decorator. André Biéler helped his wife design her business card created in decoupage with the words: "Jeannette Meunier/Decorateur/Interieurs Modernes/JMB" (fig.6). Her awareness of French trends from her training with Lemieux had left its mark. Unfortunately, little documentation exists on her clients, although one drawing in collaboration with André is for a café bar at the Ritz Carleton hotel. She also became part of a close group of artists who met regularly to discuss their work and to promote modern ideas in art. John Lyman was a central figure in this group, and André and Jeannette were among the teachers and administrators of *The Atelier*, a short-lived school founded in 1931.²⁹ The prospectus stated that the group rejected academic teaching and stressed that "the essential qualities of a work of art lie in the relationships of form to form, and of colour to colour."³⁰ Jeannette Meunier is listed as an advisor to the organizing committee. Her *École des beaux-arts de Montréal* background is mentioned, as is a note that she "is now designing furniture in wood, glass and steel and general schemes for interior decoration."³¹ Almost all the members of *The Atelier* had studied either in Europe or in the United States, and her promotion of mass-produced industrial metal furniture would probably have been supported by the three architect members, Richard Bolton, George Holt and Hazen Sise, all of whom were graduates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Sise had also spent a year working with Le Corbusier in Paris and was a faithful follower of the modern movement in architecture.³²

The architect members of *The Atelier* reflected the concerns of progressive European designers for industrial production and the use of new materials. One of the most significant and innovative developments in this regard was the tubular-steel furniture developed by Bauhaus architects Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s. Breuer began to make lightweight, tubular steel chairs in 1925 as they exactly suited the spirit of the modern,



fig.7 Tubular metal furniture in the Peel Street apartment of the Biélers, 1933, vintage photograph. (Photo: Private collection)

open-plan architectural spaces he and his colleagues advocated. Breuer's popular cantilevered tubular-steel chair was first exhibited and sold in Germany in 1927.³³ The chair could be mechanically assembled with standardized parts, and was comfortable, functional and easy to clean. Not only could it be moved around easily, but it also appeared almost weightless in comparison with heavy wooden furniture and most importantly, it did not reflect any traditional style. Breuer produced a variety of designs for tubular steel chairs and tables; they were manufactured first by Standard-Möbel of Berlin and, after 1927, by the German branch of the Thonet Brothers firm.³⁴ In France, designers and architects such as Louis Sognot, René Herbst, and Le Corbusier in collaboration with Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand, also reacted against the luxury furnishings of Art Deco and created their own versions of metal furniture.³⁵ In the United States, Donald Deskey and others began to focus on industrial tubular-steel design. Early in the century, Canadian manufacturers had already begun to produce metal furniture from sheet or bent steel for hospitals and schools, where cleanliness and durability were major concerns. When tubular-steel furniture made its appearance in Europe and America, Canadians took notice. The Robert Simpson Company of Toronto imported tubular-steel chairs and tables by Breuer and van der Rohe, manufactured by Thonet in Europe.³⁶ By 1934, Canadian companies such as Dominion Chain of Niagara Falls and Standard Tube in Woodstock, Ontario were producing their own models of chrome-plated steel chairs.³⁷ However, only the most adventurous clients allowed tubular-steel furniture into secondary areas of the house such as breakfast, entertainment or sun rooms.

Jeannette Meunier Biéler was well aware of these international trends and subscribed to French journals as well as to the German interior decorating magazine, *Innen Dekoration*, which carried illustrations of the Bauhaus designs. Considering Canadian taste in the early 1930s, her interest in tubular-steel furniture for the living room was remarkable. An interior photograph of André and Jeannette's Montreal apartment on Peel Street in 1933 shows the tubular-steel and glass desk that she designed in 1931 and had made in Montreal (fig.7). This desk is a rare example of Bauhaus influence in Canadian design in the early 1930s and is now in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.³⁸ Continuous tubular-steel elements form the legs and the structure for a glass top, which in turn rests on rubber connectors. The design is modelled on the tubular steel tables designed by Breuer in 1927-1928.³⁹ However, Biéler added a foot rest soldered to the base to give the structure more solidity. The glass book-shelves on one side of the desk are another practical addition. In later years she hung a plywood drawer from the top and on the other side she added a tubular steel holder for magazines. According to Biéler, the only place she could find skilled workers to construct the tubular

