

Modern design through the years

The philosophy built on simplicity and economy is still going strong, complementing this age of sustainability.

By David A. Keeps
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What is modern design?

The Industrial Revolution and early 20th century art movements, including cubism and futurism, helped set the stage for decorative arts that rejected the ornamentation of the past in favor of products influenced by rapidly changing technology and aesthetics. Modern design as we know it today dates to the early 1900s, and it continues to be redefined by today's practitioners. Along the way, it has established benchmarks that are widely imitated in contemporary furniture collections.

In Europe, after the end of World War I, design collectives such as De Stijl, the Bauhaus and the International Style advanced the notion of "form follows function," a stripped-down philosophy, which suggested that the best-designed product was one that most successfully and economically served its purpose. In the U.S., Art Deco, Streamline Moderne and Machine Age were exuberant designs -- expressions of the Jazz Age and America's industrial progress.

World War II and its aftermath brought a new challenge: the need to produce large quantities of affordable furnishings for a returning workforce and the growing baby boom. Echoing the principles of the Bauhaus, American designers experimented with plastics and used machines to bend steel and plywood into shapes that were economical, ergonomic and looked unlike any furniture that had come before.

Furniture by midcentury modernists Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, Harry Bertoia and Florence Knoll were truly radical in their time, says Scott Klinker, artist in residence at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. "They were informed by a new kind of 'open plan' interior space and came about as an authentic search for form in response to new materials and technology."

It is these designs, and the skeletal tables and upholstered platform furniture of Italian minimalism that remain reference points for today's modern-for-the-masses marketers.

"Modern hasn't really changed," says retailer CB2 President Marta-Maria Calle. "It's about simple lines, honest materials, new technologies."

Klinker believes it should mean more: "These retailers -- shall we call it shopping mall modern? -- are still too price-driven, using lowest-common-denominator modern style. Truly modern things are progressive and forward thinking in their performance and in how they're made. A cabinet made with sustainable materials and techniques is more modern than one that ends up in a landfill after three years in a college dorm."

The future of modern is very much green-lighted, says Eames Demetrios of the Eames Office.
"Now, more than ever, we are aware that objects in our stores have an entire history that must be addressed. Sustainability will save modern design."

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