Danish Design: From Its Famous Past to the Present: The Melancholy Fate Of Danish Modern Style
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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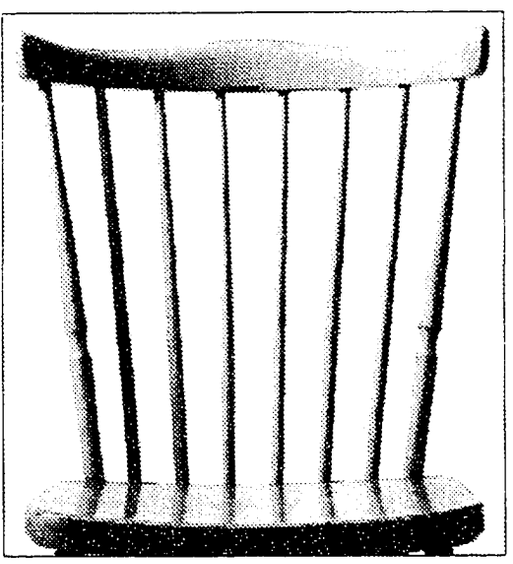
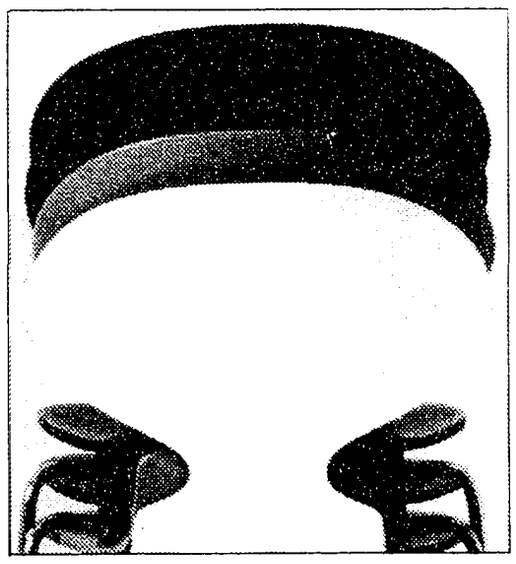
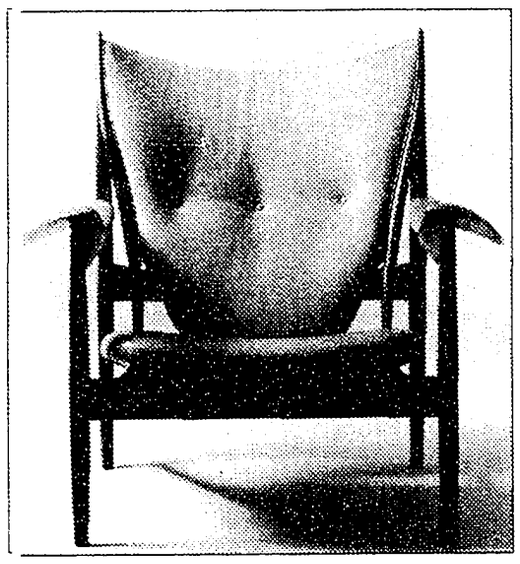
Danish Design: From Its Famous Past to the Present







