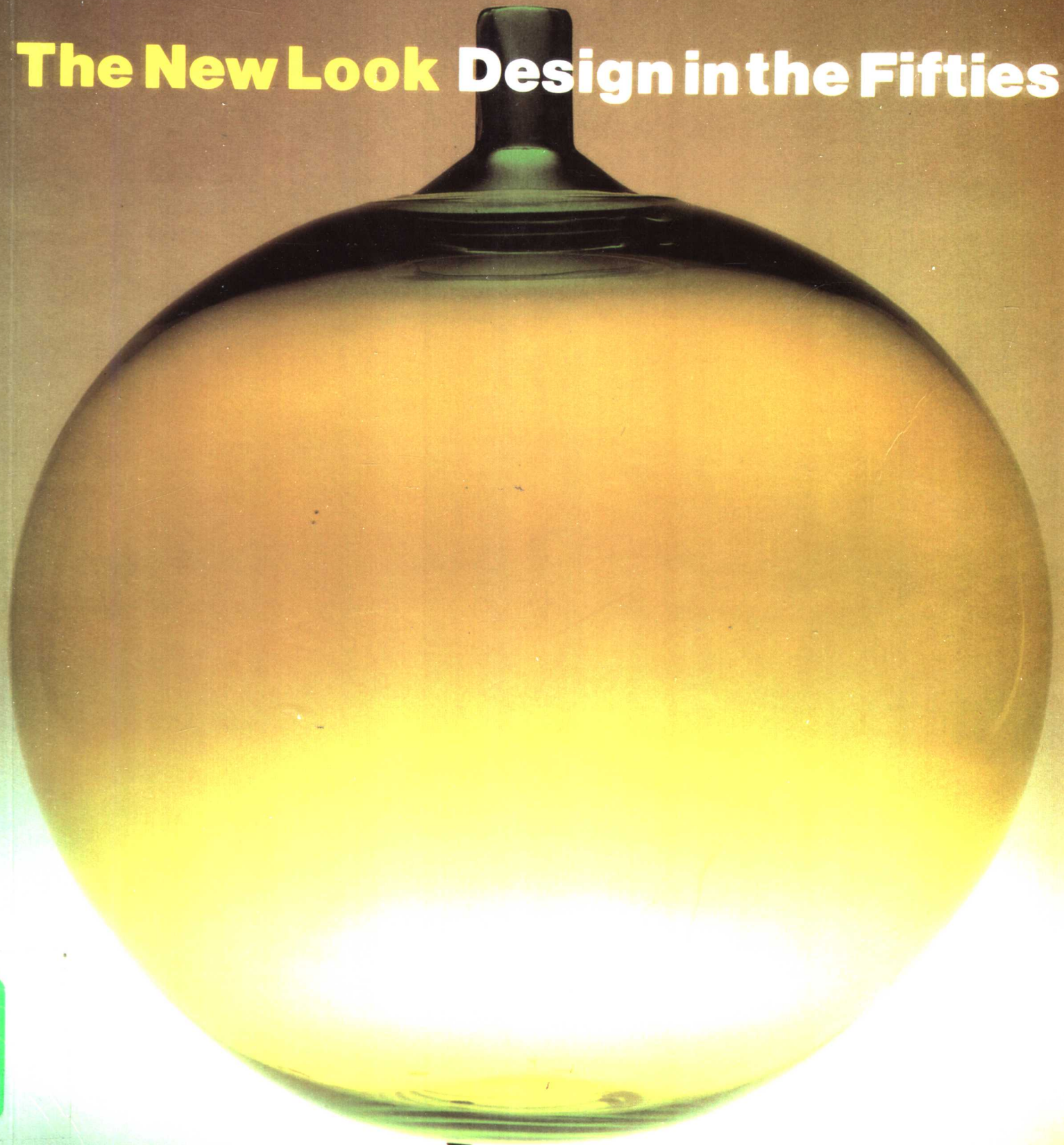


The New Look Design in the Fifties



LESLEY JACKSON



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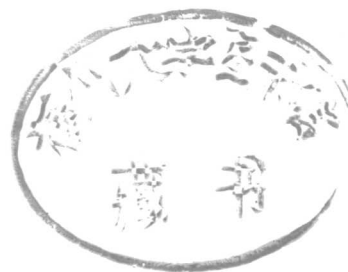
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LESLEY JACKSON

*With 266 illustrations,
86 in color*



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For Ian and my family

This book was originally published on the occasion of the exhibition
The New Look - Design in the Fifties organized by Manchester City Art Galleries.
The exhibition was shown at Manchester City Art
Galleries from 13 October 1991 - 5 January 1992,
and at Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum from
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Frontispiece 'Calyx', designed by Lucienne
Day for Heal's, 1951.

