

20 March 2014

Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design

The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia | 30 May – 19 October 2014 | Admission fees apply



By the end of the 1940s no 'contemporary' house was regarded as complete...without a pair of Featherston chairs before its bagged brick fireplace.

Neil Clerehan, *Featherston Chairs*, 1988

Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design is the first major exhibition dedicated to Australian furniture of the 1940s to the 1970s; a period of dynamic social change as Australians embraced modern ideals to encapsulate a new, cosmopolitan mode of living characterised by innovative and flexible furniture design.

From Grant Featherston's plywood Contour range and Clement Meadmore's welded steel corded chairs, so distinctive of the 1950s, to Gordon Andrews' elegant 1960s designs for home and office, mid-century furniture design turned its back on the overstuffed and ornate examples of previous decades and, in doing so, revolutionised the contemporary Australian interior.

Mid-Century Modern will showcase more than one hundred iconic pieces by these significant figures along with other key designers such as Douglas Snelling, Fred Lowen and Schulim Krimper, and present recreated

interior vignettes including a full-scale living room based on the 1955 Age Dream Home.

Tony Ellwood, Director, NGV, said: "*Mid-Century Modern* will explore the influence of modern design upon the changing landscape of Australian furniture in the decades following World War Two.

"Furniture produced by local designers such as Featherston, Meadmore and Snelling is found in galleries and actively sought after by collectors across Australia today, showing its enduring influence and appeal. *Mid-Century Modern* is the first major Australian survey to provide an in-depth look at this period, revealing how Australian furniture designers moved away from traditional, conservative pre-war styles and forged a new language of design that was innovative in its use of materials, functional and often imbued with a good dose of style."

New methods of furniture design took hold in Australia after World War Two, prompted in part by the availability of new materials, and sometimes the shortages of others, the development of new production techniques and the influx of European immigrants who were skilled in the traditions of fine furniture making. Taking their cue from international trends in furniture, local designers adopted the pared-back language of modernism to create stylish and sculptural pieces, which found the ideal setting in the architecture of the period.

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Mid-Century Modern also charts the dramatic changes that took place within Australian furniture design and manufacture across four decades, from a very modest industry in the post-war years which did its utmost to produce well-designed and affordable furniture and which, by the 1960s, was able to manufacture designs that catered to the local market as well as being exported in vast quantities.

Alongside these seminal modern furniture pieces, *Mid-Century Modern* will encompass designs by visual artists such as Robert Klippel and Janet Dawson who occasionally adapted their creative skills to the production of furniture, and examples of Fred Ward's post-war do-it-yourself Patterncraft furniture. Contextual material including working drawings, textiles of the period and photographs of contemporary architecture will also be included, building a rich picture of this relatively little known aspect of Australia's design history.

A beautifully illustrated 200-page, hardcover publication will be produced in association with the exhibition, which brings together a series of essays that elaborate on various aspects of mid-century Australian design. The exhibition's curator, Kirsty Grant, provides an overview of furniture design from the period, and Dr Conrad Hamann contributes an in-depth text on mid-century architecture, the natural counterpart of furniture. Dr Denise Whitehouse writes about Grant Featherston, while Peter Atkins considers the careers of Clement Meadmore and Michael Hirst. Additional texts approach mid-century Australian furniture design from four different perspectives: that of the architect, by Neil Clerehan; the designer, by Mary Featherston; the conservator, by Suzanna Shaw; and the collector, by Dean Keep. Available from the NGV Shop and all good bookstores for RRP\$39.95.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of public programs - visit ngv.vic.gov.au for further details.

Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design will be on display at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia from 30 May to 19 October 2014. Open 10am–5pm, closed Mondays. Admission fees apply: Adult \$10 | Concession \$7 | Children (16 and under) Free.

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Image caption:

Grant Featherston (designer), Australia 1922–95, Emerson Bros Pty Ltd, Melbourne (manufacturer) (1930s–50s), *B220H Curl-up Contour chair* (1953), hardwood, plywood, cotton, (other materials), 94.0 x 85.1 x 82.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Grant and Mary Featherston, 1973

Grant Featherston (designer), Australia 1922–95, Unknown (manufacturer), *Television BS211H Contour settee* (1953), hardwood, plywood, cotton, 78.7 x 119.4 x 82.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Grant and Mary Featherston, 1973

Grant Featherston (designer), Australia 1922–95, Emerson Bros Pty Ltd, Melbourne (manufacturer) (1930s–50s), *Television B210H Contour chair* (1953), hardwood, plywood, cotton, (other materials), 81.3 x 71.1 x 78.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Grant and Mary Featherston, 1973