

# BANKER & TRADESMAN

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## SIT ON THIS: ART AND DESIGN OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES

By Jeffrey Stein

When we say “architecture,” we think of landscapes, settlements, buildings, interiors, furniture – all those conditions of designed life. In defining the relationships between those conditions, those environments, designers create a living reality. It’s why we design.

We design our buildings, spaces and objects to describe the kind of life that might be lived around them. While keeping us warm and helping us to sit up straight, design invites us to live our lives as particular kinds of people. When we say something is “beautiful,” then we are saying that we are attracted to the way of life that thing is promoting. This is how design creates our visions of living well.

Modern Bostonians’ living visions will be on display April 3-6 at the Cyclorama on Tremont Street in Boston’s South End, during an exhibition entitled “Art and Design of the 20th and 21st Centuries.” Forty American and European exhibitors and collectors will be showing decorative art and designed objects from the past 108 years.

Public lectures on 20th century design are part of the event, as well, including one by Christy MacLear – curator of the late architect Philip Johnson’s Glass House in New Canaan, Conn. – who will deliver the Boston Architectural College’s annual Cascieri Lecture at the exhibition on the afternoon of Sunday, April 6. Twentieth century design, of course, means Modernism, that progressive movement among designers (and painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, etc.) that rode a wave of new materials, industrial processes and social optimism early in the 20th century to respond to what was then viewed as corrupt and oppressive Victorian society.

Twentieth century European designers with famous names like Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe, Americans Charles and Ray Eames, and LeCorbusier (with his oft-overlooked assistant, Charlotte Perriand, whom most believe actually designed the furniture that is credited to him) undertook furniture experiments. They designed chairs using materials like chromed tubular steel, an invention current to the times used in bicycle and motorcycle frames, objects that had speed (another phenomenon that defined the Modernist era). Technology driven logic of construction was the basis of design, especially for chairs such as Breuer’s famous B3 lounge chair, and his B2 and B5 side chairs, copies of which you likely grew up with in your parents’ kitchens.

This is one exhibition where an onlooker will encounter Good Design. Not just because things were designed well in the 20th century, but because that was the name of an actual movement in the late 20th century: Good Design. Spearheaded by the Herman Miller Furniture Co. and the Museum of

Modern Art through an exhibition in 1950, Good Design meant technics and form brought together in a clean and undecorated Modernist aesthetic. The British Design Council even had a label for the work, its seal of approval. In the 21st century, though, we are beyond that.

### **Simon Says**

Nowadays, we may think a sofa is only a sofa. But in the hands of the right designer, a sofa can become an object that speaks of wholeness, of the feminine, of infinity – and it can be made-to-measure. This is the work of Dennis Duffy at his showroom south of Boston’s Washington Street, D SCALE. Duffy is a 21st century furniture designer whose furnishings will be exhibited at AD 20/21. He designs his core collection right here in Boston and fabricates it in New England and South America.

Duffy uses a Modernist perspective to approach his own design. His work incorporates what might be called the “softer side” of Modernism. His furniture is informed by the Modernist era but is proportioned to the human body of today: more comfortable, to be enjoyed, without the severity and preciousness of early Modernism.

D SCALE’s Simon Sofa shows how this works. Covered in formaldehyde-free mohair, its appeal is not in its ornamentation (there is none) but in its surface and in its voluptuous form. It also can be found in the way Duffy juxtaposes its upholstered form and volume to stiletto-like tubular steel legs that recall 20th century industrial tradition, and make the whole thing appear to float above the floor.

But Duffy and partner Ryan Spaulding do not only design single pieces of furniture; they design entire rooms full, and they think of those rooms much the way urban designers think about entire neighborhoods rather than single buildings. For Duffy, relationships among pieces of furniture make a room work in the same way relationships among buildings in a neighborhood make a city work: balanced, complementary, flexible. Those are words D SCALE uses to describe how their furniture functions in their clients’ spaces and in their lives. Like us, modern still, but much more relaxed.

Tony Fusco and Robert Four are the originators of April’s AD 20/21 exhibition. Theirs are familiar names around the arts in Boston; together they have previously produced the Boston International Fine Arts shows each fall at the Cyclorama. And now, it’s Modern Art and Design in the spring.

“A great epoch is beginning,” LeCorbusier wrote in 1923. We imagine, by the way, that such a thing is about to happen again. To experience some of the last great epoch, visit AD 20/21 at the Boston Cyclorama; you’ll see what LeCorbusier was talking about.

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