



Gerald Summers [British, 1889-1967]
Armchair, Designed 1933-1934, Produced 1935

Tracing The Long, Controversial History Of Organic Design

A NEW EXHIBITION EXPLORES CONFLICTING IDEAS ABOUT WHAT "ORGANIC" DESIGN REALLY MEANS.

In 1941, the Museum of Modern Art in New York put on a show that is now legendary: *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*. Curated by Elliot Noyes, the museum's first industrial design curator and protégée of Bauhaus director Walter Gropius, the competitive exhibition introduced the world to the designs of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen. It was also a business deal: each of the winning designers received a production and distribution contract with a major American department store.

Miller, Meg. "Tracing The Long Controversial History Of Organic Design," *Co.Design*, January 26, 2016.

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The fact that winners would get their pieces manufactured wasn't just a perk, though. It was a major break with how organic design was thought of during the 20th century. Jennifer Olshin, co-curator of a new exhibition on organicism at the Friedman Benda gallery, says that the industrial aspect of the show was important because it marked a departure for organic design, a movement that had thus far been about craftsmanship and one-of-a-kind pieces. The tension between those two schools of thought is the crystalizing idea in the gallery's new show, *Garden in the Machine: Organic Design 1930-Present*. And it still hasn't been completely resolved in design, even today, almost 75 years later.



In the 1930s, the central belief of the organic movement was that furniture and architecture should reflect a harmony between people and nature. In furniture design, this meant natural materials like wood, and smooth, rounded forms. The bent plywood furniture of legendary French designer Jean Prouve came out of this period, as did Marcel Breuer and his laminated birch plywood armchair with a calfskin cushion.

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In direct opposition to those ideas, the MoMA show argued for mass-produced organic design. From then on, says Olshin, there was a tension within the movement between modernism and craft, the manufactured and the hand-made. "There was a longing for Bauhaus type attention to detail, but at the same time technology had moved on and it was possible to get more design to more people."



Pair of Lounge Chairs for the Organic Design Competition, Museum of Modern Art, 1941

The ideas put forth by MoMA stuck. In the '50s, the architect and furniture designer Alvar Aalto—a strong proponent of natural materials and one of the most famous designers of the movement—became a huge commercial success with his mass produced furniture and lighting. Meanwhile, the woodworker furniture designer Wendell Castle held true to his dedication to craft with handmade wooden pieces. In the '80s, Castle's fellow woodworker George Nakashima began working with large manufacturers to produce his traditionally custom-made wooden furniture, but only under strict supervision from the designer himself. These designers prided themselves on being dedicated to their craft, and their pieces were painstakingly made and not easily reproduced. "They saw it as a unique work that refers to nature," says Olshin. "These pieces tend to be unique one-of-a-kind studio work that's not easily produced in mass quantities."

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So a careful balance emerged between the natural world and the machine-made. That tension still exists, even in contemporary design. "Today, it's almost a combination of both, it's nod to both sides, neither one or another," Olshin says.

New technology is complicating that relationship too, allowing furniture designers to make one-of-a-kind pieces on a mass scale. Take Dutch designer Joris Laarman, who designs furniture using software he develops himself—and then 3-D prints the pieces to be assembled by hand. His insanely intricate Adaptation Chair, for example, is printed in parts using a large, low-cost 3-D printer and is then welded together and coated with metal. Afterwards the 3-D printed substrate is removed to leave just the copper chair. "What Laarman's doing is something neither side would have ever thought of, says Olshin. "He's customizing mass production."



Walnut sofa, 1974

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Organic design has been around since the 1930s, far longer than most movements and schools. Its longevity speaks to the broader way humans have grappled with the tension between nature and technology for the past century—a struggle that's only going to continue. As climate change transforms the natural world around us, organic design may be set to evolve yet again.

Check out our slideshow above to see the evolution of organic design from the 1930s to today. *The Garden in the Machine: Organic Design 1930-Present* is showing at Friedman Benda gallery in New York from January 21, to February 13, 2016.

All Photos: Adam Reich courtesy Friedman Benda

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