

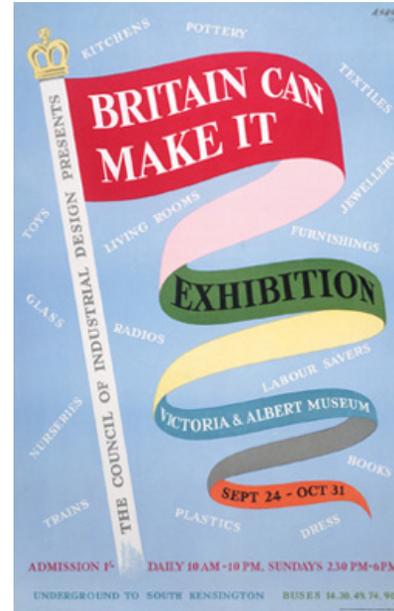
BUYING FURNITURE SINCE 1948



NOTES FOR TEACHERS

In 1946, just one year after the end of WW2, a morale-boosting exhibition called 'Britain Can Make It' was organised at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Gordon Russell was involved in promoting and encouraging the general public's aspiration to once again buy furniture after the austerity of the war years.



Exhibition Poster for 'Britain Can Make It' at the V&A Museum, 1946.

AIMS OF THIS UNIT

To explore how life has changed since WW2 by looking at how the general public bought furniture. Shopping habits had been changing from 1900 onwards, as did people's aspirations and expectations for a better life.

CURRICULUM LINKS

KS2

- History - Unit 13 (How has life changed in Britain since 1948?)

KS3

- Design and Technology - Unit 09bii (Designing for markets)
- History - Unit 11 (Industrial changes)



Advertisement for Gordon Russell Limited, c.1941

QUICK NOTES

Gordon Russell Limited, the furniture company, made furniture for most of the 20th Century.

Mr. Russell started designing furniture in the 'Arts and Crafts' style.

The early furniture was mostly made by hand at the workshops in Broadway in Worcestershire.

By the mid 1920s Gordon Russell began to design furniture that looked more 'modern' with less detail and a more uncomplicated look.

The furniture was being made using both hand and machine so that larger quantities could be made, but still high quality!

Gordon Russell opened smart new showrooms in London to show the new furniture in room settings, just as if it was in someone's home.

Customers now wanted to buy 'suites' or sets of furniture that matched.

During WW2 (1939-1945) homes were bombed and many people lost all their belongings.

Gordon Russell advised on and then became chairman



of the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee and Design Panel during the war.

Utility furniture was designed to use the minimum of materials still available as there were huge shortages during and after the war.

The designs were simple, plain and could be made by woodworking factories around the country.

After the war, customers started to get back to buying furniture and factories improved how they designed and made furniture.

DESIGNING - ONE

Gordon Russell, the company, spans the 20th century in a way that ably illustrates the changes that occurred in post-war Britain from a design and consumer perspective, right up to the turn of the millennium.

A NEW AGE IN CONSUMERISM

The design reforms Gordon Russell had developed pre-war now moved to a wider reality. The interwar years are criticised for the British love of historical pastiche, reinventing the design of the Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.



this can either be interpreted as being bought by consumers with little taste or who embraced the idea of a national identity.

The early designs of Gordon Russell, influenced by the Cotswolds and Arts & Crafts tradition of high quality furniture, were being sold to clients from these showrooms in Broadway. It reflects the craft tradition of the area.



How the company presented the furniture also changed with the times. Russell decided that he needed to reach a wider market and opened a showroom at 28 Wigmore Street in London on 1 October 1929. It was designed by the architect Geoffrey Jellicoe and managed by Ted Ould, who later became managing director of the company. The interiors were very different to those of the 1900s.

