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‘Going Modern, but Staying British’: Design and Modernisms, 1930 to 1950¹

Asking whether it was possible to go modern and remain British, the artist and designer Paul Nash pinpointed the growing dilemma for those who attempted to reconcile the internationalist tendencies of modernism with a respect for national qualities. A growing commitment to European modernist architecture and design coexisted and overlapped with a number of different approaches; thus modern meant not just modernist, Art Deco and Moderne, but also, perhaps surprisingly, some traditional styles. Increasingly articulated in modernist theory, order, structure and planning were also integral to past styles – in particular Georgian architecture and design – thus providing a sense of continuity between past and present.² To design reformers in Britain, being modern and being traditional were not necessarily opposites, but part of a continuum, and for retailers, builders, designers and consumers a synthesis of traditional and contemporary themes and styles became essential. It has been argued that a concern for ‘Englishness’ and tradition represented ‘a deferral of modernity’; but this chapter proposes that modernity was not so much deferred as renegotiated in a number of ways.³ Discussing British art of the 1920s, Charles Harrison suggested in 1978 that there was nothing innovative and progressive in Britain after the First World War: ‘the twenties had been quiet years. There were no very challenging exhibitions, no invasions by outlandish foreigners. No significant groups were formed, no radical theories expounded.’⁴ A similar line was taken in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *Modern Britain, 1929–1939*, held at the Design Museum in 1999; in this, the architect Norman Foster, after attributing almost all crucial modernist buildings of the 1930s to émigré architects (ex-Bauhaus staff Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy arrived in Britain in the mid-1930s), went so far as to argue that modernism ‘only arrived in Britain

Wireless in Bakelite
designed by Wells Coates
for EKCO (E. K. Cole Ltd)
in 1932, manufactured
in 1934.

with these émigrés'.⁵ As we saw in chapter Two, this was not the case. A variety of responses to modernity emerged in the 1910s and '20s; and although these were later reconfigured, most included elements of what would be described as modernist practice – a concern with new materials and innovative technologies; a desire for a radical visual language based on abstract, non-representational forms and simplified decoration; an engagement with universal design qualities rather than specific ones; and an awareness that modern life required new modes of representation. Designers, manufacturers, critics and consumers were therefore already 'going modern and being British' before the arrival of the European émigrés. For Norman Foster, modernism in Britain in the 1930s amounted to a handful of buildings conceived and erected against the odds by 'pioneers'. These were without exception based in the south-east of England, if not London itself. Equally, in this narrative, modernism somehow bypassed Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the 'English' regions.

No doubt persuasive, since it locates design in the hands of those few who produced one-off avant-garde objects, the notion of design as the province of 'pioneers' has limitations as a way of thinking about everyday design. Pioneers have had a special place in modernist histories of design, as curators, critics and historians have been swayed by the notion of outstanding individuals battling against the odds.⁶ At first glance, the designer and architect Wells Coates was one of these. He designed standardized units using modern materials in 1929, and although he was not termed a modernist at the time, his designs were unquestionably influenced by the complexity of modernist practices and theories. A member of Britain's fledgling avant-garde, Coates was informed by modernist ideas to a greater or lesser degree, as were several others – the artist/designer Paul Nash and the ceramic designer Susie Cooper, for example – who were part of a matrix linking social, artistic and educational networks. Indeed, they were embedded and located within very specific social and cultural milieux, rather than being outsiders. This was evident at the time: in the commissions they gained (Coates's patrons included Tom Heron, father of the artist Patrick Heron; George Strauss, Labour MP for Lambeth North; and Jack and Molly Pritchard, Cambridge graduates, respectively an engineer and a bacteriologist); the articles they wrote (Coates, for example, wrote in *The Listener*, the *Architectural Review* and the *Architects' Journal*); the exhibitions to which they contributed (*British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home* in 1933, *British Art in Industry* in 1935); the groups they formed (Unit One, MARS); and in the organizations they joined (the Society of Industrial Artists). Coates and Nash were part of a middle-class cultural intelligentsia centred on London, whereas Cooper was based in Stoke-on-Trent. University- or art-school-edu-

cated, they were not necessarily wealthy, but they had contacts and patrons who were; thus their first designs were often either privately commissioned or the product of personal contacts (Susie Cooper's first job, for example, came through the efforts of the educator and designer Gordon Forsyth).

To some of the critics and writers who were Continental modernism's early supporters, 'British' reconfigurations seemed timid and lacking in conviction. But if we accept that modernism was not singular, but plural – that it developed through a myriad of interlinked factors, rather than individual inspiration – it is apparent that modernist practices in Britain were subtle and complex, and in design terms its origins lay in the 1920s, if not the 1910s. Certainly, there were art schools in Britain in the 1920s – driven in part by economic considerations, but also by aesthetic ones – that were 'modernist' in approach if not in name, and they were not all based in London. The Potteries Art Schools in Stoke-on-Trent were an example of the ways in which manufacturers, trade unions and educators came together following recognition that design in manufacturing industry needed to be tailored to the needs of the modern world.⁷ The head from 1920 was the potter Gordon Forsyth, who set about 'reorganising the existing art schools on purely industrial lines. Up to that time people had been rather inclined to regard the art schools of the Potteries as being much more concerned with the fine arts than industrial requirements'.⁸ By 1925 he had established a Junior Art Department, which aimed to raise the standards of apprenticeships by producing artistically educated men and women suitable for employment in the pottery industry, and by 1930 there were some 1,100–1,200 students attending the Potteries Art Schools.⁹ Forsyth's own aesthetic lay in the Arts and Crafts Movement, but that did not inhibit him from recognizing the necessity for a new type of designer geared to the needs of industry. Such initiatives in Stoke-on-Trent were contemporary with those in Europe that led, for example, to the foundation of archetypal modernist institutions, such as the Bauhaus in Germany and the Vkhutemas in the Soviet Union, established in 1919 and 1922 respectively, but they were more pragmatic, less driven by experimentation and utopianism. Nevertheless, the curriculum at the Burslem School of Art was based on the idea that students had to have an understanding of industry and art, and art meant design, form and decoration rather than merely knowledge of styles – either past or present. Forsyth's Arts and Crafts background predisposed him to awareness that form and decoration should be integrated. But also Forsyth understood the practicalities of design for industry and the necessity of producing designers capable of industrial design. Importantly, these ideas were part of a wider concern in Britain to design for the needs of the modern world, and such views – with nineteenth-century origins –

formed a basis for new ideas in design education at Britain's foremost art school, the Royal College of Art, in 1946–7. With close connections to pottery manufacturing, Forsyth established links with progressive manufacturers such as Josiah Wedgwood and Sons Ltd, A. J. Wilkinson and Foley China through networks focused on organizations such as the DIA and the Society of Industrial Artists (SIA). He was also acutely aware of the importance of the consumer in the good design equation. Consumption of domestic pottery in this period was governed by a host of factors: smaller modern houses required new sets of tableware; a larger middle-class market had more choice of where to buy, what to buy and how to pay; and, of course, the Second World War. Companies such as Josiah Wedgwood had begun to change before the First World War, but it was in the 1920s that this gathered momentum. As we have seen in the 1920s, 'the modern' was represented by hand-painted mass-produced pottery, such as that designed by Louise and Alfred Powell and Millie Taplin. Based on shapes that had their origins in craft forms and eighteenth-century prototypes, these were nonetheless made by industrial methods and decorated with simplified abstracted patterns and colours that revealed the impact of modernist art, which reached the pages of the trade as well as art journals. In addition, sophisticated advertising campaigns coordinated by companies such as Shelley Potteries, Josiah Wedgwood, A. J. Wilkinson and Susie Cooper were highly effective in persuading the consumer that modernity was desirable and compatible with tradition and continuity. Consumers were keen to be modern, but they were also interested in traditional design values, hence the success of a company such as Wedgwood in combining modern decoration and form with eighteenth-century prototypes. Wedgwood, for example, advertised its 'Living Tradition', whereas Shelley used the youthful 'flapper' Elsie Harding to promote the modernity of its wares.

Synthesizing and mediating both tradition and modernity, the home became a particular focus for design reformers between 1930 and 1950 as they attempted to educate the public in good design and taste. Significantly, the home could be modern, modernist and 'English' at the same time. It was constructed using standardized parts, often incorporating new materials and technology – metal-framed windows, wired for electricity and with a garage – but it might also look countrified and 'English' with tile-hanging, half-timbering, over-hanging eaves and bay or oriel windows. Located in the suburbs or the post-war New Towns, and connected to the towns and cities with arterial roads, trams and tubes, this was a far cry from an idealized rural idyll, but stylistically it looked back to vernacular styles as well as forward to modern ones.

An engagement in the modern was articulated in design throughout

the middle decades of the century, but it did not result in one coherent set of theories and practices. Instead, artists, designers and architects grappled with 'English' and 'British' crafts and traditions alongside learning about new technologies and their myriad applications. But at the same time they were interested in crafts and traditions from other countries – from the 'Empire', but also from less well-documented countries nearer home. Thus the textile designer Ethel Mairet, based in her workshop Gospels in Ditchling, East Sussex, visited Ceylon, Scandinavia and Yugoslavia researching indigenous dyeing and weaving techniques. She attempted to reconcile hand-weaving to the needs of modern life by designing for the machine, using new materials alongside traditional ones.¹⁰ Mairet was one of a number of designers/craft makers (others included Phyllis Barron and

Chestnut and Vernede, two hand-block printed textiles designed by Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher, 1920s-'40s.



Dorothy Larcher) whose work in the 1930s and '40s had a distinctive modern feel that exemplified important aspects of modernism.¹¹

Barron and Larcher were designers and makers of hand-block printed textiles. They trained at the Slade School of Art and Hornsey School of Art respectively before entering into partnership in 1923. Barron was already established as a textile designer by this time; she had had a huge commission for the Duke of Westminster's yacht, *The Flying Cloud*, bringing other potential clients. Larcher, in contrast, had recently returned from India, where she had researched indigenous methods of dyeing and printing textiles. By 1930 the two women had established their collaborative practice. They used cotton, silk, linen, velvet and organdie printing with hand-cut wood blocks in one or two colours. Dyes were thickened with gum to produce a mottled, uneven surface at odds with standards of finish in commercially printed textiles. Exhibiting consistently from the end of the 1920s through the 1930s, particularly at Muriel Rose's Little Gallery in Ellis Street, London, the patterns they designed such as Chestnut and Vernede were remarkably abstract. Based on craft techniques, the visual style of their work connected with the formal simplicity of modernism, yet the hand-made surface of the prints – most evident in the mottling – was a far cry from the technological rationalism associated with Continental modernists such as Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier. It was, however, modernist in orientation, challenging preconceived ideas about the nature of 'design'. Something akin to this concern for surface – texture, colour, technique – could be found in the work of studio potters of the time, such as Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie and Norah Braden. Undermining accepted ideas about 'design' in textiles and ceramics, this concern for 'surface' and 'form' did not originate in 'English' craft traditions – it owed more to the East, both in spirit and detail – but traditional 'English' culture was, nevertheless, 'indexed in these uneven surfaces'.¹² Thus painterly modernism, craft and non-European cultures intersected, adding another layer to what might constitute modern design in 1930s Britain.

