

Scandinavian design

A commitment to natural materials, organic forms

Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and, to a lesser extent, Iceland, have a long history of design prominence. Dating back to 1900, when Viking revival and art nouveau styles made a splash at the Paris Exposition, Scandinavian-designed products have found enthusiastic and loyal customers the world over.

Though Nordic styles have evolved over the years, most Americans have come to think of Scandinavian design as the look so popular internationally during the 1950s, the culmination of innovative, functional principles reaching back to about 1930. Utilitarian in concept, the style's forms were simple but refined.

For all the success of the '50s look, the world — and the Scandinavian nations themselves — have moved on to other design concepts and styles. Other European nations, especially Italy, came on strong in the design field in the 1960s, after their economies shook off the remaining ravages of World War II.

Then, too, within the Nordic nations, coordinated design activities which once involved artists and industries tended to dissolve during the troubled '60s and '70s, as cultural and economic values were re-examined.

The new generation of designers, wrote Norwegian museum director Jan-Lauritz Opstad, "was no longer solely interested in the right form and correct functional characteristics of the individu-

al object, nor was it so set on the thought of making good consumer products intended for the home. Instead, it focused on the public environment (and) believed that industrial production should aim to satisfy the needs of all, not just those who can afford to buy products."

For the remainder of the 1980s, suggested Swedish design director Lennart Linkvist, there does seem to be a dream of enriching functional industrial products, including glass, textiles and furniture, with a new artistic sensibility.

"We may find that designers are able to impart a new poetic and sensual dimension to necessary everyday goods," he said.

From about the time of the 1900 Paris Exposition, tradition and innovation have been twin concerns of Nordic designers. So strong has been the Scandinavian tenet that design should reflect the fundamental values of the Scandinavian people that the director of the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design said: "Design expresses our national identity in a material form."

GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATE and a number of social/political factors all have influenced the design of Scandinavian products. Isolated from the rest of Europe until fairly recently, the region provided a foundation for special design features.

"In the past," wrote Swedish author/critic Ul-Hard At Segerstad, "impulses from the leading cultural nations on the continent passed only very slowly through the filter of geographic distance and poverty, and a great deal of time passed before they were adapted to the harsher conditions of the North."

Far more important to Nordic design, he maintained, was a fusion of the warring peasant and craft culture of the late 19th century (with its utilitarian ideas springing from harsh conditions) to industrial efficiency and socially oriented functionalism in these nations.

Within the group of five nations, however, geographical differences have created varied design identities. Early in the century, peninsular Denmark found appeal in the arts and crafts movement of England.

Norway, where topography splits the nation into hundreds of small communities along fjord and valleys, has been a leader in sophisticated crafts.

Finland, because it stands in a political and cultural crossfire between East and West, boasts an "art for art's sake" design tradition assertively independent from its four Nordic neighbors.

Sweden's location places it in contact with Russian and German design trends and related production development.

Climate is another major factor in the Scandinavian look. Segerstad pointed

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out that changes of seasons, particularly the radical shifts from winter to spring, go far in explaining the designers' "fixation" on nature.

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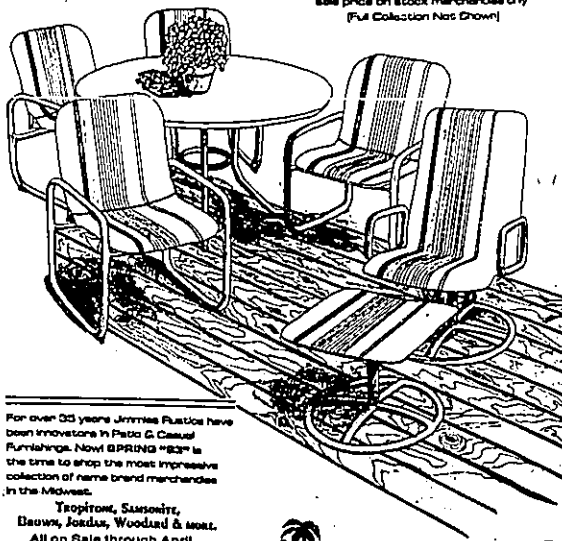
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