

Edward Wormley

WITH AN EYE TO BOTH AESTHETICS AND DETAIL, **LARRY WEINBERG** LOOKS AT THE WORK OF THIS PROLIFIC POSTWAR DESIGNER

EDWARD WORMLEY WAS NOT ONLY ONE OF AMERICA'S most significant and influential modernist designers, but also one of the busiest. From 1932 until his semi-retirement in the mid-1960s (including a brief freelance stint with Drexel Furniture) Wormley was Dunbar's in-house designer, responsible for producing up to two lines of this country's most prestigious and expensive furniture per year.

Wormley's genius was in his conversancy with design history, his meticulous attention to detail, and his conviviality. He possessed a keen eye for style and proportion, an ability to work with both fine materials and industrial techniques, and a commitment to comfort and flexibility. His best designs rank among the best of the period, either for usefulness and economic value, or for sheer exuberance and imagination. Yet, instead of trying to shock, Wormley sought to soothe, creating interiors "for the comfort, dignity, and sense of security of human beings," as John Anderson wrote in *Playboy* in 1961.

Wormley's interiors balanced accent pieces for drama and excitement with an underlying architectural sensibility that favored clean lines and simple elegance. His art was an art of assemblage, of jux-

taposition and composition, whether of elements within a piece or pieces within a setting. 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.

A sure testament to Wormley's abiding relevance is the vibrant market for his work today. Top auction houses such as Wright and Rago regularly feature a dozen or more lots of his work. More tellingly, 1stdibs—the bellwether of the vintage design industry—lists ten pages of Wormley designs, compared to five pages for Paul McCobb and only four each for Charles Eames, George Nelson, and Hans Wegner.

Because he was so prolific, grading Wormley is difficult—comparing a chair to a table is like comparing apples to oranges. There are of course a few constants: accent pieces making use of exotic materials such as Louis Comfort Tiffany-designed tiles, and boldly striking forms, such as the Listen-to-Me chaise, tend to have the highest values today, as do pieces produced in very small numbers. Still, the best approach is to examine one category at a time, starting here with case pieces.



Precedent collection dresser, c. 1947

GRADE
C

Wormley's first major commission as a freelance designer was the Precedent collection for Drexel Furniture, done shortly after World War II. Pitched to lower price points than his concurrent work for Dunbar, the Drexel line is entry-level Wormley. Still, the hallmarks exist: an overall handsome visual aspect, graduated drawer configurations thought out for usage, good proportions, and the less common material of silver elm. Nice details include the slightly overhanging top—done to break up potential visual monotony—and brass-plated J-pulls that also curve horizontally. Dunbar complained about this venture, and Wormley did not pursue other outside furniture design commissions, although he continued doing freelance textile and product design.

Approximate price \$2,000

Dunbar credenza with sliding doors, c. 1950

GRADE
B-

This Dunbar credenza design first appeared in 1945, and was produced with a number of variables, including two- and three-door versions. This, the largest size, features banks of drawers flanking a double-long adjustable shelf behind the doors, plus three drawers along the top with dividers for silverware. The construction is rock-solid, typical of Dunbar, with dovetailed interior joints and hardwood drawers, along with Wormley's signature recessed pulls. The plinth base here emphasizes the mass of the piece, while the slightly lighter tone of the walnut door panels offsets the uniform tone of the mahogany case. Still, the overall visual effect is monolithic and somewhat bland—a good team player, but not a standout.

Approximate price: \$5,000-\$5,500





Dunbar woven-front credenza, 1960s

This somewhat later iteration of the Dunbar classic credenza features woven-front door panels—a more expensive option, further enhanced by being done in rosewood. The whole aspect of the credenza is lightened by being on raised legs, and the visual excitement is augmented through the use of contrasting tones of walnut (on the flat surfaces) and mahogany (for edging)—both contrasting with the color, graining, and texture of the woven rosewood. A luxurious detail is the solid brass drawer pulls. This is a good example of Wormley's compositional abilities and Dunbar's craftsmanship.