The Condition of Britain

Writing on 'the condition of Britain in the '30s', Charles Loch Mowat discerned an increased introspection, as 'the country turned inward, and concerned itself more with its own ills than with the cares of the world'.¹³ This prompted more reflection and analysis about the state of the nation (perhaps the most novel and extensive of these was the Mass-Observation survey at the end of the decade). But Mowat also noted an increased social consciousness that led to a growing political awareness evident, for example,

in attitudes to the Spanish Civil War and the rise of fascism. For all its introspection in some areas of British cultural life, there was a measured interest in the 'new', necessitating an outward-looking stance. In parallel was the idea – most powerfully represented in J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* of 1934 – that 1930s Britain was at least two 'Britains'.

At the end of this famous journey across England, Priestley concluded that there were many Englands, but perhaps three stood out. There was 'Old England', 'the country of the cathedrals and minsters and manor houses and inns, of Parson and Squire; guidebook and quaint highways and byways'.¹⁴ There was also nineteenth-century England, 'the industrial England of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways; of thousands of rows of little houses all alike'.¹⁵ Finally, there was the third England, 'the new post-war England, belonging far more to the age itself than to this particular island. America, I suppose, was its real birthplace'.¹⁶ Of the first 'England', Priestley wrote:

we all know this England, which at its best cannot be improved upon in this world . . . It has long ceased to make its own living. I am for scrupulously preserving the most enchanting bits of it, such as the cathedrals and the Cotswolds, and for letting the rest take its chance.¹⁷

Of the second 'England', he pointed out: 'this England makes up the larger part of the Midlands and the North and exists everywhere; but it is not being added to and has no new life poured into it'.¹⁸ After a depressing account of its shortcomings, Priestley speculated as to whether the inhabitants of this England were any better off than those in the pre-industrial one, before concluding: 'they all rushed into the towns and the mills as soon as they could, as we know, which suggests that the dear old quaint England they were escaping from could not have been very satisfying'.¹⁹ He described his third 'England' derisively as 'a large-scale, mass-production job, with cut prices'.²⁰ It was as 'near to a classless society as we have got yet. Unfortunately, it is too cheap'.²¹ It's being too cheap – implying fake – he attributed to the influence of America, which among other things had brought:

arterial and by-pass roads . . . filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings . . . giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons.²²

This new post-war England was standardized and regimented, even though it might be a cleaner and healthier place than that of nineteenth-century industrialism. Priestley argued that these three 'Englands' were mingled together in every part of the country, but some areas fared better than others, particularly the south. As he put it,

was Jarrow still in England or not? Had we exiled Lancashire and the North-east coast? Were we no longer on speaking terms with cotton weavers and miners and platers and riveters? If Germans had been threatening these towns instead of Want, Disease, Hopelessness, Misery, something would have been done quickly enough.²³

Writing some 15 years later in the introduction to a new edition of *An English Journey*, Priestley observed that not only had perceptions of the book changed (it had been received initially as social commentary), but England itself had changed, largely because of the Second World War. The social injustices highlighted in his book were now the target of the Labour Government's post-war social reforms.

The British economy, however, was in disarray at the end of the Second World War; although the 1930s had witnessed growth in domestic consumption, this 'was largely a middle-class phenomenon. The exceptions to this general rule were the radio, the vacuum cleaner and the iron.'²⁴ A result of regional inequalities, ownership of these consumer durables in the 1930s was concentrated in the wealthier parts of Britain; for example, consumption of electricity by domestic consumers in the south-east was more than twice that in the north-east of England.²⁵ Middle-class women consumers in particular were addressed by magazine and newspaper advertising, but surprisingly these new goods proved to extend their time spent on housework: 'domestic technology eased the reallocation of housework away from the domestic servant to the middle-class housewife and the occasional help'.²⁶ In addition, standards of domestic hygiene were raised as women were persuaded that housework was a 'profession' that demanded specific new skills; organizational, technical and managerial. Writing in *The Electrical Handbook for Women* in 1936, its president, Margaret Moir, and director, Caroline Haslett, proposed 'a new technique of Home Management, an alliance of Domestic craft with Engineering'.²⁷ Describing the cook who used an electric cooker as a technician, she observed: 'statistics show that there are well over a quarter of a million cookers on hire in this country, whilst others, unrecorded, are owned by consumers'.²⁸

Consumption of domestic goods in the 1930s was closely linked to the provision of new homes, particularly owner-occupier housing, but because

of central and local government subsidies, this also included council-house building. Four million dwellings (both local authority and private) were built in the interwar years, and a quarter of them replaced slums. The shift to owner occupation continued, with 20 per cent owning their homes in 1939 as opposed to 5 per cent in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁹ Elizabeth Roberts interviewed one such family who moved from a two-up, two-down rented terrace to a newly-built house nearby in 1937. With a bathroom, electricity, a gas cooker and hot-water supply, this cost £295.³⁰ Although prosperity increased for some members of the working class, there was real hardship for others during the first half of the 1930s because of widespread unemployment in those parts of the country dependent on heavy industries: coal, shipbuilding, engineering, and iron and steel. In towns such as Jarrow and Hebburn on Tyneside

there was nothing in the whole place worth a five-pound note. It looked as much like an ordinary town of that size as a dustbin looks like a drawing room. Here again, idle men – and not unemployable casual labourers but skilled men – hung about the streets, waiting for Doomsday.³¹

Jarrow's unemployed famously marched to London in 1936 to protest that 80 per cent of its workforce was unemployed, but by this date the threat of war had in part stimulated the economy and recovery was on the way. The underlying structural problems in the economies of regional heavy industries remained, however, to resurface after 1945.

By 1939 a war economy was created as government powers increased. The main outcome of this was

that the market oriented economy of the interwar years was replaced by a centrally managed economy in which the state allocated the most important resources, decided what should be produced, and determined how much should be paid for it.³²

This, as we shall see, had enormous repercussions for design, because central government took control of materials, factories and labour. From 1941 all types of goods – clothing, furniture, food and consumer goods – began to be rationed using a points system. To a large extent, the government managed consumer demand on the basis of need rather than desire; this was an essential economic strategy in order to show fairness in the distribution of goods.³³ Surprisingly, food rationing lasted into the mid-1950s, but clothing ceased to be controlled in 1949.

Although the British economy was in very poor shape in 1945, fairly rapid recovery was achieved in the decade after the war, partly by the maintenance of a managed economy by the new Labour government. Wartime restrictions had created an insatiable demand for consumer goods, but the continuation of rationing caused the period of austerity to last until the late 1940s, because the emphasis lay on getting industry into full production to produce exports. Domestic consumers, it seemed, were the last in line to buy new goods; instead, these were targeted for export, as was apparent at the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition of 1946 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. State management of the economy was paralleled by increasing state intervention in design; significantly, modernist theories and practices, perceived as foreign and radical in the 1930s, were deployed to represent the 'brave new world' of post-war Britain. Inevitably, this too was 'managed' by the perpetuation of state involvement in design policy and education, exemplified by the formation of the Council of Industrial Design in 1944. The conjunction of modernist aesthetics with centralized government planning contributed to the reinforcement and consolidation of modernist ideals at a crucial historical moment, from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s. These essentially elitist design practices were undermined from within and without, however, as questions of 'national' identities preoccupied many of those engaged in building a better Britain. Design was increasingly international and in Britain it was influenced by European ideas – from Scandinavia, Italy and Germany – as well as those from the economically strong USA from 1930 to the 1950s.

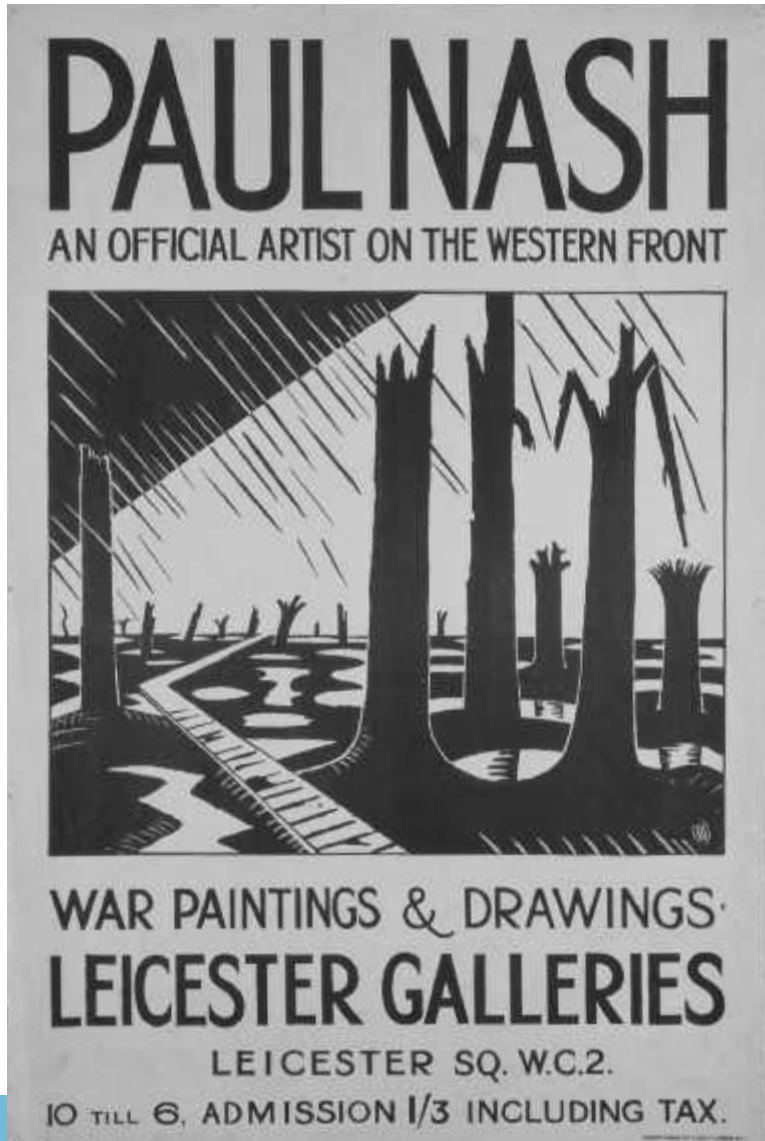
Modernist Designers: Paul Nash, Wells Coates and Susie Cooper

