

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE COLLECTION

A study on the composition the composition and representation of gender in *the Plastic Design Collection*

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 GABRIELLA VALLI | ● LELLA VIGNELLI | SANDRA WEBER
 ●● VANESSA YUAN | ENRICA ZANZI

○ Women creators with pieces already in the collection and new objects acquired between 2015 and 2024.

● Women creators whose pieces were acquired between 2015 et 2024.

●● Women creators with pieces in the permanent exhibition.

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE COLLECTION - 2024

A study on the composition the composition and representation of gender in the *Plastic Design Collection*

Echoing *Here We Are! Women in Design 1900 – Today* and *Untold Stories - Women Designers in Belgium 1880-1980*, the collections department of Design Museum Brussels presents the results of a study into the composition and the representation of gender in the *Plastic Design Collection*.

This collection of 2300 objects illustrates the relationship between design and plastic materials, as well as their impact on our everyday lives. This research has taken, and will continue to take time, as well as human and financial resources. By presenting a selection of the acquired objects, this installation showcases the evolution of the numbers in gender representation since the Design Museum Brussels established itself as a place for conservation and promotion of 20th and 21st century material cultural heritage. New pieces and names have been added to the *Plastic Design Collection*, marking the beginning of a desire to interpret the collection the collection from a gender perspective.

This study is the starting point that encourages future initiatives and enables us to continue gathering information about women in the field of plastic design, their recognition and visibility as well as their association with design history. This document presents the full research study, which a part is visible at the museum reserves from 15th October 2024 until February 2025.

