



I. Sven Ivar Dysthe, "Planet", 1965, new production by For a Form, 2002

Visionaries and Weathercocks

Norwegian Furniture Design c. 1920-1965

by KJETIL FALLAN

There is a persistent myth to the effect that Norway is and always has been the odd one out in the sphere of Nordic furniture design. But irrespective of what we ourselves might think, it is a fact that when it comes to international fame, Norwegian pioneers such as Alf Sture from Hiort & Østlyngen lose out as against the Dane Arne Jacobsen of Fritz Hansens Eftf., the Swede Bruno Mathsson from Dux/ Bruno Mathsson International, and the Finn Alvar Aalto from Artek.

A trivial, but nevertheless striking illustration of this is to be found by leafing through the "furniture bible", *1000 chairs* by Charlotte & Peter Field. Represented in it are 21 Danish designers, two Swedes, four Finns, but no Norwegians.¹ Another example is the website www.scandinaviandesign.com, which in its review of design-intensive undertakings in the North has not included a single Norwegian producer.²

However, against the background of such observations, can we really authenticate the myth of Norway's junior status? Are internationally famous designers, products and producers the only valid parameters when evaluating a nation's achievements in the field of design? Starting out from this kind of assertion, we risk creating a skewed, perhaps also slightly erroneous impression of the situation. Is it not at least as interesting to study products that have found their way into a host of homes as it is to keep up with what has been bought by museums? On the basis of such a hypothesis we are well equipped to dismiss old myths relating to design history.

Products, producers and designers most often achieve fame in the world of design by appealing to critics, design magazines and museums' purchasing committees. But design is about much more than *elite design*. What can be termed *mainstream design* usually tells us more about real social, cultural and aesthetic trends in the population at large. By applying such a *cultural historical* approach, the time is perhaps ripe for

a revaluation of a few "truths" concerning Norwegian design.

From Town to Country, Craft to Industry

The industrialisation of furniture manufacturing in the North occurred relatively late. An important precondition for industrialisation in Norway was the 1839 Act abolishing the guild system and thereby laying the foundations for a free market.³ Another important indication of industrial production is the use of machines. The first joiner's machines made their appearance during the first half of the 19th century, but they did not come into use in Norway until the 1870s. The primitive machine technique available was not suited to making furniture production noticeably more efficient, and the predominant styles were in no way suited to production by machine.⁴

Batch production and the division of labour are the two most important principles distinguishing industry from craft. At the start of the last century, most of the country's furniture production took place in cabinet-makers' workshops in the towns, where the craft masters and the apprentices who were proficient in all the production processes made the furniture to order.⁵ This situation was to change considerably during the inter-war period. Production was revolutionised during the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the most interesting features are the strong growth in newly established firms and the fact that these were mainly of an industrial nature, and also that these developments took place to a large extent in the countryside.⁶

At first sight, these aspects of the developments might appear paradoxical in the light of the difficult economic conditions marking the period. But further consideration shows that this is not necessarily the case. In times of economic depression, new ventures

are often seen as a sensible way of making a living. And under such conditions, low production costs are extremely important to competitiveness. Hence the establishing of industrial production.

By introducing the division of labour and batch production, the new local factories were able to acquire cheap labour, as they could make use of young unskilled workers who probably had no other job prospects. In addition there was the fact that the start of furniture production did not imply high costs because during the inter-war years it was still a question of an industry of a relatively manual character.⁷

The dominance of the Sunnmøre area in Norwegian furniture production derives precisely from the inter-war years. In 1920 there were 28 factories making wooden products and furniture at Sunnmøre, while in 1940 the number was 120. In other words, 92 new firms had been established within 20 years. And in 1951 there were as many people employed in the furniture industry at Sunnmøre as in the rest of the country combined.⁸

The rationalisation of furniture production headed by the Sunnmøre undertakings from the end of the 1920s to the mid-1930s led to a 40% reduction in prices during that period.⁹ Similarly, the previously so dominant imports, mainly from Sweden and Denmark, were reduced to only 6% of the total furniture sales in the country.¹⁰

Early Design – Systematised Plagiarism

So what kind of furniture were these new factories making? What and who decided their design? Let us look a little more closely at the background, the trends of the time and the battle between ideology and pragmatism.