The Classics Of 40's and 50's

What's Available In Stores Today

The View From Denmark

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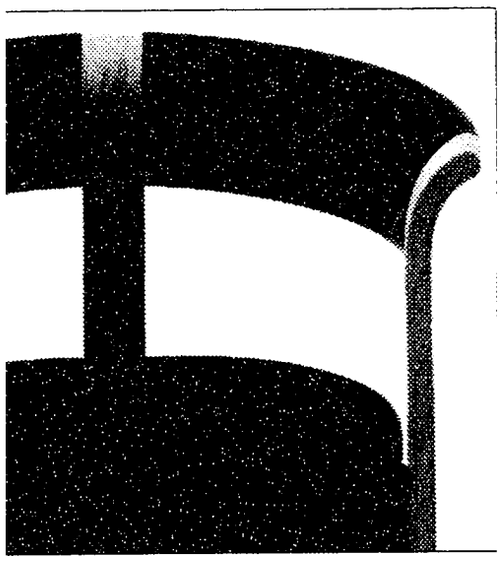
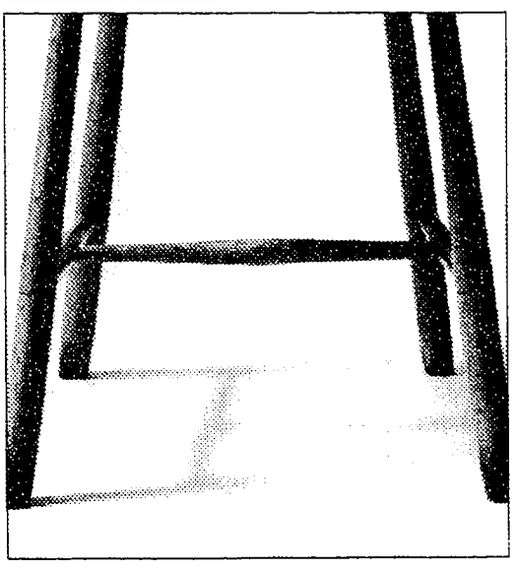
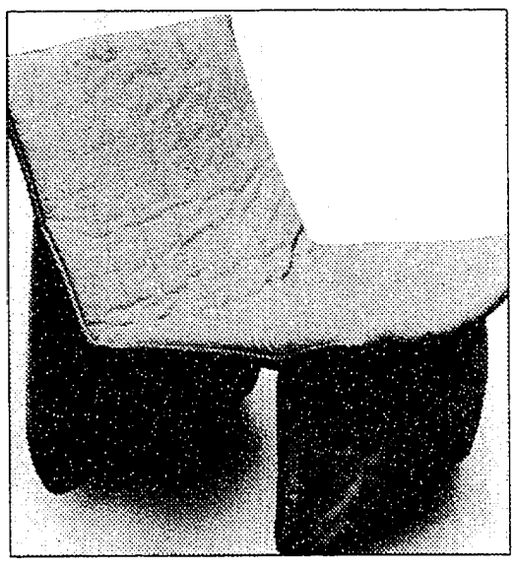
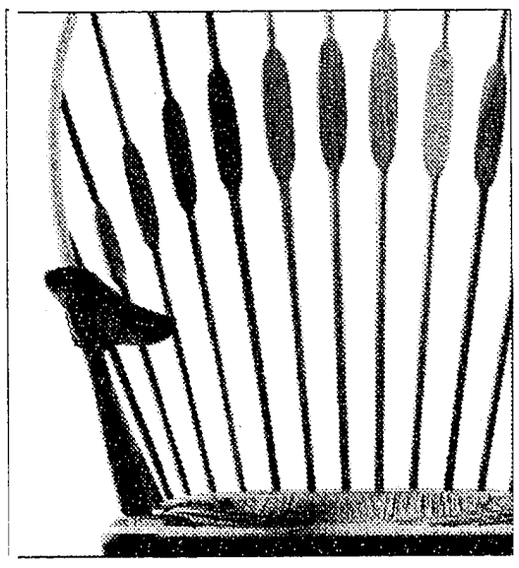
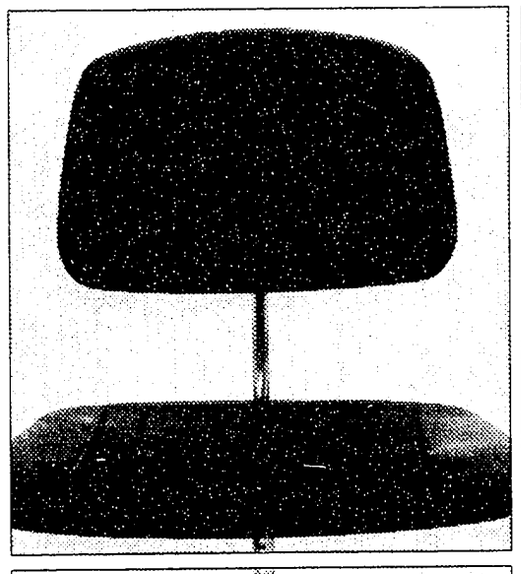
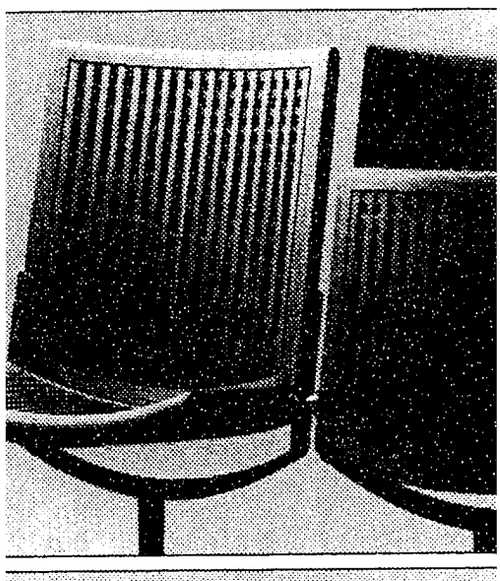