A sense of urgency informed debates from the mid- to late 1920s regarding the designer's role in developing new products for modern life. Increasingly, these took place within a framework of modernist ideas and practices; some were already evident in Britain as we saw in chapter Two, but others originated in Europe and the USA. Working in Britain during this period for Waring and Gillow, the modernist designer and architect Serge Chermayeff disclaimed all knowledge of the USA, though others were well aware of American developments, particularly the application of the latest technologies and the deployment of innovative commercial strategies.³⁴ The exchange of ideas went both ways because the USA remained a crucial export market for British goods, but French Art Deco proved particularly influential from the mid-1920s and European modernist writings (published in *The Studio* and *Architectural Review* from the late 1920s) proposed

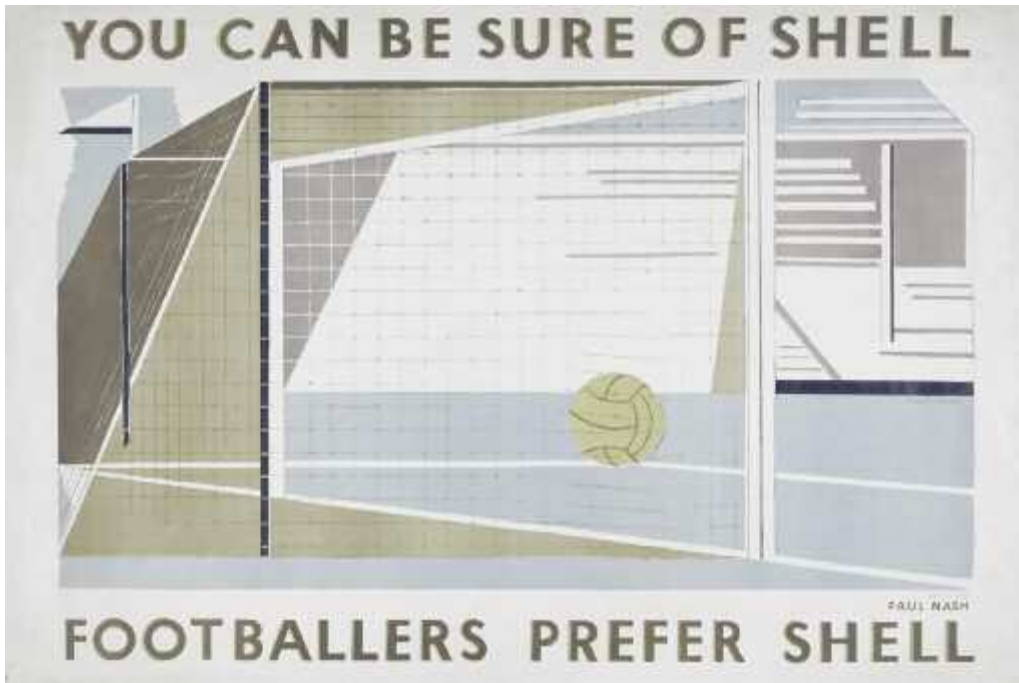
radical solutions to the problems of designing for contemporary life. In different ways, the designs of Paul Nash (1889–1946), Wells Coates (1895–1958) and Susie Cooper (1902–1995) exemplified the variety of modernist ideas and practices in Britain at this time.

Paul Nash's design practice is particularly revealing of the ways in which an artist worked in design between 1910 and c. 1935. Nash, who initially trained in illustration, switched to art, enrolling at the Slade School of

Poster advertising an exhibition of war paintings and drawings at the Leicester Gallery, London, 1918, designed by Paul Nash (lithograph).



'Going Modern, but Staying British'



Poster designed by Paul Nash for Shell-Mex, 1935 (colour lithograph).

Art in 1910. Retaining an involvement in design throughout his life, he exhibited paintings at the New England Art Club exhibition in 1913, where he attracted the attention of Roger Fry. After gaining further critical notice as a war artist, he designed book illustration and textiles from 1918. Both owed a good deal to the Arts and Crafts Movement, particularly in terms of technique (the use of wood engraving and block printing), but also in terms of style. In fact, his earliest bookplates from 1910 referenced medievalism via William Morris's Kelmscott Press, although by the mid-1920s his designs for textiles and book jackets showed an awareness of French Art Deco and the Moderne styles that began to influence design in Britain after 1925. To some extent Nash was a transitional figure working at the end of the Arts and Crafts Movement, but responsive to the ideas of Fry and associated with Omega Workshops in the 1910s. He remained in touch with various craft networks throughout the 1920s as a result of his textile designs – he designed for Celladine Kennington's Footprints company (founded in 1925) and for Elspeth Little's Modern Textiles in Beauchamp Place (set up in 1926). Although he taught design at the Royal College of Art in the mid-1920s and again at the end of the 1930s, he saw himself primarily as a painter, but, typical of the period, he moved from one to the other with relative ease. Nash became particularly focused on design in the late 1920s and

early '30s, when he produced designs for a number of manufacturers and clients: the publishers Curwen Press, Chatto & Windus and Faber and Faber; the textile manufacturers Cresta Silks Ltd, Old Bleach Linen Co. and Footprints; posters for Imperial Airways, Shell-Mex Ltd, BP Ltd and London Passenger Transport Board (as well as moquette fabrics for Underground and bus seat covers); rugs for the Edinburgh Weavers; glass for Stuart and Sons; and ceramic tablewares for A. J. Wilkinson and E. Brain & Co. Notwithstanding his reputation as a painter, Nash's practice exemplified that of a freelance industrial designer.³⁵ To a certain extent this involvement in design was in response to the economic conditions of the early 1930s, since work was hard to find (the architect Keith Murray also worked as a designer for similar reasons). But artists and architects, who had, after all, considerable skills in design as a result of their training, also responded to the call to improve the quality of design in industrial products. In part, this was caused by Britain's precarious export position, but also by modernist ideas about the importance of designing for industry and the important role of the abstract artist in this. Nash was a member, later becoming President of the Society of Industrial Artists (founded in 1930, this was concerned with the professionalization of design), the Council for Art and Industry, and he exhibited at the important *British Art in Industry* exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1935. In 1933 he founded Unit One, a group of architects, designers and artists (of which Coates was another member), aiming to express 'a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognised as peculiarly of to-day'.³⁶ Unit One was an example of the avant-garde collaborations between artists, architects and designers typical of modernism, but Nash retained a connection with Arts and Crafts principles; as Lambert argued, 'his feeling for the essence of nature is as clear in his decorations for breakfast sets as in his canvases'.³⁷ Nash believed that the 'English' tradition of design was located firmly in the eighteenth century, recognizing, along with many of his contemporaries, 'modernity' in its simplicity. Nash's design work tailed off towards the mid-1930s, just as émigré modernist architects and designers arrived in Britain from Europe. He was not enraptured by the abstract, rectilinear aesthetic proposed by such men as Herbert Read and Walter Gropius, and for all his promotion of good design in industry he remained an 'artist and an individualist'.³⁸ Nevertheless, Nash was part of the matrix of modernist design practices: organizing, campaigning, publishing and designing. His path, which included both art and design from the early 1910s to the mid-1930s, represented a negotiation of various forms of modernist practice; Fry and Omega, craft, Art Deco and the Moderne, and European modernism. While clearly modern, his work retained an interest in tradition and decoration.

Wells Coates was a very different designer to Nash, although there were some shared interests. His article 'Response to Tradition', published in *The Architectural Review* in November 1932, contributed to the increasingly contested field of what constituted modernism. His proposals refused the compromise that many believed to be characteristic of earlier interpretations of modernism in Britain. Coates's didactic views were an affront to those such as the DIA chairman John Gloag, who promoted a synthesis of 'Englishness' and modernism. Aiming directly at the DIA and kindred reformers, Coates set about demolishing their belief that it was possible to use design elements from the past in the present:

These societies for the preservation of this, the conservation of that, who say to the commoners: 'You must not erect your sham Tudor tea-shop, your sham Greek details all over your petrol station . . .' all this is based on a completely wrong psychology. For *you* have debased the great traditions. *You* have converted a Greek temple into a banking-house; *you* have plastered the second-hand columns of the ancients on to the grocers' shops of Oxford Street. The ugly petrol station is the logical conclusion of your efforts.³⁹

To jolt these reformers from their complacency, he proposed taking as a guide, 'a stranger to the West, one born and brought up according to the inflexible customs of an ancient civilisation of the East'.⁴⁰ Coates, who was born in Japan and lived there until he was 18 years old, tells us that his imaginary guide has travelled to Europe, but has been told that 'a man whose eyes have been trained in the East will only rarely want to open them in the West'.⁴¹ To overcome this, in order to see beneath the 'confusion of appearances and re-appearances, the accretion of layer upon convoluted layer of architectural growth', he provided himself with a kind of aesthetic x-ray, 'to track down its underlying shape, the sources of its traditions'.⁴² In this essay, Coates's assimilation of the ideas of Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier was apparent: 'it is for architects to invent, and to exhibit, a new architecture which will quite naturally be accepted and demanded by the people'.⁴³ He had a rather different take on modernism than some of its other followers, however. He was a vehement critic of those who believed that modernism was merely about functionalism, believing that 'every change in conditions brings with it new possibilities of systems of impulses, needs, expectations, attitudes'.⁴⁴ Coates was a perceptive thinker and a talented industrial designer; trained in mechanical and structural engineering at McGill and British Columbia universities in Canada, followed by a PhD in engineering at London University, he worked as a designer and architect

Minimum Flat for Lawn Road Flats, Hampstead, London. Exhibited at the *British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home* exhibition at Dorland Hall, 1933, designed by Wells Coates.



until his death in 1958.⁴⁵ He began designing shop fronts, interiors and fittings in 1928, but rapidly expanded his activities to include furniture, architecture, exhibition stands, recording studios, radios, aircraft, sailing craft and exhibition design. Underpinning most of his designs was a commitment to using new materials – concrete, steel, plastics and plywood – an enthusiasm for innovative design solutions and a concern for abstract forms. In his designs for Cresta Silks shop fronts, the brief was to design adaptable, inexpensive units. This theme of standardized units or modules was a feature of European modernism and it re-emerged in his work for Isokon, the company set up by Jack Pritchard in 1930 to produce furniture and housing. For Isokon, Coates designed furniture, interior fittings and housing, including Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, London, in 1933–4. There were 22 ‘minimum’ flats, which marked a clear response to modernist practice in Europe, where ‘minimum space’ was an integral element of the social housing schemes developed by city authorities to house those in need. But once inside the Lawn Road minimum flat, it was clear that this was not mass housing for the working class. Exhibited initially as a prototype at the *British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home* exhibition of 1933, the minimum flat had a plethora of modern conveniences: electric cooker, refrigerator, radio and central heating designed to suit the young middle-class professional who required services, not things, and freedom ‘from enslaving and toilsome encumbrances in the equipment of the modern dwelling scene’.⁴⁶ As Coates wrote, ‘the home is no longer a permanent place from one generation to another’, and it was obvious that the Lawn

Road flats were to be equipped for a new type of person.⁴⁷ With a maid service, central kitchen and, by 1937, a restaurant, its first inhabitants included notable figures such as the crime novelist Agatha Christie, the architect Arthur Korn, the writer and journalist Lance Sieveking and the émigré architects Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer.

