

Furniture from the Design Collection: Thonet, Guimard, Wright, and Rietveld, an exhibition of 21 works by four master designers, is on view in the second floor Goodwin Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art from Feb. 7 through Apr. 6, 1975. The exhibition, directed and installed by Emilio Ambasz, Curator of Design, presents several works which are not often placed on public view and photographs of some of the works in their original settings, offering the public a chance to enjoy further aspects of the Museum's design holdings. Because the Goodwin Galleries, which house the most significant objects of the Design Collection, can only accommodate a selection of approximately 250 of the Museum's Collection of more than 3,000 craft and industrially produced objects, temporary exhibitions of works from the Collection such as the present one are mounted periodically.

The furniture of Michael Thonet (1796-1871) was one of the great success stories of early industrialization. Thonet originally began working with bundles of veneer strips which were saturated with glue and exposed to heat in wooden molds. This technique was later improved by bending solid rods of beechwood. The revolutionary process permitted division of labor and mass production, and led straight to the serial production of the 20th century. "But Thonet's products went beyond obeying the laws of mass production," says Emilio Ambasz in his wall label to the exhibition. "The elegance of Thonet's unique concept, the spatial grace and structural dignity of its many applications, served as a potent stimulus to the great designers of modern furniture in the 1920s, who worked in the Bauhaus in Germany, or were attracted to its pioneering ideas." Works by Thonet on view include a side chair of 1835, the famous "Vienna" cafe chair of 1876, and two versions of his rockers, one of which reclines with an adjustable back.

Hector Guimard (1876-1942) was one of the most successful practitioners of Art Nouveau, to such an extent that in France the style also became known as the "style Guimard." Guimard's work was animated by his desire "to create forms inspired by the spirit of Nature's creative flow." For Guimard, Art Nouveau's line was

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naturalistic and botanical in inspiration; curved, slender, undulating, and asymmetrical. Like his contemporaries, Guimard almost invariably designed every interior and exterior aspect of a house, from the cutlery to the gargoyles. His naturalistic approach reached its highest expression in his ornamental creations and furniture design. It is particularly evident in the large "free form" desk for his own use included in the exhibition, with its elaborate structural frame and its parts joined as branches flowing into each other; and in his designs for the Paris subway entrances, an example of which is on view in the Museum's Sculpture Garden. Other works by Guimard included in the exhibition are a three-legged side table, a settee, an umbrella stand and a cast iron fireplace, as well as photographs of Guimard's own house in Paris, which give an indication of the kind of setting in which the furniture was intended to be seen and used.

For Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959), "the hierarchy of decision-making for the furniture's design has always been subordinated to the overall compositional method," writes Mr. Ambasz. Furniture was first and last a formal micro-model of the architecture housing it. This is true even of his earliest works, the furniture he designed for his famous Prairie Houses, such as the Chicago Robie House and the Martin House in Buffalo. In the furniture for these houses, Wright separated the volume of the traditional chair into its constituent planes, just as the planes composing the volumes of the houses are separated so that their volume is often not apparent. This can be seen in Wright's side chair of 1904. The furniture he designed for his two most famous office buildings, the Larkin Soap Co. Administration Building and the Johnson Wax Administration Building also give evidence of the same formal approach. The four narrow straight columns supporting the Larkin office chair, 1904, may be seen as surrogates for that building's towers and its columnar structure, and the metal desks and chairs designed for the Johnson Wax Building, 1938, echo the formal motif of its mushroom-like columns topped with floating

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circular disks.

Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) was a member of de Stijl, an organized movement in Holland from 1917 to 1928 which attempted to codify an aesthetic method which was both rational and universal. Its basic forms were circles and rectangles, its colors were the primaries, and its compositional method was asymmetrical balance. Influenced by Wright's chair of 1904, Rietveld, in his Red-Blue chair of 1917, separated the volume of the traditional chair into its supporting and supported parts, painting the structure black and the back and the seat red and blue to emphasize their distinct characteristics. Each plane maintains its formal identity, and space is allowed to flow through them. Rietveld's Zig-Zag chair of 1934 is also an attempt to create a system of planes suspended in space, but here there is an attempt to create a continuous surface made of a single material. Also on view are Rietveld's stool of 1929 and photographs of the Schröder House, designed by Rietveld in 1924 with the collaboration of Mrs. T. Schröder. Says Emilio Ambasz, "Even today, the formal theories advanced by de Stijl continue in subtle ways to pervade the aesthetic sensibility of a number of contemporary architects and designers. Rietveld's own achievement is to have turned de Stijl's aesthetic credo into works of art."

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 Additional information available from Michael Boodro, Assistant, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7504; 7501.  
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