Communism for Dinner: Commemorative Plates

March 13 - May 31, 2015
Introduction

Countries use different means to define themselves politically, socially, and culturally. Monuments and street names constitute a canon of collective memory: by highlighting specific persons and events from national history, they project an idealized and often romanticized image of the past onto the present. By suggesting a direct link between past and present, they aim to strengthen a social bond.

East German commemorative plates fulfilled a comparable function. Produced in large numbers by more than a dozen different companies, they were presented as gifts to individuals and organizations, honoring their role in the building of socialist society. These decorative plates carry a political iconography: viewed together, they offer an intriguing self-image of the East German state and its ideology between 1949 and 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down.

Given their ubiquitous presence and popularity, one would expect a serious body of scholarly research to be dedicated to these plates. Almost all aspects of GDR culture and society have been scrutinized during the past 25 years, except for commemorative plates. Our exhibition aims to take a first step in filling this remarkable gap.

Above: Meissen, Peace Defeats War, n.d.
Selected from the Wende Museum’s vast collection of more than 1,200 commemorative plates, this exhibition tells the story of the GDR through the lens of these plates, displayed according to its most significant categories: Socialist Heroes; Historical Events; Political Organizations; War and Peace; Consumption, Leisure and Sports; Agriculture; Industry; Transportation and Travel; and Topography. All these subjects contributed to a sense of identity and belonging. The plates present a society celebrating its accomplishments.

As is so often the case, material culture permits us to peek through the chinks between ideology and practice. Some plates betray the absurdities of an all-encompassing ideology or the ironic wink of a plate artist. What to think of a plate celebrating the victory over fascism and an East German victory in the European handball league? What about a plate dedicated to a hiking society that also protests the A-bomb and features Roosevelt, Churchill, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin? What do we make of a plate that simultaneously honors female workers and chicken breeding? A fascinating world waits to be discovered.

Above: Meissen, Storming of the Winter Palace, 1967
Socialist Heroes

Nearly half of the commemorative plates in the Museum’s collection reference historical figures or episodes. This fact seems paradoxical because according to socialist ideology, history is a story of progress. Nevertheless, historical figures and events are portrayed for their educational and inspirational value.

Socialism as a full-grown theory or doctrine stems from the middle of the nineteenth century, but according to East German historiography “socialist history” reaches further back. The earliest reference on our plates is to Thomas Müntzer, leader of the Great Peasants’ Revolt from 1524-25. In the GDR this revolt was reinterpreted as a grassroots social and political uprising of the people against the dominant powers of feudalism, and therefore as a precursor to the October Revolution of 1917. The importance of the early-sixteenth-century revolt to the political self-image is emphasized by the largest artwork produced in the GDR: the panorama of the Great Peasants’ Revolt in Bad Frankenhausen, painted by Werner Tübke between 1976 and 1987.

Above: Lichte Fine China. 30th Anniversary of the Thomas Müntzer Unit, 1986
Top right: Freiberger Porzellan, Working Men of All Countries Unite!, n.d.
Bottom right: Karl Marx bust, n.d., stone
With the exception of Müntzer and of Karl Marx, founder of modern socialism, most of the heroes of socialist history represented on the plates are from the early twentieth century. Prominent among them is Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) until his death in 1924.

Another inspirational figure is Rosa Luxemburg, one of the leaders of the communist Spartakus League, named after the legendary Roman slave who led a revolt between 79 and 71 BC. She was actively engaged in the struggle for equal women's rights. In 1919 she and fellow socialist leader Karl Liebknecht were killed by a paramilitary right-wing group in Berlin.

Finally, Ernst Thälmann, who is featured prominently in East German visual culture, was the leader of the communist party (KPD) from 1925 until his arrest by the National Socialists in 1933. He was imprisoned at the Buchenwald concentration camp and executed in 1944 by Hitler's personal order. In the GDR he became a symbol of antifascist courage and resistance.

