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Scandinavian Influences in Furniture Design in Australia, 1930-1975

by SIMON JACKSON

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ARCHITECTURE AND ARTS—AUGUST, 1954

1. Advertisement. 'Another Famous Contemporary Name at Guest's.' 1954

In the history of industrial design in Australia, early British influence gave way to American influence in the late nineteenth century. This transition was clear by WWII as America became the dominant design voice in Australia's war effort. In the peacetime of 1948 the new American-inspired Holden motorcar showed this influence on the streets with its large body and prominent chrome grille. In peoples' houses, however, a new source of influence was emerging. Scandinavian and Finnish craft and industrial design practice offered an alternative to the dominant British and American hegemonies of taste and this was especially evident in furniture.

This article charts three areas. Firstly, the furniture design situation in Australia prior to Scandinavian influence. Secondly, the emergence of Scandinavia as a world design "centre". While some Australian designers were able to travel to experience Scandinavian design first-hand, for many others this influence was spread in Australia largely by British and Scandinavian design critics in books and magazines such as *The Studio*. Also influential was a series of exhibitions of Scandinavian design objects that travelled to many Australian cities and towns. Finally, the resulting Australian-Scandinavian furniture hybrids are discussed.

Influences from other countries, notably Germany (in helping shape Australian design education), Italy (arriving with the post-WWII immigrants) and Japan (which was to become Australia's largest trading partner after Britain joined the EEC) are not considered, and await discussion in other forums.

Important early Moments in Australian Modern Furniture Design prior to Scandinavian Influence

The year 1936 seems to have been important in Australia's industrial development. The search for an aeroplane on which to base Australia's war effort oc-

curred in this year as did Government support for the development of an Australian-made automotive engine. 1936 also saw the publication of an early overview of tendencies in local furniture design. A nine-page review entitled "Australian Furniture" appeared in the important local journal *Art in Australia* exploring the choices offered to the consumer - either antique reproduction or modern. In the former camp, the article reproduced illustrations of furniture styled in "the French 'provincial' manner" or "Queen Anne style" veneered in English walnut. These reproduction pieces were manufactured by companies such as Stuart-Low Furniture Studios of Sydney or by Captain F.E. de Groot (figs.2-3).

Despite these, modern works dominated the article. The local designer Frederick Ward's furniture was given prominence. A modern austerity and simplicity are evident in Ward's square-legged chairs with their plain fabric seats. The modernist credo of "truth to materials" is evident in Ward's often "unfinished" or raw timbers - paint is not used to disguise the timber (figs.4-5). The 1936 article suggested reasons why modern Australian furniture was being designed, manufactured and eagerly bought by the public:

The outlook with regard to furniture has changed considerably during the last few years. Until comparatively recently, in the houses of people of discrimination and taste one naturally expected to find either 'antiques' imported from abroad or costly reproductions. Persons of only moderate incomes have to be contented with Victorian cedar and mahogany, bargains picked up at dealers...To-day the position is quite different, and the number of people starting off to furnish their homes who engage upon a search for the 'antique' is extremely small. Three main factors are responsible for this altered attitude: firstly, the development of built-in furniture,



2. Queen Anne bureau bookcase veneered in English walnut. Made by Stuart-Low Furniture Studios, Sydney



3. Queen Anne reproduction sideboard with block front panels, veneered in figured Queensland walnut. Made by F.E. de

which is definitely part of the architectural scheme; secondly, a desire for comfort and efficiency; and thirdly, a growing enthusiasm for 'modernity'.¹

The article also considered the furniture designed by local architects. It argued that furniture in Australia in the early 1930s began to be designed in sympathy with architecture:

The furniture is made for the house, or the room, often designed in collaboration with the architect, in the same way as the mantelpiece or staircase. The best contemporary furniture is therefore marked by the same characteristics as contemporary architecture, sound planning and 'workability', simplicity of form, and interest obtained by the use of fine materials rather than applied pattern or ornament.² (my italics)

This recognition of the importance of the architect is undoubtedly correct, as furniture design was taught at this time in Australia only within architectural courses. By contrast, industrial design was not to be taught as a separate discipline in tertiary institutions for another decade.³ Several architects had work shown in the same article. The architectural team Mewton and Grounds had an example (fig.6); while the Ricketts and Thorp company manufactured furniture designed by the architects Fowell, McConnel and Mansfield (fig.7), and also by Samuel Lipson. Edward Billson's furniture designs for the Branchflower company were also featured. The illustrations in the article reveal the furniture by these different designers to be similar in their economy of form, lack of ornament and in their geometric simplicity. The dominant international influence upon these progressive designers was a generalised version of Art Deco.

Furniture designed by architects to compliment specific architectural spaces seemed to be a desirable new goal. The article drew upon the words of English architect Wells Coates who had earlier written: "Very soon it will be considered quite as fantastic to move accompanied by wardrobes, tables and beds, as it would seem today to remove the bath or heating system."⁴

Writing some twenty years later in 1952, the important local architect and design critic Robin Boyd reflected on this leading role played by architects in the 1930s in Australia. He claimed: "'Built-in' was the new



4. Chest of drawers in figured messmate wax polished, and bed in silky oak. Designed by Frederick Ward of Myer Emporium Ltd., Melbourne



5. Easy chair and table in waxed Tasmanian blackwood with lamp in waxed red gum. The upholstery is in Michael O'Connell linen. Designed by Frederick Ward of Myer Emporium Ltd., Melbourne

catch-phrase of 1933."The result was that previously free-standing pieces of furniture became unified. The bath was no longer free-standing on cast iron clawed feet but was now to be set against a wall and bricked up, or was sunken into the floor. The wash basin was no longer visually supported in free air on a pedestal or by its own plumbing, but was now to be embedded in a cupboard. Wardrobes became built into niches provided in the walls of new modernist homes - no longer would many be free standing. According to Boyd, who was deferring to Le Corbusier's famous words:

Architects dreamed of the kitchen as a machine for cooking in, with every piece of equipment a standard height, depth and colour, arranged in gleaming, continuous rows. To this end they had the cupboards made in precise bands...By 1939 the dresser was losing popularity and after World War II it had all but disappeared. The furniture manufacturers who made the kitchen settings had by this time accepted the built-in approach and were making modular unit cupboards that could be screwed into the wall in a continuous run.⁵

This tendency in modern architecture was to continue. Advertisements in "home" journals in the 1930s show the emerging house designs with flexible plans that were to become prevalent after WWII, where the kitchen replaced the dining room for informal meals,

and also became an area for receiving guests. Gone was the "front" or "best" or "sitting" room. According to the retired builder Robert O'Donnell, active in the domestic building arena in Melbourne during the 1960s and 1970s, the builder and cabinet-maker also began to play a greater role in the manufacture of furniture. "Built-in" breakfast nooks constructed by the builder began to replace separate tables and chairs. American Formica adhesive veneering and the later Australian Laminex version gave the consumer a hygienic, easy-to-clean surface, and gave the builder a quick laminate for covering basic timber bench tops and table tops.⁶



6. Furniture in a dining-room off a Melbourne living-room, carried out in fiddleback grained Mountain Ash with a waxed finish. Mewton and Grounds, Architects



7. Writing desk veneered in English birch with a recessed base of Queensland walnut polished to a natural finish. The chair is upholstered in cream leather. Designed by Fowell, McConnell and Mansfield, Architects. Made by Ricketts and Thorp Ltd.