Like Nash, Coates's practice as a designer was extensive. In 1932 he worked with Raymond McGrath and Serge Chermayeff, designing interior and technical equipment at the new BBC broadcasting studios in London before designing studios in Newcastle upon Tyne and Manchester (since demolished). In these he did detailed technical equipment and fittings, including dramatic effects studios, control rooms, gramophone studios and equipment such as microphones.⁴⁸ The interiors in Newcastle were typical of his designs: simple, geometric and abstract with subtle, restful colour – green, grey, black and beige – and using new technologies and materials, including plywood, Bakelite, tubular steel, though combined with ebonized hardwoods for detailing. The overall look was modernist, but at the same time subtly decorative, referencing the Moderne style. In the same year, 1932, Wells Coates won a competition organized by EKKO, the manufacturer of Bakelite products for the design of a radio set. Astutely, he identified the

Ceramic tablewares designed by Susie Cooper in 1934. Kestrel shapes with Crayon Lines pattern.



Susie Cooper Pottery showroom in Woburn Place, London, mid-1930s. Note the presentation and display of the ceramics.



nub of the problem inherent in radio design at the time, 'a radio should never be distinguished as something else. It has its own important function in the home and is in many cases a possession regarded more as the indoor equivalent of a car than a piece of furniture.'⁴⁹ For this piece of portable equipment, Coates designed a relatively compact circular object that exploited the unique moulding qualities of Bakelite and required few moulding tools. This extremely modern design encapsulated the complexities of modernism in 1930s Britain – abstract, mechanistic and dependent on technological innovation – but nevertheless produced in a fake walnut burr Bakelite as well as a sleek black version in response to consumer demand. Coates, while unquestionably knowledgeable and committed to the tenets of European modernism, was vehemently anti-functionalist, as his designs for the BBC studios and EKO amply demonstrate. His awareness of Japanese culture infused his work with a concern for the spiritual dimensions of architecture and design that transcended functionalism.

The ceramic designer Susie Cooper represented a somewhat different engagement with modernist practices in Britain in the early 1930s. She trained at Burslem School of Art, in the north-west of England, under the tutelage of Gordon Forsyth in the mid-1920s. Because of the nature of ceramic manufacture in Stoke-on-Trent and the demands of the market, her designs represented an ongoing engagement with decoration at a time when modernist critics were promoting minimal or no decoration.⁵⁰ Although constantly castigated by modernist critics, the pottery manufacturers in Stoke-on-Trent remained committed to decorated pottery. For

those designers like Cooper who were interested in modernist design, the challenge was to develop a response to modernism that recognized the significance of decoration to both manufacturer and consumer. Like Coates, she understood that modern life required new designs, 'the drastic changes that have come over the domestic life of many people warrant the provision of smaller and better balanced services'.⁵¹ To this end she developed new ranges of wares that were attuned to the changing function of tableware within the middle-class home. Described as 'a lady who designs from the standpoint of the lady', she implicitly recognized the importance of the female consumer.⁵² European theorists articulated modernism as masculine, the result of science and technology, rationalism and standardization, and collapsed its negatives – decoration and fashion – into the realm of the feminine.⁵³ Decoration, however, was integral to earlier forms of modernism in Britain, and it had not been entirely abandoned by European exponents. Several designers (both male and female) employed a decorative language of subtle colours or neutral tones of cream, brown and black; they adopted a light, loose graphic touch and developed patterns that, although abstracted, were still recognizably drawn from nature. Pottery decoration tended to be small scale, often based on flowers, although most designers also produced patterns that were abstract and/or geometric, for example, Susie Cooper's 'Crayon Lines'. Cooper's approach reflected the belief of most pottery manufacturers that appropriate decoration was a prerequisite for good design; she believed that decoration and form must be integral: 'form, decoration and even texture in the Susie Cooper ware are part of a considered scheme; it is not merely a case of sticking a decoration on to a pot regardless of context'.⁵⁴

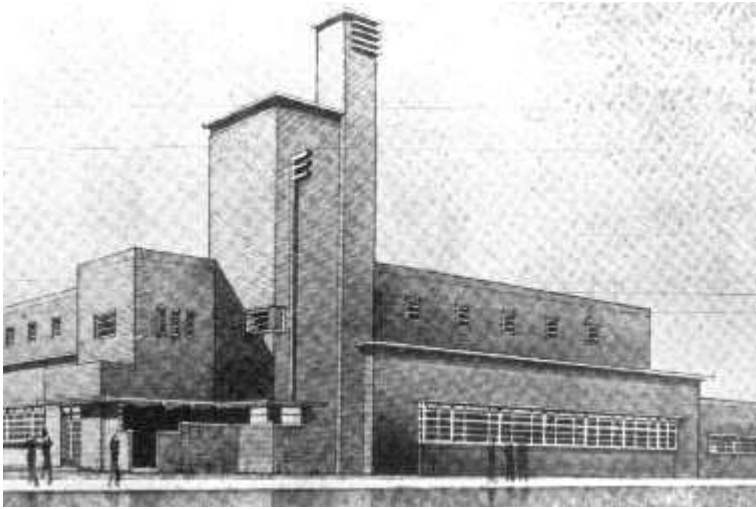
At the Susie Cooper Pottery, established in 1929, Cooper produced patterns based on hand-painted dots, dashes and wavy and concentric lines. Most were produced in a single enamel colour or two colour combinations on cream-coloured earthenware. In the 1930s she developed new pottery shapes, such as Kestrel, Curlew and Falcon. These streamlined outlines reminiscent of bird forms clearly related to the undecorated forms found in modernist-inspired architecture and design, but they also revealed Cooper's knowledge of American design, gained through her awareness of that all-important export market.

In the mid-1930s Cooper cut an unusual figure in the Stoke-on-Trent pottery industry. Not only was she one of only a handful of women to own a company, she was still a young woman in her early thirties, and had already attracted considerable critical acclaim within the trade and from modernist critics alike for a number of very successful designs. She was a participant, like Nash in the SIA and she exhibited at the *British Industrial*

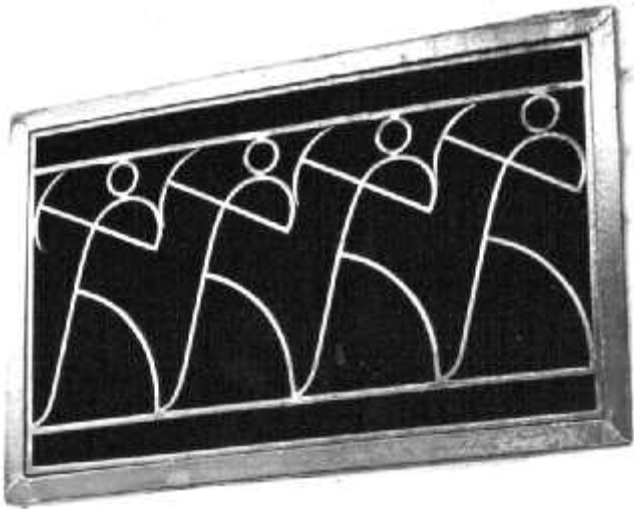
Art in Relation to the Home and *British Art in Industry* exhibitions of 1933 and 1935. She was a symbol of women's penetration of the design profession, but she was also emblematic of the feminization of culture in interwar Britain. In her refusal to reject the decorative, she offered a response to modernity that was quite different from European modernist exponents.

Design and Modernism(s)

Individual designers represented just one of the ways in which design responded to the new conditions of modern life. Government-initiated schemes, retailing organizations, publishing companies and commercial art/graphic design studios offered other contexts. Following several coal disputes in the early 1920s, the Sankey Commission, established by Lloyd George's Coalition Government to investigate the coal industry, recommended a reduction in working hours, a wage increase and state ownership of the mines (none of which was implemented). Less contentiously, it proposed the formation of a Miners' Welfare Fund to 'provide the miner and his family with fuller opportunities for recreation both of body and mind, with a brighter social life, and generally with a healthier and sweeter environment than the nature of his occupation can otherwise offer to him'.⁵⁵ The fund was financed by a levy of 1d a ton on coal produced and it initially aimed to provide amenities for miners, including pithead and swimming baths, recreation grounds, institutes, convalescent homes, aged miners' homes, libraries, allotments and educational opportunities for miners and their children. Socially reformist in orientation, it was reinforced by the Samuel Commission of 1926, which raised a levy of 1s. in the £1 on all mining royalties. This provided funds for a massive programme of pithead bath design and construction, leading to 345 being built between 1928 and 1939 across the coalfields of South Wales, Scotland, Kent, Yorkshire, the Midlands and Nottinghamshire, the north-east of England and Lancashire. A Miners' Welfare Architects' Department was formed in response; headed by J. H. Forshaw, it recruited young architects (male and female) at the start of their careers.⁵⁶ There were few guidelines relating to style or approach, but J. A. Dempster, head of the Northern regional office, advised them to 'Go Dudok'.⁵⁷ The work of the Dutch architect Willem Dudok, particularly Hilversum Town Hall (1928–31), used an abstract architectural language that was based on vertical and horizontal volumes and flat roofs; brick was used, with limited decoration. It proved remarkably popular in Britain and helped the Miners' Welfare architects to find an appropriate visual language for their designs, which used flat roofs, asymmetric plans and elevations and rationally planned interior designs. An attention to detail was apparent



Pithead Baths, Cardowan Colliery, Lanarkshire, designed by J. A. Dempster, 1934.



Decorative ventilation grille at Sherwood Colliery, Nottingham, designed by A. J. Saise, 1934. Such decorative detail was a hallmark of the Miners' Welfare Commission Architects' department.

in these designs, as at Cardowan Colliery in Lanarkshire by Dempster (1934) and Sherwood Colliery swimming pool by A. J. Saise (1934), which both incorporated figurative elements (such as the ventilation grille), decorative brickwork (as can be seen on the tower of the Cardowan scheme) and planting, thus ensuring that they blended with the brick-built housing typical of mining communities. Built in the industrial heartlands of Britain, these designs brought elements of modernism into the regions in a way that was paralleled with the development of multiple stores such as Marks and Spencer.

