

Exploring Angles and Voids

**Filipowski,
the Furniture Maker**



Experimental chair of cut and bent plywood, 1948. Included in the 1950 MoMA exhibition "Prize Designs in Modern Furniture," along with a handful of other non-prizewinning entries selected for "special interest and new ideas," but not published in the accompanying catalog.

Facing page The wooden panels of this birch prototype sideboard, with black lacquered steel legs, circa 1953, which slide vertically, are presented in a checkerboard arrangement — as in an actual checkerboard, there are eight squares across.

Richard Filipowski was one of the most gifted polymaths in the annals of American modernism. If he had a low profile in the world of modernist design, those who knew Filip, as he was called by friends, suggest it was partly by inclination. His deepest passion was for his art, which he explored in abstract paintings and sculpture that reflected what he termed the "art of the psyche." Such work turned him inward, toward self-exploration, and away from worldly judgment and the quest for rewards.

By Larry Weinberg

His early paintings — which date back to the time when he was living in Chicago, first as a student at Moholy-Nagy's School of Design and then as an instructor — bear a resemblance to those of his classmate Angelo Testa: Both took cues from the Constructivism of their mentor. Filip's later metal sculptures are evocative of those of Harry Bertoia and his assistant Klaus Ihlenfeld in their rhythms and lush naturalism. His self-acknowledged masterwork is the ark for Temple B'rith Kodesh, in Rochester, New York, a Pietro Belluschi project completed in 1962. Here, according to temple literature, the dense forestation of the welded oblong elements in the sculpture conveys a spiritual message affirming human potential and development: "seed pods for future growth."

It's interesting to note that when Filip was at the School of Design, he excelled at architecture. In 1945, his youthful professor,

the architect Ralph Rapson encouraged him to enter a competition to design a new dormitory at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. Filipowski's submission was one of 10 to receive an honorable mention. Among the other runners-up were Marcel Breuer and I.M. Pei. Walter Gropius's recently formed Cambridge-based firm, the Architects' Collaborative, was the winner.

If Filip's career as a designer was relatively short-lived — most of his pieces were executed between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s — it developed organically out of his visual education and his catholic curiosity. Relentless experimentation in different materials and fields of work, so much a part of the Bauhaus tradition, was second nature to him. A freestanding sculpture, cut and bent from a sheet of aluminum, done for a class project in 1945, became the inspiration for a chair cut and bent from a single piece of plywood, submitted to the 1948 Museum of Modern Art "International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design." The plywood chair is an extraordinary achievement: starkly sculptural yet animated and conceptually elegant. True to form, in its May 8, 1950, article about the MoMA exhibit chronicling the competition, *Life* magazine—relentlessly middlebrow—lumped Filip's chair into the "Weird Losers" category.

It took the intrepid, questioning Italian design community to recognize the merits





Prototype sofa, circa 1953. Walnut plywood with lacquered cold-rolled steelbase and frame. 26 in x 72 in x 35 in. As with all the furnishings, excluding the experimental bent plywood chair, this sofa was made for Filipowski's house in Cambridge, MA. It is here presented without cushions, reduced to its visual essence.



The back quarter angle of the sofa shows the expressive use of the triangle module, forming vertical structural tetrahedrons. Richard Wright, the auctioneer of modern and contemporary design, has noted a willful over-complication of Filipowski's bases, typical of the era, conveying an aesthetic reference to engineering. This sofa certainly appears strong, but according to the mathematics of tensegrity, which Filipowski gleaned from Buckminster Fuller, it is strong.



Prototype bench, circa 1953. Solid oak plank seat and lacquered cold-rolled steel base. 18 in x 75 in x 12 in. While related to the sofa, it's devoid of tetrahedrons.

The floor lamp may be the most successful design, by virtue of its aesthetic and material clarity. There is a well-proportioned minimalism to the piece, with its wire stand and boldly pyramidal parchment shade.



Prototype floor lamp, circa 1953.
Tubular steel and lacquered
cold-rolled steel, with a triangular
parchment shade. 43½ in x 18 in x
18 in.



Three views of a prototype chair, circa 1953. Flat, painted plywood seat and back, and lacquered cold-rolled steel framing and base. 27½ in x 15½ in x 21 in. The chair conjures Eames and Rietveld, with a dynamic base that is more Jacob's ladder than Eiffel Tower.



Prototype sideboard or buffet, circa 1953. Walnut with lacquered cold-rolled steel base and wrought iron shelf supports. 45 in x 72 in x 18 in. The buffet is shown here with the serving shelf in the dropped-down position, and the bank of drawers exposed.



of Filipowski's work. The editors of such reviews as *L'Arredamento Moderno* and *Esempi* were human divining rods for visual quality and innovation. Long before Vladimir Kagan's commercial success, they championed his designs. They also spotted visionary potential in such designers as Otto Kolb, who like Filip, did not get his most interesting work into production. At least three of Filip's designs were shown in these high-minded Italian publications — no small achievement for a fledgling designer with a different day job and another calling. In 1955, *L'Arredamento Moderno* featured his handsome sideboard with hairpin legs and open-and-closed block fronting. The rakishly horizontal proportions of the sideboard and its ordered rows of dark and light square elements are reminiscent of a chessboard, and it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to see it as a direct descendant of the Lucite chess set he made for Moholy more than a decade earlier.