Clearly, new ideas were being eagerly explored in Australia prior to WWII.

Australian Appreciation of the World's Best

While many historians have argued a pervasive Australian design "timidity", it should be noted that there are several examples of Australian furniture designers engaging in original design work and also looking towards the best international designs as models. For example, the Hungarian designer Marcel Breuer's cantilever chair design, first manufactured in 1928 in Germany, was quickly adopted by Australians.⁷ Boyd, in *Australia's Home*, wrote of the chair's design virtues and popularity in Australia: "The simplicity of its continuous tube, the excitement of its unsupported rear and the glitter of its chromium plate symbolised the new mood. One such chair without back legs was to appear in every modern interior of the next five years."⁸ According to the historian Peter Cuffley, these "German" chairs were being manufactured in Australia by A. G. Healing Limited from 1931.⁹ There is no doubt these gleaming chrome chairs were perceived to be desirable objects for private and public use. Not long afterwards a notable cafe and milk bar in Melbourne, The Milky Way, caused a minor sensation by providing them for their patrons (fig.8).

The historian Peter McNeil has noted the role played by private collections in popularising new international design styles in Australia. He claimed the wife of the Norwegian Consul to Sydney had a Bellevue Hill residence filled with European furniture:

Marcel Breuer steel chairs and table, a J. Dudok birch chair, Aalto-like bentwood chairs, Thonet side-tables, *Wienerwerkstätte* tea-service, Swedish glass and dressing table of steel and black rubber, all brought with her from Europe before 1933. Her furniture was illustrated in *The Home* and lent to the 1933 exhibition of modern furnishing and fabrics arranged by Raymond McGrath for David Jones.¹⁰

Many Australian consumers clearly *did* welcome modernity. The Australian media gave much space

8. Café and Milk Bar, Little Collins St., Melbourne. Designed by Mewton and Grounds, Architects

to the arrival of a new imported chair (especially if it was expensive or flamboyant) and examples from international designers appeared constantly at local home shows and trade fairs. Admittedly these imports from the "centre" industrial design cultures of Britain, America, Scandinavia and Europe often found their way to Australia a few years later. For example, the selection of industrial design products from the "Britain Can Make It" exhibition was shown at the Sydney Royal Easter Show in much reduced numbers two years after its original London launch. This arguably reflects more upon the various international manufacturers' reluctance to market to a small and already British-dominated market than on the reluctance of Australian consumers to embrace modernity. In fact, such was the vitality of pre-WWII Australian furniture design that the local architect Neil Clerehan recently claimed modern design in Australia pre-dated modern architecture. He reflected that Australian architectural expression had been thwarted by the post-Korean war depression and when architects finally realised their visions in the mid-1950s, appropriate modern furnishings for the house were already available, including: "Featherston chairs, cork-tiled floors, Francis Burke prints [fabrics]..."¹¹ At this time one could also find adventurous chairs by the local designers Douglas Snelling, Clement Meadmore and Gordon Andrews.

Perhaps the reason for local furniture design's progressive nature is that it was initially craft-based and was therefore inexpensive to manufacture in small volumes. Craft-based chairs, such as Fred Ward's simple wooden ones, were much cheaper to manufacture than a car or radio or any other plastic design object that required expensive engineering and tooling, and generally, multi-national investment and consequent control. Ward's designs of the 1930s were objects born of one designer's vision. Again, they were much easier to produce than was a house where building costs, council restrictions, availability of materials and the tastes of the client all had the potential to hinder experimentation.

Three major international influences contributed to shaping the practice of Australian furniture design between 1930 and 1975. The historian Grace Cochrane has noted:

In furniture design, the most important new influences in the fifties were Organic Modernism from the United States, with its use of synthetic materials; 1950s Contemporary Style from Britain; and Scan-

dinavian, which used natural timbers and included the use of both bold printed motifs and textured fabrics in natural materials and muted colours.¹²

Of these, the historian Roger Butler recently stressed the importance of Scandinavian design as the largest source of influence on Australian art and design from the 1950s onwards.¹³ In fact, this paper argues this influence began some two decades earlier.

Scandinavia emerges as a new Design "Centre" for Australians

If the development of the first largely Australian car was largely played out after WWII between British and American influences, this article argues the most important external influence upon Australian furniture design was that of Scandinavia (and, to a lesser extent, Finland). Like all foreign influences, however, it came through a British filter.

Geographically "marginal" and less developed industrially than the major European powers of Britain, Germany, Italy and France, the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, together with Finland, nonetheless must be regarded as design "centres" between the 1930s and 1970s. (Of these, the most influential was Sweden and it was common to refer to "Swedish modern" when one actually meant 'Scandinavian'. Finland is technically not Scandinavian.) It appears the Scandinavians themselves were somewhat bemused by this new-found position of influence. Writing in a special series of essays devoted to Scandinavian design in the British journal *The Studio* in 1953, Arne Remlov considered Scandinavia's importance in international design circles¹⁴ and attributed much of it to the unique role played by Scandinavia's professional industrial design associations. Remlov gave the example of the Norwegian association that, unusually at this time, involved the broader public to participate with the design community, encouraging this with "free admission to exhibitions, lectures and other functions..."¹⁵ The involvement of industrial designers in Scandinavian manufacturing industries clearly helped provide well-designed objects at affordable prices, and the design education provided to the public seemed to elevate the popular taste.