With shop fronts based on standardized design elements (similar to Wells Coates's Cresta shops) and modern interior planning and layout, Marks and Spencer pioneered an essentially modernist approach to design that owed as much to the USA as to Europe. Visiting the USA in 1924 to learn about retailing techniques, Simon Marks had returned to England with a raft of new ideas. He wrote: 'After my first visit, I made it my business to visit the United States as often as I could . . . It was there that I learned many new things . . . learned the value of more imposing, commodious premises'.⁵⁸ By 1939 Marks and Spencer had 234 stores on Britain's high streets, and during the economically difficult late 1920s and '30s the company had opened or rebuilt 218 stores. To facilitate this rapid expansion, company designers had developed a gold and green fascia that was abstracted and angular to suit the variables of each location. The fascias and the ground-floor window displays were mass-produced, standardized elements found in all the shops around the country. The interiors had island counters so that shoppers could examine goods easily, and lighting was modern, bright and hung low for better display. By streamlining the range of goods on sale and improving quality, the company matched the modernity of its interior design with that of its retailing policy. 'Nothing over five shillings' became the byword; through its use of synthetic fibres and direct merchandising

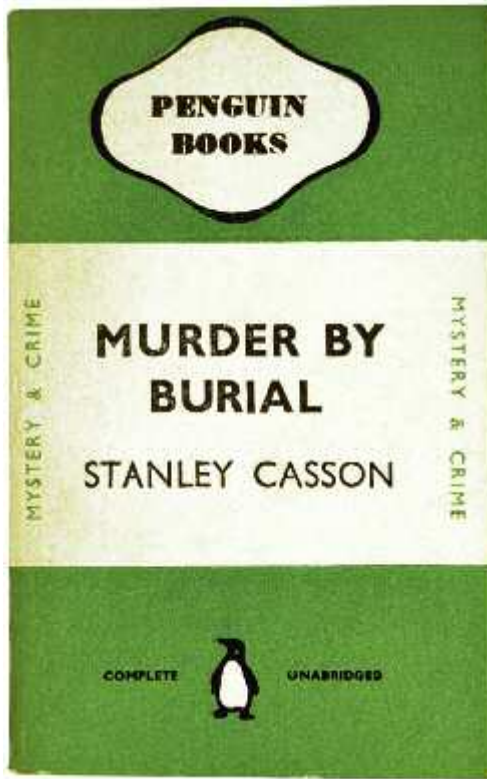
Interior of Marks & Spencer store on Northumberland Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1936. This shows the island counters and improved lighting.



strategies, Marks and Spencer responded to the mass demand for good but inexpensive clothing. Where goods were available at affordable prices, the firm attempted to improve quality; where goods existed that were more expensive than their 5s. maximum, it worked with manufacturers to bring prices down, frequently by placing large orders. As Rees put it,

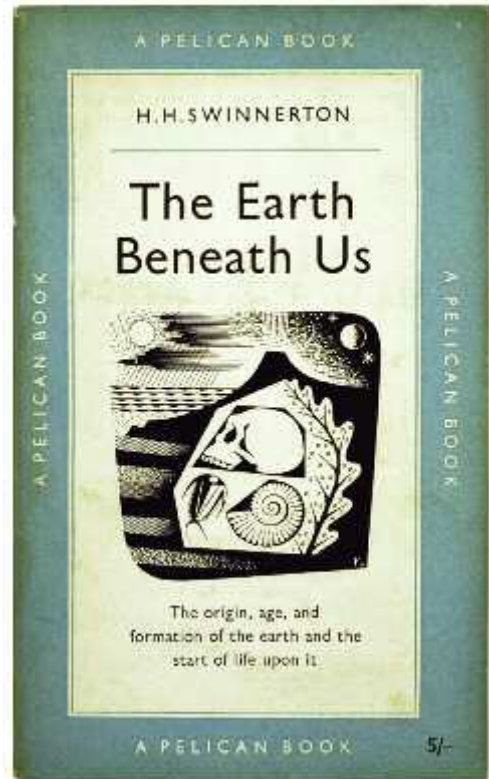
popular needs and tastes, and particularly those of the working class, were changing at a speed which we now recognize to be one of the characteristic features of the twentieth century. Any retail organisation which could interpret the public's changing needs, adapt itself rapidly to them, and satisfy them at a price within the income of the working class household was certain to receive rich reward.⁵⁹

European modernist practice merged with traditional themes in book design and typography during this period, perhaps most notably with the formation of Penguin Books in the mid-1930s and designs for Penguin from the late 1940s by Jan Tschichold and Hans Schmoller.⁶⁰ Allen Lane published the first ten Penguin books in 1935, aiming to reprint quality fiction and non-fiction at 6d (at that time equivalent to the price of ten cigarettes), and to sell books widely, not just in bookshops, but also in Woolworths, Boots and street-corner tobacconists. Contrary to current practice, Lane wanted a simple, non-pictorial cover design, and a company employee, Edward Young, developed the initial format. The cover was divided into three horizontal sections, with solid colour at the top and bottom and a white central section for the title and author's name. The geometric simplicity of the design was reinforced by the use of Gill Sans typeface for the covers and by colour coding for book types: green for mystery and crime, orange for fiction, dark blue for biography, red for plays, cerise for travel and yellow for miscellaneous. The company identity as articulated in this design was modern, dignified and restrained, but the sense of order, simplicity and rationalism was clearly in accordance with modernist principles. This was consolidated by the appointment in 1947 of the Swiss designer Jan Tschichold, an early exponent of the new typography. Tschichold refined and standardized the basic design and symbols, and established principles of typography for designers and printers working at Penguin. Two years later Hans Schmoller took over from Tschichold, when the latter returned to Switzerland. A German citizen, Schmoller had worked in Basutoland in Africa during the war, but worked at the Curwen Press after becoming a British subject in 1946. He had corresponded with Curwen's chief typographer, Oliver Simon, while in Africa, and according to Robin Kinross, his African printing was English in orientation.⁶¹ Schmoller had been interested in English culture and design idioms from the



An early Penguin book, *Murder by Burial* (1943). Overall design with horizontal tripartite sections first designed by Edward Young and with variations of the Gill Sans typeface for cover and spine.

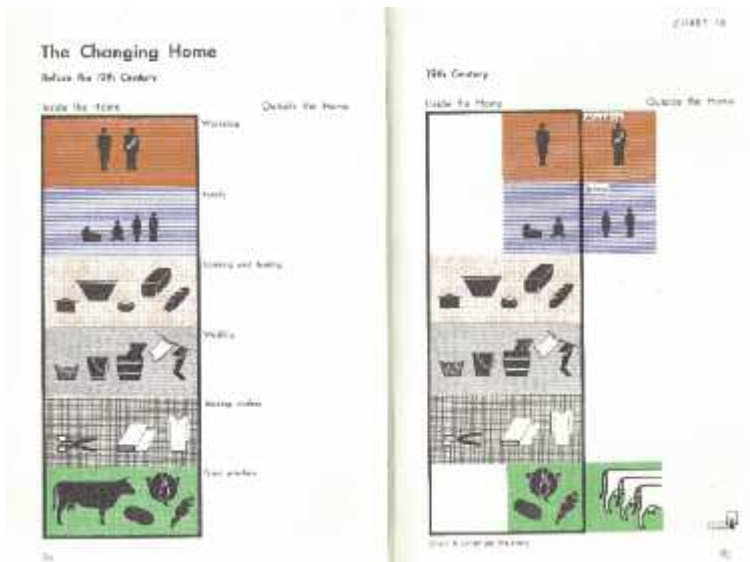
The Earth Beneath Us (1958), a Pelican book incorporating Jan Tschichold and Hans Schmoller's re-working of standard 'Penguin' elements. Illustration by Victor Reinganum.



late 1930s, and from the mid-1950s he commissioned a series of wood-engravings from Imre Reiner. These formed the basis for the black-and-white vignette illustrations on Penguin covers, which referenced both English and German book-making traditions.

In direct contrast was Otto and Marie Neurath's Isotype Institute, established in Oxford in 1942 to develop visual forms that were pictorial, but also simplified and standardized. Combined with the use of the Futura sans serif typeface, Isotypes attempted to provide a universal graphic design vocabulary that was particularly effective at representing quantitative information. Isotypes were used effectively in government and related publications during and just after the Second World War – they were found, for example, in 'The New Democracy' series produced by Adprint Ltd. A title in this series, *Women and Work* by Gertrude Williams of 1945, was a good example of the Isotype Institute's modernist approach. 13 pictorial charts explored the roles that women might play in employment when the war was over. Symbols were used comparatively to show men's and women's occupations and professions, women's progress in these areas since 1911,

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and the changing nature of the home. The book's author recommended that the reader should pay particular attention to the Isotypes, which 'are not introduced for decoration', but instead: 'if you look at them with attention you will find that they suggest all sorts of relationships between different bits of our complex society . . . It is often easier and quicker to see an argument in a picture than in words'.⁶²

Isotypes, Penguin books, ceramics, pithead baths and multiple stores were all indicative of how modernist ideas permeated design across Britain, but these were strikingly diverse, and a concern for 'Englishness' – variously interpreted – coexisted and synthesized with modernist practices derived from Europe and the USA. This was underscored by a number of government initiatives by the end of the Second World War, such as the Utility schemes and the Council of Industrial Design (COID), formed in 1944. Here modernist principles increasingly framed questions of good taste and design.

Have You Good Taste?

Between 1930 and 1951 state planning and intervention on matters of taste typified many aspects of design. This was achieved through educational policies, exhibitions, government reports and surveys, collaborative projects between manufacturers, retailers and designers, and books, magazines and journals. A defining concern was the question of 'quality'. Frequently subsumed under the heading of 'taste', the focus was on design standards

and public education in the wider context of anxiety about the economy, its vulnerability to foreign competition and the increasing importance of the domestic market. As C. L. Mowat put it, 'two things stand out in the economy of the '30s: increasing consumption and the development of the home market and consumer and service industries'.⁶³ Working-class and middle-class expenditure rose before the Second World War and resumed after 1952, but consumption patterns differed according to region, corresponding to the proportion of middle class to working class. In 1934, for example, 37.7 per cent of middle-class families were in the south-east of England and only 3.8 per cent in Northumberland and Durham.⁶⁴ From the 1930s to the early 1950s government interventions in questions of design burgeoned (particularly the Utility schemes of the war years). They included the report of Lord Gorell, who in 1932 chaired a committee examining 'the production and exhibition of well-designed articles of everyday use' on behalf of the Board of Trade.