Internationally speaking, the design history of the inter-war period is characterised by the burgeoning and spread of the ideas of Functionalism. The implementation of Functionalism, or the transition from ideology to practice, proceeded more quickly and smoothly in architecture than in design. The reason for this was that manufacturers still did not have at their disposal the production technology necessary for the rational manufacture of products designed in keeping with the Functionalist idiom. So inter-war Functionalist design must be viewed as an avant-garde movement which in

no way could be said to represent the main trends in production. In other words, the gap between *elite design* and *mainstream design* was very great indeed.

The day-to-day production of the newly-established Norwegian furniture factories was far from the utopian Bauhaus visions of unified art and Le Corbusier's ideas of the house as a machine in which to live. The leaders in these undertakings were local initiators – not revolutionary academics – and the workers were largely unskilled youths – not cabinetmakers. Their aim was not to improve the public attitude towards furniture, but to create a viable workplace.

In order to succeed in this, the factories had to produce models they were relatively sure of selling in large numbers. So furniture design was determined by what the factory owners thought people wanted. And what (not without reason) they thought people wanted was largely over-upholstered easy chairs and sofas on wooden frames. In order to be able to produce this type of furniture, they had to invest in new types of machines or enter into agreements with sub-contractors who could undertake the cabinet making. In addition, it became necessary to acquire furniture-upholstering skills. One way in which this was done was by bringing in specialists, for instance from Sweden.¹¹

As neither the management nor the workers in the factories were particularly familiar with designing, it was necessary to look further afield for help and inspiration. The simplest, cheapest and safest – and therefore the most common – way of doing this was to start out from existing foreign production. They ordered catalogues from abroad, mainly from Germany, and made variants and slavish imitations of the furniture displayed in them.

Although product development consisted largely of sheer plagiarism, some factories developed independent models. But these, too, were substantially inspired by the furniture catalogues and what had been seen on visits to furniture exhibitions abroad. A few factories certainly took the step of employing architects to design models as early as the 1930s, but this did not at first lead to any revolution in the design of their products.¹²

Representing a sharp contrast to these products were the "elite" – architects, art historians, interior decorators, cabinet makers etc. – who combined their forces in the Society for Applied Art (*Foreningen Brukskunst*) founded in 1918. It was here the ideology of Neo-Classicism and, in time, Functionalism achieved

a foothold in Norway. The Society promoted its avant-garde theories to the general public partly by means of competitions and exhibitions in which they made use of both concrete examples and illustrative texts.¹³

In 1920, the Society for Applied Art in collaboration with the Norwegian Association for Dwelling Reforms (*Norsk Forening for Boligreformer*), arranged the exhibition *New Homes (Nye Hjem)* at Ullevål Hageby. Right from the beginning, the Society for Applied Art declared itself an opponent of ornamentation and a champion of a down-to-earth style through the dictum "the new age and the new style".¹⁴ This shows that the association had quite radical visions, but the exhibition demonstrated that these were still very far from being realised. For the furniture shown in *New Homes* either bore the unmistakable stamp of luxurious Neo-Classicism or was clearly inspired by the Arts & Crafts Movement.¹⁵

The Society for Applied Art arranged several exhibitions throughout the 1920s, and the Kristiania Craft and Industry Association (*Kristiania Haandverk og Industriforening*) arranged competitions and lottery exhibitions that motivated the avant-garde Norwegian architects and cabinet makers to display their best works.¹⁶ But these were miles away from the socialist thinking that was to be so prominent a feature of Functionalist theory.

In Norway, too, the pioneers of Modernism such as Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus milieu quickly gathered followers among the young, progressive architects. The greatest determination and fighting spirit were found in the Association of Socialist Architects (*Socialistiske Arkitekters Forening - SAF*) and were disseminated through their periodical *PLAN*, published between 1933 and 1936. Although the Society for Applied Art also had its modernist views, the Neo-Classical aesthetic preferences of the middle classes continued to dominate their work.

The Association of Socialist Architects, on the other hand, refused to compromise in their struggle for a modernism based on socialist principles. Politically speaking, *SAF* was part of the movement known as *Towards Day (Mot Dag)*, and together with that association it joined the ranks of the Norwegian Labour Party in 1936 after coming to the conclusion that more could be achieved by gaining positions of influence in the Social Democrat movement than as a revolutionary group.¹⁷ For, as it was put in *PLAN*:



2. Arne Korsmo, Armchair for Villa Benjamin, produced by Sundt Monrad, 1937. Oslo Museum of Applied Art

Only a conscious public policy on housing can make the entire population aware of its own needs and persuade them to break with accepted forms.¹⁸

Here, we can clearly see the aggressive functionalism of *SAF*: Most people had to *learn* what was good and correct taste from experts and not be left to their own poor, unhealthy judgement and bad habits. And it was precisely this materialistic determinism that ensured that *SAF* fitted in well with the budding technocracy of Social Democracy.¹⁹

Not unexpectedly, *SAF* also applied its theories to interior design and furniture. As early as 1934, the architect Jacob Christie Kielland wrote that:

... it is little use building practical homes if they are furnished and exploited without sufficient thought.

