



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Design for Sight and Sound: John Vassos, A Biography

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Television debuted to the North American public at the 1939 World's Fair in New York when Franklin Delano Roosevelt appeared on the RCA TRK-12. This postdoctoral study will expand my dissertation and re-examine the archives of John Vassos (1898-1985), the Greek-born designer of this "first" television set. My study draws upon archival materials housed in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art and National Museum of American History to further understanding of the cultural and economic forces that shaped the emergence of this new medium, revealing the intersections between modernist art and industrial design in America. As RCA's lead industrial designer for over 40 years, Vassos was involved in the design and promotion of the company's major electronic products, including radios, televisions, television cameras, and computers, as well as the creation of new spaces carved out for use of these devices. The "living room of the future," for example, was featured at the 1939 World's Fair and in RCA's television studios in markets in North and South America. Vassos's career spans the emergence of central new forms of mass media in the twentieth century and provides a template for understanding the economic and social issues surrounding their introduction. My biography of John Vassos will be the first on this important modernist illustrator, interior decorator, and industrial designer, who also created scathing critiques of American mass culture in his book illustrations of the 1920s and 1930s.