The Gorell report was typical of attempts to 'manage' public taste and stimulate the development of good design, albeit for largely altruistic reasons. The committee comprised influential writers, concerned manufacturers, designers and critics, such as Roger Fry, Margaret Bulley, A. E. Gray, Howard Robertson and Harry Trethowan. Its aims were twofold: to examine the viability of establishing a permanent exhibition in London and organizing temporary travelling exhibitions at home and abroad, and the formation of a coordinating body to achieve this and related activities. The underlying problem was 'how best to raise the level of Industrial Art in the United Kingdom'.⁶⁵ As the report explained,

while the enforcement of a high standard by the central controlling body should do something to induce manufacturers to produce better articles, experience indicated that such influence is unlikely in present conditions to attain its object unless powerfully supported by other and more positive measures to improve the quality of design and workmanship, and to foster an intelligent appreciation of design by the public.⁶⁶

The committee's activities were constrained by the economic conditions of the early 1930s, although it believed that

This is, in our view, the psychological moment, while world trade remains so depressed, for making a special effort to improve Industrial Art. Educative propaganda will, we believe, fall on more receptive ground in these times of adversity than in times of plenty;

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and, at a period of relatively slack trade, time can profitably be occupied in careful planning and preparation for the future.⁶⁷

The most significant achievement of the Gorell report was the establishment of the Council for Art and Industry in 1933, which took on an important role, producing a number of reports, including *Design and the Designer in Industry* (1937) and *The Working Class Home: Its Furnishing and Equipment* (1937). It was a precursor to the Council of Industrial Design.

Integral to this process was the organization of a number of exhibitions by these two bodies, either directly or indirectly. Most were staged in London, although some toured Britain. Notable were *British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home* at Dorland Hall (1933), *British Art in Industry* (1935) at the Royal Academy and *Britain Can Make It* (1946) at the Victoria and Albert Museum, all in London; *Enterprise Scotland* in Edinburgh (1947); and the Festival of Britain on London's South Bank in 1951.

British Art in Industry typified these exhibitions. Organized jointly by the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), it marked a growing awareness of the importance of design, and was 'designed to show the public what an important part design plays and can still further play in the objects they habitually use and purchase'.⁶⁸ Prior to this educators, manufacturers, architects, artists and designers had debated the question of design standards in the RSA's influential magazine, the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*.⁶⁹ In the introduction to the souvenir catalogue, familiar arguments were outlined. It was claimed, for example, that

with the rise of the machine, as a means to an end, there has been a corresponding fall from favour of craftsman-made goods. The main virtue accruing from machine methods is the low cost of production unknown in the days of handicraft . . .⁷⁰

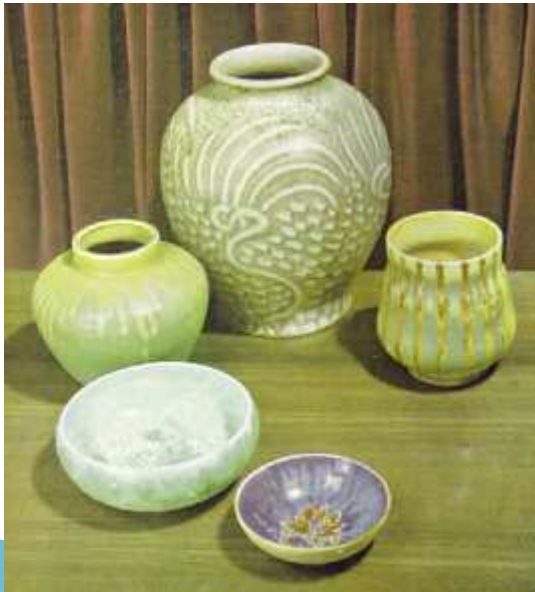
whereas crafts 'give individuality, character and charm which the machine by its very nature could not attempt to produce'.⁷¹ Because Britain had failed to reconcile these two rival approaches, 'our markets both at home and abroad . . . have been filled up with goods of foreign competitors that have readily found buyers on account of their cheapness and of the intrinsic beauty of their conception that lies behind their design and colouring'.⁷² Equally:

'British Made' once stood paramount throughout the world for quality and workmanship. To-day the world demands imagination as well as quality of workmanship and material. The follower of our national

pride has lately shown signs of wilting, only for lack of the fertilising effect of imagination.⁷³

The front cover design of a silhouetted crown with a modern sans-serif font overlaid with flat colour blocks perfectly summed up the contradictions of national identity, modernism and modernity. The inside frontispiece with 'Wedgwood blue' background mixed quirkily hand-drawn 'crowns', the initials of the Royal Academy and Royal Society of Arts, and a glamorous colour photograph of the artist and socialite Anna Zinkeisen. Posing in a stylish interior and wearing a body-sculpting evening dress, Zinkeisen was the epitome of sophistication and glamour. The photograph entitled 'Harmony in colour' used a new full-colour process called 'Vivex' (developed by British Colour Photos Ltd) to depict an array of modern goods and services: a Cubist-style travel poster, a Moderne 'club' chair, a rectilinear occasional table and, of course, Zinkeisen herself. As though on a film set, she referenced a world of modernity. But framed by Wedgwood blue, this was quite different to Hollywood style, pointing instead to a restrained form of 'good' design and taste. The products illustrated in the catalogue represented several different approaches, but common to all was an ongoing interest in decoration, particularly colour, pattern and surface texture. This was apparent both in the furniture of Betty Joel and in numerous examples of architecture. It was evident in the hand-knotted rugs for Wilton Royal Carpet Factory Ltd and the metalwork for Mappin and

Stoneware vases and bowls designed by Vera Huggins for Doulton, Lambeth, London. Displayed at the *British Art in Industry* exhibition, 1935.



Webb, as well as in decorative and figurative glassware designs produced by Keith Murray for Stevens and Williams and the stoneware ceramics designed by Vera Huggins for Doulton.

Debates about beauty and ugliness in design permeated the literature of 1930s design in Britain. In the *British Art in Industry* catalogue, there was a full-page promotion for a new book, *The Conquest of Ugliness*, edited by John de la Valette, organizing secretary of the exhibition. With a foreword by the Prince of Wales, it included essays by crucial figures in design practice and education (Gordon Russell, Betty Joel, Alison Settle, Gordon Forsyth and Harold Curwen) in support of the exhibition and aimed at 'those who take an intelligent interest in



the everyday things which surround them'.⁷⁴ Several books were published during the 1930s on this theme, notably Margaret Bulley's *Have You Good Taste? A Guide to the Appreciation of the Lesser Arts*, published in 1933 by the same publisher, Methuen.⁷⁵ Bulley had been a member of the Gorell committee, and with Roger Fry had contributed additional memoranda in the appendix to the report *On the Production and Exhibition of Articles of Good Design and Every-Day Use*.⁷⁶ Fry, for example, recommended establishing 'Laboratories of Design', which drew to some extent on his pre-war Omega Workshops, whereas Bulley proposed a new journal and a children's school of art, the latter influenced by Paul Poiret's Atelier Martine established in pre-war France. Typically astute, Fry argued that the manufacturer had lost contact with 'educated taste', and although he was able to find and use expert advice for technical matters, when it came to the 'application of art he has no guide, no clear purpose'.⁷⁷ Taking issue with the conflation of modernism with functionalism, he noted: 'Good architecture must always remain distinct from good engineering and this principle holds equally in the design of the objects of daily use'.⁷⁸ He was, however, equally critical of 'fashion', for instance, Cubist-inspired decoration:

You may find anywhere in our lower grade carpets and furniture fabrics a few s shaped curves and a few right angles scattered here and there across the surface for no intelligible reason and fulfilling no conceivable decorative purpose except to conciliate what is supposed to be the fashion.⁷⁹

When it emerged in France, Cubism was 'a coherent, consistent style' that revealed 'a distinct and definite intention', but recently 'the general producer has taken a timid and side-long glance towards it'.⁸⁰ In his memorandum, Fry identified many of the problems that design reformers had highlighted since the mid-nineteenth century; partly in response, a number of practical self-help books, such as Duncan Miller's *Interior Decorating: 'How To Do It'* and Margaret Bulley's *Have You Good Taste?*, were published.⁸¹

Bulley's book 'seeks to make a contribution towards the training of taste in regard to the lesser arts'.⁸² Good taste is determined by three main factors, 'the individual contribution, the contribution of a group or age, and the universal element'.⁸³ Appreciation of art could not be taught like other subjects, for the appeal of a beautiful object was directly through the mind to the eye and 'therefore cannot be put into words . . . Nevertheless something can be done by other means to free the springs of understanding and enjoyment and to create a receptive state of mind'.⁸⁴ Essentially a manual, Bulley's book synthesized established aesthetic rules and modernist ideas,

Frontispiece of the Royal Society of Arts exhibition catalogue, *British Art in Industry*, showing the artist and socialite Anna Zinkeisen, 1935.

with a peppering of qualifying observations – as with Fry – in relation to functionalism. Considering the history of furniture, she pointed out that a Stuart chair

is not a work of art because women wore hoops and chair seats had to be wide. Neither will a modern chair survive because it was inspired by the seat of a motor-car, exhibits a new use of steel or gives no harbour to dust.⁸⁵

Organized around comparable pairs of designs – one ‘better’ and one ‘worse’ – her argument in essence was that beauty was much more elusive than a statement of functionalism, and she firmly believed that it was possible to combine the beauty of an elaborate Queen Anne chair with the simplicity of a Le Corbusier house. She legitimized her choices and conclusions by explaining that these were subsequently endorsed by six well-known art critics or experts (Roger Fry, the directors of the Courtauld Institute of Art, the National Gallery, the Central School of Arts and Crafts and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the editor of the *Burlington Magazine*). Adding that the purpose of the book was less about making the ‘right’ choices than being provoked into ‘discrimination’ on a subject of national importance, Bulley generally veered towards the pre-Victorian. Few examples of modern design were included and still fewer were cited as good taste.

In contrast, Duncan Miller’s *Interior Decorating: ‘How To Do It’* was ‘a practical guide to decoration for people living in the twentieth century and using twentieth-century materials’.⁸⁶ Again using comparisons, he outlined principles of interior decoration and design that were increasingly informed by modernist discourses, particularly the insistence on designing for the twentieth century. Criticizing ‘fashion’, he nevertheless argued:

Nothing would surprise the designers of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century so much as the realisation that people were willingly submitting to the technical bonds to which they had to submit, and refusing to make use of modern materials.⁸⁷

Comparing interiors from the same house but different periods, 1893 and 1932 (the latter designed by Wells Coates), he made clear his commitment to the ‘zeitgeist’.

By 1937 the campaigning zeal of those like Bulley and Miller, combined with the activities of the Council for Art and Industry, culminated in the publication of the crucial report, *The Working Class Home: Its Furnishing and*



A double-page spread from Duncan Miller's *Interior Decorating*, 1937. Dining room and living room before and after alteration by Wells Coates.