So parallel with the work for rational housing plans it is necessary to work for better customs in the home and to make propaganda for the use of little but practical furniture.²⁰

SAF's political basis, rational theories and ideals regarding form were extreme and difficult to swallow in the inter-war years. But during the period of reconstruction after the Second World War, circumstances were well suited to socialist Functionalism. It is for instance easy to discern SAF's ideas in the satellite towns that grew up in the 1950s.²¹

As we have seen, during this phase the expanding furniture industry in the west of Norway was most concerned with copying traditional models it knew would sell, it showed little or no interest in the revolution in design theory taking place. The applied art movement was likewise unconcerned with industrial production and mainly found an outlet for its ideas in manually based production.²²



3. Hermann Munthe-Kaas, F 17/Folkestolen, produced by Christiania Jernsengfabrik, 1929. Oslo Museum of Applied Art

Several of the most prestigious furniture manufacturers in the country, such as Brødrene Monrad and Hiort & Østlyngen, engaged architects to design their furniture.²³ These included modernist pioneers such as Arne Korsmo and Karen Brochmann, but their models for the furniture manufacturers were characterised by Neo-Classicism and Art Deco rather than Functionalism in design, production methods and price levels (*fig.2*).

However, one curious example deserves mentioning. In 1929, Julius Nickolaysen, director of Christiania Jernsengfabrikk, established contact with the architect Hermann Munthe-Kaas and asked him to produce a design for a tubular steel chair (*fig.3*). The factory manufactured various products in standard one-inch tubular steel and wanted to expand its range to include a chair in the style of those that Nickolaysen had seen designed by German architects.²⁴

On the basis of Munthe-Kaas' proposal, the members of the factory staff produced working drawings enabling the manufacture of such a chair on the basis of the production technology the factory had at its disposal. The chair consisted of two bent tubular steel frames welded together.²⁵

Here, it is worth noting that the tubular steel frames were bent by hand.²⁶ It is paradoxical that the chair which without doubt had the most industrial or functional look about it in inter-war production in Norway was the result of a manually intensive process very much in opposition to the design theory principles forming the basis of the design. But this phenomenon was in no way unique to Christiania Jernsengfabrikk's Model F-17. The same applied for instance to the models on which the F-17 was based, which had been designed by leading Bauhaus figures such as Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Mart Stam.

The F-17 project is interesting in several respects. It is remarkable that a factory such as Christiania Jernsengfabrikk should on its own initiative seek expert help in designing a chair which must have been seen as a bold project and an experimental design in a Norwegian context. But it is symptomatic that both the factory and Munthe-Kaas appear to have been satisfied that the designer's contribution was limited to a sketch of what he thought the product should have looked like. So the project was far from having pioneering status when it came to integral product development.²⁷

However, the F-17 was in no way representative of Norwegian furniture production in the inter-war pe-

riod. As said above, this was dominated by two groups. On the one hand there was workshop-produced luxury furniture in the style of Neo-Classicism and Art Deco, produced by the applied art movement and the cabinet makers. On the other, and to an ever-increasing extent, there was the mass-produced furniture in traditional styles made by the furniture manufacturers.

The remarkable fact is that two of the most important components in Functionalist design – factory production and design theory based on the principle of social application – both found fertile soil in Norwegian furniture design during the period, but each in its own field. Factory production developed through the effectivisation and modernisation of the furniture factories, especially those in the west. But these were not in the least interested in aiming at creative design, which would have suited their production methods better. The Socialist Architects Association and in part the Society for Applied Art, on the other hand, proclaimed the design theory based on the principle of social application in vigorous terms. But these principally academic circles and the production environments with which they tried to ally themselves (cabinet makers' workshops) were not able to translate theory into practice.

Although we also encounter many of the same problems after the Second World War, the situation was radically changed both in terms of politics, society and production techniques. We shall now consider what implications this had for furniture design.