Approximate price: \$12,000

One of Wormley's most sophisticated designs, this monumental mid-century sideboard features the use of Portuguese marble (on top), Hawaiian tawi wood, mahogany, and brass. A tambour compartment and a single cupboard door complement the three drawers, the whole resting atop an open architectural brass base. The asymmetrical configuration of the facade is visually striking from a distance; from up close, the graining patterns, textures, and double-ring brass pulls add both subtlety and pizzazz. This is a large accent piece that will not overwhelm a room—no small achievement.

Approximate price: \$20,000–\$22,500

GRADE
B+

GRADE
A

GRADE
A



Custom Japanese print-block cabinet, Dunbar models 464 and 465, mid-1960s



Long sideboard, Dunbar model 5465, designed 1954

This mid-1960s design highlights two aspects of Wormley's career: his use of objects picked up on his extensive world travels and his own interior design work. (He did not take on outside furniture design after Drexel, but did run his own interior design firm out of his apartment in New York City.) This two-piece cabinet—a low sideboard surmounted by a shelving unit—was custom made for a Wormley project in Chicago. The facade incorporates antique wooden print blocks he brought back from Japan, set into a mahogany case. The asymmetrical—and very Japanese—configuration has a quiet appeal. Up close, the cabinet literally reads differently, as the print blocks themselves attract attention and scrutiny.

Approximate price: \$13,000–\$17,000

Edward Wormley, Part Two

LARRY WEINBERG LOOKS AT THE DESIGNER'S MASTERFUL CHAIRS

EDWARD WORMLEY HAS BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD—by admirers and detractors alike—as a transitional figure in mid-century design, an adapter rather than a form-giver. The design historian Judith Gura pointed this out in *Edward Wormley: The Other Face of Modernism* (1997), adding that “he represented an alternative direction of modernism, one that sought a new design aesthetic without abandoning the precepts of the past.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in his designs for chairs

and chaises. The plasticity of seating encourages exploration of sculptural form. With all his self-restraint and good taste—manifest in any number of sober, well-tailored chairs—Wormley was still given to flights of palpably modernist sculptural fancy. A staple of the current design market, Wormley's more quotidian chairs continue to fit comfortably into contemporary interiors, while his accent pieces continue to add drama and excitement.



Revolving lounge chair
(model 5606), 1956

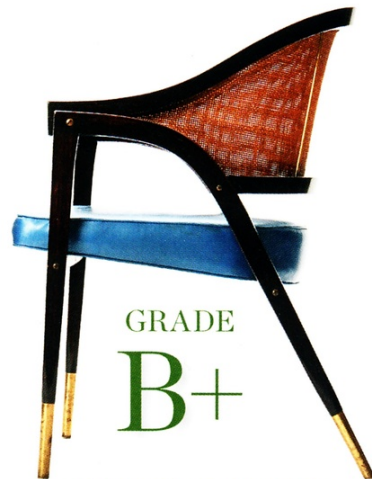
This revolving lounge chair, model number 5606, introduced into the Dunbar line in 1956, speaks to Wormley's notions of comfort and conviviality. Intended for television viewing, it is comfortable—with down-filled loose cushions—for long periods of relaxed sitting, but also slightly scaled down so that it fits more readily into conversational groupings of two to four, where the sitter can swivel into or out of contact. It is a fine example of Wormley's self-effacing approach to design—furniture first, self-expression later—that still shows its pedigree with a circular mahogany base that lightens the mass of the chair and tufting with buttons on the back cushion. It is a useful and handsome chair that blends into the background while showing how high Dunbar set the bar.

PRICE: \$4,000–\$4,500

GRADE
B

Chair number 5480 is one of a series of mid-century Wormley chairs configured like the letter A when viewed from the side, described in the 1955 *Dunbar Book of Contemporary Furniture* catalogue as having a seat “suspended in a laminated wood cradle.” The compositional merit of the design lies in the graceful juxtaposition of curves, the balance of materials and textures, and the overall visual lightness achieved by the suspended seat and the permeable caning. The softly modulated color palette of the wood, caning, and brass was often enlivened with a splash of color on the floating seat, as with the blue leather here. Dunbar details include the hand-machined brass screws that join the frame while serving as a finished decorative element. This chair was a perennial best seller; a later version was issued by Dunbar in 1974.