Equipment.⁸⁸ This report summed up the preoccupation with public taste and everyday design in the 1930s and was a precursor of wartime planning and post-war initiatives. Its primary questions were:

How far does industrial art find expression in furniture and equipment offered at prices within the reach of the working class? What proportion of the goods which their means compel the working classes to purchase are possessed of those qualities which make up good design?⁸⁹

Making up the committee were Frank Pick, the chairman; A. E. Barnes of the High Wycombe and District Furniture Manufacturers' Federation; Elizabeth Denby, a consultant on low-rental housing; Mrs Darcy Braddell, an adviser on domestic planning; J. T. Davis, the Director of the Co-operative Wholesale Society; and A. S. Hoskin of the Board of Trade. Again the report debated definitions of 'design', and concluded that in its broadest sense design involved planning in relation to function and form. The report aimed to show how a working-class home could be furnished using well-designed products. The average working-class family income in London in 1929–30 was found to be £3 18s., but based on the assumption that wages were higher in the capital, it was decided to use £3 as the basic figure. While acknowledging that homes were furnished over a period of time, the report

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aimed to offer guidance in furnishing a home 'at one plunge'; thus it was accepted that the minimum requirements of a household would be expenditure of £40, although this was eventually found to be inadequate. In fact the *minimum standard* for a family of four living in a two-bedroom house with living room, small kitchen, bathroom and wc was £51 8s. 4d, whereas the *desirable standard* required an additional expenditure of £16 or £17, and to furnish a house with a parlour needed a further £30.⁹⁰ The report was in many ways a remarkable example of the 'hands-on' approach of these design reformers, and the logical extension of the activities of the Council for Art and Industry. By drawing on the expertise of those involved in design in all its stages – retailing (Davis), manufacturing (Barnes), housing (Denby) and domestic planning (Darcy Braddell), and with a skilled chair in Pick, a dedicated reformer and modernist – the report noted:

It is possible to furnish a working class dwelling in a variety of ways with due regard to good design. It is as we thought, that good design does not necessarily enhance the cost of the article; in fact, there is a tendency in some directions for it to reduce the cost.⁹¹

Taste remained a perplexing issue, however. It was especially difficult to interpret public taste if popular lines exhibited 'an accumulation of patterns which is often conflicting and tiresome . . . [with a] general reluctance to look at anything bare and plain'.⁹² Showing some perception of popular taste, the committee 'felt, however, that it would be unreasonable to expect the average working class home, or any other class of home, to be furnished with the uncompromising severity which some modern tastes dictate'.⁹³ In its conclusions the report was optimistic, since it had shown that the opportunity of living 'in pleasant, even beautiful surroundings' was not solely down to economics. Like previous exercises to improve public taste, its impact on popular taste was hard to judge, certainly during the 1930s. Instead, it was during the Second World War that the report's detailed lists of essential equipment for a working-class home proved most useful, and its guidance in matters of good taste and design potentially influential.

Design and War

Between 1941 and 1951 the overriding priorities in terms of design were supplying goods and housing to those most in need and planning the post-war economy, but matters of taste, design standards and education remained important, as demonstrated by the formation of the Council of Industrial Design in 1944 and the organization of the *Britain Can Make It* (1946) and

Enterprise Scotland (1947) exhibitions. Particularly important between 1943 and 1948 was the implementation of the Utility schemes, in which government controlled specific industries and raw materials so as to prioritize the supply of goods to those affected by bombing. Design standards became critical, although, as Matthew Denney has argued in respect of Utility furniture, no one approach or set of theories dominated. Indeed, it was possible to recognize both modernist and Arts and Crafts design features alongside the more typical reproduction styles, especially after regulations were loosened in 1948.⁹⁴ The designer and manufacturer Gordon Russell was made chair of the Furniture Panel in 1943 with a brief to develop a new range of designs. He had been involved in getting the first range of designs into production and in planning for further ranges; in 1946 he declared 'that to raise the whole standard of furniture for the mass of the people wasn't a bad war job'.⁹⁵ There had been a mixed reception for the first range of furniture launched in 1942; these designs were the result of the combined expertise of the advisory committee on furniture, which included manufacturers, retailers, experts on low-cost housing, the Council for Art and Industry and designers. Visually the furniture looked back to Arts and Crafts and vernacular idioms, and also referenced the popular styles of the 1930s, particularly Tudorbethan – evident in the use of dark mahogany and oak for panelling (solid wood was used for the frames and veneered hardboard for the panels). It also revealed a simplicity borne of economy (decoration was minimal, evident mainly in the handles), but also a more obvious engagement with modernity, thanks to changing tastes.

Wartime hairdresser: Steiner's Salon occupying an air-raid shelter so as to carry on business uninterrupted, early 1940s.



An early initiative of the Utility schemes, introduced in 1941, was clothing. It aimed to 'produce the nation's essential new clothing using as little power, labour and material as possible'.⁹⁶ Early designs were

considered too standardized, and although in 1942 there had been attempts to raise standards of design by employing a group of well-known designers (for example, Hardy Amies, Edward Molyneux, Bianca Mosa and Digby Morton), on the whole manufacturers had not taken them up. Wartime fashion has been described as 'uniform', but the Utility schemes concentrated and designated industries in order to free up labour for essential war work. This tended to favour large

companies that used mass-production techniques, such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society and Marks and Spencer, which had always depended on these processes to keep prices low.

At any rate, fashion cultures (not just clothing) conspired to subvert standards of good taste and design during the Second World War and the post-war austerity period, as women in particular glamorized their appearance. Individual wartime garments may have been boxlike with a sharp military line, but the finished 'look' was much more complex, pointing to an exaggerated femininity at a moment of intense masculinization. As Pat Kirkham argues, as the government 'exhorted all women to look as good as possible', women's magazines advised women that beauty was a duty, and make-up became widely used.⁹⁷ Styles owed much to the cinema: highly glamorous wartime images were completed by complex, elaborate hairstyles – made up of rolls, waves and cuts – topped by beautifully decorative hats. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, design organizations such as the Council of Industrial Design (COID), in tandem with the Board of Trade, expected women to consume, but to do so in ways that were deemed disciplined and responsible.⁹⁸ The essentially paternalistic attitudes and activities of these government bodies were nowhere more apparent than in relation to Christian Dior's New Look. Introduced into Britain some months after its launch in Paris in February 1947, the new fashion for voluminous long skirts was the antithesis of responsible consumption. It used up to 20 yards of material but required only four coupons, whereas a man's suit using three-and-a-quarter yards of material required 26 coupons (such were the inconsistencies of the residual Utility regulations).⁹⁹ It was also nostalgic, looking back to the nineteenth century, and according to some of the women MPs who entered Parliament following Labour's landslide victory in 1945, it threatened the gains made towards sexual equality, and was 'only acceptable amongst a limited class of persons and led to waste of material'.¹⁰⁰ Consumption was to be managed and rational; increasingly, this meant the promotion of goods that conformed to a particular design ethos – one that was essentially modernist. The vagaries of fashion generally, and the New Look in particular, were well beyond the strictures of modernist good taste and design, which not only became consolidated during this immediate post-war period, but also increasingly orthodox.

Design by Committee

Explaining the rationale for the founding of the Council of Industrial Design at its inaugural meeting on 12 January 1945, Hugh Dalton, President of the Board of Trade, cited 'a revolution of industrial design' in the USA over

the previous 15 years, which had 'made many of our exports old-fashioned and less acceptable'.¹⁰¹ In order to give Britain an edge in an increasingly competitive world market, he argued, 'we must, therefore, make a sustained effort to improve design, and to bring industry to recognise the practical importance of this task'.¹⁰² To make improvements in design, it was crucial to 'help industry . . . appreciate the need for good design and the training and employment of good designers', and equally 'you must encourage a discriminating home market which will give a firm basis for good exports'.¹⁰³ The economic argument was persuasive. Dalton claimed that of pre-war exports totalling £400 million, half of these were affected by design. Speaking to the members of the CORD, which included Thomas Barlow (Chair), Gordon Russell, Allan Walton, Josiah Wedgwood and Kenneth Clark, he promised:

If you succeed in your task, in a few years' time every side of our daily life will be better for your work. Every kitchen will be an easier place to work in; every home a pleasanter place to live in . . . Our export trade, and our volume of business at home, will both be the greater if our goods are planned and made, with skill and imagination, to meet the user's real need, and to give pleasure in the using.¹⁰⁴

The practical outcome of this rallying call was more government intervention in design, culminating in a number of important exhibitions and reports in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Education was also widely recognized as being critical in pursuing a policy of good design, and the Council reported on 'The Training of the Industrial Designer' between February and May 1946. In an early draft, a crucial problem was identified by a manufacturer from the Midlands:

There is a difficulty in finding industrial designers in this country who, in addition to the necessary 'flair', have a general knowledge of problems of production. There appears to be no standard of industrial designers; anybody can call himself one, and the qualification claimed may mean anything or nothing.¹⁰⁵

There were many proposals in this early version of the report, which aimed at tackling first the training of designers in provincial art schools, technical colleges and regional colleges, and secondly the relationship of these to each other and to the Royal College of Art in London. But by the time the final report appeared in May 1946 there were significant omissions. Whereas the earlier version had examined questions of standards, comparability

and responsibilities around Britain under a heading 'Regional Grouping of Art Schools', the final report was much watered down. A handwritten comment in the margin of the early version summed it up, asking 'how much is this our affair?'¹⁰⁶ It is difficult to explain this apparent shift except by noting that those in London, such as the COID, and those involved in design in the provinces were frequently at loggerheads. A particularly good example of this came with the attempt to set up a Pottery Design Centre in Stoke-on-Trent in late 1947. Characteristically, the pottery industry took great exception to outside interference by the COID in attempting to establish a design centre. As a writer in the *Staffordshire Sentinel* put it:

If you were to suggest that a design centre would be a good thing for the pottery industry you are ipso facto telling the potters that their china and earthenware are abominable and that they don't know how to run their own businesses.¹⁰⁷

The Council's activities in organizing exhibitions were perhaps more successful. Historians have discussed *Britain Can Make It* in some detail, but the ways in which the COID attempted to reach beyond the south-east of England are less well known.¹⁰⁸ To compensate for the fact that 65 per cent of visitors to *Britain Can Make It* came from within 25 miles of London, and to spread the message of the COID more widely (that exports were paramount, good design crucial and thoughtful consumption essential), the Council planned smaller exhibitions around Britain that aimed to link with regional or local industries.¹⁰⁹

From the outset the Council had established a Scottish Committee, which planned its own exhibition when it became clear that *Britain Can Make It* would not travel north of the border. *Enterprise Scotland* was held in the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh in August 1947; the architect was Basil Spence with James Gardner as chief designer. In the foreword to the catalogue, Stafford Cripps explained that the exhibition would play 'a most valuable part in the nation's export drive'.¹¹⁰ The exhibition was divided into four sections, each fulfilling a specific purpose: 'Scotland Yesterday' was introductory to the whole exhibition; 'The Country' displayed sports



The 'Hall of Pinnacles' at the *Enterprise Scotland* exhibition held in the Royal Scottish Museum in 1947. Designed by James Gardner and Basil Spence.

goods, hotel equipment, tartans and souvenirs; 'Scotland Today' displayed commodities; and 'Scotland Tomorrow' showed plans for new towns, housing schemes, hydro-electric projects, etc. As in *Britain Can Make It*, the design was visually striking, particularly the 'Hall of Pinnacles' by Gardner and Spence displaying 'Scotland Today' commodities. Lightweight metal stands had a modern 'international' feel to them, but contrasting with this, the catalogue emphasized 'national' design qualities: pattern and intricacy, in particular, were described as 'Scottish'. Reiterating this, the exhibition included a number of traditional 'Scottish' items such as tartans and Fair Isle, although admittedly with a modern twist. Like its London predecessor, the exhibition had an educative slant on design. To reinforce this commitment to education, it was reconfigured as *Enterprise Travels*, embarking on a 1,000-mile tour of Scotland, beginning in Hamilton on 21 January 1948 and travelling to its finish in Oban on 22 May. A total of 456,000 people visited *Enterprise Scotland*, and 18,130 visited *Enterprise Travels*. Conferences were also organized and there were special events for schoolchildren, including a film entitled *A Question of Taste*.