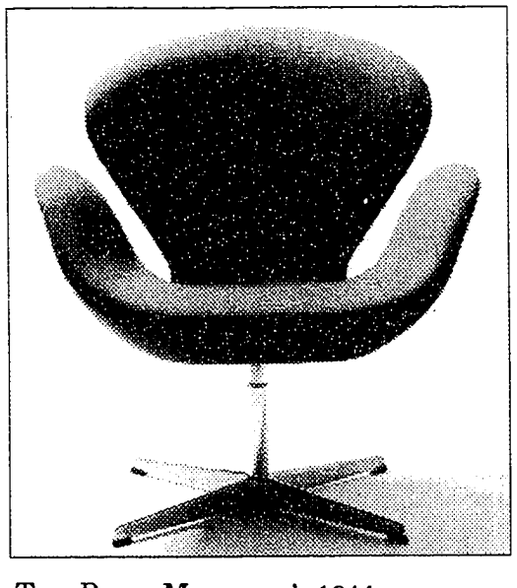




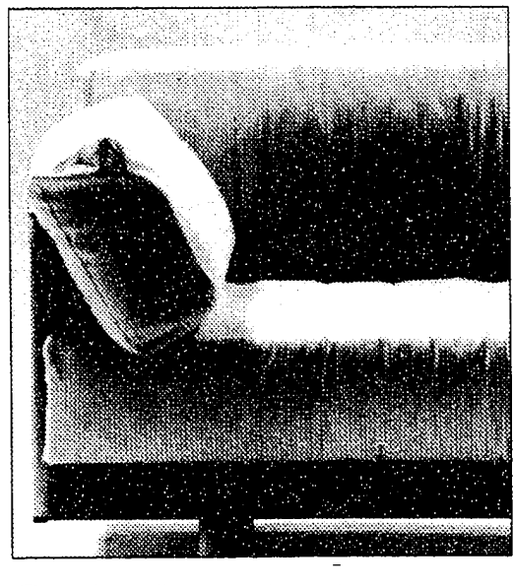






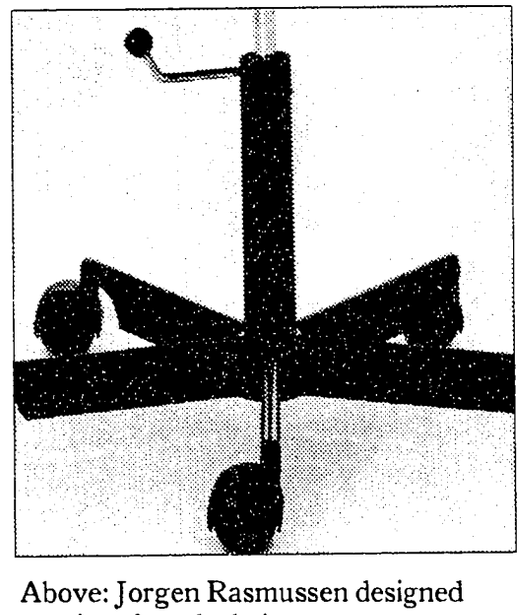


Top: Borge Mogensen's 1944 beechwood, classical Windsor-type chair is no longer sold. Above: Arne Jacobsen's 1960 upholstered Swan Chair is $775 list from I.C.F.

