

Contemporary Style

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The 1951 Festival of Britain, which was held halfway between the two New York World's Fairs of 1939 and 1964, constituted a cultural barometer of modern design at mid-century that came to be known as Contemporary Style (also Mid-Century Modern). In 1949 King George VI rang out an enthusiastic pronouncement: "As we look forward to the year 1951, each of us can share in the anticipation of an event which may be outstanding in our lives." Such post-war optimism surrounding the Festival of Britain echoed Henry Cole and Prince Albert at the Festival of All Nations at London's Crystal Palace exactly a century earlier. Abram Games's graphic images on postage stamps and patriotic posters conveyed the spirit of what King George called a "pride in our past . . . confidence in the future." It was a future to be driven by advances in science.

Where late 19th century European design styles in furniture, home interiors and graphics highlighted color and forms derived from nature, Contemporary Style featured an unknown world of forms based on scientific advances in molecular biology, especially the study of crystals, and the structure of atoms and molecules. In fine art, surrealist automatism, microscopic-like biomorphic forms also appeared in works by artists such as Joan Miro, Alexander Calder, Harry Bertoia and Isamu Noguchi, all of who inspired or actually produced works in both fine art as well as design.

Other key elements in Contemporary Design include a growing confidence in the design potential of new synthetic and industrial materials available in part by wartime production technology, a robust post-war economy, and renewed consumer confidence.

Designers responding to these forces include Charles and Ray Eames, Brooks Stevens, in the U.S.; the Scandinavian designers Poul Henningsen, the Saarinens, and Arne Jacobsen; and Marianne Straub's textiles, and Ernest Race and Robin and Lucienne Day in the UK. Race's military training, for example, provided him with a thorough understanding of the possibilities of new materials and production technologies. Recalling Alexander Calder's linear wire sculptures in space, Race's *Antelope Chair*, featured at the Festival of Britain, employs biomorphic molded plywood and enameled steel wire, brought into an affordable, whimsical, and ultimately user-friendly form. Contemporary Style, then, provided a viable alternative to the serious, hard-edged formalist functionalism in modernism, and created a new visual expression of dynamic intersections among science, art and design.

See:

Holberton, Merrell. *Austerity to Affluence: British Art & Design 1945–1962*, London: Merrell Holberton, 1997

John Woodham. "Festival of Britain," *A Dictionary of Modern Design*. Oxford U. Press, 2004, pp. 146-148.

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