Australia follows the British Admiration of Scandinavia. 1930s onwards

Many British publications dating from the 1930s to the mid-1950s praised the qualities of Scandinavian and Finnish crafts and consumer products. Some of these were written by British commentators while a surprisingly large amount were written by Scandinavians. These books and journal articles were the central design voice in Australia at the time and so were important in the spread of Scandinavian values in this country.

For example, the leading British furniture designer Gordon Russell's book *Furniture* acknowledged in depth the leading role played by Scandinavian industrial design in the immediate post-WWII international design world.¹⁶ Works included Artek's bent plywood furniture designed by the Finnish architect and industrial designer Alvar Aalto, furniture by Nordiska Kompaniet of Stockholm and Arthur Hald of Stockholm and the designs of Børge Mogensen of Copenhagen. Russell used the following words repeatedly to describe the industrial design of Scandinavia: "graceful", "elegance", "quality". He wrote:

During this inter-war period the standard of the Scandinavian countries, Holland and Czechoslovakia became more widely known and much excellent furniture was made. Especially was this the case in Sweden, where the Exhibition of 1930 in Stockholm was informed by the modern style and acquainted the public with it on a considerable scale for the first time. In this movement for showing better design the Swedish Co-operative Society has taken a conspicuous part, and so has the Nordiska Kompaniet, the biggest department store in Stockholm. They have thus shown a grasp of their social responsibilities which might be emulated elsewhere, with equally happy results.¹⁷

The British writer David Joel's *The Adventure of British Furniture 1851-1951* highlighted the furniture design of Scandinavia and Finland. Examples of furniture by designers Eero Saarinen, Finn Juhl and Hans Wegner were pictured.¹⁸ The British writers Anthony Bertram, Herbert Read and the British-based Nicholas Pevsner were all, at some stage in their writings, enthusiastic about Scandinavian design and again these views were absorbed by Australian designers.¹⁹

The identification of British design with Scandinavian design lasted from the 1930s until perhaps the middle of the 1950s and has been acknowledged by recent historians. For example Frederique Huygen has noted "British designers have always been quite unequivocal in their reactions to foreign streams. Except for Scandinavian design, which did appeal to them, they all got the cold shoulder."²⁰ At this time in Australia's young history she generally followed Britain's lead.

Case Study: Scandinavian writers on Scandinavian Design in *The Studio* 1931-1953

As with much Australian culture, Scandinavian design in this country was appreciated "through a British filter". The British journal *The Studio* was such a filter. It published a series of six articles, written by Scandinavians between 1931 and 1953²¹, and so helped propagate an appreciation of Scandinavian craft and industrial design in many countries including Australia. The importance of *The Studio* in Australia cannot be doubted. Sydney Ure Smith, one of the great Australian arts publishers, regarded *The Studio* highly. According to historian Nancy Underhill, Ure Smith wanted to emulate the success of this journal and its publishing house. To some extent he achieved this goal with his similar publication *The Home*. Underhill claimed both magazines were similar in their aims.²²

Other Australian historians have acknowledged the importance of the British journal in Australian cultural life. The historian Robert Holden declared that *The Studio* "inaugurated a new modern era in design and illustration."²³ Similarly, Grace Cochrane noted "... contemporary Scandinavian and European industrial wares were published in the journal *Studio*, which was available in Australia."²⁴ The views of this important British magazine on Australian design, therefore, must be considered significant.

An article published in *The Studio* in 1931 offered an overview of Swedish architecture and industrial design and through this, a survey of the national character. At a time when Gropius' functionalism and, on the other hand, reproduction antique styles marked the poles of taste in 1930s Britain, Sweden seemed to offer a middle course. Influenced by its crafts tradition, economic prosperity and emphasis on physical comfort, Sweden's design sensibility was deemed "an unobtrusive tastefulness".²⁵ Fifteen years later, in a 1946 issue of

The Studio, the centenary of the Swedish Society of Arts and Crafts was celebrated. Formed originally in 1845 this body was one of the world's first. An exhibition was staged called *Hundred years...and then* at which Swedish industrial designers considered the immediate post-WWII problems of supplying affordable goods "in order to obtain a good combination of industrial design and social welfare...The exhibition presented various ideas, goods, everyday ware, and utility furniture at reasonable prices, and the public was advised how to furnish an apartment in the most practical and sensible way with good taste and good quality even for those with a small income".²⁶ In 1952 *The Studio* made another attempt to explain the Swedish national design identity to a British and international readership. The writer declared that the consumer goods of Scandinavian countries were shaped by "the Scandinavian way of life" that included long winters indoors and led to an emphasis on refined crafts-based home-wares.²⁷

The noted architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen wrote an overview of Danish industrial arts in *The Studio* in 1949 appropriately entitled "Industrial". If the Swedes chose to emphasise the legacy of their rich crafts tradition on their domestic product design²⁸, the Danes tended to emphasise their engagement with mass production.²⁹ The final Scandinavian country reviewed in *The Studio* series was Norway, whose various consumer goods were deemed "applied art". Norway's crafts production included modern furniture, silver and enamel work, hand-woven textiles, pottery and art glass.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Australia's admiration of the industrial design of Scandinavia largely flowed from Britain. British publications, of which *The Studio* was but one example, espoused the ideals of Scandinavian crafts and design and were often written by important Scandinavian designers and commentators. These publications were widely available throughout Australia.

Australian admiration of Scandinavian industrial design – travels and trade fairs

A survey of popular Australian magazines of the 1940s and 1960s reveals many advertisements for travel to Scandinavia by SAS (fig.9). Examples of Scandinavian design had come to Australia and were generating

critical approval - the Swedish Legation building, Canberra, won the Sulman Award for public buildings in 1935³⁰, while in 1957 the competition for the design of the Sydney Opera House was won by the Danish architect Jørn Utzon. These two high-profile commissions surely inspired local architects and designers to travel to see work first-hand. Scandinavia and Finland appeared attractive destinations. By contrast American visas were hard to obtain and other European countries had been ravaged by the war.

The Scandinavian travels of the Melbourne architect D. A. Norman suggest these countries offered Australian designers a rich experience. In 1950 Norman visited Scandinavia and, on his return, wrote an article for *The Australian Home Beautiful*. In this article, he declared himself pleased to see so much contemporary furniture in ordinary Scandinavian homes (in stark contrast to what he termed the "vulgar veneers favoured by many of our furniture makers"). While



9. Advertisement. "Scandinavian Modern is Imagination in Glass..."

conceding the Scandinavians were at an advantage to have so much suitable wood, Norman realised “their competence in design is obviously due to something more than the quality of the materials used.” The mass-produced furniture of Scandinavia particularly impressed him. “A similar investigation here would be extremely interesting. Our insistence on cumbersome suites and oversized armchairs is quite incompatible with the minimum areas dictated by the economics of present day housing.”³¹ Instead, Australian magazines of the time were filled with advertisements of such “cumbersome suites” suggesting these indicated the general level of Australian taste – overstuffed lounge suites covered with chintz fabrics.