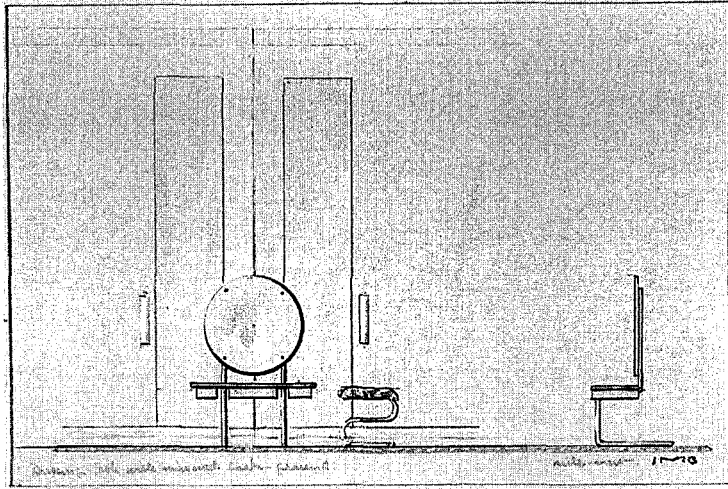


fig.8 Jeannette Meunier Biéler, sketch for a "Dressing-table with mirrored back-ground" and "side-view," early 1930s, private collection. (Photo: Brian Merrett, MMFA)

elements for the table based on her plans, was a Montreal aircraft company.⁴⁰ The photograph of the Biélers' apartment on Peel street shows, above the stark metal and glass furniture, a 1930 painting by André Biéler depicting the interior of his brother Jacques's early Quebec country house at St-Sauveur and featuring a handcrafted, wooden rocking chair.⁴¹ The juxtaposition of this painting with her desk underlines the contrast between the traditional crafted designs of rural Quebec and those Jeannette espoused for urban modern life. Before his marriage, André Biéler had admired and collected early Quebec furniture; his wife urged him to put it into storage when they married.⁴² The photograph also reveals the floor decoration of painted geometric, zig-zag pattern, in keeping with Jeannette's taste for modern motifs.

Other watercolour renderings for furniture designs by Jeannette Meunier Biéler indicate tubular chromed supports for such pieces as a dressing table and stool, a bed, or furniture for a cocktail bar (fig.8). Unfortunately there is no record of furniture actually being produced after these designs. As she suggested in later years, it was not always easy to persuade her clients to

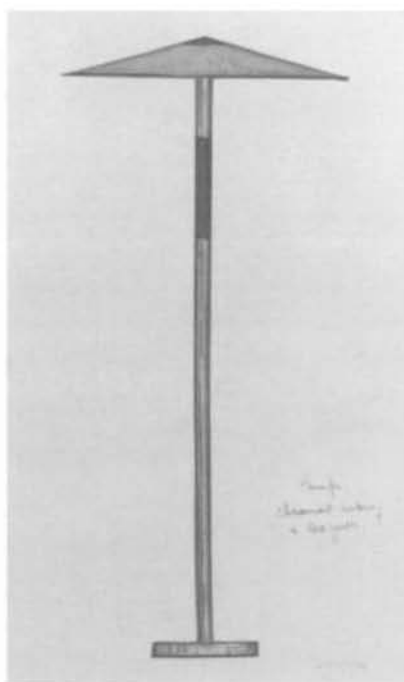


fig.9 Design for
a standing lamp in
chromed tubing
and lacquer, private
collection.
(Photo: Brian
Merrett, MMFA)



fig.10 Small lamp
in metal, wood and
parchment, private
collection.
(Photo: Brian
Merrett, MMFA)

