

# TIMELESSNESS

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Some works of art and design transcend time, remaining relevant and cherished regardless of their age. I intend to categorize the characteristics of timeless designs in an effort to better understand what constitutes timelessness. The focus of this study is towards the Modern Era of furniture and design. Timeless works of design differ from those of art in the fact that these exact styles are still being produced and utilized to this day. I will create an exhibition that investigates these characteristics and elaborates on the role of timelessness in the contemporary atmosphere.

Proceeding the Industrial Revolution towards the turn of the 20th century, new materials and methods of production were becoming available and commercially practical. These developments in manufacturing enabled the architects of this period to apply their masterful knowledge of materials and spatial qualities to a potentially limitless capacity. As architecture began making its transition into modernity, architects were presented with the opportunity of not only designing structural spaces, but also designing and producing furniture to occupy these spaces. The designed environment no longer placed its value in historicism, but rather in the departure from it. Techniques which could be more easily and accurately reproduced were favored over the tedious methods of craftsmen.

Michael Thonet's invention of a process for steaming and bending wood in 1840 marked the first step in a century-long golden age in modern furniture. Steam bending wood does not require laminate glue nor does it produce wasted wood shavings that carving and lathing do. The "Corbusier" Dining Chair designed by Gebrüder Thonet in 1870 is the second oldest modern chair still being actively produced. The Corbusier features minimal, continuous components of bent wood with gently curving contours and a sturdy frame. This chair could also be disassembled and stored in less than one cubic meter of space, yielding greater efficiency for manufacturers and retailers. These concepts are definitive of modern furniture: easily replicable production methods, reductive forms, and efficiently utilized materials.

Acceptance of the machine as a method of production opened broad new avenues for furniture designers to pursue. The introduction of materials such as steel and aluminum alloys, plastics, and curved wood solidified this new era of design. Materials like these, once considered industrial and brutal, were beginning to find a home in residential, communal, and professional spaces around the world. One of the earliest and most holistically masterful examples of such furniture is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Chair designed in 1929 as an asset for his Barcelona Pavilion designed in the same year. This chair features two curved, steel members on either flank, intersecting at the joint of the seat and backrest. Both the structure and the function of the chair are not only made apparent, but put on display through its form. All unnecessary ornamentation and pageantry is stripped away. Each aspect of its design needn't an explanation or debate. The Barcelona Chair offers a unique perspective on timelessness when compared to its forgotten successor: the

Tugendhat Chair. This chair plays off of many of the same ideals and characteristics of the Barcelona Chair, but instead features a cantilevering structure as well as armrests added to either side. The materials of the frames and cushions are identical, but in an effort to gain further comfort and utility, it sacrificed the incomparable grace that granted its predecessor with timelessness.

Although bent wood methods offered remarkable freedom to explore forms that had never previously existed, the designers of the 30's and 40's still outgrew the restrictions of these materials relatively quickly. This period saw the rise of the modern era's most influential furniture design duo: Charles and Ray Eames. In the late 1930's, Charles worked with Finnish designer Eero Saarinen to push the possibilities and limitations of bent plywood in furniture. In an attempt to make wood chairs as organic and ergonomic as possible, these two sought to develop a method of bending plywood in multiple dimensions to maximize comfort. While they were able to achieve their desired outcome through manual production methods for a single prototype, they encountered issues with commercial manufacturing. Despite their best efforts, industrial methods of production always resulted in splits and cracks in the plywood. Ultimately, they had to abandon their hope of a single-piece, bent plywood shell for a two-piece design that was practical for production. This crossroad was a testament to Charles Eames' design philosophy. "Action" is his definition of the method of design. "Constraints" are the limitations of design. Successful design is a hybridization of the two. In regards to his 1946 plywood chair for the Vitra Design Museum, the form was achieved by a compromise of his desired vision and the constraints of the materials. Any design that sacrifices function or practicality in pursuit of a preferential form has failed.

In response to the limitations of applying new methods to traditional materials, designers began investigating new materials to surmount these obstacles. In 1963, Robin Day achieved a milestone in design that would alter furniture production forever: the Polypropylene Stacking Chair. This chair was made possible by the use of injection moulding, circumventing the issues involved with bending wood. Virtually any form could be achieved through moulding without the sacrifice of structural integrity. Not only did this design resolve a complication of materials, but it also presented an innovative perspective on the mass-production of furniture. The Polyprop Chair addressed its own nature as an object being replicated by the thousands in the fact that multiple copies of this chair can be perfectly nested onto each other for storage and transport. Rather than glorifying each piece of furniture as art, Day acknowledged the reality of modern manufacturing and tells the truth of its process through this thoroughly minimized design and additional functionality.

Emerging developments in technology and manufacturing offered the designers of the early and mid 20th century with opportunities to achieve remarkable feats of innovation. The furniture of this era was stripped of ornamentation in the pursuit of becoming as ergonomic and applicable as possible. The logic of these pieces' design is irrefutable. Furniture no longer required a skilled craftsman to produce them, but rather a method that could be reproduced on a factory floor at a fraction of the price and time. The relevance of these designs has persisted for nearly a century without showing signs of faltering. In a lifetime of trends that rise and fall, the furniture of the Modern Era of design has proven at every turn that it remains a thoroughly and truly steadfast model of timelessness.

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