Another Australian traveller to Sweden at this time was the industrial designer, German-born Fritz Löwenstein (who was to change his name to Fred Lowen and later formed the Fler furniture company). He came back enthusiastic about the potential for developing a range of Swedish-inspired blonde wooden furniture for Australians.³²

Nor was blonde wooden furniture the only attraction of Scandinavia. A certain racist sentiment may be observed in the Australian celebration of Scandinavian people. For example, the Australian holiday guide *Off on Holidays* reported in the mid-1960s that the northern countries were an ideal holiday destination: “If you go north there is Scandinavia. Denmark, Sweden and Norway are becoming big holiday centres. Cities are open, clean and gay and the people are blonde and attractive. Life is free and easy in Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Oslo...”³³ But for those Australians who could not visit Scandinavia, Scandinavia came to Australia in an important series of exhibitions.

Case study: Scandinavian and Finnish Exhibitions at Australian State Art Galleries 1962-1976

Between the years 1962 and 1976 a remarkable series of exhibitions of Scandinavian design objects visited Australia. The Swedish Government worked with Australian State Art Galleries to enable four exhibitions to tour the country: *Design for Living* (1962), *Design in Scandinavia* (1968), *Architecture in Finland* (1973), *Adventures in Swedish Glass* (1976). These shows and the accompanying publications helped propagate the Scandinavian style in Australia.

Design for Living 1962

The Design for Living exhibition was a survey of international consumer goods amongst which Scandinavian consumer goods were prominent. Held in 1962, the exhibition had an educational focus and was mounted jointly by the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), The Council of Adult Education and the Education Department of Victoria. The exhibition toured all Australian State Art Galleries. According to the NGV director Eric Westbrook “The aim of this exhibition has been to show articles that incorporate the principles of good design. All of them have been designed for domestic use.”³⁴ Eighty consumer products from twelve countries were displayed of which twenty-five were from Scandinavia or Finland.³⁵

It is arguable that these exhibits of Scandinavian crafts and products of industry inspired in some commentators a response *against industrialism*. It is, for example, surprising to note Colin Barrie, director of the Industrial Design Council of Australia, expressing a crafts-based design sensibility as he wrote about the beauty and integrity of simple objects made by ancient civilisations:

This arose from the all-embracing nature of the process of production. The craftsman was the designer; he was also the master of his materials, for he prepared the raw materials of his trade and knew intimately the characteristics of those materials. He knew what he could achieve with the tools he used to turn the materials he handled into useful and beautiful objects. It is not surprising that such a unified production process resulted in goods of a satisfying wholeness, in a unity of visual and functional elements.³⁶

The unified production process admired by Barrie, and which he evidently saw in the Scandinavian craft objects on display, is not a part of modern industrial design practice where a division of labour occurs between industrial designer and manufacturer. Scandinavian craft-based design objects such as hand-made timber chairs offered an alternative to the mass-production of other countries. Finnish stoneware pottery by the Arabia company was particularly noted for this individuality and passion: “[the bowls] have the joy in creation and a violent urge towards artistic expression.”³⁷

Finland’s connections with nature were referred to in the catalogue essay.

Finnish designs have a rugged individuality and honesty that match the country and its people. When Tapio Wirkkala, a sensitive artist in glass, ceramics, plywood and metal, was asked to name his country’s greatest designer, he replied simply, ‘Nature’.³⁸

This favouring of craft (and not of mass-production) seemed to be how Australians chose to view the Scandinavian contribution. The words “Scandinavian” and “Swedish Modern” seemed to be used by local critics as synonymous with “warmth”, “craft” and “humanity.” Coupled with the opinions expressed by Barrie, a growing interest in a crafts-based design sensibility seemed to be taking hold in some quarters in Australian industrial design circles.³⁹ Several commentators gave this exhibition of utilitarian domestic design objects high praise. Alan Warren, first head of industrial design at Melbourne Technical College and also the *Sun* newspaper art critic, wrote of the benefits such exhibitions of design could play in awakening the public to design in everyday life: “If an art gallery aims to dispel the idea that art is not confined to pictures on a wall it starts to play a vital part in the community.”⁴⁰

Design in Scandinavia 1968-9

Six years later the exhibition Design in Scandinavia was staged. Between February 1968 and January 1969 it travelled all over Australia visiting the Western Australian Art Gallery, the David Jones’ Art Gallery in Adelaide, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The ‘Introduction’ to the exhibition catalogue written by the painter, graphic designer and Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Hal Missingham, explained the intentions of the show:

The decision to exhibit industrial design at the Australian State Galleries was some time ago decided in the interests of educating taste in the community in all its widest manifestations. We feel quite sure that this exhibition of the best products of arts, crafts, and industrial design of the Scandinavian countries will not only demonstrate their undoubted creative

abilities but will materially *help our own country to progress in these fields*.⁴¹ (my italics)

National identity was a strong theme in the exhibition. The catalogue essay forged a strong link between national identity and industrial design.⁴² It further stressed the importance of the Scandinavian crafts tradition to Scandinavian industrial design.⁴³ Finally, it also gave a brief overview of Scandinavian design’s influence on international design:

