

mid-century mind-set

A show at the Museum of Modern Art gets a dealer and aficionado thinking about his specialty



I began buying, selling, and collecting Good Design in the early 1990's. Back then, there was much mid-century design left to rediscover, and the process of ferreting out unusual and hard-to-find pieces was absorbing and challenging.

When George Nelson claimed in 1949 that the "work in furniture being done today by like-minded people the world over is very, very exciting," he was in a position to know, and he was not exaggerating. The palpable enthusiasm among designers, design critics, and the design-literate public as well as the optimism and buoyancy that characterized the early postwar years are what first drew me to the cutting-edge American work of that era.

The term Good Design refers to a program at New York's Museum of Modern Art, not to a rigidly defined

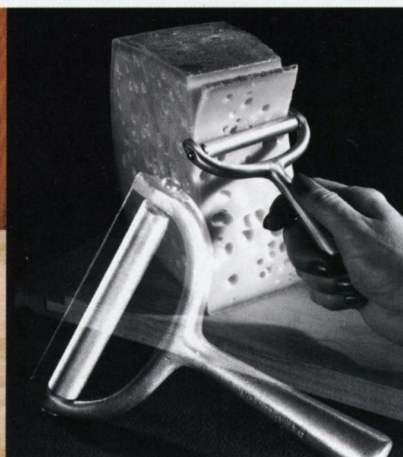
standard of goodness. And MoMA is currently running a retrospective that shines a spotlight on this moment: "What Was Good Design? MoMA's Message 1944-56." Judging by the selections and the accompanying text, that message had much to do with restraint, economy, and efficiency in design. Affordability was a key factor, inherited from MoMA's "Useful Objects Under \$10" shows beginning in 1938, filtered through the privations and exigencies of World War II, and linked directly to MoMA's International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design of 1948. That emphasis also tied in to curators' mandate to educate the public, as low-cost items could wind up in more households.

But the chief criterion was what Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., who ran the Good Design program, called "eye appeal." This represented a reshuffling of the values hierarchy of earlier shows, which had ranked function above

aesthetics, and MoMA was now criticized for overemphasizing appearance and for appearing arbitrary. In 1950, however, modernism was still competing for attention in the marketplace, progressive design was underexposed at all levels, and guidance was needed.

Just as important, following the perceived austerity and sobriety of the war years, MoMA felt the need to show that modernism embraced and conveyed warmth, gaiety, delight, humor, and liveliness. Kaufmann sought to generate excitement about modernism and was keenly interested in nurturing and stimulating imaginative and experimental work, particularly at small, fledgling studios. This was a bias in his selection process, and this was the sort of design I gravitated toward.

Charles and Ray Eames's work in plywood is represented in "What Was Good Design?" by a screen, a



Clockwise from top: Nesting tables, circa 1953, designed anonymously for Yellen in wrought iron, walnut, and webbing. Prototype stacking chairs in fiberboard and plywood, circa 1943, by Henry Glass for W.L. Stensgaard and Associates. One of the objects shown in "What Was Good Design? MoMA's Message 1944-56," the Presto cheese slicer by John Carroll for R.A. Frederick Co. A steel space heater, circa 1955, retailed at the Bertha Schaefer gallery in New York.

Opposite, from top: Pamphlets and brochures dating from 1947 to '55. The second "Good Design" show, which took place in 1951 at New York's Museum of Modern Art.



Clockwise from top: Larry Weinberg on the bench that Allan Gould designed in solid cherrywood and clothesline for Functional Furniture, circa 1954. The oak-plywood knock-down Butterfly table, circa 1941, by Dan Cooper for the Drexel Furniture Co. A 1950's prototype folding sling chair designed by Glass in tubular steel and nylon. Bill Lam's floor lamp, circa 1952, in fiberglass, tubular steel, and birch.

cabinet, and a low table. The Eameses really are the alpha and omega of American mid-century design—certainly where you begin the dialogue and probably where you end it. For me, though, it's their LCW potato-chip chair that opened up avenues of sculptural possibility and comfort just after the war, doing so without reference to the past and with an affordable price. Moving beyond plywood, the show includes the only known prototype of the

Eameses' La Chaise. That chair used to help

get me up at 4:00 AM on market days, just in case a second prototype slipped through the cracks.

While MoMA may have spearheaded Good Design, the movement soon extended far beyond, and I pored over catalogs from a string of exhibitions at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. All these provided insight into the best-practice design of the period as well as useful illustrations. I gleaned more illustrations, along with much-needed curatorial information—measurements, materials, etc.—from publications such as *Furniture Forum*, the *Everyday Art Quarterly*, *Current Design*, and *Modern Furniture for the Home*, sources that proved invaluable in targeting and documenting the desired details.

Over time, my New York apartment and storage unit began to fill up with plywood furniture; chairs and tables that fold up and knock down; modular case goods; and other by-products of a quirky and eccentric period of cultural remodeling. They were, in a way, *pure design*, geared toward low

cost, mobility, and flexibility and created in small studios and anonymous garages. Never luxurious but often elegant, confident, and forward-looking, reflecting supple intelligence and heart, these pieces remain evidence of a process intended to elicit the best in designers and the rest of us.

Like Kaufmann, I have personal favorites from my collection: a Frank Lloyd Wright plywood chair from a Usonian house; interior designer Dan Cooper's plywood Butterfly table, shown twice at MoMA in the 1940's; an unwrapped bolt of fabric, printed with colorful lines, by KnollTextiles director Esther Haraczy, Marcel Breuer's friend; a floor lamp in fiberglass, tubular steel, and birch by Bill Lam, a Hawaiian-born and Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained architect; a Swift and Monell cocktail table with a birch top suspended on leather straps; a Ralph Rapson rocker with the original burnt-orange wool; an upholstered lounge chair by visionary polymath Alvin Lustig; a space-age space heater distributed by the Bertha Schaefer gallery; a string chair by industrial designer Irving Sabo; prototypes for stacking and folding chairs by Cleveland industrial designer Henry Glass; and nesting-table prototypes by Harvard University Graduate School of Design alum Fran Hosken, designed for her own use and later distributed by Raymor.

Part of the collection that I built over the past 15 years with Andy Lin, my former partner in the Lin/Weinberg Gallery, is going on the block at the Rago Arts and Auction Center on October 24, but this does not mean the search is over. I will someday purchase a Donald Knorr chair in its original red-painted sheet metal. (Restrained and economical, yes, but wow!) And I'm still looking for an example of the rope-wrapped tubular-steel chairs and tables by Designers in Production and for the biomorphic chairs and ottomans by Vakassian & Sons. Anybody? —Larry Weinberg