Arnaud Bozzini, Director
Cristina Bargna, Head of Collections

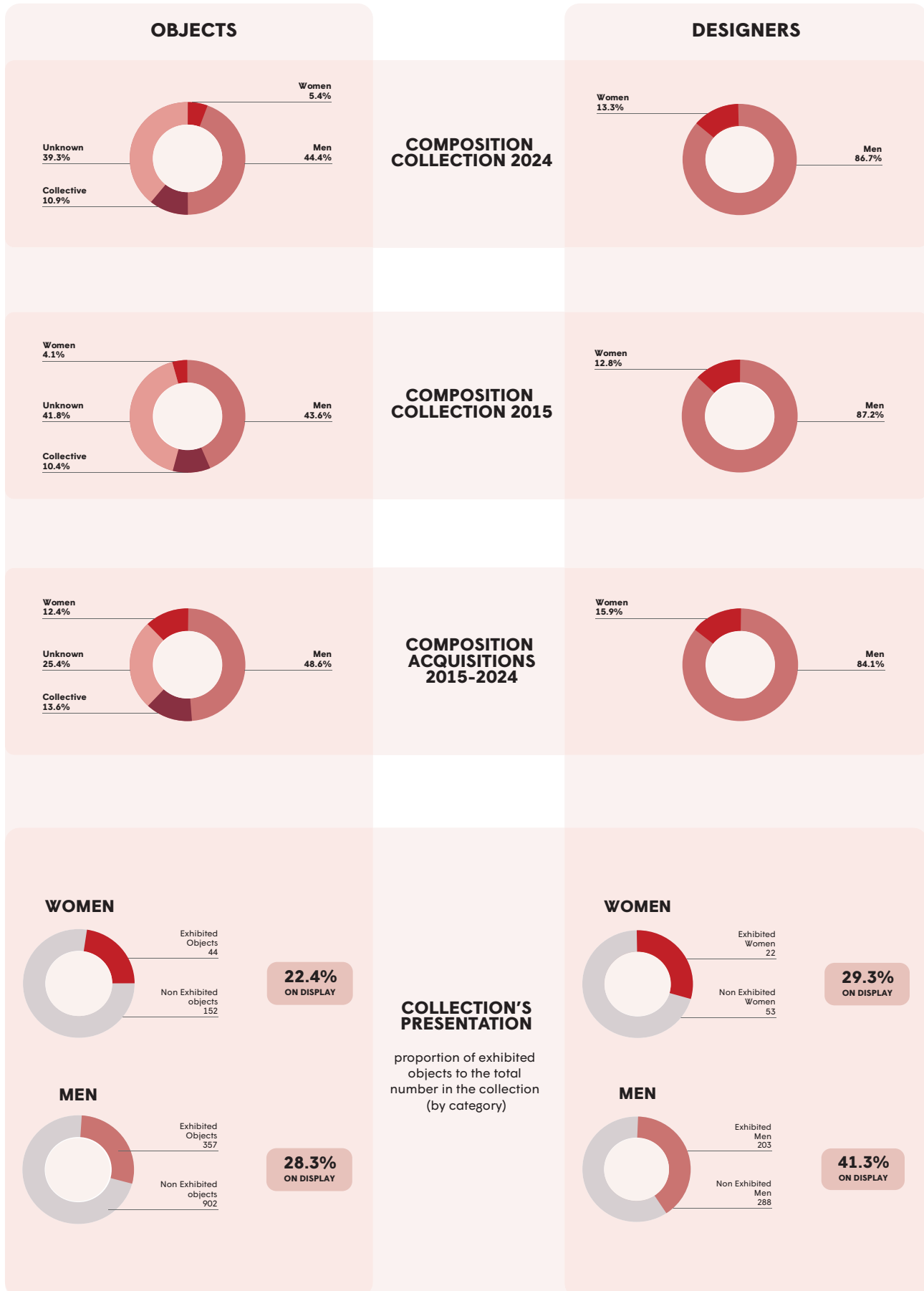


Installation in the reserve of Design Museum Brussels - Ph. Liophotography

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE COLLECTION - 2024

A study on the composition the composition and representation of gender in the *Plastic Design Collection*

IN A NUTSHELL



THE SUBJECT

The present study explores the evolution of the composition of the Design Museum Brussels' collection, titled *the Plastic Design Collection*, through a gender perspective. Lead by Cristina Bargna (Head of Collections), Cristina Marcolla Carnelos (Collections Assistant) and Barbara Bodiot (Collections Intern), it analyses the ways in which the acquisition policy in operation as well as the curation of the permanent exhibition both impact the enrichment of the collection, aiming to achieve a better representation and visibility of women creators and designers in the plastic design field.

The **acquisition policy** plays a decisive role in the museum's mission to preserve, witness and enhance the historical, technological and socio-cultural dynamics that are woven around the objects. Since the museum's opening in 2015, the core of the collection, consisting of 1937 inventoried objects (84.8% of the current collection) has been expanded by 346 items. The new pieces and names that enriched *the Plastic Design Collection*, mark the beginning of a desire to complete the history of design in plastic with examples of pieces conceived by women designers.

With the same ambition, the **curation of the pieces exhibited in the collection's presentation** allows the museum to show, as of now, a selection which lessens the existing gap of this ensemble. The selection of pieces presented throughout the exhibition circuit aids to reclaim the place that women creators active since World War II have always occupied in design, but have not always been credited for.

This initial statistical study considers these two approaches as a starting point and divides itself into two parts. The first is centered around the objects of the collection and the second on the designers and creators. The analyses and percentages are based on the numbering of the collection database and the last inventory number listed is 2024.0020, verified on the date 18/09/2024.

A. COMPOSITION OF THE COLLECTION - THE OBJECTS

This first part of the study analyses the composition of the collection in terms of objects, based on the typology of their production. We have defined as **individual production** the cases where an object was created by one sole designer; we have defined as **collective production** the cases where an object was created by group or results of a collaboration; finally, we have defined as **unknown production** the cases where an object's creator is unidentified. This last case corresponds to the cases where there is no information available or where we know only the manufacturer (E.g. Philips, Sony or Tupperware).

1. Composition of the collection in 2024

During the first phase of the study we have determined the composition of the current collection (2024) that counted with 2283 objects, broken down as follows:

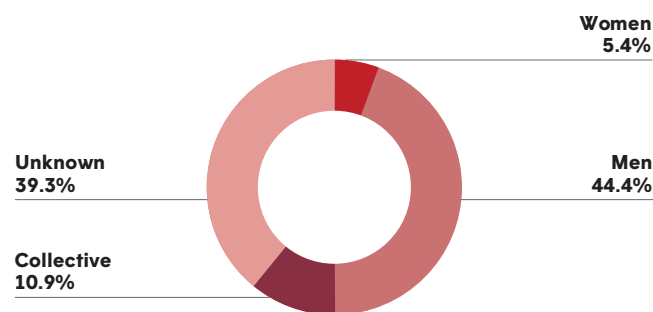
Individual production: 1136 objects

Men: 1013 (44.4%) objects were designed by men designers.