This was a strategic moment in British design and economic development, but as Woodham argued, the COID's view of good design was based on conviction rather than evidence, and therefore unlikely to persuade the public, manufacturer or retailer.¹¹¹ These convictions were increasingly informed by modernist principles, and manufacturers in particular were sceptical about modernist aesthetics and practices. In order to overcome this, the COID organized a number of smaller exhibitions in the English regions, with a further one in Wales, as well as Design Weeks and Design Fairs in Newcastle upon Tyne, Burslem, Manchester and Cardiff. The aim

Sheffield on its Mettle exhibition, 1948, organized by the Council of Industrial Design.



'Going Modern, but Staying British'

was 'to arouse and maintain interest in the provinces and to supplement the Council's activities in London'.¹¹² To involve manufacturers directly there were links with local industries: for example, steel and cutlery in *Sheffield on its Mettle* (1948) and woollen textiles in Bradford, *Story of Wool* (1949). These continued the didactic approach of the London and Edinburgh exhibitions, with displays showing simple everyday objects of good design. A display on taste at *Sheffield on its Mettle* tried to dispel the idea that the COID was pre-occupied with only one definition of good design. Another display at the Design Fair in Manchester City Art Gallery (June 1948) aimed to show that taste varied by looking at five people and their choices of five different chairs: somewhat stereotypically, Mr Higgins the lorry driver chose a Windsor chair described as 'good and honest'. Another display forming part of the Design Fair in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (April 1948) showed goods costing not more than £1, purchased a few days before the opening of the exhibition, as an illustration of good design. This directly addressed criticisms of the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition, which recommended designs that were not available in the shops.

Alongside the organization of fairs, weeks and exhibitions, the COID planned Design Centres focusing on particular types of goods and materials: a Rayon Design Centre had been set up by 1948, and further ones were planned for silk, wool and carpets. By 1948 the Council felt that there was considerable evidence that greater interest was being taken in 'industrial design . . . by all classes'.¹¹³ It was at this stage, too, that its aims were restated as Gordon Russell succeeded Thomas Barlow as Chairman. Russell brought his particular knowledge of the furniture panel of the Utility schemes to the job. He was committed to improving the quality of furniture design and his appointment at the COID was entirely consistent with this. A useful insight into Russell's views in 1947 can be seen in a children's Puffin book, *The Story of Furniture*, co-written with the Czech architect Jacques Groag. In this, it is clear that education was paramount, since they advised: 'If you are going to get good furniture when you grow up you will have to take a little trouble.'¹¹⁴ They then summarized the essence of good furniture design, aiming to instil basic principles, and at the same time involve children directly: 'Will you help to show that in the new Britain nothing made by hand or by machine need be ugly, unless men and women are too careless, too stupid, or too indifferent to insist on a high standard?'¹¹⁵ Although the authors argued that 'There is no reason why machine-made things should be shoddy or ugly . . . It all depends on the point of view of the people making them, the people selling them, the people buying them', Russell's Arts and Crafts philosophies inevitably spilled over:

It is broadly true to say that people who used at one time to make furniture by hand were interested in their product before everything, whereas many people who make it by machine are interested first in profits . . . You cannot get much pleasure out of anything which no-one took pleasure in making.¹¹⁶

The Story of Furniture was peppered with advice such as this, mixing Arts and Crafts and modernist principles. In relation to the use of metal in furniture-making, it was proposed that pleasant furniture could be made for domestic purposes from metal, but 'it must not try to look just like wood furniture'. Instead, the authors advised that metal allows 'the same beautiful precision and fit that you see in an airplane engine'.¹¹⁷ Concluding with a series of illustrative comparisons (Margaret Bulley's *Have You Good Taste?* for the under-12s), children were asked, 'Isn't the simple sideboard nicer than the overdressed one?' and 'Which hall-stand do you prefer?'¹¹⁸

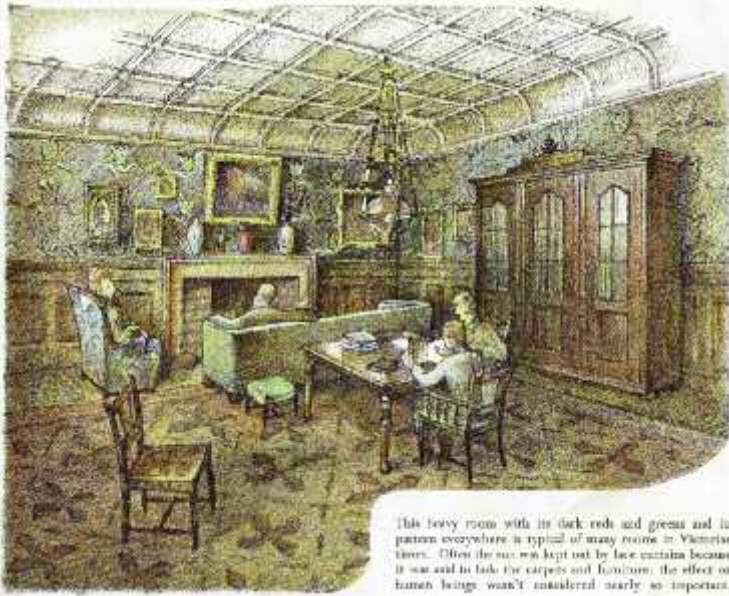
In the same year and written in a context of post-war reflection, John Gloag defined 'the contemporary interpretation of the English tradition' as 'exuberant and vivid' and 'changeless in character'.¹¹⁹ With disregard for national unity, he focused on England, rather than Britain, reinforcing the view that the 'real English' tradition in design was the result of the enterprise and skill of gifted individuals, including Frank Pick, Gordon Russell, Wells Coates, Maxwell Fry, Keith Murray, Dick Russell, Marion Pepler and Paul Nash. Their designs in steel, plywood, aluminium, plastics, glass and textile formed one of 'the threads of the English tradition run[ning] back to medieval England, back to the wisdom of men who worked with simple tools, few materials and abundant ingenuity'.¹²⁰ Articulating a modernist preoccupation with the 'zeitgeist' or the spirit of the age, Gloag believed that by the end of the 1920s design had begun to be understood as 'industrial'.

Gloag's account rehearsed a modernist history of design first delineated in England by Nikolaus Pevsner in *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1936), except that his 'story' was peopled with British designers and architects. The antecedents of an 'English' tradition were to be found in the preceding 600 years.¹²¹ The golden age of design, defined by him from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth, saw the bringing together in a 'coherent relationship the form of everything that was made, through the universal comprehension and use of rules of proportion'.¹²² During this period there was no 'muddling of proportions and ornamentation', but instead 'graciousness of form while preserving that basic English characteristic, common sense, which demanded stability and delighted in good workmanship'.¹²³ In the intervening years, between 1830 and 1930, there had been a number of deviations from these essential rules, notably Art Nouveau, but a character-



The Story of Furniture, children's book co-written by Gordon Russell and Jacques Groag, 1947. The 'preferred' modern interior.

Now, you see, we welcome the sun and we have come to regard furniture as part of the equipment for a pleasant life rather than as something to impress our friends. And we don't have more than is necessary, so that there is more room to move about. We have discovered that people are more important than things.



This heavy room with its dark reds and greens and its pattern everywhere is typical of many rooms in Victorian times. Often the sun was kept out by lace curtains because it was said to fade the carpets and furniture; the effect on human beings wasn't considered nearly so important.

The 'overdressed' interior of *The Story of Furniture* by Russell and Groag.

istic of the twentieth century, he argued, was the restatement of these rules in industrial production. Citing the locomotives of the Great Western Railway and the hulls and superstructures of the Wallasey ferry boats by way of ancestry, he proposed (in a manner not dissimilar to Le Corbusier's references to motor cars and aeroplanes in *Vers une architecture*) that today the contemporary expression of the 'English' tradition could be discerned, for example, in the rolling stock, posters, stations and equipment for the London Passenger Transport Board. Acknowledging that the 'English' tradition had been 'masked by a false "Olde England"', it was 'alight and alive today all about us', and could be found in glass and steel bus shelters, radio sets, prefabricated homes, but also in Keith Murray's decorative glass, in the textile designs of Nash and Pepler, and the ceramic designs of Milner Gray and Eric Ravilious. In these, 'the spirit of England resides: exuberant and vivid as ever; different in execution but changeless in character'.¹²⁴

Gloag's exegesis of identity and design hinted at the complexities of modern design in mid-twentieth century Britain. There was an insistent longing for an idealized 'Englishness' rooted in the countryside and dependent on traditional design values, but nevertheless dependent on new technologies (the development of crafts and the design of the interwar suburban house were examples); there was a continual interest in eighteenth-century design reworked for a contemporary market (Josiah Wedgwood being an exemplar); and alongside this were the market-driven design practices stimulated by us example (Marks and Spencer provided a case study). In addition, popular decorative design idioms were applied to a plethora of mass-produced goods that engaged with notions of modernity; and modernist theories were systematically disseminated by public and private institutions, organizations and individuals. Parallel and interwoven were debates about 'good' design and taste, abstraction and figuration in design, internationalism and nationalism, which were stimulated to some degree by the impact of Continental modernism on British, but not English, design. Design thus became a tool of economic recovery in the 1930s and '40s, while modern design practices and theories spread beyond London. The moulding of public taste was to become increasingly significant as the period of austerity gave way to economic stability and expansion, and the consumer had more disposable income, more goods from which to choose and greater opportunities to consume.

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