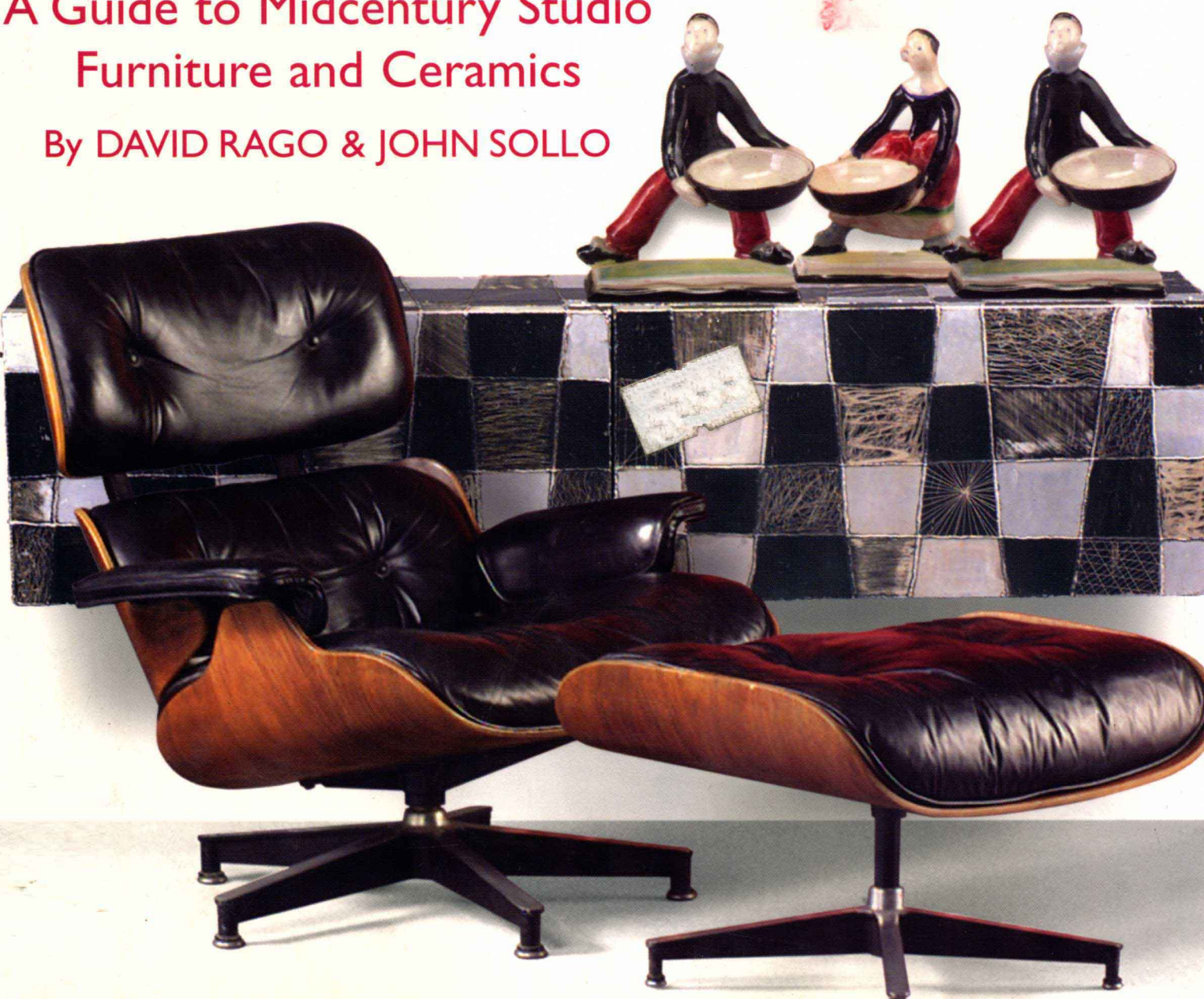


# COLLECTING MODERN

A Guide to Midcentury Studio  
Furniture and Ceramics

By DAVID RAGO & JOHN SOLLO





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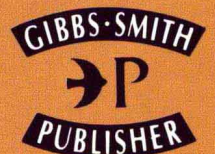
A Guide to  
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Studio Furniture  
and Ceramics

David Rago  
and  
John Sollo

## Room dividers

Paul Evans/Philip Powell

Two-panel, welded-steel room dividers on walnut frames,  
with gold-washed lattice in fish-scale pattern.