Women: 123 (5.4%) objects were designed by women designers.

Collective production: 249 (10.9%) objects come from collaborations, whether mixed or not.

Unknown production: the designers of 898 (39.3%) objects are currently not identified.



2. Composition of the collection in 2015

During the second phase of the study we worked on the same calculations however utilising the data from from the collection at the time of the museum's opening in 2015. This ensemble, acquired from engineer Philippe Decelle (°1949) counted with 1937 pieces and corresponds to 84,8% of the current collection. These percentages have enabled us to understand the foundations on which the museum's collection has been built, and to measure changes since 2015.

Using the same criteria, the composition of the collection in 2015 was as follows:

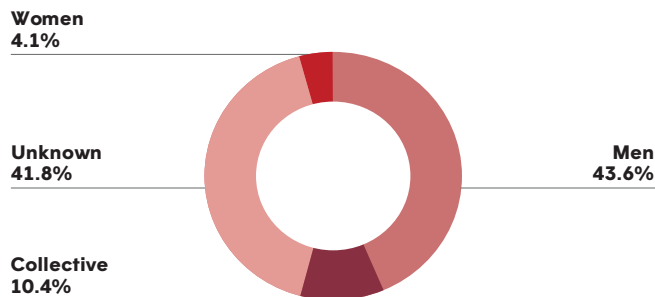
Individual production: 925 (47.6%) objects

Men: 845 (43.6%) objects were designed by men designers.

Women: 80 (4.1%) objects were designed by women designers.

Collective production: 202 (10.4%) objects come from collaborations, whether mixed or not.

Unknown production: the designers of 810 (41.8%) objects are currently not identified.



3. Analysis of the impact of acquisitions (2015-2024) on changes in the composition of the collection

After determining the composition of the current collection and that of its nucleus at the time of the museum's opening, the analysis was focused on the acquisitions that have enriched the ensemble between 2015 and 2024.

Representing 15,2% of the current collection (2024), the results confirm that they are one of the two levers that have made it possible to improve gender representation within *the Plastic Design Collection*.

Although this process depending on multiple factors, such as the financial resources available, we can observe that if we isolate and analyse the composition of the acquisitions, we have a greater proportion of pieces designed by women designers (in individual production) compared to the collection acquired as a single set in 2015. Using the same criteria as before, the acquisitions (2015-2024), which total 307 items, are broken down as follows:

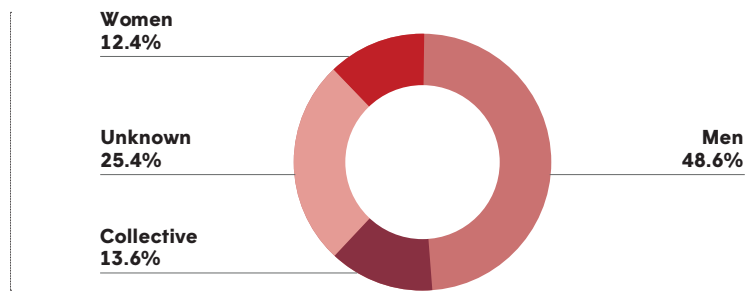
Individual production: 211 (61%) objects

Men: 168 (48.6%) objects were designed by men designers.

Women: 43 (12.4%) objects were designed by women designers.

Collective production: 47 (13.6%) objects come from collaborations, whether mixed or not.

Unknown production: the designers of 88 (25.4%) objects are currently not identified.



The next step was to calculate the % increase in the composition of the current collection (2024) in terms of objects compared to the collection in 2015. We can see that the percentage representing the increase in pieces designed by women designers (individual production) is the highest. In detail :

Individual production: 211 (61%) objects

Men: with the acquisition of 168 pieces, the number of objects created by male designers rose from 845 to 1013, **an increase of 19.8%**.

Women: with the acquisition of 43 pieces, the number of objects created by women designers rose from 80 to 123, **an increase of 53.7%**.

Collective production: With the acquisition of 47 pieces, the number of objects from mixed and unmixed collaborations rose from 202 to 249, **an increase of 23.2%**.

Unknown production: The designers of 88 new pieces are currently unidentified. Compared with the 810 in the initial collection, this represents **an increase of just 10.8%**.