accept metal designs for furniture. However, she was sometimes successful, noting in a rare comment from the early 1930s that, “Madame Woodyatt a commandé deux chaises metal ce matin.”⁴³ Biéler’s other designs were for simple, undecorated furniture, sometimes multifunctional to suit modern apartment living. This is evident, for example, in her design for a free-standing chest with sets of drawers opening at the front and at the back. Her modular shelving units anticipate the American development of mass-produced, multipurpose units during the 1940s and 1950s. Her drawings also reveal her particular interest in lighting. One shows a starkly simple standing lamp to be made of “chromed tubing and lacquer” with a modern low shade (fig.9). A small bedside lamp from her own collection consists of a simple arrangement of metal wires forming a sphere at the centre of the stem (fig.10). André Biéler was a ready collaborator in his wife’s decorating business and tells of one incident about a steel chaise-longue, complete with cushions of hand-woven material, designed by Jeannette for a customer at Christmas. When the chair was ready, it was left at the platers to receive a coating of chrome. Just before Christmas, the plating firm called to say a terrible accident had occurred, the wrong material had been put into the electrical bath and the chair had melted.⁴⁴

Jeannette Meunier Biéler’s interest in the development of tubular-steel furniture was certainly unusual in Canada at that time. She was not afraid to experiment with other non-traditional furniture materials as well. A cabinet made for her family, probably in the early 1940s, reveals her exceptional foresight in accepting the use of plywood for furniture designs (fig.11). The most avant-garde European designers, such as Alvar Aalto and Marcel Breuer, were exploring the possibilities of plywood chairs in the 1930s. Plywood was then used mainly in industrial production because it was cheap, strong and does not split along the grain when bent, as does solid wood. Biéler often used solid natural oak for her furniture, but she designed this cabinet in light-coloured plywood. Tall and narrow, it stands on four tubular steel feet like architectural pilotis. The only suggestion of ornament is the light-toned wood inlay on the plywood door. To break the symmetry of the composition and to add more visual interest to the piece, a narrow cabinet of glass shelves was attached to the side. It is a unique, inventive design that recalls certain multifunctional cabinet units by Marcel Breuer.

Jeannette Meunier Biéler’s career in Montreal was brief, as she and her husband moved to Kingston in 1936, when André became head of the Queen’s University Art Department. The couple had four children, and in the early years Jeannette was primarily concerned with bringing up her large family. However, she did carry out a few commissions for the University. She collaborated with her husband on the decoration for a music/concert room.



fig.11 Cabinet, plywood, metal and glass, designed by Jeannette Biéler in the early 1940s, private collection. (Photo: Brian Merrett, MMFA)

André designed a figurative scene for an inlaid design in the floor, and Jeannette was responsible for the furniture and interior décor, designing natural oak and red leather armchairs for the room. In the 1950s she also designed a night-club interior in Kingston, and in the 1960s, was responsible for a project to convert a Victorian house into a women's residence for the University. The couple remained in Kingston, where they died within one year of each other, André in 1989 and Jeannette in 1990.

Little has been written on the history of interior decoration in Canada, a field which was usually the domain of architects. It would seem that, in Canada, women were a rarity in the field of interior decoration and design.⁴⁵ The young women who took classes at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal often did so as a social activity to improve their appreciation of culture.⁴⁶ Some female students did pursue professional careers as artists or teachers, for example Jori Smith and Marion Scott, while others disappeared into the world of commercial decoration or went into ceramics or weaving. Jeannette Meunier Biéler was inspired by the European model, especially the rise of the French *ensemblier*, when she launched herself as a decorator of modern interiors. Her furniture and drawings are evidence that she embraced the most progressive design concerns of the twentieth century.