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Contents

Acknowledgments	6
1 The New Look	7
2 The Emergence of the New Look	21
3 New Shapes	35
'Soft Forms' · The Rise of Organic Modernism	
The Tulip Phenomenon · The Exaggeration of Form	
Three Legs or Four? · The Problem of Asymmetry	
4 New Patterns	61
From 'Doodledash' to 'Pythagoras' · New Directions in Pattern-Making	
Mix and Match · New Ideas About Colour	
'Nylon Homespun' · The Feel of Things to Come	
5 New Imagery	85
The Appliance of Science	
'Homemaker' and the Imagery of Contemporary Life	
6 The New Look and the New Lookalikes	101
 Directory of 1950s Design	 107
CERAMICS American · British · Italian and German · Finnish Swedish and Danish	109
FASHION <i>by Anthea Jarvis</i> American · British and Irish Italian and Spanish · French	117
FURNITURE American · European · Italian · Scandinavian	123
GLASS British and Czech · Danish and Dutch · Finnish Italian · Swedish	129
LIGHTING American and British · Italian · Scandinavian	135
METALWORK British and Italian · Scandinavian	139
TEXTILES American · British · Italian, Swiss and German · Scandinavian	141
WALLPAPERS American · British · German, Swiss and Scandinavian	147
 Notes on the text	 152
Bibliography	154
Illustration Acknowledgments	157
Index	158

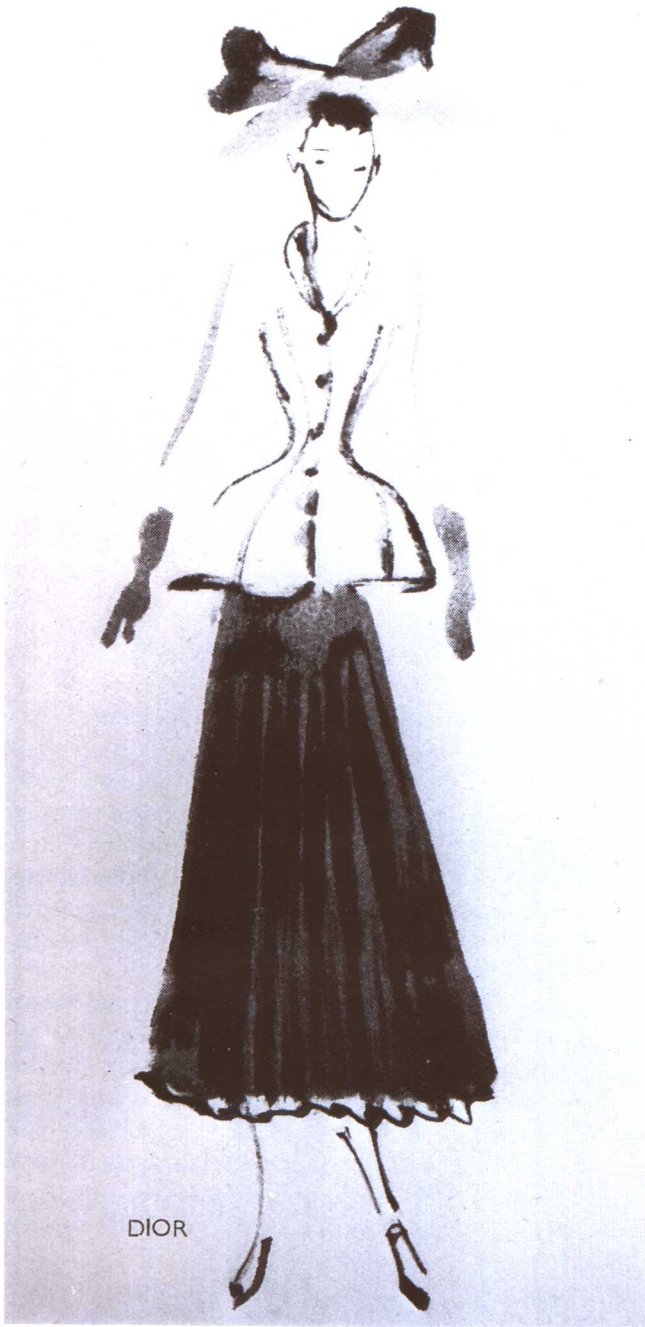
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LESLEY JACKSON

1·The New Look



The dramatic 'Bar' Suit from Christian Dior's first New Look Collection, Spring 1947, with its 'tight tussore jacket, padded to a teacup curve'.