Salt Lake City



*To Suzanne, Elaine, Mary Lynn, and Denise.*

— DR

*To Bob Miles, Calvin Dyer, and Erma Knoch.*

— JS

First Edition

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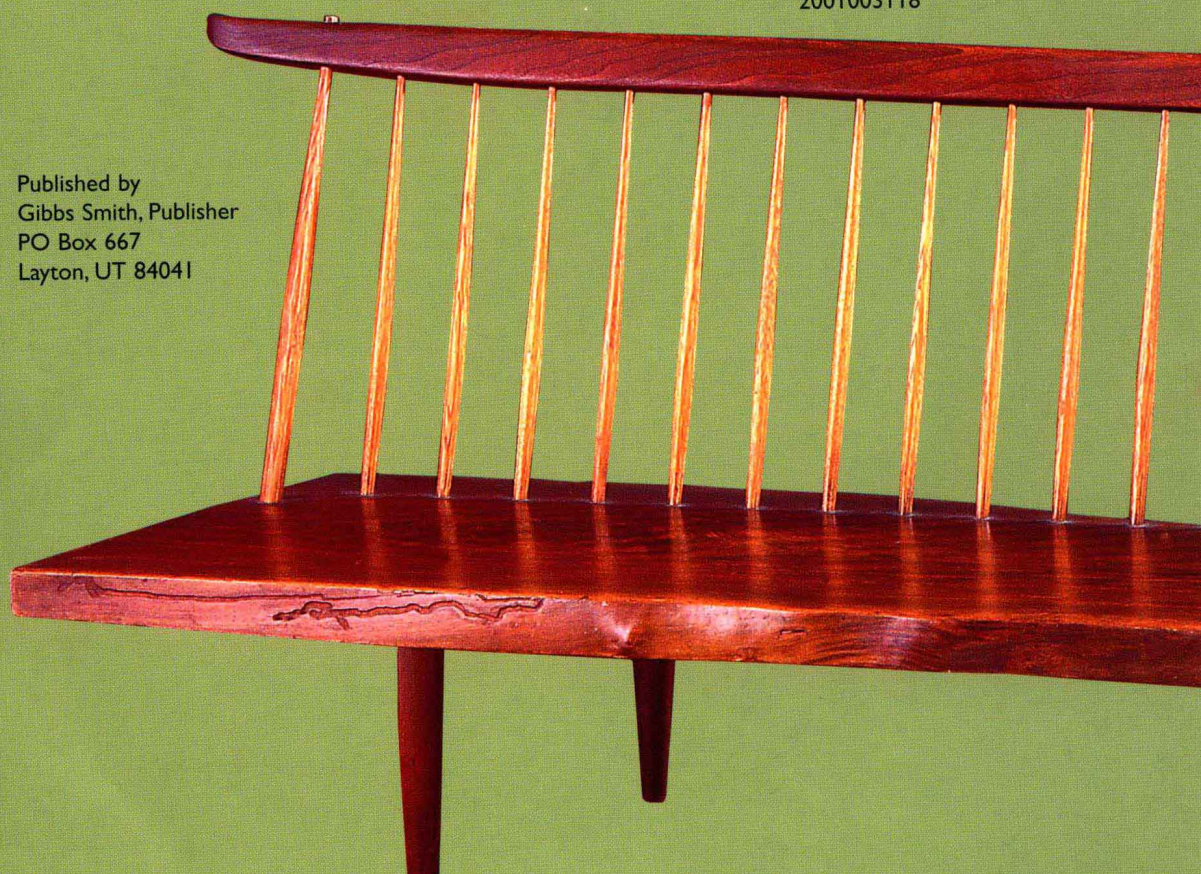
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George Nakashima

