

EDWARD WORMLEY

The Other Face of Modernism

An exhibition of mid-century furniture designs

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at the Lin-Weinberg Gallery, 84 Wooster Street, New York City

presented by

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In a *Playboy* article of July, 1961, Edward Wormley is pictured in the company of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen. Wormley, the author argues, shared in the spirit of exhilaration that characterized mid-century design, while also fashioning interiors “for the comfort, dignity, and sense of security of human beings.”¹ In the years since, while Eames and Saarinen have enjoyed critical acclaim and renewed popularity, Wormley has pretty much dropped out of the picture. This retrospective is intended to bring a corpus of Wormley’s designs back into public view. The exhibition spans Wormley’s career and features a cross-section of his work. Still, the selection is far from comprehensive, and favors designs that make strong visual statements (“Sheaf-of-Wheat” table, Tiffany tile stand, etc.). This can be misleading. For the most part, as Edgar Kaufmann notes, Wormley subsumed personal expression to the goal of “designing for others’ needs.”²

Wormley’s most enduring legacy is the body of work he designed for Dunbar furniture. From the earliest years of their association, Wormley and Dunbar set out upon an ambitious project that amounted to no less than the creation of a distinctly American version of modernism. Such a creation was needed if Dunbar hoped to integrate a wide array of historical styles into a coherent framework. The resulting design ideology, which evolved slowly and fitfully, was based upon freedom of choice and geared toward accommodating personal tastes and needs. In this, it differed dramatically from the avant-garde modernism of the time, which Wormley perceived as being over-regimented and overly standardized. As Wormley later put it, “modern...is an expression of attitudes toward living and cannot be the same for everyone.”³

As it evolved, Dunbar’s take on modernism was promulgated in the catalogs and advertising – a context as carefully wrought as the furniture itself. Time and again, Dunbar presented artfully arranged, modern-looking room settings that balanced soft curves against straight lines, and offset classicism with baroque flourishes. The message was often hammered home in accompanying text: “American modern in every sense [Enduring Modern pieces] offer...opportunities for combination with the lasting designs of the past.”⁴ Design and campaign reached fullest expression in the New World Group of 1941. Part of the Enduring Modern line, New World was just that, rejecting European antecedents and aimed at contemporary American needs. Pitched to smaller homes and lower budgets, New World featured sectional sofas and modular case goods that could be combined or arranged in myriad ways – fourteen different ensembles are presented – so that no two Dunbar customers need have the same interior. Here was a design ethic appropriate to a democratic zeitgeist: a pluralistic (even melting-pot) modernism that

embraced diversity and individuality rather than standardization and conformity.

All of Dunbar's plans and efforts hinged on Wormley's talents as designer and decorator. Throughout his career, Wormley created furniture with its precise uses in mind. He accepted the challenge of designing for modest needs and limited budgets, structuring flexibility and adaptability into his pieces. Drawn to tradition and to good craftsmanship, Wormley developed a style that involved simplifying the overt decorative characteristics of selected past designs and recasting them to meet practical needs. The resulting forms – clean-looking and stripped of most cultural baggage – blended easily into modern interiors. Overall, it was a happy collaboration: though obligated to produce up to two lines of furniture a year, Wormley was free to draw inspiration from a wide variety of sources, and to create a type of modern design suitable to his own temperament.

Given the range and volume of his output, Wormley's career is difficult to judge. Wormley's best designs ranked with the best designs of the period, either for usefulness and economic value or for sheer exuberance and imagination. Wormley's art was an art of assemblage, of juxtaposition and composition, whether of elements within a piece or of pieces within a setting. In its broadest sense, Wormley's career represents a complex achievement: balancing old and new, he created a body of work that was comfortable and familiar, yet still managed to send the underlying message of modernism to places it might not otherwise have reached. This exhibition, it is hoped, will help relocate Wormley among the pantheon of mid-century American designers. **EW**