

Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design

By DJ Huppatz

Curated by Kirsty Grant, the National Gallery of Victoria's *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design* (May-October 2014), focused on Australian furniture design and production from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s. More than simply a presentation of iconic furniture, the exhibition captured a significant era in Australian design, one that included the professionalization of industrial design, the beginning of design-led manufacturing, and a shift in consumer taste towards modernism. Accessible and colourful, Mid-Century Modern's nostalgic or retro appeal (depending on the viewer's generation) gave it an approachability sometimes lacking in decorative arts exhibitions. It also reinforced the reputations of designers such as Douglas Snelling, Fred Lowen, Clement Meadmore, Grant Featherston, Frances Burke and Michael Hirst, addressed the role of local furniture manufacturing, and highlighted design modernism's promotion in department stores, magazines and exhibitions.

Mid-Century Modern began with Sydney designer Douglas Snelling's "Snelling Line" chairs comprising frames of local timber upholstered with synthetic webbing derived from wartime industries. World War 2, argued Grant, had a two-fold effect on Australian design: manufacturing and material restrictions during and immediately after the war generated an innovative design culture, while new methods and materials developed during the war created new possibilities. Along with Melbourne designer Fred Ward's DIY Patterncraft furniture, launched in 1947, and Grant Featherston's experiments with moulded plywood, the post-war generation of Australian designers represented a new, entrepreneurial design culture. With prototypes and small batch productions of simple, functional, light chairs upholstered in modern colours, the exhibition captured the excitement of this generation, particularly the possibilities suggested by new technologies and the optimism surrounding post-war life. However, in the catalogue, Grant also noted the difficulty that existed for designers in the late 1940s and 1950s, "whose aim of mass production was often thwarted by the limitations of technology and methods of manufacturing, as well as the relatively small scale of the Australian market." (catalogue p. 22). Although the scale was relatively small, local furniture design received considerable support from department stores such as Anthony Hordens' in Sydney and Myer Emporium in Melbourne, and from magazines such as *Australian Home Beautiful*, while the designers themselves were acutely aware of modern advertising and promotional methods.

The exhibition's strongest section was the 1950s, and the survey of Meadmore's simple cord chairs, lighting fixtures, tables and other furniture reinforced his reputation as an innovative designer. Featherston's iconic Contour series of moulded plywood chairs and lounges were presented in vignettes and alongside promotional material, a strategy that helped convey the emerging culture of domestic relaxation and comfort. But in the catalogue, Denise Whitehouse argued that Featherston's design thinking went further than singular chairs. Available in a variety of types, covered in different fabrics and colours, Featherston chairs combined with tables, desks and other units, "formed the core of a cohesive aesthetic for the contemporary interior" (p.48). This systems approach was later taken further by Featherston into holistic corporate fit-outs, "a functionalist design system for contract interiors that, applicable to everything from boardroom tables to lighting and storage systems, was exemplified by his Modular Office Units (1956-58) that shaped the hierarchical language of the modern office, from typing pools to executive suites" (p.48-49). Unfortunately, this systems aspect of Featherston's practice did not feature in the exhibition.

Mid-Century Modern made clear connections between modernist furniture and architecture, not only in domestic homes but also in commercial and institutional contexts such as Melbourne's first

glass and steel skyscraper, ICI House, which featured Featherston-designed furniture. Modernist designers' participation in international expositions, particularly Boyd and Featherston's collaboration for Expo 67 in Montreal, were also represented. The post-war period also coincided with shifts in formal design education, and the formation of professional associations such as Melbourne's Society of Designers for Industry, founded in 1948. The professionalization of local design included also awards and exhibitions, exemplified by the 1949 "Modern Home Exhibition" in Melbourne and the House of Tomorrow, designed by Robin Boyd, with furniture by Grant Featherston and textiles by Frances Burke. The partial recreation of the 1955 Age Dream Home in the exhibition was a highlight. As well as the professionalization of industrial design, "Mid-Century Modern" also captures the professionalization of interior design, with the inclusion of Marion Hall Best, a cameo by Margaret Lord, as well Grant Featherston (who founded Featherston Contract Interiors in the mid-1950s) and Meadmore's [interior commissions](#).

However, *Mid-Century Modern* also highlighted the limitations of gallery exhibitions of modern design: the presentation of furniture as sculptural objects, exemplified by the catalogue's images of furniture floating in white voids, and the fragmentary information that might help viewers distinguish mass produced furniture from small batch production from singular prototypes. Featherston's 1963 chair Delma, was a case in point. One of the most successful chairs ever manufactured in Australia (Artistoc Industries made 250 000 of them), Delma is perhaps so ubiquitous that it sits uncomfortably in a gallery founded on unique or rare objects. An interesting juxtaposition – an unresolved tension perhaps – was between such mass produced chairs and Schulim Krimper's unique, hand-crafted timber furniture.

While *Mid-Century Modern* registered the impact of European (particularly Scandinavian) and American design, it did not reproduce an image of an insecure, imitative or marginal design culture. Instead, it presented the work of a dynamic and confident (though small) group of modernist designers responding to global forces in a local context. The exhibition's end point, the early 1970s, seemingly saw the decline of Australian furniture design, although the reasons for this might be best addressed in a follow-up exhibition. Although consciously selective, focusing only on Sydney and Melbourne (with more weight and depth devoted to Melbourne), *Mid-Century Modern* might provide a foundation for further exhibitions on Australian design. Finally, it is worth noting that I wrote this review while seated in a Featherston-designed "Mitzi" chair in the University of Melbourne's Ballieu Library. The Mitzi, a lightly upholstered simple steel chair designed in 1957, is still serving its purpose over half a century later.



Grant Featherston (designer)
Emerson Bros Pty Ltd, Melbourne (manufacturer)
B220H Curl-up Contour chair (1953)
hardwood, plywood, cotton, (other materials)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Grant and Mary Featherston, 1973

Grant Featherston (designer)
Unknown (manufacturer)
Television BS211H Contour settee (1953)
hardwood, plywood, cotton, (other materials)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Grant and Mary Featherston, 1973

Grant Featherston (designer)
Emerson Bros Pty Ltd, Melbourne (manufacturer)
Television B210H Contour chair (1953)
hardwood, plywood, cotton, (other materials)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Grant and Mary Featherston, 1973



Douglas Snelling (designer)
Functional Products Pty Ltd, Sydney (manufacturer)
Snelling Line armchair (1946)
Australian hardwood, cotton, metal
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Grant, Kirsty, ed., *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design*, NGV, Melbourne, 2014.

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