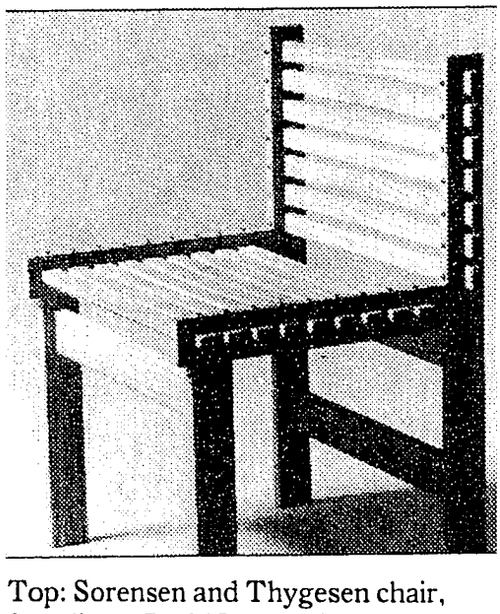


Top: Arne Jacobsen's laminated wood 1953 Ant Chair is $115 list at I.C.F. Center: Kebe Mobler's 1975 Ribbon Chair by Niels Bendtsen, is $125, Museum of Modern Art Bookstore.

Top: Finn Juhl's 1949 Chieftain Chair, $4,000 list; center: Hans Wegner's 1947 Peacock Chair, $2,700 list, both at D.S.I. Bottom: Niels Bendtsen's sofa for Komfort is not sold here yet.



Above: Jorgen Rasmussen designed a series of work chairs on casters with adjustable backs and seats for Kevi in 1960. Workbench sells some versions for about $120.



Top: Sorensen and Thygesen chair, $416 list at Rudd International. Center: Poul Kjaerholm's 1978 theater seating. Above: Gunnar Aagaard Andersen's experimental 1979 ash chair.

The Melancholy Fate Of Danish Modern Style

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WHATEVER happened to Danish Modern? Where has all the furniture gone that was such a tidal wave of good taste and good design in the 1950's? Danish dominated every prestigious design exhibition and profitable furniture promotion; it was in all the best model rooms, as an important part of the Scandinavian design supremacy of the years just after the Second World War. Danish products were the cachet of the homes of the artistic and intellectual elite, the darlings of museums and markets everywhere. Handsome and utilitarian, they stressed simplicity, logic and truth to life, structure and materials. Danish Modern was the war-delayed promise of a better and more beautiful world.

What happened, of course, is what happens to all home furnishings and consumer products — they went out of style. Or more accurately, they were supplanted by other styles, because the best Danish Modern is beyond style in its unassertive timelessness. After being widely acclaimed and acquired, it was copied and cheapened and then replaced by those whose business is marketable novelty and change.

Something with a familiar resemblance is still around in endlessly bowdlerized versions that seem to have been spawned spontaneously in dentists' waiting rooms, in the rear sections of surburban furniture stores and in standardized motels. The best descendants have filtered down to mass-produced furnishings for the middle class, sold through design-conscious retail outlets that stress natural woods and the healthful life. The original, superbly crafted Hans Wegner and Finn Juhl pieces are certain to last a lifetime, wherever they are.

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But the double kick of rejection was finally given by the counterculture, which would have none of the earnest establishment image of Scandinavian design, and the new culture, for which only the shocking is chic. That plunged Danish Modern into the indisputable category of the passé.

Not surprisingly, the Danes are less than happy about this turn of taste, particularly those who deal in the design, marketing or national image business. Their concern has led to a special event this summer, held under official Government auspices, called the Danish Design Cavalcade, a series of seminars, trips and informational briefings intended to make it clear that design is alive and well in Denmark today and Danish designers are still producing beautiful and useful things.

