As a pioneer of interior design Margaret Lord’s story is archetypical of the young Australians who, inspired by the idea of modern design in the 1930s, went on to lead the development of design as a profession in the post World War II years. Lord’s story began with a young country girl arriving in Melbourne from the provincial town of Warrnambool to study art at Swinburne in the early to mid 1930s where her education in design included furniture and packaging. Lord recalled that while she did not know of any practising interior designers she decided to take it up as a career path because it seemed different and glamorous. Perhaps she got this idea from the articles in Australian Home Beautiful and The Home magazine that were promoting the international trend for modern homes and interiors. She also may have been influenced by the modern architecture that was beginning to appear through the city and the glamour of the modernist art scene emerging around Sam Ayteo, Sidney Nolan and Cynthia Reed’s shop in Little Collins Street.

[1]
Lord set off to London in 1936 where she joined other hopeful Australians studying at the Central School of Art before securing a junior position at Reens Arta, a fashionable interior decorating firm serving London’s elite. There she learnt the intricacies of interior decorating, as it was then known, through hands on experience. She also learnt that the glamour associated with this new profession was underpinned by the tedium of detailed planning and the tactful management of clients’ needs for the newness of modernism balanced by tradition. Taking every opportunity to travel and study furniture and interiors, Lord began to formulate a set of theoretical principles for the design of modern interiors that she used to inform her teaching as Director of Studies at the prestigious Arnold School of Interior Decoration. [2]

Lord returned to Sydney with the onset of the war together with many of her London expatriate friends, including the graphic designers Alistair Morrison and Dahl and Geoffrey Collings and artists Carl Plate, William Dobell and Russell Drysdale. Ambitious, stylish and socially well connected, Lord was sought after by the media as a professional expert who could offer instructive and practical advice on how to modernise the Australian home and workplace. [3] As a participant of the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Design in Everyday Things series, Lord joined leading architects and designers in nurturing the morale of the country by promoting the ideal of good design and modern manufacture as a means for improving the quality of the Australian way of life. [4] Through her articles for Australian Home Beautiful she was able to promote interior design in a systematic and theoretical manner and inject it with intellectual credibility that challenged architecture’s marginalisation of it as women’s work. [5] Her excellent communication and education skills attracted the attention of the Royal Australian Army’s Education Section, which commissioned her to develop a correspondence course for its women service members. The course was overwhelmingly successful with both women and men and this led to its publication in 1944 as Interior Decoration; A Guide to Furnishing the Australian Home: the first Australian monograph on interior design. [6]

With the end of the war Lord returned to design work with her expertise in lighting, colour and furnishings being highly sought after by commercial companies and institutions as they concentrated on rebuilding their physical infrastructures and businesses. Working on projects for Berger Paints, Shell Petroleum, Sydney University, Johnston and Johnston, Wrigley’s, Kirribilli House, Sydney, Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital, the Royal Women’s Hospital, and Melbourne’s Australia Club, she was instrumental in establishing the role of the interior design consultant. [7] Her work as a consultant for Berger saw the establishment of Australia’s first colour advisory service and the introduction of the planned use of colour (for safety and information as well as aesthetics) within industrial, institutional and commercial environments. The professionalism and astute business management that Lord brought to this work for industry earned her support within the architectural field with the firm Fowell, Mansfield and Maclurcan involving her in post war refurbishment projects that included the refitting of the
Union Steamship Company’s S.S. Monowai, Manoora and Kanimbla as luxury passenger ships for the Australian and South Pacific regions. These experiences led to Lord’s design of the colour schemes for the Overlander train and the interiors for the new fad for “flying boats”. [8]

With the return to civilian life stimulating a refurbishment and building boom and with this a demand for professional interior designers, Lord joined with Marion Hall Best, Mary White, Don Johnston, Edmund Dykes, Don Shaw and Stuart Low in establishing the Society of Interior Designers in 1950. A driving force within the profession she worked tirelessly throughout the 1950s to raise the standard of design within Australia, lobbying furniture and fabric manufacturers and companies to improve the quality of their products through the use of modernist design ideals and the employment of qualified designers. [9] Although a lecturer in interior design at Sydney University’s architecture department, she nevertheless recalled that her biggest struggle was convincing architects that the best interiors are the result of collaboration between an architect and decorator who are sympathetic and respectful of each other’s contribution. Lord retired from professional practice in the early 1960s when she and her husband Vincent Wardell moved permanently into the country where she became an avid conservationist. [10] In 1969 she published her autobiography, A Decorator’s World; Living with Art and International Design, the success of which was a reflection of rising status of professional designers in Australia due to the pioneering work of Lord and her contemporaries. Lord died in 1972 after a debilitating stroke.

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Reference List

2 Lord, A Decorator’s World, pp.28-46.
3 Lord, A Decorator’s World, pp. 95-108.
6 Lord, A Decorator’s World, p.104-108.
8 Lord, A Decorator’s World, pp.109-129.
9 Lord, A Decorator’s World, pp.109-129.