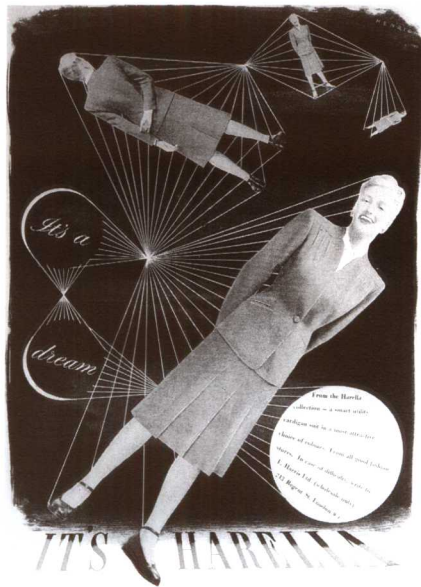
'Dior is the new name in Paris. With his first Collection he not only shot to fame, but retrieved the general situation by reviving interest in a somewhat uninspired season . . . His house was newly decorated, his ideas were fresh and put over with great authority, his clothes were beautifully made, essentially Parisian, deeply feminine.' VOGUE, April 1947.

Although the term 'New Look' is often used in a general way to refer to the re-design of a familiar object or place, when the phrase is applied in a more specific context, it is inextricably associated with the world of post-war haute couture – with Christian Dior's New Look.

In February 1947 Dior startled the world with his Spring Collection. Rejecting the idea of austerity tailoring, he transformed the unflattering square-shouldered outlines of women's wartime fashions overnight. In their place he created a sculptural fantasy, exaggerating the natural curves of the female figure where they existed; redefining them where they did not. The new figure resembled an hourglass. 'The waist is breath-taking', declared *Vogue* in October 1947. The contours of the bosom were emphasized by literally skin-tight tailoring; hips were padded to exaggerate the slenderness of the waist; new 'hipbones' were created from the stiffened peplums of the jacket; and the skirt was full and extravagant in its use of fabric: this was the essence of Christian Dior's New Look.

Dior was not alone in his tendency towards the sculptural exaggeration of the female figure. 'Wasp waists' were also a feature of Christobal Balenciaga's Spring 1947 Collection. In *Vogue* these two couturiers, one French, the other Spanish, were presented as allies. Balenciaga's 'black taffeta jacket' with 'rippling collar' and 'umbrella hips' was illustrated in the same double-page spread as Dior's influential 'Bar' Suit, with its 'tight tussore jacket, padded to a teacup curve'. Balenciaga, it seems, created his own New Look at exactly the same time as Dior.

The main outcry against the New Look, not surprisingly, centred on Dior's lavish use of textiles. In Paris a model wearing a New Look outfit had her dress torn from her back,



The New Look (far left) as interpreted by the British couturier, John Cavanagh, in 1953, and the Old Look (left) as seen in a Utility suit in 1946.

whilst as far afield as Chicago the designer was met by crowds of angry women bearing placards saying 'Burn Mr Dior' and 'Christian Dior Go Home'.¹ At a time when, throughout Europe, there were still serious shortages of raw materials, and in Britain rationing and the Government-controlled Utility scheme were still in operation, Dior's New Look was startling indeed. In France, by contrast, the situation was quite different – at least where haute couture was concerned. Fashion being the nation's acknowledged design forte, the top French couturiers were positively encouraged by their government to develop their controversially extravagant collections. Dior himself received significant backing in his enterprise from a wealthy textile manufacturer, Marcel Boussac, without whose support and unlimited supplies of fabric the New Look could never have been conceived.

In retrospect, however, more important than the initial media controversy surrounding the introduction of the New Look was the radical shift in aesthetic that the collection signified. Once public indignation about wastefulness and indulgence had abated, it did not take long before the basic principles of the new style were accepted – not half-heartedly, but with relish. Within the space of fifteen months even Utility dresses would be produced in a simplified New Look style.² With hindsight it can be seen quite clearly that the New Look brought about a fundamental change in the conception of the female shape that was not just the whim of a season, nor simply a reaction against wartime austerity: it heralded the arrival of a New Look for a new decade.

This book, however, is not just about fashion, but about a more widespread shift in design aesthetics during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The year 1947 marks a turning point in international design. Hence the reason for the reapplication of the phrase, the New Look, out of its original context to describe the nature of these changes. In Italy, for example, the late 1940s was a time of regeneration and revitalization for design – what the Italians themselves called 'ricostruzione'. In the USA there was a huge consumer boom after the war creating new markets for new products, and ample wealth for enlightened manufacturers to re-invest in design. Through their bold and confident achievements in abstract art and modern design during the 1950s, the Americans asserted their cultural identity and attracted international esteem. In Finland, Denmark and Sweden this period marks the emergence of the Scandinavian Modern aesthetic, a renaissance in design which transformed every aspect of the applied arts.