PRICE: \$3,000–\$3,500



GRADE
B+

Chair number 5480, 1954



The A chair (model 5481), 1954

The next design in sequence, number 5481, christened by Dunbar the “A” chair, is a more austere design but is nonetheless a standout visually. Composed of laminated bent mahogany with brass shoes (or knee-high boots in the case of the front legs) and a floating seat, its elegant silhouette possesses a regal bearing and opulence belying its minimalism. The streamlined use of material places greater emphasis on Dunbar's production techniques and structural engineering—the bending and joining, and the seven-layer hand-rubbed finishes. A distant echo of the ancient Greek klismos form,

GRADE
A

its one-piece back extending into the forward-thrusting front legs make this both a sleek and a chic modern design. Equally clear is that it merits a higher grade than model 5480, reflected in the 1954 sticker price of \$395, compared to \$325 for 5480.

PRICE: \$6,000–\$8,000

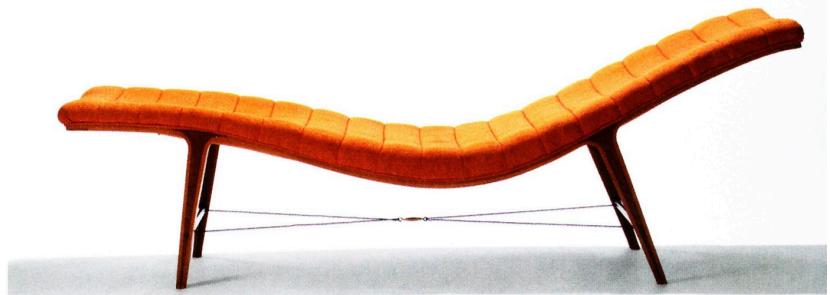
The first thing to note about the famous Listen-to-Me chaise is the year it was designed—1948. At a time when most American furniture companies were shifting gears or gearing up, Wormley pushed the envelope at Dunbar to create a tour-de-force of high end American modernism—a couture counterpart to 1940s Eames and Saarinen production seating. A glance at what George Nelson was doing at the time—his great modern Marshmallow sofa and Kangaroo chair—should put to rest any notion of Wormley as adapter rather than originator.

Possibly Wormley's boldest and most expressive design, the chaise is a riff on a traditional recamier sofa. Wormley pares it down into a gently curvilinear shape, with a frame of laminated maple and cherry and a slender, channeled cushion. Add the guide wires and the result is sculptural in an abstract and forward-looking way. Wormley took traditional elements and propelled them into the space age. A Hockaday ad of the time advances this narrative, picturing the chaise on the moon surrounded by a spaceship and men in spacesuits. Today, this rare chaise is one of the most prized of mid-century American designs.

PRICE: *Approximately \$20,000–\$25,000*

GRADE

A+



Listen-to-Me Chaise, 1948

GRADE

A+



Wing chair (model 4432), 1944

If the Listen-to-Me chaise is not Wormley's most sculptural design, then this extremely rare wing chair might be. Once again, the year of the design is telling, 1944, only months after Wormley returned to work from wartime service. Right off the bat, he challenged Dunbar's production capabilities to create the ultra-sleek and dynamically swooping silhouette, with its upholstered wings, a pierced back, and stripped-down neoclassical legs. Shown in an ephemeral *Dunbar-for-Modern* catalogue in 1944 (as model 4432), the chair pushed into design territory occupied only by Finn Juhl and Carlo Mollino. A slender and elegant swan to the chunky biomorphic ducklings in the 1940s Knoll and Herman Miller collections, this chair anticipates Vladimir Kagan's rakishly curvilinear work by eight or nine years. Pricing the chair is difficult, as the present examples (there are two) are the only ones to appear in the last decade.

PRICE: *\$20,000 and up*