Consciousness-raising and Professionalisation

In the period following the Second World War, Norway was characterised by reconstruction and the collective approach to culture and society. This situation impinged on all areas of life, including furniture design. The scepticism regarding the industrial production of furniture that had been such a prominent feature in many areas in the inter-war years was soon a thing of the past, for the slogans were *effectiveness* and *rationality* when the country was to be rebuilt. The public authorities built roads and heavy industry and regulated the satellite towns. Housing was built at speed, and industry was able to adapt to peacetime production again despite the severe scarcity of goods during the early years.



4. Alf Sture, chair no. 1036, produced by Hiort & Østlyngen, 1941. New production by Tønning Møbelfabrik, 2003. Oslo Museum of Applied Art

All the new houses, flats and public buildings that were erected during the reconstruction period naturally also had to be furnished. In addition, most people's buying power was greater than might have been feared, and public finances went on the offensive, especially after the Marshall Plan came into effect. So the furniture industry experienced a particularly happy period despite the fact that it could be difficult to get hold of the materials desired. However, the factories sold everything they were able to produce, and so it was strictly speaking not necessary for a company's profitability to aim at pioneering design and product development. As Ingmar Relling – the designer, among other things, of *Siesta* – puts it:

Why should the producers collaborate with designers when the frantic demand for new furniture meant that they sold anything at all provided it looked like a chair?²⁸



5. Adolf Relling, Kaminstolen, produced by Aarnæs and Hjelm, 1946. Norsk møbelfaglig senter

However, the situation changed from the start of the 1950s. 72,000 new homes had been built between 1947 and 1950, and goods were now markedly less scarce.²⁹ The furniture industry was still enjoying good times, but a few leading figures were beginning to realise that a fresh start had to be made on product development. Design became a competitive factor.³⁰

During this period, *Bonytt*, edited by Arne Remlov, became an important instrument for the Society for Applied Art and its propaganda on behalf of modernism. By 1943 it was possible to read how important it was to make "furniture with dimensions intended for the small size of modern homes and the present-day way of life in those homes".³¹ As already said, the Society for Applied Art's ideas found a ready audience in the leading cabinet makers, for instance at Hiort & Østlyngen, where Alf Sture became a pioneer for the new idiom (*fig.4*).³² But about ten years were to elapse

before modernist design theories gained a foothold in the Norwegian furniture industry.

Mainly two factors were instrumental in opening the eyes of the industry to modernist design. To begin with, there was the *need*. As said above, the market experienced increased competition, and several producers began to realise that design was a competitive factor. Jens Ekornes went to the USA to learn about rational factory methods as early as 1946.³³ During the following years, several groups of representatives went off with the same object in view, and one thing they learned was the importance of good design.

The other necessary precondition was the *range*: At the National School of Craft and Design, (*Statens Håndverks- og Kunstindustriskole - SHKS*), a course in "Furniture and Interior Design" was established in 1939 under the direction of Arne Korsmo. This was to be of great importance to post-war Norwegian furniture design. Among the first groups on the course to qualify, we find names such as Adolf Relling (*fig.5*), Alf Sture, Tormod Alnæs (*fig.6*) and Birger Dahl.³⁴ So by the beginning of the 1950s there was a small cohort of specially trained furniture designers who could be engaged by the industry. The first to take advantage of this was Møller og Stokke, who appointed Arnt Lande as its permanent designer as early as 1947. However, it was to be a more common practice to employ freelancers or design offices such as Bruksbo and Rastad og Relling.³⁵

The furniture designers from *SHKS* were trained in a socialist tradition. Arne Korsmo was deeply committed to the inter-war period's idealistic, socialist Functionalism, something that admittedly was more theoretical than practical. Combined with the designers' background and the tasks confronting them in the post-war period, this meant that they became part of the great modern project, in which the designers' task was to create things of benefit to the greatest number of people.

The producers, too, focused on the social aspect during this period. In a contribution to the National Association of Furniture Manufacturers' rationalisation conference in 1954, it was established that:

Although extensive new sections of the population have appeared as purchasers of furniture, we are far from having satisfied the need for good-quality furniture in all homes. And in this battle for purchasing power we have the best social conscience

because we are contributing to increasing satisfaction in the home.³⁶

It is, of course, necessary to take into account the fact that rhetoric of this kind was used in order to reinforce the position of the Norwegian furniture industry. But given the spirit of the age and the great modern undertaking, it can nevertheless be assumed that the quotation also expresses a genuine social commitment on the part of the producers.