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Notes

- 1 Early biographical information was given to the author by Nathalie Sorensen, the Biéler's eldest daughter, in an interview on May 8, 1996. Ted Biéler and Sylvie Baylaucq were also most helpful in giving me information on their mother. I would also like to thank Jeannette's grandson, Philippe Baylaucq, who has provided me with family photographs and has been an enthusiastic supporter of my research on his grandmother's life and work.
- 2 "New Professors for École des Beaux-Arts," *Montreal Daily Star*, 24 Sept. 1925.
- 3 Université du Québec à Montréal, Bibliothèque des arts, Centre de documentation et Service des archives, fonds de l'École des beaux-arts de Montréal, files 5P-100/1 and 5P 510/1.
- 4 Jeannette Meunier Biéler, interview with the author, Kingston, 17 Oct. 1988.
- 5 Jacques LACHAPELLE, *Le Fantôme Métropolitain, L'Architecture de Ross et Macdonald* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2001), 65.
- 6 Isabelle GOURNAY, "Jacques Carlu et le style paquebot outre-atlantique," *Monuments Historiques*, no.130 (December 1983): 71-74; LACHAPELLE, *Le Fantôme Métropolitain*, 75-76.
- 7 Suzanne TISE, "Les Grands Magasins," in *L'Art de Vivre: Decorative Arts and Design in France 1789-1989*, ed. Catherine ARMINJON, et al. (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1989), 97-98.
- 8 The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue: *A Selected Collection of Objects from the International Exposition of Modern Decorative & Industrial Art, Paris, 1925* (New York: American Association of Museums, 1926).
- 9 René and Elizabeth Cera, telephone conversation and correspondence with the author, October 1988.
- 10 Biographical information on Lemieux was obtained thanks to the Galerie Turenne Inc., Montreal.
- 11 Evelyn de R. MCMANN, *Montreal Museum of Fine Arts formerly Art Association of Montreal/Spring Exhibitions 1880-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 222 and her *Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Exhibitions and Members 1880-1979* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 237-38.
- 12 Paul SAINT-YVES, "Aux Galeries Eaton," *Le Devoir* (Montreal), 10 Oct. 1927.
- 13 In 1951 he supervised the city decorations for the British royal visit, and was in charge of the decoration of the Hélène de Champlain restaurant on Ile Ste-Hélène, Montreal.
- 14 Jeannette Biéler, unpublished text, 8 May 1985.
- 15 Paul Pagé, telephone interview with the author, May 1996. Pagé worked in Eaton's decorating department in Montreal from 1939 to 1987 and remembered that Lemieux knew Cormier well. Cormier built his own residence on Pine Ave. in French Art Deco style in 1930-1931.
- 16 These rooms were published in an article "Convenient Beauty in Art Moderne" in *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (February 1929): 25.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 This bedroom display was probably modelled after the dramatic presentations of bedroom ensembles (even down to the lozenge pattern wallpaper) of the great French

designer Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, whose interiors were published in 1924 by Jean Badovici in an album entitled '*Harmonies. Intérieurs de Ruhlmann*' (Paris: Albert Morancé).

19 Virginia WRIGHT, *Modern Furniture in Canada 1920-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 13. The armchair with stepped-back arms included in the man's study in Eaton's "L'Intérieur Moderne" was made by the Grand Rapids' firm. An identical example is in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

20 Jeannette Meunier Biéler, interview with the author, 17 Oct. 1988.

21 "Le mobilier ne prend toute sa valeur que dans un cadre s'harmonisant avec lui. Le décor c'est la robe du mobilier.... Ayons confiance que l'art moderne règnera un jour à Montréal et remercions ceux qui osent devancer le goût de la foule." Henri GIRARD, "À Propos d'Art Moderne," *La Revue Moderne* (February 1929): 7.

22 "par ses recherches constantes de la ligne, des proportions, arrive infailliblement à créer de l'harmonie, le premier facteur dans la décoration bien comprise. Il balance les nuances, les valeurs, les couleurs; il doit coordonner l'application des arts: l'un est au service de l'autre." Jeannette MEUNIER, "La décoration intérieure moderne," *La Revue Moderne* (May 1929): 37.

23 "Le décorateur doit être autorisé à faire exécuter son tapis, et à dessiner ses tissus." Ibid.

24 *Technique: Revue Industrielle* (Montreal), vol.10, no.9 (November 1935). This special issue celebrated five years of the cabinetmaking section of the École Technique de Montréal and the founding of the École du Meuble. See also Gloria LESSER, *École du Meuble 1930-1950* (Montreal: Le Château Dufresne, Musée des arts décoratifs, 1989).

25 When asked in 1988 if she knew Gauvreau, Jeannette only said yes. In any case, the Biélers left Montreal the year after the founding of the École du Meuble.

26 Henri Girard praised André Biéler's painting, *Un Vieux*, in his review of the exhibition in *La Revue Moderne* (July 1929): 13.

