

50th Anniversary



MARCEL BREUER DESIGN RETROSPECTIVE TO OPEN AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

MARCEL BREUER: FURNITURE AND INTERIORS, a retrospective in recognition of the range, scope and impact of that architect's interior designs and furniture, will open at The Museum of Modern Art on July 25, 1981. The exhibition will be the third in the Museum's series on important 20th century designers, the first two of which were devoted to the work of Charles Eames and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Co-directed by J. Stewart Johnson, Curator of Design at the Museum, and Christopher Wilk, Guest Curator, the exhibition will remain on view through September 15, 1981 in the East and Northeast Galleries.

While Breuer's architecture has already received much of the attention it so richly deserves, his furniture and interior designs have yet to be given a comprehensive exhibition of their own. By the age of 28, Marcel Breuer had created a body of work that would remain one of the most significant in 20th century design. His furniture, especially his work in tubular steel, was innovative and influential. Through his natural sense of design and his thorough knowledge of materials, Breuer was able to create furniture and interiors that rose above the level of decoration or function. Half a century after their conception, his works remain as modern and contemporary, as vital and relevant, as any designed in the present day.

Born in Pécs, Hungary in 1902, Breuer graduated from the local gymnasium in 1920 and attended the Vienna Academy for a very brief period before finding his way to the Bauhaus in Weimar. The most widely recognized symbol of "modernism," the Bauhaus was formed by Walter Gropius shortly

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after World War I as a trade school offering instruction in art and the crafts. From 1920 to 1924, Breuer studied the principles of construction. As a student in the Bauhaus carpentry shop, and later as the shop's Master following his graduation in 1924, he put into practice what he had learned about the design and construction of furniture.

In 1925, inspired by the handlebars of a bicycle he had purchased, Breuer designed and built the first chair of chromium-plated, tubular steel, with seat, back and arms of stretched fabric. "Breuer's development of modern tubular furniture was revolutionary," writes Christopher Wilk in his monograph to be published in conjunction with this exhibition. "His prototypical furniture provided the basis for hundreds of tubular steel designs that appeared all over Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 30s. In tubular steel Breuer had found a perfect solution to the problem of chair design. Tubular steel was, and is, a unique material for mass-produced furniture. No other substance offered comparable strength, resilience, lightness, comfort or resistance to wear and damage. It was uniquely suited to the modern interior and to modern methods of mass production."

Indeed, Breuer's 1925 design "set off a tremendous burst of creativity around him," according to J. Stewart Johnson, co-director of the exhibition. In his introduction to the Breuer monograph, Mr. Johnson explains how there seemed to be an "instant recognition" among architects and designers that bent tubular steel was the ideal material for modernist furniture. "The cool austerity, the sleek gleam of metal, was exactly what had been needed to bring the modernist interiors to life....Had he accomplished nothing

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beyond that first tubular steel chair, his signal importance would remain for his vision of a new kind of furniture, the machine for sitting in, the chair within the handlebars."

At the same time, Breuer was working on solutions to problems of interior design. "He concentrated on a narrow range of materials and furniture types. He developed only a few basic designs in wood for tables and wall storage units," writes Wilk. "With great sensitivity and clarity he created interior designs through the use of a small number of component elements, allowing each, whether it was a woven floor covering, a wide expanse of wall or a piece of furniture, to assume large significance within the interior space he had conceived."

The interiors Breuer finished before leaving the Bauhaus in 1928 led to commissions that have become classics in modern interior architecture. During the 1930s, while in private architectural practice first in Berlin and later in England, Breuer experimented with aluminum and plywood in an effort to identify other materials for his furniture suitable for mass production and acceptable to a public "still disdainful of the use of tubular steel in the domestic interior."

Breuer came to the United States in 1937 to teach architecture with Gropius at Harvard. Among his students were many of today's most prominent architects, including Edward Larrabee Barnes and I. M. Pei. From that time on, first in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and later in New York, Breuer maintained an active and successful architectural practice. During the 1940s he designed and built several private homes of note; during the 1950s the nature of his work began to change as he received many more commissions for large commercial buildings.

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MARCEL BREUER: FURNITURE AND INTERIORS will present some 37 pieces of furniture, including examples of Breuer's innovative chair designs, such as his wood armchair (1922), the first tubular steel chair (1925), his tubular steel cantilever chair (1928), his aluminum armchair (1932-33), and the Isokon molded plywood lounge chair (1935-36). Full-scale photographic enlargements of selected Breuer interiors will be installed behind the related pieces of furniture to illustrate Breuer's overall approach to design problems. Interiors represented, in addition to major commissions executed in Germany and England in the 1920s and 30s, will include Breuer's own Lincoln, Massachusetts house (1939), the Geller House on Long Island (1945), and the dining area of the house that was built in the Sculpture Garden of The Museum of Modern Art in 1949. Original drawings for furniture and interior designs, copies of catalogues and brochures, and enlargements of documentary photographs will also be included.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum will publish a monograph by Christopher Wilk, Guest Curator and co-director of MARCEL BREUER: FURNITURE AND INTERIORS. The 224-page book will present a detailed history of Breuer's furniture and interior design from his Bauhaus years to 1967, and will contain 200 illustrations. \$22.50 clothbound, \$12.50 paperbound.

A series of special gallery talks organized by the Department of Education will be given by Christopher Wilk on the following dates: Thursday, August 13, 3:30 p.m.; Thursday, August 20, 7:00 p.m.; Tuesday, August 25, 3:30 p.m.; Thursday, September 3, 7:00 p.m. and Tuesday, September 8, 3:30 p.m.

After closing at the Museum in September, the exhibition will travel to: the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland (October 13-November 22, 1981); The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Canada (April 1-May 15, 1982); the Cleveland

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Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio (June 16-July 25, 1982); and the Institute Chateau de Fresne, Montreal, Canada (September 13-October 31, 1982).

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