Modernism's ideological missionaries also applauded this trend towards lighter, simpler and more rational furniture. The first furniture fairs after the war were arranged in 1951 and 1952 by the Society for Applied Art and the National Association of Furniture Manufacturers. Commenting on the 1952 exhibition, Arne Remlov of *Bonytt* was particularly pleased:

[...] that the so-called practitioners of applied art have had an impact on the producers. [...] the lighter, architect-designed furniture has so to speak taken over the entire field. [...] I will merely point to the particularly gratifying fact that a number of the factories in the west have now started on the right road [...] The influence of the furniture designers is now very noticeable.³⁷

At all events, there is no doubt that great changes took place in the Norwegian furniture industry at the beginning of the 1950s, both in the effectivisation of production and the renewal of the idiom. In the coming years, Scandinavian design became world famous. Let us take a closer look at Norway's role in this "miracle".

Scandinavian Design: Norway – "Little But Happy"?

Scandinavian design is a frequently misused and partly misleading concept. It is usually used to categorise design from the Nordic countries (and usually it is Denmark, Sweden and Finland that are meant) during the period c. 1950 to c. 1970. The actual concept is of neither Scandinavian nor Nordic origin, but derives from media discussion of *Design in Scandinavia – An Exhibition of Objects for the Home from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden*, a travelling exhibition that toured the USA and Canada from 1954 to 1957.³⁸

The exhibition met with great interest among the public and the media and was probably the one single event that contributed most to the cult status that Nordic design was in the process of achieving. *Design in Scandinavia* was a result of two parallel initiatives, one Finnish and one Danish/Swedish. These both stem from 1951 and from contacts associated with the IX Triennale di Milano, where Norway typically enough was not represented on account of a lack of cash.³⁹ However, Norway was nevertheless included when it was decided that the travelling exhibition was to be a common Nordic manifestation.⁴⁰

This is unfortunately quite symptomatic of Norway's position in Nordic post-war modernism (which is a more correct and more descriptive concept than Scandinavian Design). The Norwegian design environment only took a small number of extrovert promotion initiatives, but benefitted from the fact that our neighbours seemed to have agreed to move the focus from national to Nordic.

Another important arena for Nordic design in the fifties was the above-mentioned Triennale di Milano. Sweden, Denmark and Finland were all ready for the ninth of these in 1951 and enjoyed great success, whereas Norway was conspicuous by its absence. In 1954, for the tenth Triennale, Norway was represented by its own section curated and designed by Ferdinand Aars and Arne Korsmo.⁴¹ Like the contributions of our neighbours, the exhibition was well received in Italy.⁴² Giò Ponti, at the time the director and editor of *Domus*, even described the Norwegian contribution as "the revelation of this year".⁴³

This and many other similar verdicts that Nordic design received abroad naturally flattered the Norwegians of the time, hungry as they were for international recognition as a designer nation. But what was it that Norway exhibited on these occasions? In view of the focus and title of the exhibition, *Design in Scandinavia*, it was, to a worrying extent, prototypes and decorative art that were characteristic of Norway's contribution.

The possibility of creating a sensation centred on the goods that could become the objects of export in large quantities was not exploited. While Sweden, Denmark and Finland exhibited furniture, glass and ceramics from volume producers, Norway received praise and prizes for things like a table specially made for pickled herring and silver plate designed by Grete Prytz Kittelsen for Tostrup.⁴⁴ And so Norway did not



6. Tormod Alnæs, "Pony", 1953, new production 2002 by FurnArt

receive the sales-promoting and identity-creating publicity for mass-produced industrial products, which helped lay the foundations for our neighbours' international fame as designer nations during this period.

But although the promotional work was less successful in the case of Norway, this does not mean that Norwegian furniture production and design lay with its back broken. Rather the opposite! In Norway, as in most other industrialised countries, there was a rapid development in production and design throughout the 1950s and 1960s. New materials such as plastic, foam plastic and laminates effected miracles for the production methods in the furniture industry and thereby also for the designers' potentials. And that was precisely what laid the foundations for the organic, natural design for which Nordic modernism became famous.⁴⁵

If we use parameters such as market samples in time and space, references in the literature and press

and frequency of exhibitions, it might today look as though it were only the Danes (and to a certain extent Swedes and Finns, but certainly not Norwegians) who developed furniture during this period with new and creative designs based on the new materials and production techniques. Fortunately, this is not so.