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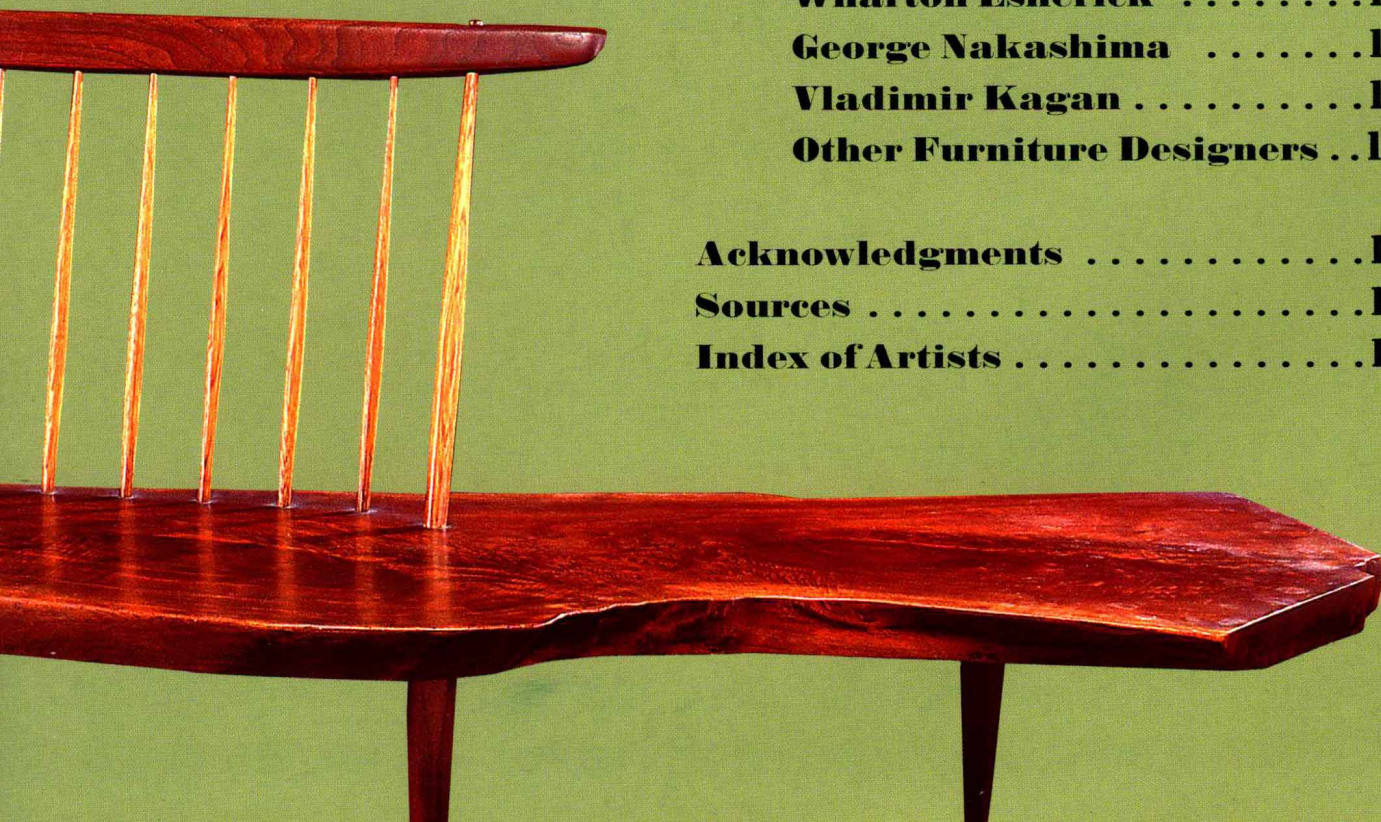






