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LIVING WALL



DESIGNED BY  
PAUL McCOBB



## The Real McCobb

Mid-century's Paul McCobb is finally getting the recognition he deserves

Few American furniture designers enjoyed greater commercial success during the mid-century than Paul McCobb. His low-cost Planner Group case goods, tables, and seating from 1950 achieved strong sales, and a decadelong association with the Directional company, alone, made McCobb a household name. Directional's Irwin collection of brass-edged wall units and marble-topped cocktail tables in 1952—and later lines—pushed the company onto an international stage, with ads in shelter magazines and showrooms in New York, Miami, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Editorial recognition and critical acclaim followed. McCobb's work appeared in leading U.S. and Italian magazines and in George Nelson's books *Storage* and *Chairs*. In 1957, ALCOA commissioned a McCobb chair to spearhead a print campaign advertising future uses of aluminum—never produced, the prototype has as much eye appeal as anything from the period. And at least a dozen of his pieces were named Good Design selections by the Museum of Modern Art between 1950 and 1955.

Despite all this, McCobb is today something of an enigma, even among dealers and cognoscenti. Few realize that he was largely an autodidact, working as a window dresser in Boston before reinventing himself as a product designer in New York in the years after World War II. Fewer still can parse the course of his relationship with Directional or delineate the range of his work, which comprises furniture for indoors and out, lighting, dinnerware, pottery, and textiles. And even so-called experts have trouble authoritatively differentiating his originals from imitators. Part of the problem is that he died in 1969, his bridges burned with Directional, and there was no one to champion his legacy thereafter. The situation is poised to change, however, thanks largely to the efforts of Gerard O'Brien, owner of the Reform Gallery in L.A., and Jonathan Goldstein, a collector and historian in New York. Ardent fans of McCobb, they share a passion for his elegant yet Shaker-simple designs, reveling in the details of all things McCobb-ian.

O'Brien, well ahead of the curve, purchased his first McCobb, a Planner Group desk, in the mid-1990's. After that, O'Brien started buying the rare lamps for Northcraft Lighting and the equally elusive wrought-iron furniture for Arbuck, then kept them tucked away for years. He has now amassed over

300 pieces, possibly the largest and most comprehensive private collection of any one designer's output in the U.S. In a way, he pursued McCobb's work *because it was there*, there in the period literature and there in the marketplace, often misattributed and frequently at ludicrously low prices. Scholarly curiosity about an underappreciated talent simultaneously led O'Brien to assemble a reference library of catalogs, magazines, and ephemera—a treasure map for dealers and collectors.

Goldstein discovered McCobb considerably later, in 2008, in the guise of a serving cart at a thrift-shop auction. Although Goldstein's auction bid was unsuccessful, he found himself drawn to the clean and unpretentious aesthetic and the backstory of a self-made man. Studying and collecting steadily ever since, Goldstein figures to become the James Boswell to McCobb's Samuel Johnson, clearing up misconceptions about McCobb's life and work and filling in gaps in the historical record. Goldstein's meticulous research has thus far resulted in a blog that amounts to a primer on McCobb misattributions.

In addition to contacting McCobb's children in New England and scouring the Internet, Goldstein has pored over magazines and books at libraries—of course including O'Brien's. The two experts are also formally collaborating on a catalogue raisonné, which they hope to publish soon. When they do, it will truly be the ➤



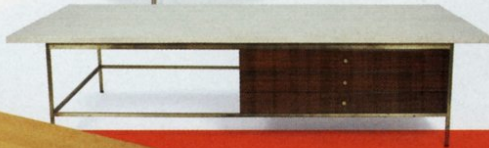
**From top:** Paul McCobb in a 1954 copy of *Today's Woman*. A catalog image, 1958. Fiberglass chairs introduced in 1959 by Directional. The Reform Gallery's booth at the Los Angeles Modernism Show & Sale, featuring a Planner Group table in maple and birch and chairs in bentwood and wrought iron, all circa 1952. Northcraft Lighting's 1951 lamp in iron and glass.

**Opposite:** McCobb prototypes in a 1957 ad for ALCOA.

FROM TOP: TOM YEEZ/JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN (2); COURTESY OF SULTANA AND 1STOIBS; JONATHAN

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**Clockwise from top:** A 1955 leather-covered armchair for B.G. Mesberg National Sales. Part of Directional's Irwin collection, a 1952 cocktail table in travertine, brass, and mahogany. A Directional sofa, 1957, with original leather. Anchoring another vignette at the Reform Gallery's Los Angeles Modernism booth, Planner Group's 1953 table in maple, bamboo, and wrought iron. A Planner Group cabinet in maple, plastic laminate, and wrought iron, 1954.



PLANNER GROUP by

PAUL MCCOBB

McCobb bible, providing the scholarship that helps to authenticate pieces and support prices.

The market, meanwhile, has already begun a reevaluation. Since handling a little McCobb early in my career as a dealer, I've largely been watching from the sidelines, and a glance at 1stdibs, the on-line marketing site that is a bellwether of the business, recently revealed four Web pages of listings. (Among the American modernists, only Edward Wormley has more.) Offerings include such standard McCobb fare as Planner Group modular cabinets, but rarities are surfacing, too, for example an Arbuck room divider and an Excelsior Art Studio table lamp. And prices, while remaining generally reasonable, are beginning to spike. An Irwin Collection cocktail table lists for \$10,500; a Directional faceted sofa in original mustard leather is \$16,000. With L.A., Chicago, and New York dealers such as J.F. Chen, Converso, Dual, Lost City Arts, Modern Living Supplies, and Wyeth actively seeking and selling McCobb's work, the fire is clearly lit.

O'Brien and Goldstein will only fan the flames. The Reform Gallery began selling O'Brien's vast holdings this past spring, with all-McCobb presentations at two L.A. vintage design shows, accompanied by a small catalog for each. Response from both the public and the trade was enthusiastic, and O'Brien plans to replicate the concept next spring at a New York venue. As the buzz and excitement around McCobb continue to increase, the next year or so may be the last opportunity to collect the best pieces before they attain iconic status. —Larry Weinberg



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF J.F. CHEN AND 1STDIBS; COURTESY OF DUAL AND 1STDIBS; COURTESY OF CONVERSO AND 1STDIBS; JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN; COURTESY OF MONTAPELLO STUDIOS AND 1STDIBS