Everyone knows the chairs Arne Jacobsen made for Fritz Hansen. Both the laminated chairs (the *Ant* and the *Seven*) and the armchairs formed in plastic (the *Egg* and the *Swan*) have continued to stand as icons of Nordic modernism both for their shape and the material used. On the other hand, there are not many who are aware that the material and production process that made possible the *Egg* and the *Swan*, hardened styropor, is a Norwegian patent from 1956.⁴⁶ But to begin with, Jacobsen and Fritz Hansen were anything but the first to think along these lines. And perhaps more important in this regard: Furniture of a similar

kind, parallel to the famous Danish products, was also developed in Norway.⁴⁷

From the middle of the 1950s, many Norwegian furniture manufacturers had begun to make furniture of plastic materials, exploiting the special qualities of the materials in the design of their chairs. The inspirations were the same as for Jacobsen and Hansen: the innovative works made by the American designers Eero Saarinen, Ray and Charles Eames and George Nelson for the producers Herman Miller and Knoll. Among the places where they were shown was the exhibition *Amerikansk Form*, which toured Scandinavia in 1953-54. Not all the Norwegian producers maintained an equally high level, but it is not difficult to find good examples that are fully on a level with foreign products.

Hans Bratterud's *Scandia* for Hove Møbelfabrikk from 1957 (fig.8) and Kjel Richardsen's *Tønnestav* for Tynes Møbelfabrikk from 1960, are examples of Norwegian chairs based on the same construction as Arne Jacobsen's *Ant* and *Seven*: the seat and back in laminate, and tubular steel legs.⁴⁸ Neither from the point of view of production technique nor formally are these in any sense inferior to the Danish products. As a curious indication of this, mention can be made of the fact that *Scandia* has recently figured in glossy articles on interior decoration in, for instance, *Design-Interiør* and *Wallpaper*.⁴⁹ So in order to understand that *Seven* today is one of the most famous and most widely sold chairs in the world, while *Scandia* is completely unknown to most people and was taken out of production decades ago, it is necessary to look for other explanations than aesthetic qualities.

It should be noted here that *Scandia* was re-issued in 2002. The same has recently happened to several other pieces of Norwegian furniture from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Tormod Alnæs' *Pony* and Sven Ivar Dysthe's *Planet*, which have nowadays acquired cult status (fig.1). Looked at pessimistically, this could be seen as an attempt to exploit a market potential originating from the great interest seen today in modernist design in general. From a more optimistic perspective, the phenomenon can be interpreted as an expression of cultural historical information. Or it could be

viewed as a sign that the present design ideology paradigm is more closely related to that of the 1950s and 1960s than was the case 10 or 20 years ago.

These examples show clearly that good design is not sufficient on its own to ensure international fame. In order to succeed, you are dependent on good design being followed up by successful promotion and marketing. And it is obvious that producers and designers in our neighbouring countries have been far smarter in this field.

The first organised export drive on the part of Norwegian furniture producers came in 1955 with the establishment of the export undertaking Westnofa Factories Ltd. Among the firms taking part in the project, we find names such as P.I. Langlo, Vestlandske, Møremøbler and Stokke.⁵⁰ The aim was naturally to gain a foothold in the export market, especially in the USA. Westnofa even established its own dealer network in the USA. But success was to turn out to be more difficult to achieve than expected, both because it was expensive to maintain a sales network and because production for export demanded very considerable resources.⁵¹



7. Fredrik Kayser/Rastad & Relling, "Kryss-stolen", produced by Hjellegjerde Lenestolfabrik, 1956. Oslo Museum of Applied Art



8. Hans Bratterud, "Scandia jr.", produced by Hove Møbel-fabrikk, 1957, new production by fjordfiesta.furniture, 2002.

But does the fact that Norwegian furniture did not make any particular inroads among exclusive international dealers and was not purchased by prestigious museums mean that Norwegian design was not up to it? As said in the introduction to this article, this is too simplistic a conclusion. The design revolution that overwhelmed the Norwegian furniture industry in the 1950s had an enormous effect on Norwegian homes and thus also on people's everyday lives, culture and social activities.

Another important factor in the furniture industry towards the end of the 1950s was the development of what gradually became a sharp distinction between the private market and the contract market. These markets made very different demands on the products they were seeking, something that led to many furniture manufacturers specialising in one of the sectors.⁵²

This distinction was of great significance for design developments. The producers aiming at the private market in Norway chose mainly to remain loyal to what they thought was "popular taste" and the com-

fortable homes Norwegians were so concerned with. The firms probably felt that a cautious approach such as this was necessary to ensure sales and that they could not afford to take chances in product development. Admittedly this section of Norwegian furniture also laid a golden egg from time to time. One of the greatest Norwegian furniture successes ever, Ingmar Relling's *Siesta* from 1965 (fig.11) was produced by Vestlandske Stol- og Møbelfabrikk, now part of Ekornes – a typical representative of the producers for the private market.⁵³

The producers who chose to aim for the contract market developed quite a different attitude to design. It quickly emerged that their customers – professional buyers and people with a special interest – made demands on quality in shape and function far beyond those made by the private market, and they were far more accustomed to experimentation.⁵⁴ Consequently, it was not only possible, but also absolutely necessary for producers in this sector to aim resolutely at innovative design.