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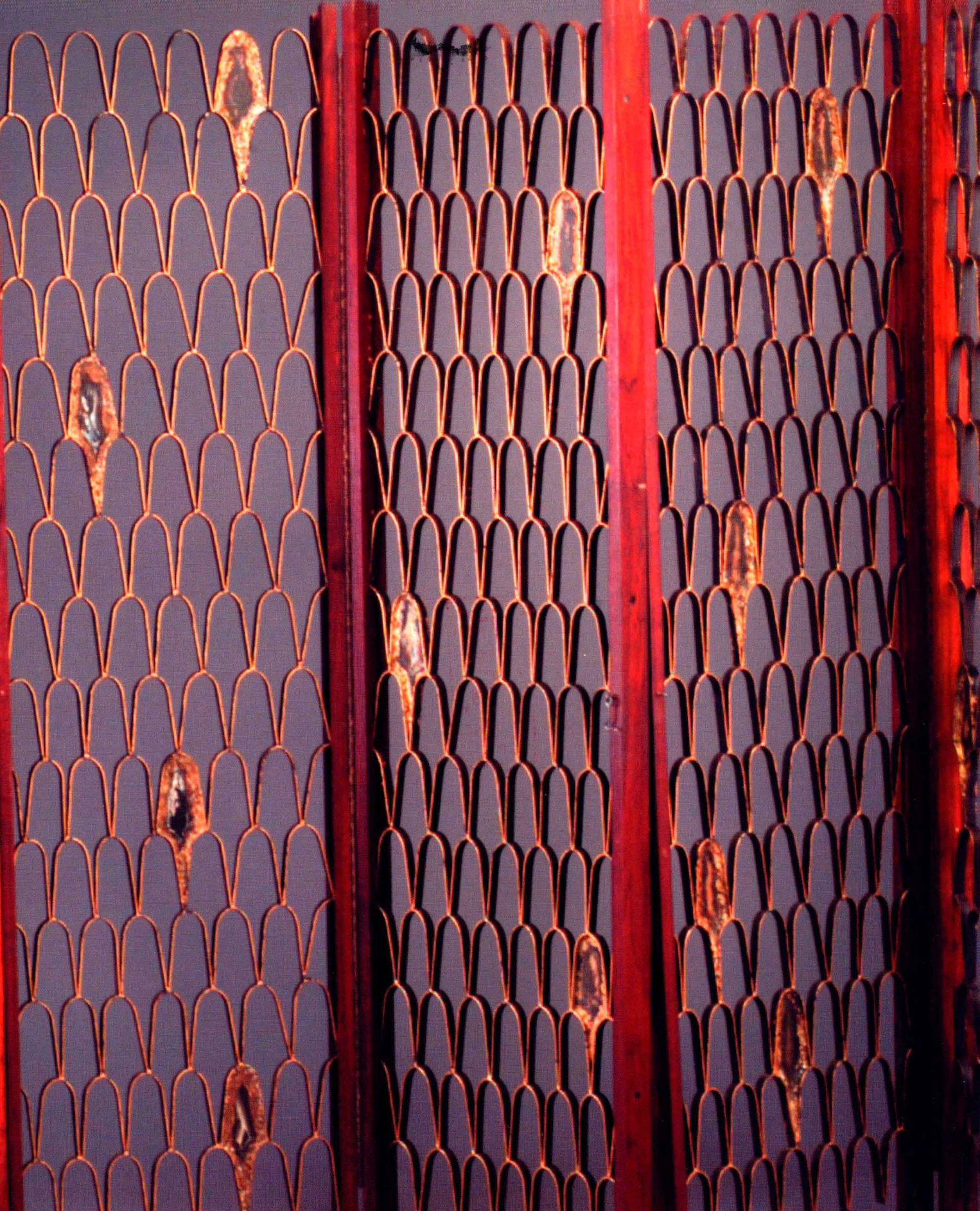