Although this is a potentially vast area to cover, there are benefits to be gained from surveying the field internationally. It is fascinating to study the process of cross-fertilization between different designers, different media and different countries. It is also illuminating to examine the impact of art on design. The one acknowledged limitation of the book is that it deals with design in the sense of interior design rather than product design. Cars, radios, fridges and jukeboxes are all well illustrated in other books on the 1950s, whereas the applied arts have yet to be fully explored.³ Although it takes its name from fashion, therefore, this is basically a study of

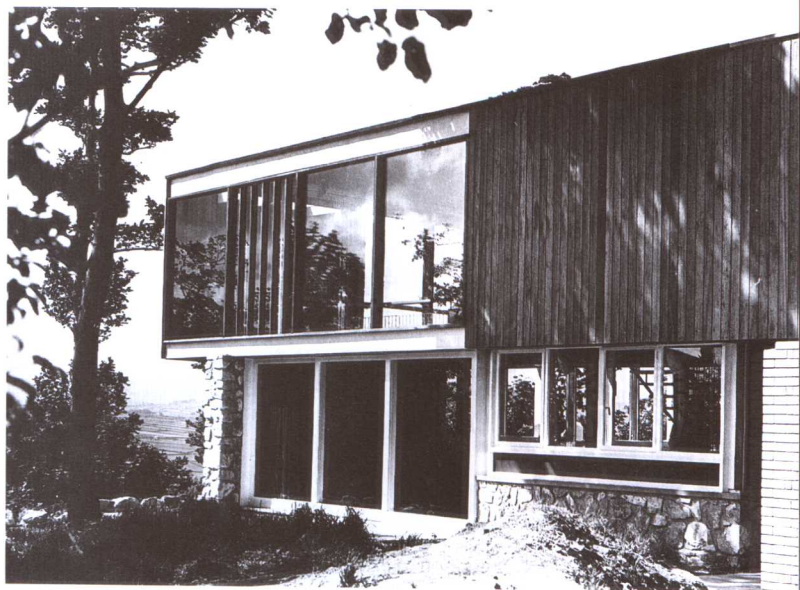
furniture, furnishings and household accessories. Its aims are to highlight the creative achievements of the 1950s, and to define the visual characteristics of the New Look.

The years 1946–48 – the period during which Dior's New Look was conceived and consolidated – were the time when a new generation of outstandingly talented international designers first made their mark in the fields of ceramics, glass, silver and furniture. These designers represented many different countries and were part of a growing international movement: organic modernism. They included Tapio Wirkkala and Timo Sarpaneva in Finland, Stig Lindberg and Nils Landberg in Sweden, Henning Koppel and Hans Wegner in Denmark, Carlo Mollino and Paolo Venini in Italy, and Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen in the USA. Selective as it is, this list reveals the scale on which these transformations were taking place. Together these designers were responsible for re-shaping the basic forms of the applied arts, and for creating a New Look which, like Dior's, would revolutionize the mainstream design aesthetics of the 1950s.

The New Look arrived in two distinct waves. The first wave, organic modernism, took sculpture as its primary source of inspiration and affected the shapes of three-dimensional design and architecture. The second wave transformed patterns, and reflected the influence of recent developments in abstract painting on the decoration of textiles, wallpapers and ceramics.

The year of the New Look, 1947, was also the year in which Jackson Pollock created his first large-scale action paintings. This 'dynamic new aesthetic', as Sam Hunter described it,⁴ caused tremendous controversy and excitement in the art world, and it was not long before the influence of abstract expressionism could be discerned on two-dimensional pattern-making. In general, however, the New Look in pattern design took hold somewhat later than the New Look in three-dimensional design, especially in the more conservative manufacturing areas, such as wallpapers and industrial ceramics. But despite initial resistance, once it got underway, the transformation was as rapid and comprehensive as that which had taken place several years earlier in other branches of the applied arts.

These and other innovations in the fine and applied arts all point to 1947 as the year in which the tide turned. At the heart of it all was the special relationship that existed at this time between painting, sculpture and design. Significantly, 1947 was also the year in which Picasso took up ceramics. His work in this medium had a decisive effect on studio potters throughout the world – Italy and Britain, in particular – and his fresh approach to an unfamiliar material can be seen as yet another dimension of the New Look. One of the reasons, in fact, why Picasso adopted ceramics was in order to make a



Farnley Hey, designed by the British architect, Peter Womersley, in 1953, and winner of a RIBA Bronze Medal in 1957. One of the first New Look houses to be built in Britain after the war.



The New Look in furniture: (above left) Charles Eames's LCW chair for Herman Miller, designed in 1946; (above right) Carlo Mollino's bentwood and plywood chair for the Casa Cataneo-Agra, 1952.



The New Look in ceramics: (left) 'Faun's Head' plate designed by Pablo Picasso, 1956; (below) hand-painted faience bowl of a type designed by Stig Lindberg at Gustavsberg from the 1940s onwards.



decisive break from the art he had been producing before and during the war. He looked upon this challenging new medium as a vehicle for discovering a new and original form of expression, and in doing so he opened up a whole range of possibilities for those potters to whom the medium was already familiar.