1. Winterling Porzellan, Marxism is Almighty Because it is True, n.d.
2. Unknown manufacturer, She Was and Remains an Eagle, n.d.
3. Freiberger Porzellan, Honorary Gift - SED District Administration Karl-Marx-Stadt, 1974
Historical Events

The two events most often celebrated on the plates are the 1917 October Revolution and the victory over National Socialism in 1945, attributed to German communists and the Red Army. The hand-painted Meißen plate depicts the storming of the Winter Palace, or Hermitage, in Petrograd (present-day St. Petersburg). The composition is based on a well-published photo from 1920, depicting the reenactment of the event during its third anniversary. In 1927, the storming of the Winter Palace would make for a defining scene in Sergei Eisenstein’s famous movie *October*. Another plate references the battleship *Aurora*, which in October 1917 fired the first shot of the revolution.

*Top: Meißen, Storming of the Winter Palace, 1967*
*Center left: Unknown manufacturer, 60th Anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution, 1977*
*Center right: Henneberg Porzellan, 60th Anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution, 1977*
*Bottom: Kahla Porzellan, 70th Anniversary of the October Revolution, 1987*
From the very beginning, the GDR presented itself as an “antifascist” country. In the process, the state stressed its complete break with the recent past, as well as the alleged personal and political continuities between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic of Germany. The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 was immediately described as “liberation”. Interestingly, it wasn’t until 1985 that Chancellor Richard von Weizsäcker in an official speech used the word ‘liberation’ to this effect in West Germany. References to the Second World War on commemorative plates often feature the Soviet War Memorial in Treptow Park, Berlin, and the monument to the victims of the Buchenwald concentration camp, the place where in 1944 communist leader Ernst Thälmann was executed.

Upper left: Meissen, Conotaph Berlin Treptow, n.d.
Upper right: Unknown manufacturer, National Memorial Site Buchenwald, n.d.
Bottom: Wallendorfer Porzellan, Day of Liberation, 1970
A special story relates to the plate depicting the red flag of Krivoy Rog. This historical event was narrated in a novel by Otto Götsche and subsequently illustrated in a 1967 movie directed by Kurt Maetzig. The German mining town of Gerbstedt received the flag in 1929 from the Ukrainian mining town Krivoy Rog as a symbol of solidarity, but after 1933 it also became a symbol of communist resistance against National Socialism. The Nazis did everything in their power to capture the flag, but, in spite of terror and torture, it was successfully hidden by the communist resistance fighters and their families.

Above: Unknown maker, Battle Group Otto Brosowski, n.d.
Political Organizations

In a politically centralized state like the GDR, it is no surprise that political parties and organizations figure prominently in visual culture. The plates are no exception. The mother of all political institutions was the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED). The SED was founded in April 1946 following the merger between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). The party’s symbol is a handshake, referring to the party congress where Wilhelm Pieck (KPD) and Otto Grotewohl (SPD) sealed the unification of their respective parties.
Since workers, together with farmers and soldiers, were seen as the very pillars of East German society, work has a central significance in commemorative plates. The Free German Union Association (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund FDGB) was supposed to represent workers' rights and wishes, but was de facto just a political extension of the SED.

2. Unknown manufacturer, For Special Merit in the Folk Art Initiative, 9th Party Congress of the SED, 1981
4. Unknown manufacturer, For Excellent Accomplishments in the Socialist Competition, 1977
5. Unknown manufacturer, 30th Anniversary of the Free German Union Association, 1975
Among the ministries of the GDR, one stands out for the amount of plates dedicated to it: the Ministry of State Security (Ministerie für Staatssicherheit, abbreviated ‘Stasi’). This ministry guarded the national borders of the state but invested most of its energy spying on its own people. Throughout the 1980s, one out of every fifty citizens of the GDR was involved in the Stasi, be it as official employee or as “unofficial employee” (inoffizielle Mitarbeiter). The Stasi became the symbol of political oppression among the critics of the state. Often featured on the Stasi plates is Felix Dzerzhinsky, who, between 1917 and 1926, was the remorseless director of ‘Cheka,” the secret police and precursor to the KGB in Russia and the Soviet Union. He was celebrated as the spiritual father of the Stasi.
1. VEB Deutsche Schallplatten, *Angela Davis Album*, 1973
2. Kahla Porzellan, *10th World Festival of Youth and Students*, 1973
Agriculture

The GDR presented itself as a “country of workers, farmers and soldiers.” Agriculture and industry were the testing grounds par excellence for the superiority of communist ideology, symbolized by the economic Five- and Seven-Year Plans with ever-increasing productivity rates. In the process, the distance between theory and practice of agricultural and industrial production grew ever larger.

Already during Soviet occupation (1945-49) a policy of land reforms reorganized farm production by expropriating large landowners and founding Agrarian Production Communities (Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgemeinschaften, LPG), based on the Soviet model of the Kolkhoz. Land, animals and machinery were shared by the farmers working at the LPG, which were often named after communist heroes (Ernst Thälmann) or socialist accomplishments (“Sieg des Sozialismus,” Victory of Socialism). Many of them had their own commemorative plates. The Association for Mutual Farmers Assistance (Verein der gegenseitigen Bauernhilfe, VdgB) was a mass organization managing farm equipment and supply facilities.

East German agriculture took pride in using modern technology and a scientific approach. Numerous artworks and films illustrating farm life highlight modern equipment and the availability of electricity. Several of our plates recognize accomplishments in plant cultivation and animal breeding. A surprisingly big organization was the Central Union of Small Gardeners, Settlers and Small-Animal Breeders (Zentralverband der Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter, VKSK) with 1.5 million members in 1988. It catered to the interests of small garden cultivation and small animal breeding, from birds and rabbits to goats, dogs, cats and bees. Small garden owners growing vegetables and fruits could cultivate for themselves what was largely unavailable in shops.

Above: Unknown manufacturer, 40th Anniversary of Land Reform Wanzleben, 1986
Top left: VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, 30th Anniversary of Socialist Agrarian Politics, 30th Anniversary of GDR, 1979
Top right: Weimar Porzellan, 25th Anniversary of LPG Cooperation Cobbelsdorf-Fläming, 1977
Bottom left: Weimar Porzellan, 30th Anniversary of LPG "Seed Growth", 1982
Bottom right: VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, Agrarian Exhibition of the GDR Leipzig-Markkleeberg, n.d.
2. W. Noack, Gerhard-Helbig-Memorial Prize, 1972
4. Meissen, Honorary Prize of the Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry of the Province of Saxony, n.d.
5. VEB Colditz Porzellanwerk, Educational and Accomplishment Exhibition of Beekeeping 1983, 1983
7. VEB Colditz Porzellanwerk, Gerhard-Helbig-Commemorative Prize, 1972
8. Kahla, 40th Anniversary of Branch Cormick, 1988
WAR AND PEACE

In the socialist countries during the Cold War, ‘peace’ and ‘world peace’ were recurring media sound bites. The Cominform – an organization of communist parties worldwide with its headquarters in Moscow – organized lectures, conferences and festivals around the topic of world peace, and Pablo Picasso’s peace dove became the symbol of socialist peacefulness. Picasso received the Stalin Peace Prize in 1950; meanwhile East Bloc art critics condemned his modern art as “bourgeois-decadent.” At the same time in the United States, Picasso was considered a communist threat by conservative politicians and the FBI kept a bulky file on him, even though he never visited America.

Paradoxically, in spite of its ubiquitous peace rhetoric, the GDR was a thoroughly militarized society. The National People’s Army (Nationale Volksarmee, NVA), created in 1955 and comprised of an air force, navy and border troops, was an influential institution in East Germany. Civil Defense forces (Zivilverteidigung, ZV) prepared for natural disasters and military catastrophes and counted up to 500,000 members. As a paramilitary institution, the Civil Defense provided political education as well as military training. By the 1970s and 1980s, it had become more of a social organization. The volunteer Workers’ Militia (Kampfgruppen), recruited from schools, factories and companies, formed a back-up force for the regular army. Finally, the People’s Police (Volkspolizei, VP) fulfilled more traditional police tasks once the NVA was established.

Together, these organizations formed a tight network of control, while they tried to express the idea that safety in socialist society should be everyone’s concern and get everyone involved. Of seminal importance here is how a society defines its internal and external enemies. Peace rhetoric and militarization were clearly two sides of the same coin in the GDR.

Above: Watchtower, commemorative gift from the National People’s Army, n.d.
2. Unknown manufacturer, *Customs Administration of the GDR, District Administration Berlin*, n.d.
Consumption, Leisure, Sports

Especially during the first two decades of its existence, the focus of attention for the East German political leadership was on production. Karl Marx said that man can fulfill his destiny through work. However, this emphasis on production never led to an affluent society as in the capitalist West. The Socialist Unity Party’s second General Secretary, Erich Honecker (1971-89), recognized that more openness towards the material wishes of the people was needed in order to prevent large-scale social unrest and political dissent.

Anticipating consumer wishes, the GDR produced its own product advertisements, in many cases obscuring the fact that the advertized products were hardly available. In some cases these advertisements found their way onto decorative plates, as in the ads for Wernesgrüner and Cannewitzer beer and for the luxury Interhotel Panorama Oberhof. Responding to the small pleasures of daily life, a number of plates feature menus, again in spite of the scarcity of many ingredients.

East Germany lost the struggle for affluence and consumption to the West, but it could compete fairly well on another symbolic level of Cold War competition - sports. Many of the plates in our collection refer to international sports accomplishments. Sometimes these successes are explicitly politicized, for instance on a plate celebrating the East German victory in the European handball league as a victory over fascism. The ‘International Peace Race’ plates have another implicit reference; the race course straddled East German and Polish territory, signifying the new peaceful relations between the two countries since 1945 and the East German respect for the Oder-Neiße border, which was briefly contested during negotiations about German reunification in 1990. The Moscow Olympics plate from 1980 celebrates an event without the participation of Western countries; the Games were boycotted that year because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
Select clips from The Wende Museum’s East German film collection played in-gallery to accompany the exhibition of commemorative plates.

Still image from a 16mm film print of *The Eyewitness: Reports from the 10th World Festival of Youth and Students, July 28-August 5, 1973* in Berlin, DEFA-Studio für Kurzfilme, East Germany, 1973

Still image from a 16mm film print of *By Foot into the Clouds*, DEFA-Studio für Dokumentarfilme, East Germany, 1984

Still image from a 16mm film print of *Make a Left Behind the Moon*, DEFA-Studio für Trickfilme, East Germany, 1959

Still image from a 16mm film print of *Mr. Green Hair Teaches Agriculture*, East Germany, 1959
Industry

Numerous plates in our collection are dedicated to heavy industry: mining, machine factories, chemical industry, steel works, plastics etc. Working conditions were often harsh. Although productivity was supposed to rise according to the rigorous Five- or Seven-Year Plans, material conditions for such growth were lacking. During the late 1970s and the 1980s, the environmental pollution caused by heavy industry was one of the main causes of political dissonance in the GDR.

Remarkably, the commemorative plates hardly celebrate workers involved in heavy industry. Rather, they depict the factories themselves. One of these, the ‘VEB Leuna-Werke Walter Ulbricht,’ named after the first Secretary General of the GDR, was the biggest chemical plant in East Germany. The abbreviation VEB stands for ‘Volksseiger Betrieb’ (Publicly Owned Company), referencing the socialist principle of the people owning the means of production. In fact, it was the state that, through State Planning Commissions, managed and controlled the industries.

The emphasis on production in the GDR could not conceal a growing resentment among the population about the scarcity of consumer goods, especially compared to the capitalist West. Through gifts from West German relatives and West German television programs received in the GDR, people started to realize the downside of their centralized economy. In June 1990, seven months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ‘Treuhandanstalt’ (Trust Agency) took over the management of the VEBs in a partially successful attempt to reprivatize them.

Above: VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, VEB Leuna Factory Walter Ulbricht, n.d.
2. VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, *Central Youth Object of the GDR - Nuclear Power Station North*, n.d.
2. VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, Mining Klettwitz – Overburden Conveyor Bridge, 1987
3. VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, Day of Miners and Energy Workers of the GDR, n.d.
5. Henneberg Porzellan, VEB Flat Steel Industrial Area Hermann Matern, n.d.
7. VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, VEB Machine Factory and Ironworks Wurzen, n.d.
Topography

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the GDR took pride in urban development and the construction of new housing in the modernist tradition of the Bauhaus. However, since the late 1970s, a new concern for historical town centers and monuments arose, connected with a growing interest in historical tradition. Cities like Berlin and Dresden began to celebrate their centuries-old history and to restore old buildings, monuments and even whole urban quarters. The Halle-Neustadt and Berlin Television Tower (Fernsehturm) plates are clear examples of the first category, while the City of Ilmenau, Frankfurt (Oder) and Dresden plates relate to the second group.

2. Unknown manufacturer, Image of the World-Famous City of Dresden in the Year 1650, n.d.
4. VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, Halle-Neustadt, n.d.
Some of the plates show highlights of cities, both classical and modern, like the Berlin monuments plate. Others feature specific monuments and iconic buildings, such as the “Völkerschlachtdenkmal” (Monument to the Battle of Leipzig in 1813 between Russia, Prussia, Austria and Sweden against Napoleon’s army). This imposing nationalist structure from 1913 was originally condemned as a proto-fascist edifice, but was later reinterpreted positively as a monument to the “people’s revolt” against the French dictator.

The East Berlin Palace of the Republic (Palast der Republik, PdR), which housed the East German parliament as well as shops, cafés, and a popular bowling alley, was the topic of a fierce controversy during the 1990s. The government of reunified Germany decided to dismantle the building in favor of rebuilding the mid-eighteenth-century City Palace, which was damaged during the Second World War and completely demolished in 1950. The Wende Museum acquired numerous materials from the Palace of the Republic, including master drawings, programs, furniture, glassware and, shown in this exhibition, the typical PdR dinnerware.

1. Meissen, Völkerschlachtdenkmal – Leipzig, 1966
3. Winterling Porcelain, Day of Cities and Local Communities of the GDR, n.d.
2. Freiburger Porzellan, Mining City Freiberg, n.d.
3. Meissen, German Hygiene Museum Dresden, 1961
4. Kahla Porzellan, 17th GDR Championship in Archery, Kénitz, 1975
5. VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, VEB Building and Assembly Industrial Area South/KB Assembly Construction Grimma, n.d.
Henneberg Porzellan, various PdR (Palast der Republik, Palace of the Republic) dinner service plates, 1970s
Transport and Travel

East German citizens were very much restricted in terms of international travel possibilities. Border guards not only defended the borders against foreign enemies, they also prevented their own citizens from escaping to the West. Traveling to the non-socialist world was normally the exclusive preserve of elite party members and distinguished scholars and artists. The right to travel freely was one of the most vocal demands during the protests of 1989 that eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Nevertheless, there were possibilities to visit other socialist countries in the Eastern Bloc, and the means of transport – car, train, boat - were quite popular on decorative plates. For private transport people naturally used cars, for instance the Trabant, produced at the car plant in Zwickau in the province of Saxony. One of our plates proudly announces the one millionth Trabant rolling from the assembly line. Nonetheless, there was a waiting list of up to fourteen years for this extremely polluting Duroplast car. It is therefore not surprising that trains and ferries were more regularly featured.

1. Unknown manufacturer, One Millionth Trabant, 1973
2. VEB Colditz Porzellanwerk, Raw-Hermann Matern, n.d.
3. Unknown manufacturer, 2nd Blossom Festival-Mountain Test Kloschwitz '77, 1977
A very privileged way of traveling was by cruise ship. The GDR had one such ship, the "MS Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) that was bought from a Swedish shipping company, and which carried elite party members and winners of the East German lottery over international waters to destinations along the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean coast or even to Cuba. The Wende Museum has a collection of plates from this ship that describe its route and special daily menus.

Even more exclusive was traveling into space. During the four decades of the GDR, one East German kosmonaut, Sigmund Jähn, joined his Soviet colleagues in 1978. He immediately became a national hero. The GDR was very proud of its partnership with the Soviet Union in the ‘Interkosmos’ space program, and space travel figures prominently in East German visual culture.

1. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) - Cuba Itinerary Olympic Competition, 1976
2. VEB Steingutwerk Torgau, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People), n.d.
1. Weimar Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) - Happy New Year, 1975
2. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) Menu, 1975
3. Weimar Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) Menu, 1973
4. Weimar Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) - Happy New Year, 1973
5. Weimar Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) Menu, 1974
6. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) - International Friendship Voyage, 1975
1. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People), 1976
2. Weimar Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) Vase, n.d.
3. Weimar Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People) Vase, n.d.
4. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People), 1978
5. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People), 1979
6. Kahla Porzellan, MS "Völkerfreundschaft" (Friendship of the People), n.d.
Producing Commemorative Plates

Commemorative plates were produced by about a dozen different companies, most of them in the province - since 1990 federal state - of Saxony, around the cities of Dresden, Weimar and Leipzig. By far the most famous of these companies was - and is - the Meißen porcelain manufactory, which has existed since the early eighteenth century and has been a hallmark of artistic quality throughout Europe and the world ever since. After the war the company fell into Soviet hands but was turned over to German ownership again in 1950, one year after the founding of the GDR, where it became one of the few organizations that remained profitable. Meißen's trademark symbol is two crossed swords. Many of the hand painted commemorative plates in this exhibition are from the Meißen factory, e.g. the plate representing the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd (present-day St. Petersburg) in 1917. Among big companies that produced commemorative plates are Kahla, Henneberg, Weißwasser, Wallendorf, Colditz and Weimarer Porzellan, all recognizable from their company symbols. After German reunification in 1990, most of these companies shut down or changed hands. About half of them continue to exist, sometimes under a different name, but they have stopped producing commemorating plates altogether.

Meissen, Merseburg, Presented by the City Council, n.d.

Back of plate showing Meißen crossed swords

Weimarer

Winterling

Kahla

Henneberg

Henneberg (alternate)
The plates were always commissioned for special occasions; they were not produced for the market. Clients could be companies, brigades or organizations. They informed the factories what had to be highlighted, whereupon the porcelain company provided the design. This in turn had to be approved by both the client and a political advisor before it went into production. Commemorative plates were presented as gifts for individuals or collectives to honor their special political, economic or sporting successes. Cultural accomplishments were not often celebrated on plates, probably due to the always tense relationship between the worlds of politics and culture.

Some of the commemorative plates are painted by hand with brush and/or pen, which in some cases does not exclude the existence of several copies, but the majority of designs were mechanically printed onto the plate. Most companies employed one painter who was responsible for the hand-painted plates. Bigger companies, like Kahla and Weimarer Porzellan, specialized in reproduced images by means of screen printing or decal application. Whereas most plates were unique, some of them were produced in editions of up to about 30.

Triptis Porzellan, Best Wishes to International Women’s Day, 1971

Henneberg Porzellan, 700th Anniversary of the City of Ilmenau, n.d.
Communism for Dinner: Commemorative Plates from the Wende Museum was organized by Chief Curator Joes Segal, with assistance from Collections Manager Patrick Mansfield.

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Learn more about the objects in this exhibition by visiting our online catalog at <http://www.wendemuseum.org/collections/exhibition.php?kv=3>.

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