27 Frances K. SMITH, *André Biéler. An Artist's Life and Times* (Toronto: Merritt Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), 74. Also David KAREL, *André Biéler ou le choc des cultures* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2003).

28 SMITH, *André Biéler*, 75.

29 "'The Atelier', A School of Modern Art," *The Montrealer* (October 1932). Elizabeth Frost who had studied art at the Slade School in London was the main organizer of the group and the architect Hazen Sise acted as vice-president.

30 *The Atelier, A School of Drawing, Painting, Sculpture*, undated pamphlet, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Library archives, unpaginated.

31 Ibid.

32 Norbert SCHOENAUER, "McGill's School of Architecture: A Retrospection," *McGill Schools of Architecture and Planning Prospectus*, ed. Ellen LEIBOVICH (Montreal: McGill University, 1987), 20.

33 Christopher WILK, *Marcel Breuer, Furniture and Interiors* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 70.

34 Ibid., 66, 75.

35 *Bent Wood and Metal Furniture: 1850-1946*, ed. Derek E. OSTERGARD (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1987), 282, 287-88. Sognot and Herbst exhibited

their tubular steel furniture at the annual Paris Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1928 and 1929. Le Corbusier, Jeanneret and Perriand's famous chaise-longue was designed in 1929.

36 Illustrated in *Canadian Homes and Gardens* in 1930 and 1933; WRIGHT, *Modern Furniture in Canada*, 37 and 53.

37 Ibid., 46-47.

38 It was donated by her grandson Philippe Baylaucq and had been passed down through Jeannette's daughter Sylvie Baylaucq.

39 WILK, *Marcel Breuer*, 78-79.

40 Jeannette Meunier Biéler, interview with the author, 17 Oct. 1988. Biéler could not remember the name of the company nor where she acquired the chairs shown with the glass table. They are not Breuer models as the canvas back and seat are not slipped over the tubular frame, but rather they are set into and attached to the tubular frame with screws. The slightly curved horizontal metal support at the back of the seat is also unusual.

41 This painting entitled *Intérieur de la maison rose*, 1930, private collection, is illustrated in KÄREL, *André Biéler ou le choc des cultures*, 105.

42 Nathalie Sorensen, interview with the author, 8 May 1996.

43 "Madame Woodyatt ordered two metal chairs this morning." Jeannette Meunier Biéler to André Biéler, undated, 1932 or 1933, André Biéler archives, coll. 2050, series I, Correspondence file, family letters, Queen's University Archives, Kingston. Jeannette presumably carried out a commission for Mrs. Woodyatt, as she exhibited *Intérieur chez Mde J.B. Woodyatt* in the 1934 Art Association of Montreal's Spring Exhibition.

44 SMITH, *André Biéler*, 77.

45 One of the few women who made a name for herself early in the twentieth century as an interior decorator was Kate Armour Reed (d.1928). She supervised the decoration of rooms in the Canadian Pacific hotels, most notably the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec city. See France GAGNON PRATTE and Eric ETTER, *The Château Frontenac* (Quebec: Éditions Continuité, 1993), 28.

46 Laurier LACROIX, *Peindre à Montréal 1915-1930* (Montreal: Galerie de L'UQAM and Musée du Québec, 1996), 62.

JEANETTE MEUNIER BIÉLER

Décorateur intérieurs modernes

La carrière de la décoratrice montréalaise Jeannette Meunier Biéler (1900-1990) a été brève mais cependant exceptionnelle, au Canada, par la promotion, à la fin des années vingt et au début des années trente, des tendances les plus progressistes venues de France et d'Allemagne. Bien que les exemples de son travail soient rares et qu'il n'y ait pas de véritable registre de ses clients, ses dessins et les meubles qu'elle a dessinés pour sa famille attestent de l'originalité de son œuvre dans le domaine de la décoration d'intérieur au Canada.

Jeannette Meunier est née le 29 décembre 1900 à Sainte-Anne-de-Sabrevois, Québec. De 1924 à 1928, elle a étudié à l'École des beaux-arts de Montréal, où ses œuvres exposées furent remarquées par Émile Lemieux, directeur du département de la décoration du magasin de la compagnie T. Eaton à Montréal. En 1928, il lui offrit un poste d'assistante. Elle accepta, contre l'avis du directeur de l'École, Charles Maillard, et ne termina pas ses études en vue d'un diplôme en beaux-arts.