And it is the contract market that since then has been the driving force behind Norwegian furniture design and led to innovative and experimental products, some successful and some less successful. It is in



9. Tore Borgersen and Espen Voll, "Dock High", produced by Globe Furniture, 2002



10. Sigurd Resell and Cato Mansrud, "Irafas", 1956, new production by FurnArt, 2002

this sector we find producers such as Stokke, HÅG and Fora Form, and it is here that designers such as Sven Ivar Dysthe and Peter Opsvik have found scope for accomplishing their ideas.

Aims

Despite the total numbers in the field of Norwegian manufactured goods and design being extremely modest when compared with the other Nordic countries, the furniture industry is nevertheless in a special position. The furniture industry is the most important sector in the field of Norwegian manufactured goods, where it occupies a dominant position regarding both firms, exports and turnover.⁵⁵

The Norwegian furniture industry has demonstrated vitality against all the odds, and it can today boast a particularly varied and relatively large production. It has virtually continuously been accused of being in crisis by the designers, who have complained at the lack of a foothold among the producers. Nevertheless, designers and producers in collaboration have produced some best-sellers and international prize-winning models.⁵⁶

The history of Norwegian furniture design is many-faceted and fascinating. In contrast to Denmark and our other Nordic neighbours, the Norwegian story is not dominated by international fame. The most striking salient feature about the history of our furniture design is plurality, both with regard to quality and the degree of innovation in design and production. But there has been no lack of good ideas, and a number of producers



11. Ingmar Relling, "Siesta", produced by Vestlandske møbelfabrikk, 1965, now produced by RyboNor. Oslo Museum of Applied Art

have been willing to integrate innovative design into their product development. The reason for Norway's lack of recognition as a furniture-designing nation is, then, to be found in its reluctance to aim at innovative design in products intended for the private market.

So, if we use the furniture industry as an indicator, it appears as though the idea of Norway as the odd one out in the Nordic design family is very largely due to the inability or unwillingness to communicate and promote Norwegian design and Norwegian products in the export market and private market. We can see today how important this aspect is, because the Norwegian manufactured goods industry was also to an alarming extent

compelled to capitulate to imports on the domestic market, as the oil economy gradually made it possible to live with a very modest domestic production.

It is a very unfortunate development we have witnessed here, and it is vitally important that the present attempt to change things should be successful. Norwegian design lacks neither competence nor ideas – Norwegian design lacks aggressive figures to provide the commissions. So it is fascinating to see whether the political agencies and industry itself accept the challenge to build up a manufactured goods industry based on innovative design as the most important competitive advantage.