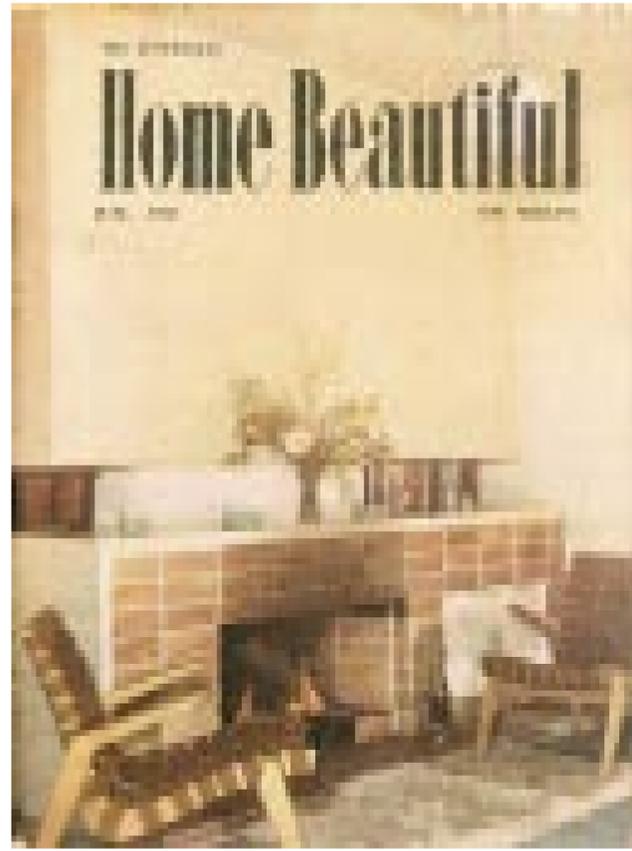
By the 1930s, Swedish Modern was a world design centre. After WWII, Danish Design, especially in wood, came to exert a world influence. By the middle and end of the 1950’s, Finnish glass and ceramics attracted world attention. In the early 1960s, Norway was seen to be a new, dominant furniture centre.⁴⁴

Many of the Scandinavian companies with objects in the Design in Scandinavia exhibition had agents in Australia and were therefore available for sale to the public through retail outlets.⁴⁵

A review of the *Design in Scandinavia* exhibition by critic Patrick McCaughey emphasised several themes: Scandinavian naturalness; Scandinavia’s role as an arbiter of taste; Scandinavia’s quality beyond functionalism; its human comfort and “humanness”; the legacy of its crafts tradition; its lack of engagement with mere “fashion”. The Scandinavian position as world arbiters of taste was noted by McCaughey:

...Scandinavian design provides us with our most powerful image of the good life. Sitting at your natural wood table in your streamlined chair, buttering your bread with your handle-less Jacobsen knife, sipping your beer from a Boda glass and knocking the ash of your cigarette into an Orrefors ash tray would indeed make a hair-raising display of good taste. Just how securely the Scandinavians have become the arbiters and makers of domestic taste can be seen from the large exhibition, *Design in Scandinavia*, at the National Gallery of Victoria. What’s so interesting is the discovery that while much of it is good, little of it is surprising, indicating the success of the Scandinavian infiltration.⁴⁶

The relationship between the human body and the Scandinavian design object was also enthusiastically



10. Cover. *The Australian Home Beautiful*. June 1950.

praised by McCaughey.⁴⁷ But he claimed the strengths of Scandinavian industrial design went beyond mere functionalism - there was a "naturalness" of the materials and forms that he found appealing.⁴⁸ As with other writers, he held the Scandinavian crafts tradition responsible for much of the various products' appeal:

The Scandinavian designer's capacity to harness technology without becoming chillingly clinical represents one of their major coups. It points to the long and honourable craft tradition from which their post-war designers spring. Sometimes, as in the Norwegian pottery, a sense of sturdy peasant craft continues quite openly without being archly folksy.⁴⁹

The ceramics of Norway on display demonstrated these values well. At a time when the American industrial design industry in particular was being accused

by the design-moralists in Britain of "styling obsolescence", the ceramics on display and Scandinavian industrial design in general, was considered by Patrick McCaughey to be "direct" and "honest".⁵⁰ The exhibitions Architecture in Finland (1973) and Adventures in Swedish Glass (1976), while of less relevance to this paper on furniture, were also influential for Australian designers.

It is important to note that these exhibitions had a lasting legacy. As well as exposing Australian consumers and designers to what was perceived to be the best in international design objects, at around this time several Scandinavian design objects were acquired for the permanent collections of many Australian art galleries. For example, around 1968 the following Scandinavian chairs were purchased for the NGV: Hans Wegner's Round chair, the Ax chair designed by Peter Hvidt and Orla Mølgaard-Nielsen, Eero Saarinen's Tulip chair and Arne Jacobsen's Swan Armchair.⁵¹

Australian-Scandinavian Furniture Hybrids

The publications about Scandinavian design by Scandinavian and British commentators and the travelling Scandinavian exhibitions clearly had a lasting influence upon the local design community. They offered an alternative to the British and American design hegemony of taste that had thus far largely characterised Australian design practice. Post-WWII developments in Australian furniture design and manufacturing could well be described as a mixture of international influences and local responses. The various British, American and Scandinavian examples of furniture exhibited at Australian Trade Fairs and gallery exhibitions after WWII helped create notions of other national identities in designed objects. Australian-designed and manufactured furniture often borrowed these identities according to which market segment it was appealing to.

Australian Perceptions of British and American Furniture

The image of British furniture that emerges from most of the promotional materials (publications, advertisements and exhibitions) explored during this article's

chronology is largely one of English "heritage" and "formality". These works found favour with one local market segment. One of the only modern British styles to influence local designers was the "Contemporary Style". By contrast, American design was perceived by Australians as being "modern". Chrome tubular steel furniture, while it had its origins in the works of the Dutch designer Mart Stam, the Hungarian Marcel Breuer and the Weimar Bauhaus, was promoted by Australian companies as "American". For example, the local Australian company Chevron's work was so advertised. These works found favour with another group of buyers. Scandinavian design was perceived by Australian designers and consumers quite differently.

Scandinavian 'Naturalness' as a Model for Australian Furniture

It is worth noting that the majority of Australian craft-people and designers did not aspire to emulate the Scandinavians in their expertise with stainless steel and glass but instead admired their use of textiles, timbers, and ceramics. Notable amongst Scandinavian contributions to international furniture design was the use of "exposed seat webbing". Canvas webbing has long been a part of chair construction, but was traditionally hidden underneath decorative coverings. The Scandinavians were the first to make a feature of this "skeleton". The first chair to reach the consumer in this raw "webbed" state was probably Alvar Aalto's Armchair 406 of 1933. This technique was later taken up by Bruno Mathsson, who combined it with experiments in laminating and bending wood.⁵² Mathsson's furniture was described in an overview of Swedish crafts and design in *The Studio* as: "experimental and newer. It has the lightness, elegance and simplified construction that is characteristic of Swedish furniture to-day."⁵³ Australian versions of this technique appeared on the local market designed by the Melbourne-based designer Grant Featherston from 1947 onwards⁵⁴ and the Sydney designer Douglas Snelling from about the same time.