The photographs shown in the magazines make for a telling aside. All were taken in Filip's living room, using curtains and a rug as backdrops and books and vases for accents. These were not snapshots but carefully staged images, clearly indicating that Filip had an interest in publishing, if not producing, his designs. According to his brother George Filipowski, Filip was interested in marketing his pieces, going so far as to print business cards that read Custom Furniture, and creating two lines of basic, rather pedestrian, assemble-it-yourself furnishings. But limning a painting or writing a lecture is one thing; producing and distributing furniture is another. While Filip had an abundance of creative talent, he lacked business acumen.

Perhaps the best way to view Filip's design work is as a hobby with an upside. His output was basically limited to a series of prototypes. Like many designers of modest means, he designed and made much of his own furniture. His Lexington, Massachusetts, home was a repository of paintings, metal sculptures, and furnishings. His own designs include a sofa, a chair, a bench, a coffee table, a dining table, and some lamps, all with fretwork or metal strut bases; plus an outdoor grouping of metal chairs, some wooden stools reminiscent of Charlotte Perriand's pieces, and several occasional tables. It is a testament to his visual sensibility that they group easily into vignettes.

The floor lamp may be the most successful design, by virtue of its aesthetic and material clarity. There is a well-proportioned minimalism to the piece, with its wire stand and boldly pyramidal parchment shade. The elements that make up the larger furnishings, however, are a study in contrasts. Take the seating pieces: The chair and sofa backs and seats are simple slabs of plywood that make no reference to human contours; it is the complex strut bases that fascinate.

When working on his bases, Filip applied lessons learned from Moholy and Buckminster Fuller, with whom he overlapped as an instructor in Chicago and later at M.I.T., as well as his own mathematical and architectural aptitude. The question Filip posed might



Above and facing page Two views of the prototype buffet. Facing page shows the facade with the sliding doors closed; above shows the service shelf in the raised position. The flipdown shelf is a clever space-saving feature.



Prototype three-legged work stools, circa 1953. Solid painted pine. 18¾ in x 12 in. The red color adds an accent to this pleasantly chunky modernist form.



Prototype dining table, circa 1953.
Walnut with lacquered cold-rolled
steel base. 28¾ in x 71¾ in x 45
in. Top and bottom views were
published in *Esempi Tavoli Tavolini*
Carrelli Seconda Serie (Ulrico Hoepli,
Milano), 1955.



Prototype serving table, circa 1953. Walnut plywood with wrought iron frame and metal clips. 18 in x 19 in x 15½ in. A humbly industrial design with the mien of an Eames Storage Unit (ESU) 200 series. The red serving tray is removable, and the entire piece is readily demountable. Shown both assembled and disassembled in *Mobili Tipo* (Ulrico Hoepli, Milano), 1956.

be this: What if we take the underlying unity of the geometrically and physically stable triangle and make it visually kinetic? The intersecting wire struts of the bases elongate or compress, hide or reveal, simplify or complicate, depending on the position of the viewer — Moholy's "vision-in-motion." Juxtaposed in a group, the strut pieces offer a unifying triangular theme yet also provide a dynamic and varying visual experience based on the placement of the pieces. This maintains a sense of order on the one hand, while avoiding repetition and boredom on the other.

Photographs shown here of the strut-based chair and sofa capture this three-dimensional dynamic. Both pieces present themselves to the savvy design viewer as familiar yet utterly fresh objects — Gerrit Rietveld meets Charles and Ray Eames by way of Wendell Lovett. While the sofa exhibits a visually exciting balance from almost any viewer position, the intersecting lines of the chair shift constantly from symmetric to asymmetric, forming a multitude of photogenic compositions. The architecturally resonant sideboard, too, has a varied demeanor. With the doors closed and the serving shelf down, it presents a simple and unornamented but handsome façade, utilizing the graining of the wood, the rhythm of the doors, the horizontal proportions of the case and the shelf, and of course the raised strut base for visual interest. Opening one of the doors to reveal three drawers separated by negative space and raising the top shelf add horizontal lines to the mix, along with graphic punch.

Had Filip continued his experiments in furniture design, he might have become more of a household name. He had all the tools: a fertile visual imagination coupled with a mathematical bent, a working knowledge of materials, and a gift for rendering. But Filip clearly saw himself as an artist of the psyche first, a teacher second, and a designer only third.

(Adapted from an article in the Fall 2010 issue of *Modern* magazine.)

Larry Weinberg is a dealer specializing in vintage modern design and art. He also writes on design topics and is a regular contributor to the magazines *Interior Design* and *Modern*. In collaboration with Kim Hostler and Juliet Burrows, he represents work from the estate of Richard E. Filipowski.



Prototype stand, circa 1953. Cold-rolled steel and steel. 45 in x 12 in x 12 in. According to Filipowski's sister Barbara, this is a flagpole.