Les années vingt furent une période de grande expansion et de développement pour la compagnie T. Eaton qui élargit ses opérations principales à Toronto et ouvrit des magasins à travers le Canada. En 1926, la compagnie fit l'acquisition du magasin Goodwin, à Montréal, à l'angle des rues Sainte-Catherine et Université, et entreprit des rénovations. L'apogée de ce programme de rénovations fut la création de la célèbre salle à manger du neuvième étage, au stylisme moderne, œuvre de l'architecte français Jacques Carlu, sur le modèle des brillants décors Art déco des transatlantiques français. La France était devenue le chef de file mondial en arts décoratifs à la suite de l'*Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, tenue à Paris en 1925. De grands magasins à rayons parisiens, tels le Printemps, les Galeries Lafayette et les Magasins du Louvre ont joué un rôle majeur dans la diffusion de «l'art moderne», aussi connu sous le nom d'Art déco. Dès le début des années vingt, ces magasins avaient aménagé des décoration d'intérieur où l'on conseillait les clients sur tous les aspects de la décoration du foyer. On y présentait comme modèles des pièces entièrement meublées. Des revues comme *Art et Décoration* et *Art et Industrie* de Paris, *Good Furniture* aux États-Unis et *Canadian Homes and Gardens* au Canada, publiaient des articles et des illustrations sur les développements en décoration.

Au Canada, la compagnie T. Eaton réagit promptement à la mode Art déco en engageant le styliste français René Cera comme directeur du service de la décoration à Toronto. Le chef du service de la décoration d'intérieur et des étalages du magasin Eaton de Montréal était Émile Lemieux (1889-1967). Né à Montréal, Lemieux avait commencé sa carrière de décorateur en 1911 et il était devenu chef décorateur chez Eaton en 1927. Jeannette Meunier Biéler considérait Lemieux comme son mentor et, de 1928 à 1931 environ, elle a été son assistante chez Eaton. Elle l'a aidé à créer le studio «L'Intérieur Moderne», sur le modèle des studios de décoration des magasins à rayons parisiens. Des photos d'époque font voir les salles de montre disposées autour d'une galerie centrale sous un plafond d'une hauteur impressionnante supporté par des colonnes octogonales doubles et un piano à queue comme centre d'intérêt. Des pièces adjacentes représentent les aires principales d'une maison, y compris la chambre à coucher principale avec un grand lit placé théâtralement sur une estrade. L'ameublement reflète le goût pour les formes géométriques, les dessins audacieux, les surfaces polies, les contreplaqués de bois précieux, les riches tissus et les tons à la mode, l'argent, le beige et le vert, de l'Art déco.

À cette époque, Jeannette Meunier écrivit un article sur «La décoration intérieure moderne» dans le numéro du 29 mai de *La Revue Moderne*. Elle y discute du rôle du décorateur moderne qui «par ses recherches constantes de la ligne, des proportions, arrive infailliblement à créer de l'harmonie, le premier facteur dans la décoration bien comprise. Il balance les nuances, les valeurs, les couleurs; il doit coordonner l'application des arts : l'un est au service de l'autre.» Ces idées étaient communes en France à l'époque, alors que les décorateurs jouaient le rôle d'*ensembliers*. Plutôt que de réunir des éléments existants, l'ensemblier commandait ou dessinait tout ce qui était destiné à l'ameublement intérieur, depuis l'éclairage jusqu'au papier tenture.

Jeannette Meunier était aussi attirée par le milieu des arts montréalais, et elle contribua à organiser, chez Eaton, la deuxième exposition d'art canadien tenue du 6 au 18 mai 1929 dans la galerie d'art du magasin. C'est pendant l'élaboration de ce projet que Jeannette se lia d'amitié avec celui qui allait devenir son mari, André Biéler (1896-1989) qui y exposait. Ils se marièrent le 27 avril 1931 et passèrent leur lune de miel en France et en Suisse. C'était, pour Jeannette, son premier voyage en Europe et c'est à cette époque qu'elle s'est intéressée au design moderne allemand et particulièrement aux meubles de métal. À leur retour à Montréal, les Biéler installèrent chacun leur studio sur des étages différents de leur résidence du 2039 rue Peel. Jeannette quitta Eaton et s'installa comme décoratrice d'intérieur. Elle fit aussi partie d'un groupe d'amis proches, L'Atelier, formé d'artistes et d'architectes montréalais qui se rencontraient régulièrement pour enseigner et promouvoir les idées modernes en art.