The Australian notion of Scandinavian values appeared in the work of many other local designers. For instance, at the Made in Australia Exhibition held in Melbourne in 1952 a Scandinavian sensibility could be detected in the furniture of Fler and the textiles

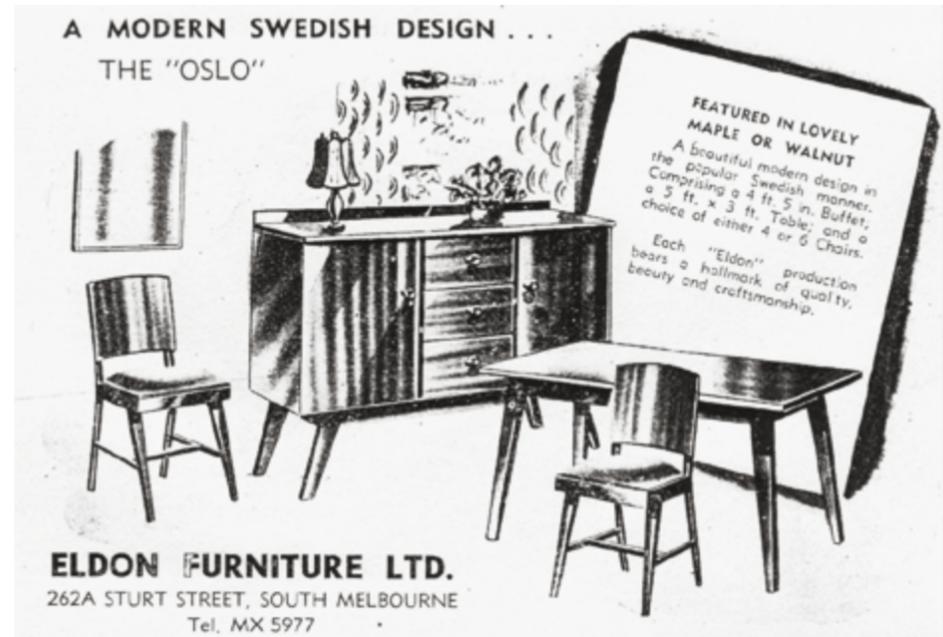
of Frances Burke. The use of language in the Official Souvenir of the Exhibition suggests an adventurous, direct and practical display:

The Fler Co. Stand 4. This exhibit depicts a modern room furnished with *Swedish type* furniture manufactured in natural coloured timbers with a special waxed finish which takes very little upkeep...In conjunction with the Fler Co., Frances Burke has designed the cushions, Hangings, Wall Coverings, etc. Handturned table woodware comprising Cruet Sets, Salad Bowls, Plates...⁵⁵ (my italics)

The Fler company was formed by German immigrant Fred Lowen and Austrian Ernest Rodeck in 1946. Three years later they were manufacturing a Swedish-style dining chair that had been designed by Australia's first modernist in furniture, Fred Ward. About this chair Lowen said "They are typically Swedish...They represent the entire Swedish way of living - plain lines, no unnecessary ornaments, light natural woods. The Swedes are simple in their ways of living."⁵⁶ The Fler chair was enthusiastically reviewed by Isobel Kennedy in *The Australian Home Beautiful* who noted the pale golden-hued Pacific maple timber as "a happy change from the inevitably dark, highly-polished, heavy wood which we have been brought up to believe in as 'correct'."⁵⁷ In other words, from the reproduction antique British furniture traditions that had so long dominated the Australian furniture market.



11. Advertisement. Fler. *Modern Home Exhibition*. 1949.



12. Advertisement. 'A Modern Swedish Design...The 'Oslo'. Eldon Furniture.'

After Fler, Lowen formed the company Twen (later known as Tessa – and to have its own furniture range called “Stockholm”) that also used soft forms and natural materials. Other local furniture manufacturers in the 1950s through to the 1970s also favoured a Scandinavian design sensibility – Parker, Danish De Luxe, Eldon and Malmø Chairs. Even the plastic chairs from Scandinavia inspired local versions. For example, the organic plant-like form of Featherston’s Stem chair of 1969 is clearly indebted to Finnish designer Eero Saarinen’s Tulip chair of 1956.

Scandinavian choices of timbers filtered through to many international design cultures, including Australia’s. The “knotty” grain and “blonde” coloration of the timber many Australian industrial designers and architects saw in magazines was considered “very Swedish” and very desirable. The climate in Australia was not sufficiently cold to grow the sort of birches or pine grown in Scandinavia (Australia grew *Radiata* pine only), and so it was imported from Sweden. It was known in Australia as “Baltic” pine and several timber merchants became suppliers. For example, in the 1950s in Melbourne the Alstergren brothers, originally from Norway, became importers of Swedish timber.⁵⁸ The Australian company Malmø Chairs often used blonde timbers in its interpretation of Swedish design values.

If blonde timber was synonymous with Sweden then dark timber was perceived as representing Denmark. The local manufacturer Danish De Luxe, for example, used local dark-coloured hardwoods in their homage to Denmark. Their expensive Denmark chair crafted from Australian blackwood was a local copy of a chair originally designed in 1949 by the Danish master Hans Wegner.

It is, of course, also apparent that the names of these Australian companies are equally revealing of the sources of their inspiration.

By 1975, Scandinavia and Finland’s role as a design “centre” for Australian designers seemed fulfilled. The Sydney Opera House had been completed and the Swedish furniture company IKEA had opened its first Australian branch (in Gordon, New South Wales) further awakening the public’s awareness of Scandinavian design. In addition to events such as these, numerous articles had appeared in international and local publications proclaiming the merits of the Scandinavian design traditions. Typical of them was the following that appeared in the February 1970 issue of the popular local magazine *Australian Home Beautiful*. Entitled “Top of the Chair Pops”, the article celebrated the Danish furniture industry as the “world’s design leader”, and Arne Jacobsen’s “Ant” as the world’s most numerous chair.⁵⁹

Between 1930 and 1975, the industrial design practice of Scandinavia and Finland offered Australians a range of design values different than those offered by the previous dominant influences, Britain and America. Where British design was often perceived by Australians to mean “heritage” and American to mean “modern”, Scandinavian design was perceived to mean “naturalness” and have an emphasis on the crafts that resonated with local designers and consumers. The resulting furniture that emerged from the Australian workshops of Fler, Tessa, Parker, Eldon, Danish De Luxe, Malmø Chairs and others was inspired by the best from abroad, adapted to suit local materials and needs. During the period covered by this paper – the “best” meant Scandinavian.

