



Practical, progressive items for the home, circa 1950. Foreground: Eero Saarinen's Womb chair.

The Simple Life

Mid-Century Modern Revisited: Design 1943–1953

Brazos Projects

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Reviewed by Kelly Klaasmeyer

In the 1955 movie *The Tender Trap*, Debbie Reynolds plays a young actress whose overriding goal in life is to find a husband. As her character puts it, “A career is just fine, but it’s no substitute for marriage.”

But this retrograde, cliché-ridden character has decidedly progressive taste in furniture. In the movie, Reynolds visits “The American Home Show,” featuring “exciting innovations in homemaking.” She’s planning for her married life with an as-yet-undiscovered groom. Standing in the middle of an ultramodern model living room, Reynolds drafts a series of men to sit in and try out an Eero Saarinen Womb chair. When her agent (Frank Sinatra) arrives to fetch her, she enlists him as well. Sinatra, a man she had previously dismissed, becomes her intended matrimonial target when he sits in the Saarinen chair. Reynolds cocks her head to the side with a stunned look on her face. Suddenly, sitting in the high-design white chair, Sinatra looks like her version of a husband.

Today it seems odd—the traditional values Reynolds espouses manifesting themselves in the decidedly more up-to-date Saarinen Womb chair. Aside from the chair’s motherly moniker, Reynolds’s objectives seem better suited to the wing-back armchair from *Father Knows Best*. But the lust for the modern wasn’t a Hollywood fabrication. The scene is revealing because it shows how modern furniture had inserted itself into the popular culture of the 1950s. Modern furniture had stopped being suspect and avant-garde, and instead was being seen as practical and progressive, befitting an era that looked to science and technology to eventually solve everything. If a Womb chair didn’t exactly make it into every family’s home, modern-influenced designs did appear in more accessible (read: inexpensive) lines such as Heywood-Wakefield and managed to turn up even in remote Midwestern hamlets (if my grandparents’ living room was anything to go by).

“Mid-Century Modern Revisited: Design 1943–1953” at Brazos Projects presents choice objects from the early years of mid-century modernism. The practical, low-cost design origins of many of the pieces can be traced to an elegant but enigmatic molded plywood object hung on the wall in the midst of chairs, coffee tables, and ceramics: a leg splint.

The splint was included in the show because of its pedigree; Charles and Ray

Eames designed it. A precursor to the Eameses’ famed molded plywood furnishings, the splint was developed during World War II to address wartime metal shortages. In devising their solution to the problem, the Eameses also developed a technique for mass-producing molded plywood furniture.

Modern design at mid-century found the beauty and efficiency in low-cost and un-exotic materials. Feeding growing postwar consumer appetite, the pared-down forms fit neatly into the pared-down, low-slung 1950s houses being put up at an astonishing rate. While the Bauhaus movement, with its goals of integrating art and technology, is an obvious precursor, modernism at mid-century leaned toward warm, curving, human-conscious forms. The way the splint was designed to cradle the leg is mimicked in the way the Eameses’ 1945 molded plywood dining chair gently curves to the back—and the backside.

The Eameses’ 1946 screen is a virtuoso display of molded plywood. The beautifully, organically undulating narrow panels have a warm wood grain and are held together by unobtrusive fabric hinges. The wood mimics the folds of a curtain, and the whole thing can collapse neatly together. In the show, the screen serves as a backdrop for another wonderfully organic object, the black version of Eero Saarinen’s enveloping Womb chair,

complete with ottoman. It still looks marvelously contemporary almost 60 years later.

In the exhibit’s living room vignette, the chair is partnered with George Nelson’s glowing, podlike Bubble lamp and the curves of a rare, early, natural wood version of Isamu Noguchi’s iconic coffee table. The glass that rests on the crosspiece and point of the base has a satisfying slablike feel to its softly rounded angles. The thick edge is a deep emerald green that plays beautifully off the reddish tones of the wood.

Especially seductive is the exhibition’s selection of everyday objects. Russell Wright’s tableware brought modern design into millions of American homes—I’m certain Debbie Reynolds’s character would have listed it on her bridal registry. Wright’s ruby-red Pinch tumbler (c. 1953) has a rounded bottom and sides indented as though someone had pressed a thumb into the molten glass. Looking at it in the display case you can imagine the satisfyingly smooth weight of it in your hand. Farther down in the case, a pale earthy green china carafe has a delicate little rounded spout at the base of a smooth columnar neck that doubles as a handle. It’s part of Wright’s c. 1946 Casual Dinnerware. One wants to caress all of them, especially the charcoal-gray covered vegetable dish. When was the last time you felt that way about tableware?

But Wright was by no means the only one creating organically inspired forms for the table. Eva Zeisel’s syrup pitcher has sensual curves. Who knew a syrup pitcher had that kind of potential? The vessel’s tuliped edge is perfectly designed to fold over the juncture between your thumb and forefinger, allowing for a precisely molded grip. Zeisel’s salt and pepper shakers are almost animated; they have seal-like bodies, with hefty rounded bases sprouting necks ending in smooth heads. The smaller green shaker snuggles into the curve of the larger black shaker. It’s a decidedly empathetic collection of tableware.

The exhibit’s economical and sensitive presentation of a choice selection of objects brings home the appeal of mid-century design. You can even—almost—understand Reynolds’s crazed zeal for housewifedom. Surely, in a home filled with this furniture and these objects, life would be simple, elegant, and beautiful.