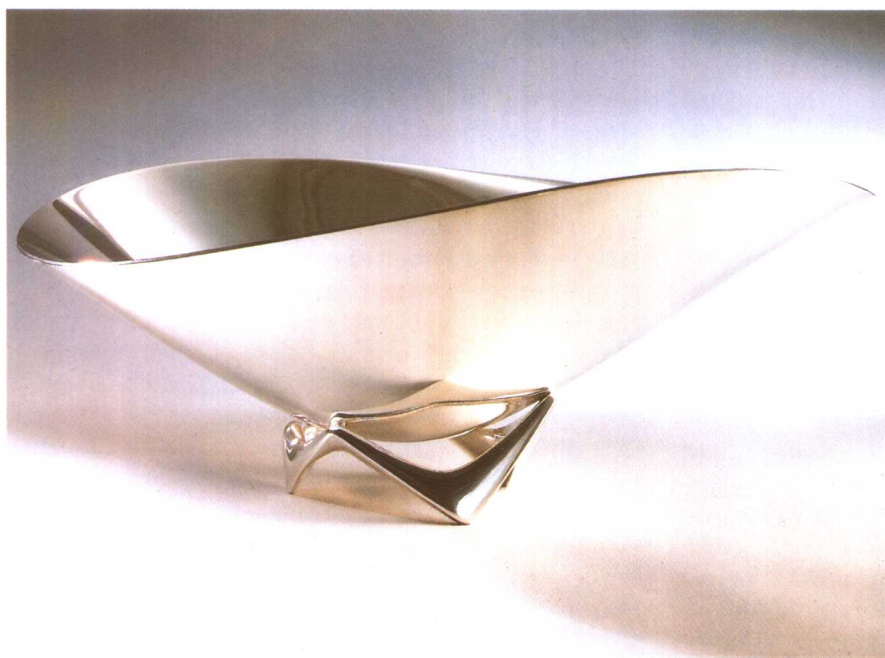
Further justification for the broader application of the phrase 'the New Look' is provided by its contemporary usage in magazine commentaries and advertising. An article by Dora Billington in *The Studio* magazine in 1955, for example, is entitled 'The New Look in British Pottery', and describes the recent work of three potters, William Newland, Margaret Hine and Nicholas Vergette, whose visual ideas had been transformed by the revelation of seeing Picasso's fresh approach to ceramics: 'To all who saw the work of these three potters . . . it must have been apparent that English studio pottery is at last acquiring a "New Look", more in tune with current ideas in house decoration and design

generally. Gay, amusing, colourful . . . an exciting mixture of sculpture, painting and potting.' The use of inverted commas around the words 'New Look' indicates that the writer is conscious of lifting the phrase out of its original context. Billington's conclusion that the work of these potters is 'made to fit into the contemporary scene' adds fuel to the argument that changes within each individual branch of design should not be considered in isolation, but must be seen within the context of a broader shift in aesthetics.⁵

Bernard Leach, the grand old man of English studio pottery, was particularly scathing about these new post-war developments, and especially the idea of an untrained artist being able to contribute anything of value to the craft of the potter. He contemptuously dismissed Picasso's British disciples as 'the Picassettes', and his reaction, like the anger directed against the 'New Look' in fashion, shows how dangerous (in the sense of being threatening to the establishment) these new departures were perceived to be.⁶

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The New Look in glass (above): Tapio Wirkkala's 'Kantarelli' vases for Iittala, created in 1946. The New Look in silver (left): a sculptural bowl designed by Henning Koppel for Georg Jensen in 1956.



Rosenthal's 'New Look' vase by Beathe Kuhn, one of a new range of organic shapes launched in 1955.

The phrase, the New Look, was also adopted by the German firm, Rosenthal, to describe their new range of organic porcelain in 1955, and by *Vogue Export* to describe the new abstract printed textiles being issued by firms such as David Whitehead and Edinburgh Weavers at the time of the Festival of Britain in 1951: 'The new look of furnishings is stimulating and satisfactory to both top and middle-price markets. Their modern manner, designed for a new approach to living, fits, like a glove, the mood of a new generation of decorators.'⁷ Later in the 1950s, when the New Look in home furnishings – by this time called the 'contemporary' style – was de rigueur, it is not surprising to find a downmarket British wallpaper merchant, Heath, relying on the very modernity of its abstract designs as their major selling point. Its 1959 collection, 'Effects by Heath', was described on its opening page as 'the book with the "look"' – meaning, of course, the New Look.⁸

Interestingly, it appears that certain avant-garde developments in the fine arts, such as abstract expressionism, became more rapidly accepted by the general public during the 1950s simply because of their widespread adoption within the applied arts. What was difficult to accept in the form of a vast canvas in an art gallery was much more palatable in the form of curtains or wallpaper in the home, or the fabric of a dress. The artist, Paule Vézelay, commented on her abstract

furnishing textiles that 'many people . . . would be bewildered by the same design if it were an oil painting and shown in an art gallery.'⁹ At this date the fine and applied arts were more closely allied and more intimately inter-related than ever before, and much of the reason for this intimacy appears to be the particular appropriateness of abstraction as a means of visual expression for the applied arts. For as long as the fine arts remained rooted in the principle of realism and representation, there would always be a divide between painting, sculpture and the decorative arts. A mutual reliance on abstraction brought them closer together, so that the 1950s was to become a period of 'applied' art in the truest sense of the word.

