

For many years, MoMA mounted a pre-Christmas show that also served as a holiday gift shopping guide. Highlighting the beauty and utility of modestly priced items such as orange juicers, ashtrays, and dog bowls, the shows—all bearing the words “Useful Objects” in their titles—encouraged visitors to bring good design into their homes. The premise of these exhibitions can be traced to an educational exercise devised by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA’s founding director, who had students mount an exhibition of well-designed objects worth a dollar or less.

The first exhibition of this series, *Useful Household Objects under \$5.00*, featured approximately one hundred commercially available items. According to a press release, it confirmed that one could purchase “everyday articles of excellent design at reasonable prices.” The exhibition toured to seven additional venues nationwide, proving so popular that it was staged until 1948 as an annual series continuing through all but two years of World War II. By 1948, the price limit of the show’s objects had increased to \$100, and twelve other US museums had adopted the winning exhibition formula.

MoMA stimulated new works of good design, in part, through open competitions. Its first, Organic Design in Home Furnishings, included a section for Latin American designers. Examples of the winning designs were manufactured for a MoMA exhibition the following year, and were made available on special order at department stores in major US cities. Displayed here are several original entry panels submitted to the Museum's jury, as well as finished textiles and furniture pieces. Partners Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen swept this competition with innovative designs for plywood furniture molded to fit the human body. The Organic Design competition and exhibition helped publicize some of the fundamental tenets of MoMA's design philosophy: as curator Eliot Noyes wrote, organic design was marked by "harmonious organization of the parts within the whole, according to structure, material, and purpose." Noyes added, "Within this definition there can be no vain ornamentation or superfluity." Far from being limited to MoMA programs, however, the notion of organic design gained traction internationally—as seen, for example, in a 1941 exhibition of Japanese household objects held in Tokyo's Takashimaya department store.

The International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design was launched to foster mass-produced furniture suitable for the modern lifestyles of postwar American families. MoMA curators believed that new technology and materials paired with progressive thinking could provide the most inexpensive, comfortable, and adaptable furniture for contemporary homes. While few of the award-winning projects were ever mass-produced, Danish designer Hans Wegner recalled that “the competition got a lot of people going.” As Wegner explained, “We felt as if a window had been opened and we were given a chance to show what we could do.”

Competitions for printed textiles and lighting were particularly important as highly visible public platforms for small businesses, recent design graduates, and the many independent women designers who participated. For curator Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., such competitions were an important part of keeping the general public informed about current designs, emergent talents, and the potential of new materials.

“To me good design is simply art applied to living,” stated Dorothy Shaver, president of the Lord & Taylor Department Store, at the launch of Good Design, a radical five-year collaboration between MoMA and the Chicago Merchandise Mart in 1950. On the basis of “eye appeal, function, construction, and price,” furniture, textiles, appliances, and other domestic products were chosen annually for installations in both cities. The program’s director, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., felt that museums had “the responsibility of guiding the consumer toward those qualities which make an object beloved for generations.”

A MoMA Good Design Kit provided participating retail outlets throughout the US with sample store layouts, advertising, and logo labels to promote sales of designs shown in the exhibitions. MoMA’s Good Design program was covered widely in popular media, forging unprecedented connections between designers, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. Yet the program was not without its critics, some of whom expressed discomfort with the blend of commerce and culture, or picked out certain items as elitist, inartistic, or impractical.

Good Design Is International

As a movement extending well beyond MoMA, good design gained an international foothold in the 1940s and 1950s. During those decades, the term cropped up in numerous catalogues, ads, magazines, and government reports, at the same time that people worldwide came to see industrial design as a profession. In the aftermath of World War II, nations scrambling to kick-start industrial production and rebuild export markets supported the launch of international exhibitions, design magazines, and awards, all of which emphasized new materials, technological innovation, and informed consumer choice.

Governments on both sides of the Cold War divide, meanwhile, woke up to the seductive power of contemporary design as a political tool. Responding to requests from officials at home and abroad, MoMA curators embraced the ideological value of well-designed objects as emissaries of the openness and freedom of Western democracy. In this respect the Museum played an important role in promoting American industrial design internationally, initially under the auspices of the Marshall Plan, which distributed US aid to European and Asian economies devastated by the war.