4. Analysis of the impact of the curation on the collection’s presentation

Other than the acquisitions, the study has analysed how the curation of the collection’s presentation constitutes a second lever of action for the visibilisation of the pieces designed by women designers. Effectively, the selection exhibited is the focus of special attention in order to enhance the representatin of the designers in the collection and to narrow the existing gap in the collection. Currently, 468 pieces (20,5% of the collection) are exhibited.

In the following calculations, we have subtracted from the total the pieces that are part of the unknown production. In addition, the objects resulting from collaborations have been divided proportionally into the categories of *individual production - women* and *individual production - men* (E.g. the DSW chair designed by the couple Charles and Ray Eames counted as 1 individual production – women and 1 in the category individual production – men. The same process was applied to more numerous groups).

In total, we counted 44 objects designed by women designers currently in the exhibition against 357 by men designers. Using the same criteria, the composition of objects present in the permanent exhibition is as follows:

Individual production: 317 objects

Men: 288 objects were designed by men designers.

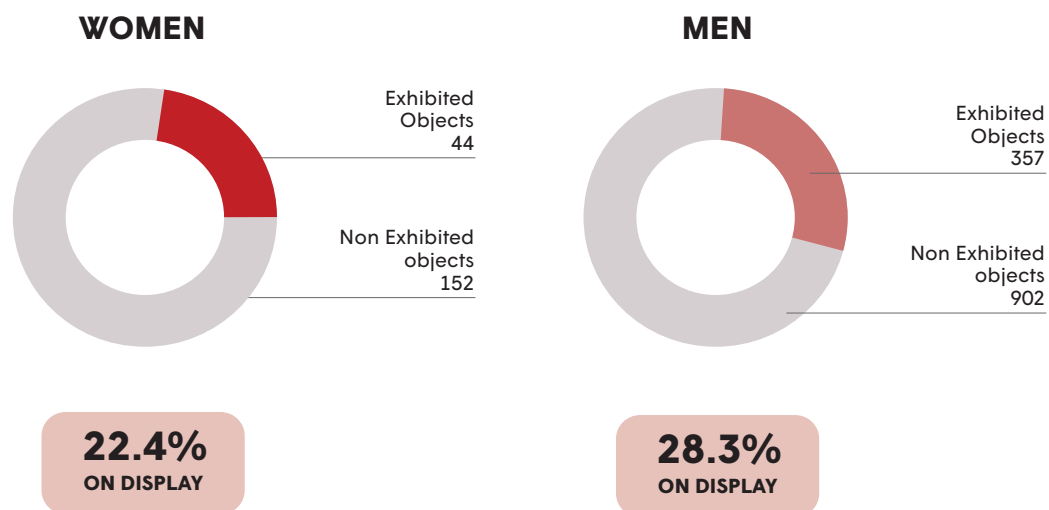
Women: 29 objects were designed by women designers.

Collective production: 69 objects come from collaborations. In particular, all 69 involve male designers, and 15 of these objects include female designers.

If we combine individual and collective productions, we find a total of 357 objects designed by men designers on display and 44 pieces designed by women designers on display. We then analysed the proportion between the objects exhibited in each category and all the objects belonging to the same category in the collection. Once this calculation had been made, we obtained the following results:

Men: if we compare the proportion of objects conceived by men designers exhibited compared to all the pieces designed by men designers in the collection, i.e. 357 objects out of a total of 1259, which means that **28,3% of the objects created by men in the collection are on display.**

Women: if we compare the proportion of objects conceived by women designers exhibited compared to all the pieces designed by women designers in the collection, i.e. 44 objects out of a total of 196, which means that **22,4% of the objects created by women in the collection are on display.**



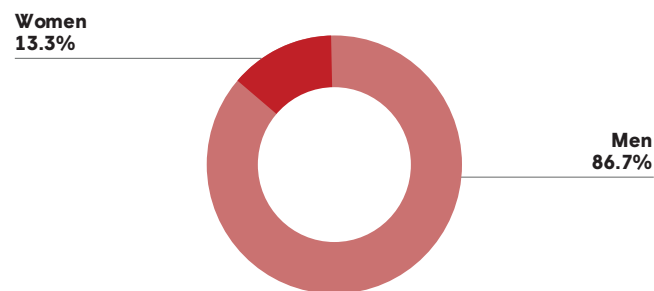
B. COMPOSITION OF THE COLLECTION - THE DESIGNERS

The second part of the study analyses the composition of the collection in terms of the 566 designers that feature in it. The nature of the collection, that counts majoritarily of serial industrial design objects (the museum has several exemplars of the same object), makes it interesting to work the statistics using this parameter. We have defined two categories: **men designers** and **women designers**. In this section we have subtracted the 'unknown designers' and we have also divided the members of the collective productions into the two categories.