The New Look marked a fundamental transformation in the concept of form and surface decoration. It lifted the applied arts on to a higher level of creative expression. Undeniably, by the second quarter of the 1950s, a debased version of the New Look was being exploited commercially by many manufacturers as a mere style, but that is not to deny its purity of purpose in the hands of its originators. The reason why many people have such a poor opinion of 1950s design, however, is that they are only familiar with the New Look in its bastardized form. Isamu Noguchi commented bitterly: 'Plagiarism, of which I have been a constant victim, is not as painful when a thing is copied outright as when it is distorted and vulgarised in an attempt to disguise the theft.'¹⁰ Innovation and plagiarism went hand in hand on a national and an international level throughout the 1950s and, without seeking to pass judgment, this book aims to differentiate between the New Look and the New Lookalikes.

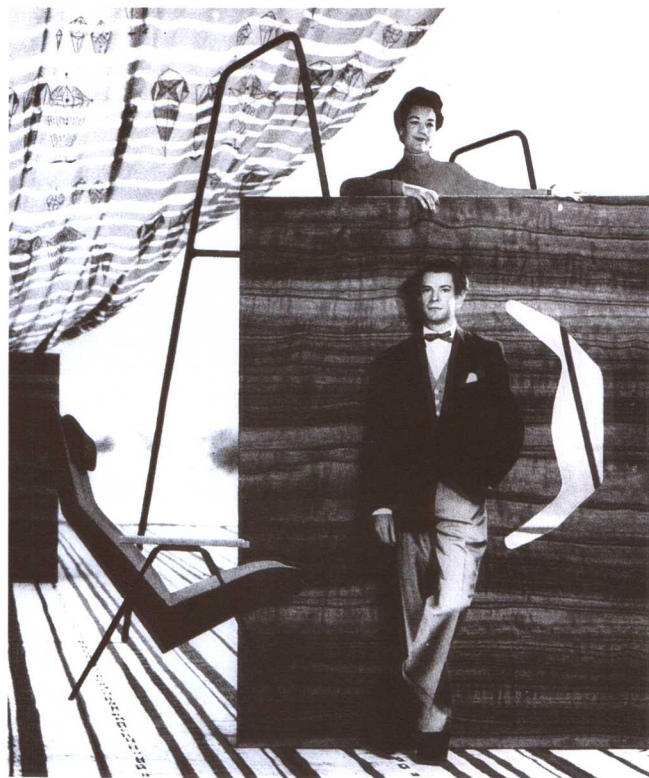
This leads to the second main point of significance about post-war developments in the applied arts: the trends within modern design and the fundamental changes that were taking place were more strongly international than at any other time in history. Such development had been incipient before the war, but came to fruition during the 1950s, partly as a result of world-wide disruption and the displacement of architects and designers from Europe to the United States, and partly because of improved communications amongst the design fraternity and the revival of major international design exhibitions, such as the influential Milan Triennales.

After the war almost every Western country had its design strength and the creativity of some, considering the damage inflicted on them during the war, was quite remarkable. French haute couture is a case in point, as is the renaissance in Czechoslovakian glass, and the resurgence of British textile design. Certain countries undoubtedly swung back into production (or, in the case of Finland and Italy, simply swung into production) more quickly than their neighbours,

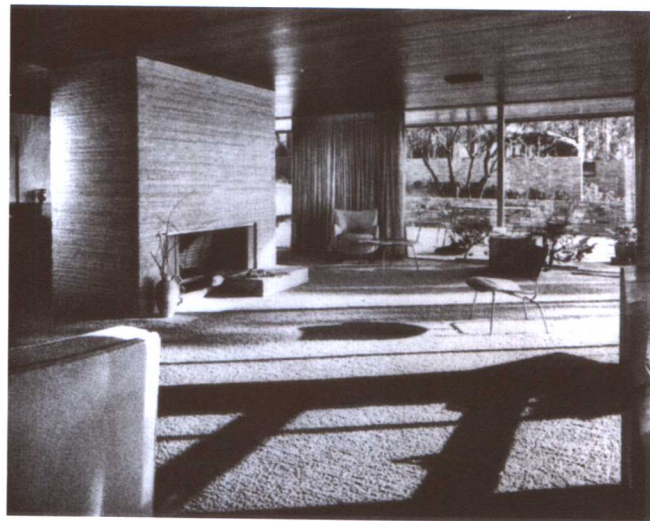
sometimes, but not always, as a result of foreign investment. Others, such as Britain, were so badly affected by shortages and trade restrictions in the early years after the war that development in certain areas, such as furniture, was retarded, and in other areas, such as glass, was brought to a standstill. For these reasons it soon became apparent that certain countries were visibly in the ascendant as early as 1947, a mere two years after the cessation of hostilities. By the early 1950s the undisputed hothouses in design had emerged as Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Italy and the USA.

