

Show debunks myths on contemporary look

The recent International Contemporary Furniture Fair demonstrated that contemporary furniture is far more varied and lively than retail stores reflect. Susan S. Szeny, editor of Metropolis magazine, a co-sponsor of the event, calls the designers "America's best kept secret."

This year, its second, 235 exhibitors -- mostly individual designers and manufacturers of avant-garde products -- spread their wares over 48,000 square feet of New York's Jacob K Javits Convention Center. American, Italian and English firms dominated.

A walk through the trade show offered proof that no one style or material dominates. Designers are adventurous. Prices are moderate to outrageous.

One trend is redo traditional designs in new materials and to offer new treatments for traditional materials. One company translated the old pine farm table into marble and granite. In the hands of Godley-Schwan, a natural cherry triple dresser (\$9,000) took on new interest with the unexpected color of the cherry and undulating lines on the drawer fronts and the top front edge.

Though many people think of modern furniture as angles and hard edges, the majority of forms in this show were rounded. Upholstered pieces, tables and cabinetry had soft edges. It was common for cold-rolled steel to be bent and twisted into undulating shapes for bed headboards, side chairs, tables and decorative screens.

AMONG SOME of the most imaginative offerings:

Bower Studios of Vergennes, Vt., showed 12 ready-to-assemble pieces of fiberboard decorated with silk-screened images of classical building elements such as columns and gargoyles. The least expensive item, a frame for a picture or mirror, is about \$54. There are also benches, desks, chairs, shelves and a storage box that looks ideal for toys (\$352).

Yumi Kokubo, a Japanese woman who works in New York, combined white paper and silk gauze in

freestanding screens that filter light. A screen can be placed in front of a window or elsewhere in a room as a decorative element (\$4,500 to \$8,600).

The Children's Museum Programme collection of chairs, play table and cupboard has a pegboard-like surface to accommodate a 20-piece building toy game for play or display. The furniture, available in the United States through Ligne Rosset of Los Angeles, is made in Austria. Prices range from about \$140 for a chair to \$850 for a cupboard. The game is \$40. Designed by Makis Warlamis, a Greek architect, the furniture is based on Warlamis' design of the Children's Museum of Athens.

The indoor-outdoor "Picnic Chair" is a lightweight, all-weather folding butterfly chair of polyester mesh. It retails for about \$120, and the Finnish designer, Ahti Taskinen of Proforma, is seeking an American outlet.

EXAMPLES of streamlined design and luxurious materials include Jasper Morrison's graceful sofa with two tailored pillows, one a cylinder and one a rectangle (\$3,428) and Matthew Hilton's glass-topped table on metal flippers (\$798). Both by English designers, they are available through Palazzetti in the United States and Canada.

The world of contemporary home furnishings is international. It is quite common for, say, an Italian or a German company to produce pieces by an English or Japanese designer. Morrison is a case in point. His furniture is manufactured by companies in England, France, Italy and Japan.

Americans are just beginning to cross borders in this way.

"We have a long way to go," says Lyn Godley, a Brooklyn, N.Y., designer who is organizing the first group showing of Americans for the Milan Furniture Fair next April. "There is no networking system here."

"We need manufacturers willing to work with 20 to 50 small companies instead of expecting to sell a huge quantity of the same mass-market product."

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