1. Composition of the collection in 2024

First, we determined the composition of the current collection (2024), which includes 566 designers and is broken down as follows:

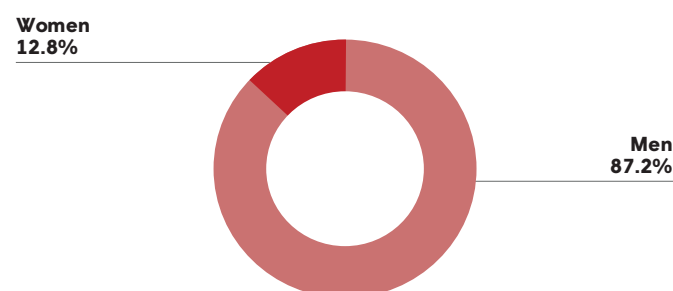
Men: 491 (86.7%) men designers.
Women: 75 (13.3%) women designers.



2. Composition of the collection in 2015

In the second stage we carried out the same calculation using data from the collection at the time of the museum's opening in 2015, which numbered 484 designers and was broken down as follows:

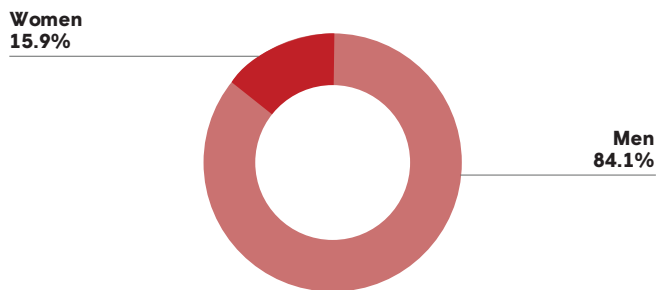
Men: 422 (87.2%) men designers.
Women: 62 (12.8%) women designers.



3. Analysis of the impact of acquisitions (2015-2024) on changes in the composition of the collection

Having determined the composition of the current collection and its core at the time of the museum's opening, the analysis focused on the acquisitions that enriched the ensemble between 2015 and 2024 with new designers. The composition of the acquisitions (2015-2024), which include 82 new names, is broken down as follows:

Men: 69 (84.1%) men designers.
Women: 13 (15.9%) women designers.



The next step was, once again, to calculate the % increase in the composition of the current collection (2024) in terms of designers compared to the collection in 2015

Men: thanks to the acquisitions, 69 men designers have entered the collection. This represents **an increase of 16,3% of men designers in the collection.**
Women: thanks to the acquisitions, 13 women designers have entered the collection. This represents **an increase of 20,9% of women designers in the collection.**

4. Analysis of the impact of the curation on the collection's presentation

As in the first part of the study, we also analysed the selection of designers in the permanent exhibition. In total, there are 225 designers currently on display.

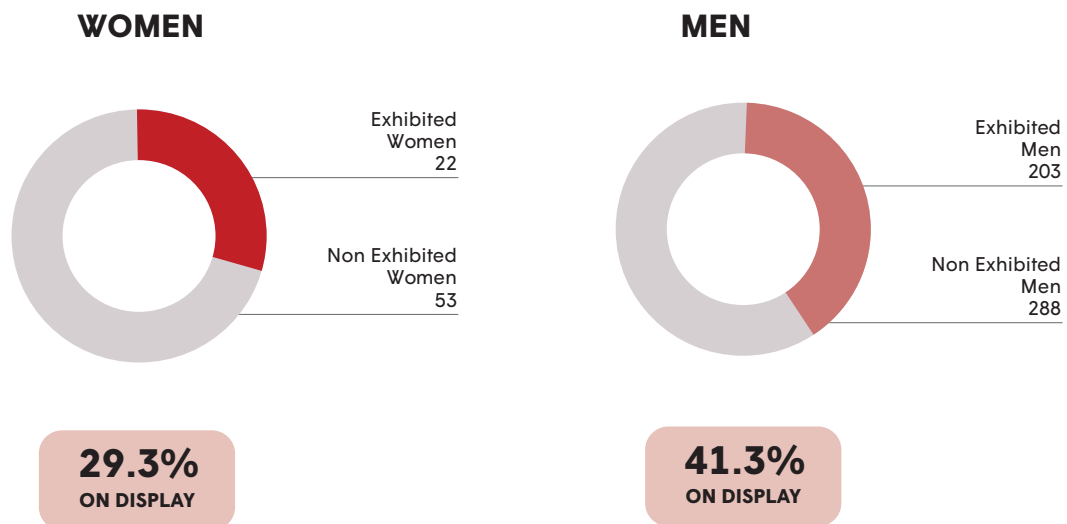
Men: 203 (90.2%) men designers.
Women: 22 (9.8%) women designers.