The names of many Australian furniture companies and the chairs they manufactured (Danish De Luxe, Malmø Chairs, Stockholm, Denmark and others) were also revealing of the Australian love of Scandinavia. Today in Australia these interpretations of Scandinavian design values are highly sought after by collectors.

NOTES

1. “Australian Furniture” *Art in Australia*, November 16 (1936), 80.
2. *Ibid.*, 80.
3. The Melbourne Technical College, now Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, introduced a Diploma Course in Industrial Design in 1946.
4. “Australian Furniture”, *op. cit.*, 80.
5. Robin Boyd, *Australia’s Home*. Melbourne, 1972. 108.
6. Conversation, Robert O’Donnell, 10 November 1997.
7. For a survey of the use of bent tubular steel in international chair design, see Simon Jackson, *The Seated Image*, exhibition curators Dennis Bryans and Simon Jackson, Prahran, Vic.: The National School of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, 1995. [n. p.]
8. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 98.
9. Peter Cuffley, *Australian Houses of the Forties & Fifties*. Melbourne, 1993, 174.
10. Peter McNeil, “Decorating the Home: Australian Interior Decoration Between the Wars.” *Art and Australia* 33, no. 2, Summer (1995), 31.
11. Neil Clerehan, “Preface”, Lane, *Featherston Chairs*. Melbourne, 1988, 7.

12. Grace Cochrane, “A Different Way of Life: The Emergence of the Crafts Movement”, *The Australian Dream: Design and the Home of the 1950s*. Judith O’Callaghan ed., Sydney, 1993, 145.
13. Roger Butler, “Introduction”, *The Europeans: Émigré Artists in Australia 1930-1960*. Roger Butler ed., Canberra, 1997, 9.
14. “It appears more has happened in the applied art of Scandinavia than anywhere else in the western world during the last fifteen to twenty years, and we have often wondered why! We have often tried to discover the reason why Scandinavian design has acquired such a remarkable position of leadership – if the reader will forgive the apparent smugness of this remark. Have our relatively small communities fostered greater talents in the sphere of modern design, or are our training facilities possibly ahead of the bulk of those situated outside Scandinavia? My own conclusion is that the latter is the explanation, as well as the fact that in Norway, as in the other Nordic countries, a great number of designers have been trained who have created a sense of critical awareness among the general public. Another factor which undoubtedly makes itself felt is the wide-spread propaganda which the National Society of Norwegian Arts and Crafts and Industrial Design has created during the thirty-five years of its existence. This society is somewhat different from its British counterpart...” Arne Remlov, “The Art of Norway: Contemporary Applied Art.” *The Studio* 145, no. 727, October (1953), 125.
15. “As far as furniture is concerned we may say that to-day the bulk of our many high-grade factories make use of the services of expert designers who command good fees. Furniture of good modern design and quality workmanship is therefore well within the range of even the lowest income groups. Any foreigner who has an opportunity to visit the home of the Norwegian worker will undoubtedly be surprised at the high level of design and taste shown, and the same applies to Sweden and Denmark.” *Ibid.*
16. No. 3 of “The Things We See” series on the design issues in post-WWII Britain and published jointly by the Council of Industrial Design and Penguin, this series was perhaps a model for Australia’s Longmans ‘Arts in Australia’ series. The British series was published in the late 1940s and included the following titles: *Indoors and Out, Houses, Furniture, Pottery and Glass, Public Transport, Ships*. The Australian Longmans’ series was published over a decade later and by 1963 included the following titles: *Aboriginal Art, Architecture, Commercial Art, Contemporary Drawing, Design, Early Colonial Architecture, New Painting 1952-1962, Painting, Sculpture, The New Architecture*.
17. Gordon Russell, *Furniture*. West Drayton, Middlesex, 1947, 34.
18. The year of the book’s publication, 1951, was the great moment for British industrial design with the *Festival Of Britain* and the public awareness of the “Festival” or “Contemporary” style of furniture. This style is demonstrated by Ernst Race’s *Antelope Chair* – a chair which surely owes a debt to the “splayed” “spiky” legs of Danish examples. See David Joel, *The Adventure of British Furniture 1851 - 1951*. London, 1953, 250.
19. These British writers have been acknowledged as influences by the Australian designers and educators with whom I have had conversations.
20. Frederique Huygen, *British Design: Image and Identity*. London, 1989. 119.

21. "The Swedish Exhibition of Industrial Arts and Crafts." *The Studio* 101, no. 457, April (1931); Helmuth Duve, "The Modern Home As Sweden Sees It." *The Studio* 101, no. 457, April (1931); Åke Huldt, "The Art of Sweden: Craftsmanship and Design." *The Studio* 144, no. 712, July (1952); Steen Eiler Rasmussen, "The Art of Denmark: Industrial." *The Studio* 138, no. 680, November (1949); Arne Remlov, "The Art of Norway: Contemporary Applied Art.", *The Studio* 145, no. 727, October (1953); Arna Skold, "The Swedish Society of Arts and Crafts." *The Studio*, 131, no. 638, May (1946).
22. Nancy Underhill, *Making Australian Art 1916-49: Sydney Ure Smith, Patron and Publisher*. Melbourne, 1991. 133, 183.
23. Robert Holden, *Cover Up: the Art of Magazine Covers in Australia*. Rydalmere, N.S.W, 1995, 18.
24. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, 145.
25. Duve, *op. cit.*, 288.
26. Skold, *op. cit.*, 150-151.
27. "One of the main reasons for the strong position of our handicrafts is the care and thought that throughout the ages we have devoted to our homes. The climate alone has caused us to make far more use of our homes than is usual in more southerly latitudes. Distances between dwellings have often been great, their surroundings poor, barren and cold. Hospitality, which we like to count among our national virtues, has been a necessity, for without it the traveller would have perished. It has also given rise to one of our weaknesses, our desire to make our homes as fine as possible, sometimes at the cost of comfort. Our homes have always been the centres of our existence..." , Huldt, *op. cit.*, 24.
28. The Swedish car industry (which began in 1927 with Volvo and 1947 with Saab) and the country's aeronautical industry have had little influence on Australian designers working in these two fields. Car design, for example, was dominated by the American giants Ford and General Motors who established their own local manufacturing arms. The Scandinavian influence on Australian design was limited to domestic consumer design, notably crafts-based furniture design.
29. Rasmussen, *op. cit.*, 156-158.
30. Boyd, *op. cit.*, 1960. 31.
31. D. A. Norman, "Scandinavia Sets High Design Standards." *The Australian Home Beautiful* 29, no. 8, August (1950), 6-17.
32. Isobel Kennedy, "Simple but Suave." *The Australian Home Beautiful*, June 1 (1949). 37.
33. "European Holiday: Grand Tour...or on a Shoestring!" *Off. The Australian Holiday Guide Annual 1964/65*, no. 1 (1964). 205.
34. Eric Westbrook, "Introduction", *Design for Living*, Council of Adult Education and Education Department of Victoria Melbourne, 1962, 2.
35. Of the 80 exhibits the following countries were represented thus: Denmark provided 15 examples of consumer goods: glassware, vessels made from a new plastic "Melamine", simple crafted wooden ornaments, salad servers and nut crackers made from teak. "Significant" words used in the exhibition catalogue (which seem to sum up British and Australian views on the Danish national sensibility) include: "well proportioned", "a pleasure to use." West Germany had the second largest number of exhibits. 11 examples of stainless steel, porcelain and 'Polyamide'