Apart from the three Scandinavian giants, the main force in European design during the 1950s was Italy. Whereas Sweden, Denmark and Finland fed off each other, and thus produced an overall unified aesthetic, Italy stood entirely alone. Italian furniture, lighting, ceramics, glass, silver and textiles were wayward and unique. The Italians had no rule book; they were governed by pure instinct, which sometimes led them, if not to excess, then at least beyond the bounds of acceptable 'good taste'. In many cases, as in the flamboyant lighting devices of Gino Sarfatti, the dividing line between creative flair and kitsch is a difficult one to draw. One of William Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell' comes to mind when trying to sum up the nature of Italian design in the 1950s: 'Enough, or Too Much', meaning the only way of defining what is enough is by going to excess.¹¹ The creative benefits of this impulse were recognized by Gio Ponti in his comments on the uninhibitedly organic work of the Brazilian architect, Oscar Niemeyer: 'Niemeyer is such a genius that almost anything is forgiven, genius is allowed to sin by excess.'¹²

The Italians used the brightest colours, created the most extravagant forms, painted in the crudest styles, exploited the most unconventional manufacturing techniques, and ran their workshop-businesses on the smallest scale, and yet, paradoxically, they were by far the most sophisticated, artistically inspired, technically advanced, and commercially successful of all the Western European nations during the early 1950s. Moreover, the speed of their recovery after the war was miraculous: there was literally an explosion of design creativity. In the words of Andrea Branzi: 'If we look today at the products of Italian design in the fifties, they never, or almost never, appear to be truly industrial products or authentic expressions of popular culture. The positive feelings they undoubtedly stimulate are more of an expressive than a cultural nature . . . Furnishings were developed individually in a way that was opposed to the unitary trend characteristic of the sixties. Tables, chairs, ceilings, doors, vases and lights were all designed to be expressive as single objects.'¹³



Robin and Lucienne Day, the husband-and-wife team who were Britain's leading designers during the 1950s.

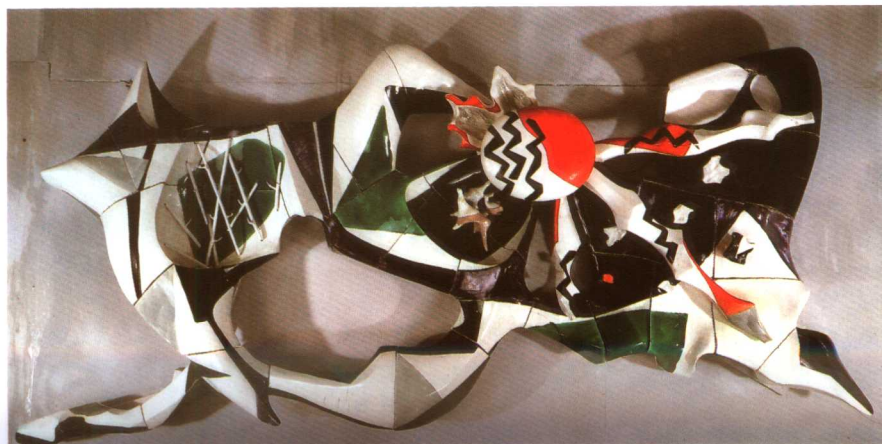


Richard Neutra's airy open-plan interiors provided the ideal setting for the furniture of leading progressive American designers, such as Charles Eames.