We then analysed the proportion between the designers exhibited in each category and all the designers in the same category in the collection.

Once this calculation had been made, we obtained the following results:

Men: if we compare the proportion of exhibited objects designed by men compared to the total number of objects designed by men in the collection, i.e. 203 objects out of a total of 491, which means that **41,3% of men designers in the collection are on display.**

Women: if we compare the proportion of exhibited objects designed by women compared to the total number of objects designed by women in the collection, i.e. 22 objects out of a total of 75, which means that **29,3% of women designers in the collection are on display.**



CONCLUSION

The results show how the two approaches developed since the museum opened, namely the acquisition policy and the curation of the collection's presentation, have enabled *the Plastic Design Collection* to evolve gradually in a more representative and inclusive direction.

Acquisitions tend to take place over the long term, not only because they are affected by the human, logistical and financial resources available to the museum, but also because the core collection, acquired as a single unit in 2015, makes up 84.8% of the current collection. For this reason, we considered it essential to calculate the percentage change in the collection between 2015 and 2024. Taking into account the reality of the collection built up by Philippe Decelle, the data relating to the women's individual production category reveals the best trend, with +53.7% compared to the 19.8% of pieces designed by men's designers. Similarly, in the case of designers entering the collection, we have an increase of 20.9% for women's designers compared with 16.3% for men's designers.

For almost 10 years, the museum has also been gradually reducing the existing difference in the composition of the collection, thanks to what is made accessible to the public through the curation of the permanent exhibition.

We note that 22.4% of the objects in the collection that are designed by women designers are exhibited, compared with 28.3% by men designer. In terms of designers, 29.3% of the women designers listed in the database are currently on display, compared with 39.7% of men designers.

This refinement of the statistics is also due to the work carried out on unknown production. On the one hand, the acquisition policy has limited the acceptance of donations or proposals of objects whose designers remain unknown. In conjunction with this study, documentary research was carried out on the collection in an attempt to identify pieces whose designers were hitherto unknown. Thanks to this approach, we have also begun to compile additional statistics in order to delve deeper into the subject, i.e. using the typologies of objects in the collection.

DESIGN MUSEUM BRUSSELS

Initiated by the Atomium's acquisition of a private collection, the Design Museum Brussels nestled in the Heysel Plateau is dedicated to 20th century and contemporary design. Since 2015, the museum's the Plastic Design Collection has traced the landscape of plastic design from the 1950s to the present day. Alongside this collection, the museum has opened *belgisch design belge*, a permanent exhibition space dedicated to Belgian design and its history.

Favouring a historical approach and echoing current and future research, it aims to make design accessible and understandable to all audiences. Much more than formal, aesthetic, and functional objects, design bears witness to the economic, social, ideological, and cultural conditions of the time. A place for encounters, discoveries and sharing, the Design Museum Brussels promotes the multidimensionality of design through its collection, exhibitions and mediation activities.

THE PLASTIC DESIGN COLLECTION

The Design Museum Brussels collection offers a unique opportunity to explore 20th and 21st century history through the special relationship between design and plastic. Developed from the private collection of Belgian engineer Philippe Decelle (°1949) and acquired by the Atomium in 2014, it highlights the heterogeneous evolution of plastic design as a key witness to the second half of the 20th century and a particular form of industrial production.

From material to object and from object to society, the Plastic Design Collection as a permanent exhibition weaves a cultural, social, and political history of plastic design through the most common everyday objects as well as limited edition productions. The Plastic Design Collection is thus a unique ensemble that illustrates how this material has shaped everyday life in society, from the economic boom of the Golden Sixties to the present day, as well as our relationship with mass production, consumer society, and sustainability.