- goods were on display. 10 English goods were on display, many of which were gardening equipment and simple and practical kitchen utensils. Australia was well represented, but its 9 exhibits were limited to one material - glass - and were mostly functional drinking vessels. Finland's 5 exhibits, by contrast were more varied including stoneware vessels, stainless steel cutlery and art glass. Sweden provided 4 examples of art glass which were declared "pleasant to use", while Japan exhibited 4 craft-based examples of ceramics and cast iron. America was represented by 4 stainless steel vessels and a Corning glass casserole made out of an advanced material, "Pyroceram". Italy was represented by 2 examples of art glass, while Switzerland, Norway, and Austria had only 1 design object on display. *Ibid.*, *passim*.
36. Colin Barrie, "The Need for Good Design." *Ibid.*, 3.
37. *Ibid.*, 7.
38. *Ibid.*, 12.
39. The establishment of the Meat Market Crafts Centre in Melbourne in the 1970s and many other crafts (not industrial design) centres is testimony to this revival of interest in the crafts.
40. Alan Warren, "Design for Living", *The Sun: Magazine Pictorial*, March 3 (1962). 22.
41. Hal Missingham, "Introduction", *Design in Scandinavia*, Stockholm, 1968, 5.
42. "Show me the possessions, and I will show you the man'. This variation of an old saying is sometimes quoted in Scandinavia when discussing the furnishing of private homes or public environments. One could also extend this to read: "Show me the products, and I will show you the country." *Ibid.*, 8.
43. "Thanks to the comparatively late arrival of the industrial revolution in Scandinavia, it was possible, with the assistance of the societies, to transfer a handicrafts tradition that was essentially alive to the industries producing goods for use in the home. The famous Danish master carpenters, who carry on the skill in the art of making furniture, have literally incorporated their knowledge in the furniture industry...In Norway and Sweden one can show how the art of glass-making has developed continuously right up to the present-day glass firms..." *Ibid.*, 8.
44. *Ibid.*, 10.
45. In Melbourne the following agents supplied Scandinavian goods to retailers and the general public: Danish Design Agency, Dudley St., agents for a wide variety of furniture from Norway; Forum Pty. Ltd., Southern Cross Hotel, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Stevenson, Davies Pty. Ltd., Clayton agents for a wide variety of furniture from Sweden. In Sydney there appear to have been several more agents handling Scandinavian consumer goods: Artes Studios, George St., agents for a wide variety of furniture from Denmark and Norway; Danfield Pty. Ltd., Crows Nest, agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Finnish Importing Co., Northbridge, agents for a wide variety of furniture from Denmark, Finland and Norway; Harland L. Hogan & Son, George St., agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Incorporated Agencies Pty Ltd, Kent St., agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Sweden and Finland; Messrs. James L. Hudson Pty Ltd, Clarence St., agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark; Peter Marich & Co., Pty. Ltd., agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Norway; Unik Import, Double Bay, agents for a wide variety

- of ceramics from Denmark; Vasa Agencies, Pty. Ltd., Wentworth Ave., agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Denmark. In Perth, Messrs. Ahern Pty. Ltd. were agents for a wide variety of furniture from Denmark. In Brisbane, Messrs. Lee, Monteath & Biggs Pty. Ltd., Charlotte St., were agents for a wide variety of ceramics from Norway. *Ibid.*, *passim*.
46. Patrick McCaughey, "Scandinavian Naturalness", *The Age*, October 12 (1968). Saturday Pages Supplement. 10.
47. "Simberg-Ehstrom's chaise-longue may have a stainless steel frame and base but its swooping curve proclaims a sensuous love of human comfort. The humanness of Scandinavian design reaches its high point in Yrjö Kukkapuro's chair whose back is as smooth and as svelte as Catherine Deneuve's if rather broader in the beam. [...] In other instances, such as the first-rate Ittala glass with its incised bases, the designers have retained the naturalness associated with craft work; as easy on the eye as to the hand and lip." *Ibid.*, 10.
48. "...Even the worst Woolworth's glasses perform their function adequately enough as receptacles to drink from. What distinguishes the Scandinavian product is the pure pleasure the humblest knife and fork or the simplest salt and pepper shaker can give the user. Although the majority of exhibits are the results of a sophisticated technology, they exude a totally non-technological feeling. Whereas a Bauhaus chair tells you firmly and proudly of its production line history, the Scandinavian furniture on view

- suggests a human naturalness." *Ibid.*, 10.
49. *Ibid.*, 10.
50. "Along with the naturalness of Scandinavian design goes its unspoken valuing of the direct and the honest. Such virtues refute mere chic. Elegance is too feeble a word for the simplicity of, say, the small Jensen bowl. In an exhibition as large as this, it is easy to miss these perfect, smaller pieces. Yet the Jensen sugar bowl could serve as a paradigm for much of the exhibition. It teaches us to see the gulf between the simple and the plain. Style in the Jensen bowl, as in so much of the exhibition, is part of the making process. You never feel a 'stylist' has come along afterwards." *Ibid.*, 10.
51. Lane. *One Hundred Modern Chairs* Melbourne, 1974. [n. p.]
52. Jackson, *op. cit.*, [n.p.]
53. Huldt, *op. cit.*, 28.
54. Lane, *op. cit.*, 1988, 16.
55. *Made in Australia Exhibition.*, *op. cit.*, 25.
56. Fred Lowen quoted in Kennedy, *op. cit.*, 37.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Conversation, Robert O'Donnell, 10 November 1997.
59. "Top of the Chair Pops", *Australian Home Beautiful*, February (1970), 49.