L'intérêt de L'Atelier pour la modernité rejoignait celui des européens progressistes pour la production industrielle et l'utilisation des nouveaux matériaux. Un des développements les plus importants et innovateurs dans ce domaine fut les meubles en acier tubulaire par Marcel Breuer et Mies van der Rohe. La populaire chaise cantilever en acier tubulaire de Breuer fut montrée pour la première fois et vendue en Allemagne en 1927. Lorsque les meubles en acier tubulaire firent leur apparition en Europe et en Amérique, les Canadiens les remarquèrent. Jeannette Meunier Biéler était bien au courant de ces tendances internationales. Elle était abonnée aux revues françaises ainsi qu'au magazine allemand de décoration d'intérieur *Innen Dekoration*. Une photo d'intérieur de l'appartement montréalais d'André et Jeannette sur la rue Peel, en 1933, montre le bureau en verre et acier tubulaire qu'elle avait dessiné en 1931 et fait fabriquer à Montréal. Ce bureau est un rare exemple de l'influence Bauhaus sur l'art décoratif canadien au début des années trente. Il appartient maintenant à la collection du Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. D'après Jeannette Biéler, le seul endroit où elle pouvait trouver les ouvriers capables de fabriquer les éléments tubulaires pour la table, selon ses plans, était une usine d'aviation de Montréal. Sur la photo de l'appartement des Biéler, rue Peel, on peut voir, au-dessus de l'austère meuble d'acier et de verre, un tableau d'André, daté de 1930, représentant l'intérieur d'une maison à Saint-Sauveur où l'on peut voir une chaise berçante en bois faite à la main. La juxtaposition de ce tableau et du bureau souligne le contraste entre les meubles traditionnels du Québec rural et ceux de Jeannette qui épousaient la vie urbaine contemporaine.

D'autres esquisses à l'aquarelle de meubles dessinés par Jeannette Meunier Biéler montrent des supports tubulaires en chrome pour des meubles tels une table de toilette et un tabouret, un lit, ou pour un bar à cocktails. Ses autres dessins représentaient des meubles simples, sans décoration, parfois multifonctionnels en accord avec la vie en appartement. Ses rayonnages modulaires anticipent le développement aux États-Unis, dans les années quarante et cinquante, d'unités de série à usages multiples. Elle a aussi expérimenté avec d'autres matériaux d'ameublement non traditionnels. Un cabinet fabriqué pour sa famille, probablement au début des années quarante, révèle son flair exceptionnel dans l'utilisation du contreplaqué pour le dessin de meubles. Les stylistes européens les plus avant-gardistes, tels Alvar Aalto et Marcel Breuer, avaient exploré, dans les années trente, la possibilité de fabriquer des chaises en contreplaqué. Le contreplaqué était utilisé à l'époque principalement pour la production industrielle parce qu'il était bon marché, résistant et qu'il ne fendait pas le long du grain, comme le bois massif, lorsqu'on le pliait. Le meuble de

Biéler est haut et étroit et est supporté par quatre pieds en acier tubulaire comme sur des pilotis. Un étroit cabinet à tablettes de verre est fixé sur un côté et rompt la symétrie de la composition. C'est un dessin unique et inventif.

La carrière montréalaise de Jeannette Meunier prit fin en 1936, quand elle et son mari déménagèrent à Kingston où André devait occuper le poste de directeur de la section des beaux-arts de l'Université Queen's. Le couple avait quatre enfants et, au début, Jeannette s'occupait surtout d'élever sa famille. Elle a, cependant, réalisé quelques commandes pour l'université. Elle est décédée en 1990, un an après son mari. Ses meubles et dessins nous sont restés comme témoignage de son adhésion au décorateur moderne du XX^e siècle.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette