

Opening

A Go-To Source for Nakashima and More Gets a Major Upgrade

On its 35th anniversary, dealer Robert Aibel moves
Moderne Gallery into a bigger and better space

By Alia Akkam
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Moderne Gallery now occupies a 4,500-square-foot gallery in Showrooms at 2220 in Port Richmond, Philadelphia.

Photo: Courtesy of Moderne Gallery

In the summer of 1984, shortly after receiving his Ph.D. in visual anthropology and aesthetic communication from the University of Pennsylvania, Robert Aibel received a grant to spend time in France researching the filmmaker, actor, and screenwriter Georges Rouquier. When Aibel unexpectedly finished his work early, he spent those last few carefree days perusing furniture to potentially dress up his new, empty house back in Pennsylvania. He was in awe of the designs he encountered. “I got sucked in by Art Deco,” he recalls, “and by the time I got home, I knew I wanted to pursue a second career.”

Already a documentary filmmaker and assistant professor at Drexel University, Aibel, buoyed by his whirlwind French shopping expedition, indulged his longtime fascination with auctions and antiques by opening Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia’s Old City that fall. Specializing in French and American Art Deco classics from the 20th century, it made a splash in a neighborhood that was home to only four other galleries. Now, by decamping to the brand-new Showrooms at 2220, Aibel proves he’s still every bit the visionary.



Dealer Robert Aibel displays a selection that represents everything from Art Deco to the American Craft Studio movement, with plenty of his signature George Nakashima furnishings.

Photo: Courtesy of Moderne Gallery

Located in Port Richmond, a Philadelphia row-home community with deep Polish roots that is in the midst of rapid development, the 100,000-square-foot Showrooms at 2220 reenergizes the notion of the traditional art, design, and antiques center. Online shopping may be cutting down the frequency of visits to brick-and-mortar spaces, but Showrooms at 2220, owned by Kamelot Auctions, aims to make the physical experience more viable by providing dealers with gently priced booths and showrooms, combined with in-house auction and reupholstery services. Apart from the owners, Aibel is the first tenant at this former 19th-century mill.

Aibel's Old City building, dating from 1880, was in need of significant upgrades, so when a new neighbor expressed an interest in buying it and Aibel learned about the opening of Showrooms at 2220 almost concurrently, he knew it was time for the leap.

This new iteration of Moderne spans a 4,500-square-foot gallery to display collections of furniture, ceramics, and turned wood, as well as a studio for Aibel's nephew, who handles the refinishing work, and a warehouse with more than 11,000 feet of storage. Clean-lined with rustic touches, the interiors, kitted out with brick and wood beams, come courtesy of longtime local collaborator Michael Gruber Design.

"There is an industrial quality to it that serves the furniture quite well. It's a wide open space, and it's nice to be able to present the pieces as best as we can. When something is placed in a better context, people notice it, and we're seeing that happen," Aibel explains.

Moderne is accustomed to evolution. In 1985, Aibel received a phone call about "used furniture" that a doctor was selling. A stash of George Nakashima pieces, it laid the foundation for Aibel's reputation as the world's preeminent Nakashima dealer. This encouraged Aibel to delve deeper into the American

Craft Studio movement, showcasing vintage selections from the likes of Wharton Esherick, Sam Maloof, and Arthur Espenet Carpenter.

As midcentury interest began to trump Art Deco tastes, Aibel gradually started weaving in works from contemporary artists like Miriam Carpenter, and he plans to add, albeit slowly and carefully, more names to the roster. Between this shift in direction, the recently unveiled location, and his son Josh—a onetime restoration apprentice—coming on board as codirector, it's poignant that Moderne Gallery has entered a new chapter on its 35th anniversary.

“We were pioneers in Old City, and now we’re a pioneer of a new business model and destination,” says Aibel. “We are at the beginning of something that’s going to flourish.”