More form than function

Designers have moved away from looking for a utilitarian purpose to the objects they buy. By Gareth Harris

Collectors of top-end design are still relatively few in comparison with contemporary art, and their motives are diverse — but as new collectors have entered the market in the past decade, specialist auctioneers, dealers and curators have noted a shift in the way people are collecting. Instead of buying works of design, some of whom have been active for over 30 years, have started to see works of design as both beautiful and utilitarian, while a newer group of designers are emerging who view design objects in much the same way as they view contemporary art, and are less bothered about its value.

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Collectors including the late Yves Saint Laurent and Mickey Wolfson, founder of the Miami Design District, have an interest in design that is often reflected in their collections. Some of which are housed at their New York office, includes works from every decade of the 20th and 21st century, from which they own the designs of the likes of Jean Prouvé, Eileen Gray and Charlotte Perriand commanded today’s high prices.

Their primary aim has been to create an alluring and stimulating environments in which to live, marking them out as distinct from some of the most high profile contemporary art collectors such as Los Angeles financier Eli Broad and French luxury goods magnate François Pinault, who acquire major works that — through their museums and loans — are also symbols of their wealth and prestige.

The New York-based collector and designer, Reed Krakoff, the founder of the luxury clothing and accessories brand, began collecting design over 25 years ago, picking up “Tiffany knock-offs” in flea markets. Now, a significant part of which is housed at his New York office, includes works from every decade of the 20th and 21st century: Marcel Breuer, Jean Prouvé, Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne, Maria Pergay and Joris Laarman are among the designers represented. Design is not only socially conscious: a painting is more recognisable than, say, a coffee table. Krakoff says.

Alberto Eldib, a Miami-based physician, describes how he scoured flea markets more than 25 years ago, among works by the Los Angeles-based duo Charles and Ray Eames and the US Modernist designer George Nelson — before 20th century pieces were viewed by the market as tangible assets.

Everything Eldib collects, he says, “is unique and in storage. ”

“Flea markets were one of the first ways to buy things,” says Eldib. “I have a love for objects and art, and I think that’s why I’ve always been interested in design.”

The French art and design advisor Romain Le Nagard argues that many design collectors are as rigorous in their approach to building a collection as the most contemporary art collectors. The US philanthropist Ronald Linder, who buys both modern and contemporary design, collects specific designers within that framework of depth, acquiring, for example, 25 pieces by the architect Raoul Norguès.

Michael Boyd, a Los Angeles-based consultant on the restoration of modernist houses and their interiors and a major collector of design, has broad ranging taste, with works in his collection dating from 1900 to 1970 by designers such as Carlo Mollino, Charles and Ray Eames, Jean Prouvé. But he is too determined to stay as focused as possible.

“Collecting is all about building a narrative. I’m more interested in the functional, engineer- ing aspect of design, more in the pieces, less interested in the decorative aspect, Design, after all, is art that has a function,” he says.

“Design changes your life. You experience new feelings, even in your own house, sometimes you look around and see something that changes your perception,” he says.

One London consultant, who works by Peter Dieg and David Shrigley with vintage 1950s desks and lamps, says that his pieces, which guests can pick up and use, always prompt conversations (in contrast, a Paris-based dealer told him that she opened the doors of her drawing room, that we should look at, but not touch, the Mattia Benetti table and the Georg Briedl cabinet, it seems, it can be exhibited, just like art).

What differentiates these collectors from some of their contemporary art counterparts is a relaxed approach to the art market. The London-based collector Julian Treger, founder of the Audley Capital Hedge Fund, even goes so far as to say that design can be an “investment” (most of design experts consulted entertain like a mantra that buyers in the field very rarely enter into with such an aim).

“Contemporary design is reasonable compared with contemporary art, especially the top-end works. You can get an amazing design piece for between £60,000 and £80,000,” he says.

“Many modern and contemporary abstract and contemporary artists including Bridget Riley, Hans Arp and Max Ernst are doing sculpture and also contemporary designers feature in this collection.”

Treger says that he was initially attracted to design because of its inherent formal qualities. “I’ve always liked sculpture and when the contemporary art market took off I couldn’t afford great works. Design was still affordable.” He treats design the same way as his art collection — holding the collection in store, rotating both art and design pieces through his central London home. Treger has “interests in some editions” of furniture by Zaha Hadid and Tom Dixon and sells “versions of what I own from time to time while keeping my pieces.”

The German fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld is more of a magazine than most, selling on entire collections when he tires of them. In the early 1980s, he furnished a penthouse in Monaco with works by the Memphis designers. According to the New York Times, the walls were grey and adorned with nudges by Helmet Newton, the floors were made of black rubber and the eyepopping, playful furniture filled the rooms. “I had that look for five years, and then suddenly it was like a dress from another era... I sold the collection after eight or nine years because I thought in storage it wasn’t improving.”

Lagerfeld said.

Enveoiing himself in design schools has enabled the fashionista to construct a highly stylized look and brand more than any number of works of art ever could. Throwing off his furniture is, for Lagerfeld, like throwing off a jacket and who can argue with that?