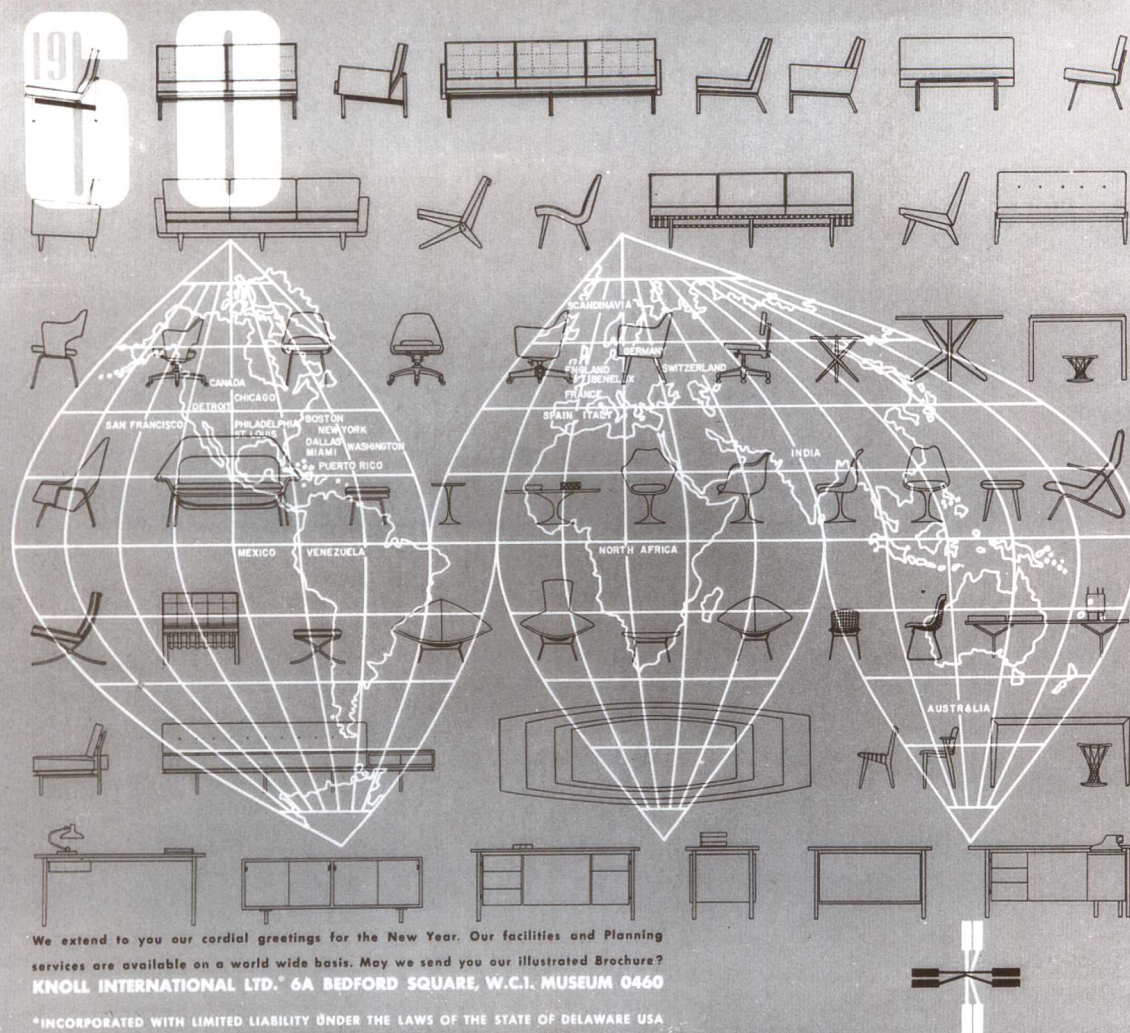


Uninhibited by conventional ideas of 'good taste', the Italians were responsible for some of the boldest creations in the applied arts during the 1950s. Art and design were fused in the ceramics of Marcello Fantoni (left) and Antonia Campi (below). Campi's spectacular wall panel was created for the Milan Triennale in 1951.

The influence of abstract painting resulted in a New Look for textiles, as seen (opposite) in this furnishing fabric by Friedlinde de Colbertaldo for David Whitehead in 1960.







The small firm of Knoll Associates had expanded by the end of the decade into Knoll International.

How different this was from the climate in America, where the discussion of what constituted 'good design' took on moral overtones. In the USA 'good design' was championed from the 1940s onwards by no less an institution than the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In these circles frivolity was not encouraged. Good sense was the order of the day, as embodied in the idea behind MOMA's 1948 competition for the design of low-cost furniture. Furniture and architecture were, in fact, America's outstanding achievements during the 1950s, and they were often engineered by the same individuals, such as Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen. Other leading architects, such as Richard

Neutra, invariably selected Knoll and Herman Miller furniture to complement their interiors.¹⁴ Along with interior designers such as Florence Knoll, it was the architects who revolutionized the treatment of the interior. They created the ideal spaces – airy, open and uncluttered – in which to display the new organic clean-lined furniture to greatest effect.

American painting after the war was characterized by two divergent tendencies, one towards restraint (colour field painting), the other towards excess (abstract expressionism). These two extremes are also to be found in American design of the post-war period, for it was in America that the greatest excesses in terms of design styling were undoubtedly committed. This was most apparent in the field of cars and consumer goods, but it was inherent in the wider impulse towards over-consumption that characterized the period.