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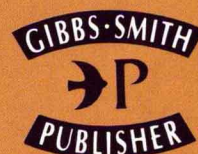
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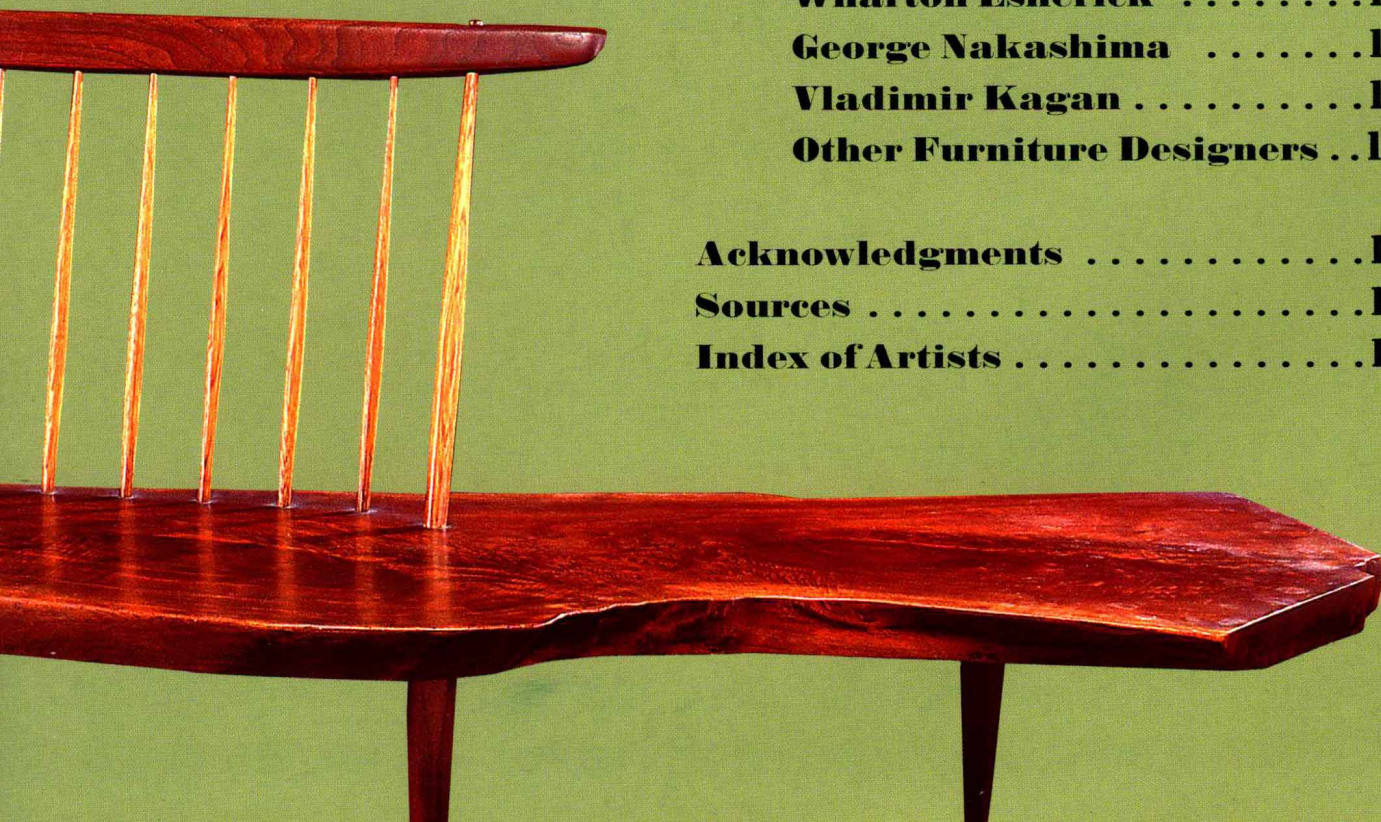






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A still life photograph in a warm, orange-toned style. In the center is a wooden table with a curved top. On the table, a deer head is mounted on a stand, and a small, shallow, multi-compartment bowl sits to its right. Two wooden chairs with curved backs are positioned around the table. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Introduction to Collecting



**T**he fastest-growing segment of the art and collectibles market is midcentury Modern furniture and decorative arts. There are many reasons for this, including its tremendous availability, relatively low cost, and imaginative variety. But it is also true that the maturity and inquisitiveness of today's collectors have created a viable forum for things that are relatively new, in contrast to the persistent desire to value only things that are reassuringly old.

Not very long ago, it seemed that the average buyer of art and antiques needed the objects of their pursuit to be sufficiently aged to be credible. For example, the furniture of Thomas Chippendale was valued for generations by our ancestors. We were raised knowing it was special and worthy of the pedestal it rested securely upon. Louis XIV? Who could deny that prime pieces from this period were bona fide antiques? Ming Dynasty porcelain? You get the idea.