Part of the problem is undoubtedly the fact that there is a lot more design competition in the home furnishings field in the 1980's than there was in the 1950's. At that time, Scandinavia and Italy were the source of the most interesting new ideas. But those standards are being met almost everywhere now. And with the general rise in design sophistication, there is also a tendency to wear out styles quickly.

Some of those who experienced the 1950's firsthand are convinced that the Danish design dominance of that time owed as much to the spirit of one man as to the excellence of the product. Just Lunning, who headed George Jensen in New York with a fine-tuned combination of taste and daring, made the famous Fifth Avenue corner store synonymous with the new and the beautiful. (Even the building is hard to find now; after the famous silver Jensen plaque was removed, the structure was stripped of its limestone facing for an anonymous, all-purpose "modernization.")

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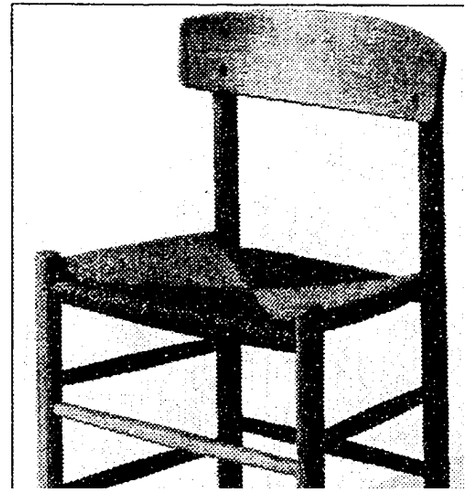
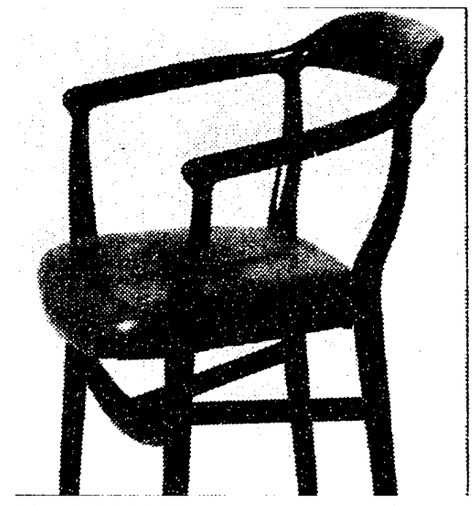
The best appeared first at Jensen's, to become the wedding gifts of choice and most coveted possessions of several generations of purchasers. The Jensen silver box rivaled Tiffany's blue box in status and surpassed it in the design distinction of its contents. Just Lunning was the not-very-grisée éminence, the patron and promoter who commissioned and supported the finest Danish work. When he died in 1965, Danish design lost its most quietly charming and persuasive and consummately knowledgeable spokesman.

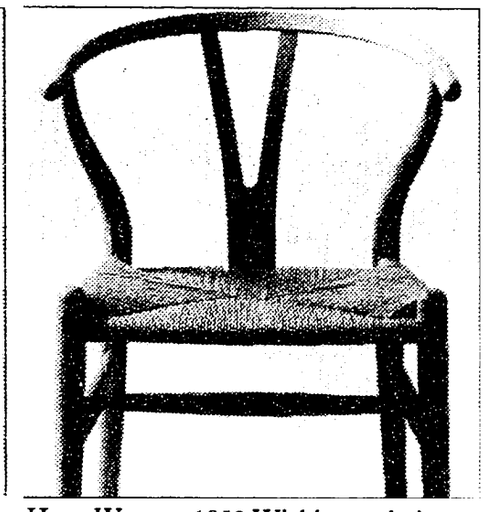
But the story of Danish Modern begins long before the 1950's, when it reached its high point of international recognition and astute promotion. Danish design was part of the modern movement, although its development was less of a revolution in style and structure than a slow, careful evolution devoted to matching traditional furniture-making skills to the needs and tastes of modern life. The Danish avant-garde started as part of the European functionalist movement of the 1920's.