NOTES

1. Charlotte & Peter Field, *1000 Chairs*, Cologne 1997, 746-758.
2. www.scandinaviandesign.com/companies.
3. Alf Midtbust, "Fra laugssamfunn til industrisamfunn", Alf Midtbust (ed.) *Møbelprodusentenes landsforening 50 år – Møbelsnekkeren Jubileumsutgave* (n. 4-6, 1959), 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.
5. Vigdis Mørkedal, *Frå etterlikning til nyskaping – Om møbelprodusentenes landsforening 50 år*, Sykkylven: Norsk Møbelfaglig Senter, 1997, 15.
6. Alf Midtbust, "Næringen vokser fram", Alf Midtbust (ed.), *op. cit.*, 9-10.
7. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 15-16.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. Fredrik Wildhagen, *Norge i Form – Kunsthåndverk og design under industrikulturen*, Oslo 1988, 101.
10. Elen Omtvedt, *Norsk Møbelproduksjon i 1940- og 50-Årene, Belyst ved interiørarkitekt Alf Stures Design – Tradisjon og Formyelse*, Oslo: Undergraduate dissertation in the Department of Archaeology, Art History and Numismatics, University of Oslo, 1996, 31.
11. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 28-32.
12. *Ibid.*, 28-32.
13. Elen Omtvedt, *op. cit.*, 31.
14. "The new age and the new style" was the subtitle of Carl. W. Schnitler's introductory article to the exhibition catalogue.
15. Espen Johnsen, "Nye møbler for nye hjem", Morten Bing & Espen Johnsen (eds.), *Nye Hjem – Bomiljøer i mellomkrigstiden*, Oslo, 1998, 72-73.
16. Morten Bing & Espen Johnsen, "Møbler og interiør i endring", *ibid.* 31-32.
17. Kjetil Rolness, *Med smak skal hjemmet bygges – Innredning av det moderne Norge*, Oslo, 1995, 49-50.
18. *PLAN* 3,35.
19. Kjetil Rolness, *op. cit.*
20. Jacob Christie Kielland, *Små egne hjem*, Oslo, 1934, 16.
21. Kjetil Rolness, *op. cit.*
22. Frederik Wildhagen, *op. cit.*, 102-103.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 103-104.
25. *Ibid.*, 104.
26. *Ibid.*
27. By *integral product development* is meant a process in which form, function, production technique, life-cycle analysis and marketing are co-ordinated with a view to creating the best possible overall product.
28. Interview with Ingmar Relling in *Bonytt* 1986.
29. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 56.
30. Trinelise Dysthe, "Tilbake til fremtiden. Form gjennom tid – ord gjennom år" in Eldar Høidal (ed.): *Et liv i form – hedersskrift for Inge Langlo*, Sykkylven: Norsk Møbelfaglig Senter, 2000, 30-31.
31. Arne Remlov in *Bonytt*, 1943, 182.
32. Elen Omtvedt, *op. cit.*, 54-66.
33. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 67.
34. Alf Bøe, "Norske nåtidsmøbler – Ca. 1940-1967", Peter Anker & Alf Bøe (eds.), *Norske møbler i fortid og nåtid*, Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim, 1967, 22.
35. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 82-87.
36. Oluf A. Martins in a contribution to the National Association of Furniture manufacturers' rationalisation conference in 1954, quoted in Alf Midtbust (ed.), *Møbelprodusentenes landsforening 50 år*, *op. cit.*, 38.
37. Arne Remlov, *Bonytt*, 1952, 100.
38. Elen Omtvedt, *op. cit.*, 38.
39. There are various theories regarding the initiatives for the exhibition and their sources, and this is one of the plausible versions.
40. Fredrik Wildhagen, *op. cit.*, 38.
41. *Catalogo della Decima Triennale*, Milano: Centro Studi Triennale, 1954.
42. Kjetil Fallan, *Shaping Sense – Italian Post-War Functionalistic Design*, Trondheim, 2001, 71.
43. Giò Ponti, "Saluto alla Decima Triennale Augurio alla Undicesima", *Domus*, 302, 1955, 2.
44. There were naturally also exceptions in the case of Norway. A good example could be Sønnico's aluminium lamps designed by Birger Dahl – a pioneer in Norwegian industrial design (in the correct sense of the word).
45. Ingeborg Glambek, "Scandinavian Design – En kortvarig affære?", Widar Halén (ed.), *Art Deco Funkis Scandinavian Design*, Oslo, 1996, 76-78.
46. Widar Halén, "The Patent that Revolutionised the Furniture Industry the World over", *Scandinavian Journal of Design History*, 9, 1999, 41-55.
47. Widar Halén, "Skumplasten – Materialet som revolusjonerte norsk møbelindustri", Jorunn Haakestad (ed.), *Design Symbol Stil*, Oslo, 2000, 31-33.
48. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 141.
49. Marianne Lie Berg, "Campari i slottets ballsal" in *Design Scandinavia*, 6/2001, 50-59 and Leila Latchin, "Seven dishes for seven days" in *Wallpaper*, 46/2002, 250-251.
50. Vigdis Mørkedal, *op. cit.*, 106-107.
51. *Ibid.*, 121.
52. Inge Langlo, "Eksport gjennom samarbeid", Eldar Høidal (ed.), *Et liv i form – hedersskrift for Inge Langlo*, Sykkylven: Norsk Møbelfaglig Senter, 2000, 132.
53. Ekornes sold the production licence for *Siesta* to Ribo Nor in January 2001.
54. Arild Bakke, "Om Inge, Fora Form og bevisst bruk av merket for God Design og Møbelfakta", Eldar Høidal (ed.), *Et liv i form – hedersskrift for Inge Langlo*, *op. cit.*, 158.
55. Peter Butenschön, "Drømmen om den gode stol", *ibid.*, 18.
56. Eldar Høidal, "Et liv i form" *ibid.*, 7.