But this changed steadily during the twentieth century, beginning with Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and finally, the Arts & Crafts movement. Typical art and antiques collectors regularly turned their noses up at such notions. After all, how could something so recent be any good? It seemed that age, more than anything else, was the qualifier of merit.

# Modern

by  
**David  
Rago**

I recall vividly the annoyance expressed during the 1970s at my relatively innocent attempts to market American art pottery and Mission furniture. The established art and antiques dealers, on any given occasion, reminisced with a mixture of condescension and joy at how they used furniture by the likes of Gustav Stickley as firewood. Even the revolutionary art pottery of George Ohr was used for target practice by some of his heirs.

The first clue that this was changing became apparent when professors and schoolteachers began searching for these early-twentieth-century icons. It is a fact that from about 1965 to 1975 a disproportionate number of collectors of Art Nouveau and Arts & Crafts were educators. Overeducated and underpaid, they well knew the value of these marvelous things and could ill afford the more established works made up through the Victorian era. A good rule of thumb in ferreting out undervalued quality in design is to watch what museum curators and art historians are buying for their own collections.



Predictably, the prices for and interest in Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau increased so rapidly during the 1970s that it was only a matter of time before they, too, outstripped the financial resources of the learned middle class. By the mid-1980s, Hollywood and Wall Street began to understand the stoic beauty (if not the philosophy) of Mission oak, and prices skyrocketed. Art Nouveau, the darling of the belle monde and drug dealers alike, had already darted for higher ground. What was an aspiring aesthete to do?

I remember my first brush with Modern material one rainy afternoon in a soon-to-be-former Arts & Crafts collector's lower Manhattan loft about 1978. Mark McDonald and Ralph Cutler were showing off some brightly colored stuff that had been made by a certain Mr. Eames not so long ago. To my undereducated eye, not long accustomed to the chunky brown simplicity of Stickley and, literally, his brothers, this seemed like a lot to ingest.



This Eames "hang it all," for example, was made of metal and wood, mixed round things with wire things, and was abundantly colorful with fragments of red, yellow, blue, and white. They assured me, though I was incapable of believing it then, that this was to be the "next big thing."

Mark and Ralph eventually opened one of the first Modern galleries in America. They soon teamed with Mark Isaacson, a visionary by anyone's standards, and moved into a grand space not far from my Manhattan studio, calling the venture Fifty-50. I remember walking through this airy showroom, amused, baffled, and intrigued by the weird colors and forms.

Another cool thing about this Modern stuff was that many of the artists who designed these pieces were either still



alive or sufficiently archived so that a tremendous amount of information on them and their work was still available. I recall an exhibition, held in 1980 at Mark Isaacson's Soho Gallery, on the pottery of the Scheiers (featured on pages 46-55). In addition to a mesmerizing assortment of their ceramic and "flat art" pieces, the Scheiers themselves were in attendance. I'd never had that opportunity with the likes of such Arts & Crafts-period luminaries as the Roycrofters Elbert Hubbard and the well-traveled designer Frederick Rhoad.

It would have been impossible to know then that, fifteen years later, my coauthor and I would be involved in hosting our own semiannual Modern auction series. America is a society that looks quickly for the next big thing; I call it the blue M & Ms syndrome, where our culture's short attention span causes us to become quickly bored. On a superficial level, Modern furniture and decorative arts have certainly become the next big thing.

**A good rule of thumb in ferreting out undervalued quality in design is to watch what museum curators and art historians are buying.**

But the interest in these things relatively new will endure for generations to come because the recent past has so much to offer. Chippendale, mentioned earlier in this introduction, was indeed a brilliant designer and craftsman. But does anyone actually believe great craftsmanship and design stopped there? The less liberal among us would have it that the Belters and Emile Galle, and maybe even Gustav Stickley and L. C. Tiffany, were equal to the challenge. But that's still an easy supposition because these important designers are long dead and their works have been validated by collectors, museums, and scores of tomes for decades. It's a lot safer to accept and admire that which a previous generation has already venerated.

And this is precisely what makes Modern material and the people who collect it so different, if not extraordinary. While a week doesn't seem to pass without some new exhibition, gallery show, or book on some obscure Modern



designer or another appearing, there seems to be a certain leap of faith, or otherwise internal certitude, found among present-day collectors.