Borge Mogensen wood chair with woven seat was designed in 1947.



Finn Juhl 1944 rosewood armchair was in the cabinetmaker tradition.



Hans Wegner 1950 Wishbone chair, now machine made, $300 list at D.S.I.

Released from historic references, Danish designers sought simple forms directly expressive of purpose. They aimed at a "natural" vocabulary of form that would retain the "intrinsic" value of materials — notably wood. Ethical considerations became as important as esthetic standards; this furniture was supposed to bring a useful beauty and higher standard of living to a modern democratic society. Unlike the products of the Bauhaus, which were far more radically oriented toward a machine esthetic, Danish furniture never renounced its handcraft tradition. In fact, craft remained the anchor that provided suitable standards of design when other considerations were rejected. Art was always synonymous with craft and skill.

In 1924, the architect Kaare Klint was appointed to head a new class in furniture design at the Royal Academic School of Architecture. His systematic reduction of furniture structure to its most basic and elementary parts, achieved through a thoughtful analysis of use, influenced an entire generation of Danish architects and designers through the 1930's. The simple pieces he produced, which seemed so revolutionary 50 years ago, are the direct antecedents of everything that followed.

In 1930, a series of annual competitions for new furniture designs was begun by the Danish Cabinetmakers Guild. This encouraged the development of experimental prototypes that were to be put into more general production later, in the 1940's. The collaboration of architect and cabinetmaker, of design and craft, remained characteristic of the Danish product, and because relatively small quantities were made, the line between handcraft and industry was never very sharply drawn. The transition from hand production to assembly-line production took place after World War II, as the market for Danish design grew.

The furniture of the architect Finn Juhl that was so highly prized in the 1950's — and is still so handsome now — was actually developed a decade earlier. By 1945, working with the cabinetmaker Niels Vodder, Juhl had established the suavely sculptured wooden frames, with elegantly shaped leather or upholstered seats and backs treated as separately articulated parts, that are so characteristic of his work.

This style became more elegantly extreme in the 1950's. One piece by Hans Wegner, which was known internationally simply as "the chair," was a stripped down version of traditional forms brought gracefully up to date; it was first produced in 1949 for the cabinetmaker Johannes Hansen. The tactile elegance of these pieces is still unsurpassed.

It was not until the 1950's that a machine esthetic based on industrial materials flowered in Denmark, most notably in the work of the architect Arne Jacobsen. Characteristically, however, he stayed with curved and flowing shapes. The first models of his steel and plywood chairs were made in 1952, and the famous "egg" and "swan" chairs of 1957, with upholstered shells of synthetic materials, represented a breakthrough in factory techniques.

Poul Kjaerholm's steel and woven reed chairs were no less appealing for their straight lines; they bridged the gap between the warmth of craft and the cool elegance of the machine — in a typically Danish product.

The 60's saw more laminated woods, plastic and technologically advanced assembly techniques. But the furniture always had the look of something meant to please the eye and hand. Only one notable exception — a chair of runny blobs of sprayed urethane foam that was not the work of an architect but of a painter, Gunnar Aagaard Andersen — managed to be fashionably revolting and to join the Juhl, Wegner, Jacobsen and Kjaerholm examples in the design collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

The resistance to transient esthetic kicks, to departing from all traditional norms, was probably the real reason for the decline of Danish Modern among the style-setters; those carefully crafted or machined classics just don't say "now." Or even a definite enough "then." The furniture that says now is inflatable or industrial, made of cardboard or carpeting. It is admired to the degree that it shocks or outrages, is trendy, trivial or nostalgic. Novelty and camp are the preferred values.

Since Danish Modern is none of the above, it is currently nowhere. Its elegantly understated esthetic is based on inadmissable elitist values. It is totally old hat — or old chair.

Today, who wants timeless form or craft in the manner of Chippendale or Hepplewhite? Good taste is for suburban squares. Since this kind of design is neither eccentric nor ephemeral enough to be revived, neither fun nor fashion, the Danish second coming has not yet come. But give it time. Like the Victoriana in the attic, it will all be rediscovered again.