

REVIVAL

OF THE

The restless design community finds



AT THE LIN/WEINBERG GALLERY ON WOOSTER Street, it was an opening straight out of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*: solemn waiters bearing trays of crostini wrapped with prosciutto, the cool notes of Miles Davis floating above the drone of a hundred conversations, guests spilling out into the street clutching plastic cups of Chardonnay while chauffeured Lincoln Town Cars idled curbside. ■ The only thing that didn't quite fit the picture was the reason for the gathering: an exhibition called "Edward Wormley: The Other Face of Modern-

B Y R E N E C H U N

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOSHUA MCHUGH
FOR NEW YORK

FITTEST

a new hero in the late, great Ed Wormley.



Left & Right Chairs

ism." Arranged in chronological groupings and separated by diaphanous scrims were 80 pieces of furniture, dating from 1932 to 1965. It was all simple, unpretentious stuff—the kind of pieces a couple of boomers might have furnished their first house with. No plywood compound curves floating in space à la Eames. No decorative aluminum tubing à la McArthur. No trilevel biomorphic coffee table à la Gibbings.

No matter. Wormley, the designer perhaps most responsible for bringing modern furniture to the mainstream, proved to be a genuine crowd-pleaser. "This is a rare combination of craftsmanship, good design, and style," gushed Barbara Deisroth, the director of Sotheby's twentieth-century-decorative-arts department. "Even I could live with this stuff." Near Deisroth, a young man wearing Gucci pony-skin loafers was a little more circumspect, whispering to his companion, "Who's Ed Wormley?"

Good question. Even many furniture dealers in town know little about the man who made the Dunbar Furniture Company one of the industry's most prestigious brands. From 1932 until 1967, Wormley was Dunbar's exclusive designer. His name appeared on every Dunbar ad, the editors of shelter magazines and newspapers lionized him, and he received countless awards. Between 1950 and 1955, MOMA featured more than two dozen Wormley pieces in its canon-making "Good Design" exhibitions.

Wormley was always too traditional to be as hip as Saarinen, Bertoaia, and Eames, but he borrowed from the modernists in subtly appealing ways. His furniture is characterized by sober lines, excellent proportions, and unsurpassed workmanship. Signature touches include two-tone veneers, tables inset with



Long John Coffee Table

"Wormley wasn't designing for his peers or other



Occasional Table

Tiffany glass tiles, hairpin legs, upholstered seating bent into free-floating angular frames, and laminated plywood used to wrap legs and frames.

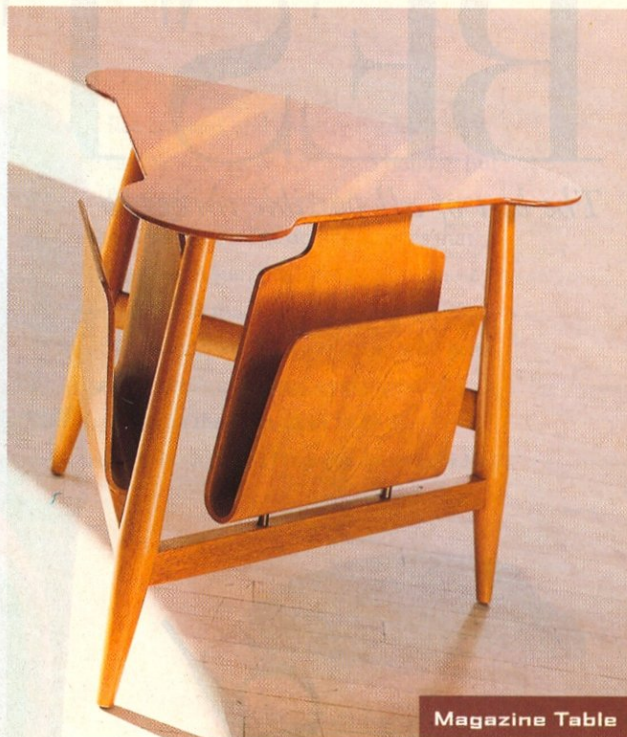
Even today, most custom cabinetry cannot compare with Dunbar's obsessive attention to detail. Sofas and lounge chairs had maple upholstery frames with corner-block joinery, nine-way hand-tied coil springs, and hand-stitched upholstery. Case pieces featured dovetailed corners, solid-brass hardware (produced at Dunbar's own foundry), and three-step hand-rubbed finishes. Even drawer interiors were hardwood—Dunbar used no "secondary woods." If bentwood laminates were involved, Wormley insisted on 21 layers (Aalto might use three to five layers, Eames five to seven).

None of this came cheap. A side chair from the 1956 Dunbar catalogue retailed for \$220. You could pick up a Herman Miller Eames chair that same year for \$58.

The Wormley revival can be traced back to March of last year, when the Braswell Gallery in Norwalk, Connecticut, auctioned off the designer's estate. Wormley had died in 1995, virtually penniless but with a huge design collection. Nearly 1,500 lots, including a great deal of furniture, went on the block. The infusion of new inventory on the market piqued interest and fed demand. In the past year, prices have risen steadily, and 26th Street—flea-market merchants, who once referred to certain pieces as "Dunbar," now refer to them as "Wormley by Dunbar."

Museum curators are following the Wormley trend closely. MOMA has had two Wormley pieces in its permanent collection since the fifties. The curators at the Dallas Museum of Art are hoping to acquire a Listen-to-Me chaise (Wormley's only well-known piece), and the Houston Museum of Fine Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts are all quietly making inquiries.

New York's haute design community, meanwhile, is smitten with the rediscovered Wormley. Designers William Sofield and



Magazine Table

designers. He was designing real furniture for real people."



La Gondola Sofa



Lounge Chair

David Howell have purchased basket-weave sideboards recently, and *House Beautiful* ran a piece on Wormley in its March issue. Need an endorsement? Designer-of-the-moment Thomas O'Brien deems Wormley's work "warm and inviting."

What makes Wormley so hot now? For one thing, his understated designs complement the prevailing minimalist aesthetic. Unlike much of the modern furniture out there, Dunbar pieces never overpower the surrounding architecture.

More important, after working their way through the twentieth-century modernists, New York's furniture cognoscenti have grown bored. And Wormley's output is a collector's fantasy; he created thousands of different designs but never mass-produced them. The average run was 12 to 24 pieces, and he also did a considerable amount of custom work.

Still, not everyone is buying into the Wormley hype. "It's boring and conservative," says furniture dealer Jeff Greenberg. "Wormley's not a true modernist. None of his stuff is worthy of being in a museum." Fellow furniture dealer Mark McDonald concurs: "I've never had anyone ask me for a Wormley piece, and I don't suspect I ever will. My clientele is a bit more sophisticated than that."

But Larry Weinberg of Lin/Weinberg dismisses such criticism outright: "Those are typical design-snob comments," he says. "You have to realize that Wormley wasn't designing for his peers or other designers. He was designing real furniture for real people."

Author Judith Gura is also pro-Wormley—so much so that she is writing a book about the Dunbar designer. "Wormley's great tragedy is that he didn't invent the Eames chair," says Gura. "He didn't devise new forms or experiment with new materials. But Wormley gave an alternative direction to modernism, one that offered a new aesthetic without abandoning the past. Take away Wormley, and America would still be into Chippendale reproductions." ■