Some of the reasons for this are more personal and mundane. There are those who enjoy being around the things they grew up with. I remember the day my parents finally bought some new furniture back in 1960. Most of it was knock-off Danish Modern and the like. But there was this wood-and-metal Nelson star clock that adorned our kitchenette. It still hangs there, forty years later, keeping good time and attesting to how close our family was to at least a marginal hipness during the bleak Eisenhower years.

While the more avant-garde aspects of collecting Modern had diminished by the 1990s, there were those early buyers who reveled in how odd and unpopular such material was at that first stage. By the early 1990s, enough New York and Los Angeles dealers were developing a market base to attract the attention of mainstream publications.

**As soon as the recession of the early 1990s eased, it was evident that furniture of molded wood and plastic was the next big thing.**

This interest, and the fact that Modern furniture started appearing in movie sets and fashion spreads, was a clear indication that cool was coming. As soon as the recession of the early 1990s eased, it was evident that furniture of molded wood and red plastic was the next big thing.

Modern furniture was still inexpensive enough in the mid-1990s to attract a young collecting base worldwide. While there were always those who needed their furnishings accompanied by a fresh packing crate (or, in some cases, to have the joy of assembling it themselves), prices were soon irrevocably driven by an army of self-assured collectors who more than understood the fun and importance of midcentury design.

The dot-com economy of the late 1990s drove prices to the point where they doubled, and doubled again. Large furniture companies, such as Knoll, reissued premier lines that had been shelved for decades or, in many cases,



simply increased the production of those that never lost the attention of the design-conscious.

We are currently in the phase of a mature market where, in search of more blue M & Ms, some new buyers are looking for the new next big thing, whatever that turns out to be. But this, perhaps more than anything else, offers a true perspective on how permanent a fixture midcentury Modern will remain. It seems that new markets, at some point, have to fall out of favor so that, upon later re-evaluation, they finally become accepted.

In my capacity as publisher of *Modernism Magazine*, I once received an anonymous letter telling me that I was selling the "emperor's new clothes." Modern masters indeed, they went on to say. This was little more than a passing trend that I was helping to fuel out of misguided ignorance and personal gain. They ended by suggesting I get a "real job."

That was one of the most validating letters I've ever received because it was a wayward shot from a dying sensibility.



In my thirty years as a decorative arts dealer, I've never experienced so broad a collecting base fueled by such self-confidence and knowledge. It has been an invaluable experience, from my puzzling introduction at the hands of Mark and Ralph to helping develop the auction market for the best the postwar period has to offer. Seldom is a dealer/auctioneer in any given field provided the opportunity to see a market grow from its very beginning to one of such broad-based respectability.

We'll review in this book the time lines leading up to and through this midcentury phenomenon. John Sollo and I have selected key artists and producers to sketch the enthusiasm and vitality of this era. We doubt that any single book could do little more than begin to describe the talents of designers and factories worldwide. This one is far from an exception. But it is our hope that we will at least spark your interest and open your mind to the possibility that the next big designer might be born tomorrow, and that many were working a scant fifty years ago.



# Modern Pottery





# A Historical Context by David Rago

**W**

hile not often appreciated as fine art, Modern ceramics said as much about the evolution of midcentury design as any other art form. The shapes and colors, as well as the techniques employed, were all symptoms of a new and revolutionary approach to this ancient aesthetic. The studios creating the best American ware were similar to those creating Modern craft furniture. These were non-factory producers, developing their personal styles while shaping the decorative arts.

The significance of Modern ceramic design is best understood against a backdrop of the stylistic evolution of decorative ceramics in America. While the more contemporary pieces are stimulating in their own right, they take on a richer context when the foundation established for them by their predecessors is examined.

## **Bowl**

Edwin and Mary Scheier

Photo courtesy Gansevoort  
Gallery, New York.

After reviewing this design evolution, we'll look at several key Modern potters: Edwin and Mary Scheier, Otto and Gertrud Natzler, Peter Voulkos, Rose Cabat, and Maija Grotell. These were chosen not necessarily for the prominence