Left: Interior of the Gordon Russell showrooms in Broadway c.1925, Above Right: Interior of the new showroom at 28 Wigmore Street London c.1929

DESIGNING - TWO

- 1920** Furniture showroom in the Lygon Cottage in Broadway was acquired.
- 1929** London showroom opened at 28 Wigmore Street. Marian Pepler was the buyer for 'factored' goods e.g. glass, carpets, ceramics and items not manufactured by Gordon Russell Ltd. It was set to close during the slump of 1933 but managed to survive. Marian Pepler was a designer in her own right and married to Gordon's brother Dick.
- 1935** A new showroom opened at 40 Wigmore Street, designed by the architect Geoffrey Jellicoe and reflected the consumers' desire to see furniture in room-sets in a bright modern environment. It continued until 1940 with Nikolaus Pevsner as chief buyer until 1939, who had earlier fled Nazi Germany. It closed when it nothing left to sell during the war!
- 1950s** Contracts showroom in Stratford Place, London, opened to architects, designers and corporate clients.
- 1967** Stratford Place showroom closed and contracts showroom moved back to Broadway.



Exterior of the London Showroom, 28 Wigmore Street 1929



Exterior of the London Showroom, 40 Wigmore Street, designed by Geoffrey Jellicoe c.1935

MANUFACTURING AND MATERIALS - TWO

CHANGE

To illustrate the change in consumer taste and expectations compare these two pieces of furniture that have a similar function and were designed for limited production.



Paris Cabinet, designed by Gordon Russell in 1924 and made by William Marks, cabinet-maker at Gordon Russell Ltd. It is made from English walnut inlaid with ebony, box and yew, with handles of ebony. It won the Gold Medal at the Paris Exhibition of 1925.



Chest of drawer units designed by Professor R.D. Russell RDI FSIAD and made by individual craftsmen by tradition cabinet making techniques in solid English yew and handles in brass. The drawer linings are cedar.

These cabinets were selected for 'The Craftsman's Art', a national exhibition of the work of living English craftsmen, which was staged at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in March 1973. It was awarded a Guild Mark by the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers, 1976.

The Units represent a modern development of the traditional naval chest they have been designed to provide a range of flexible storage units which can be bolted together both vertically and horizontally, the bolt holes not in use being capped by brass inserts. It was the first of a series of limited edition collector's pieces, each of which was original in design.

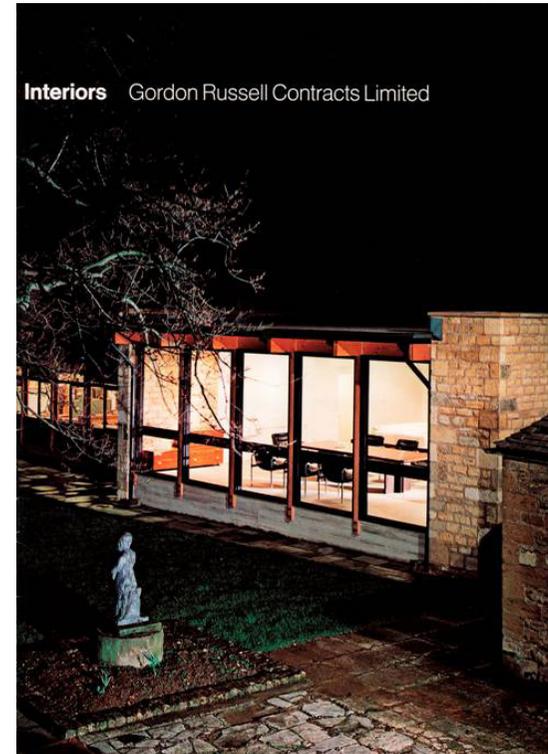
INNOVATION - ONE

Change was underway in how people bought goods. The influences of advertising, cinema, gramophone, automobile and the emerging large-scale corporations cannot be underestimated. After the recovery from the Wall Street Crash in 1929 designers and companies began campaigns to remodel designs repeatedly - a new automobile body shape was now available each year in a variety of paint colours.

As other companies began emulating the designs of Gordon Russell Ltd the company moved to targeting the middle class customer. Their pre-war reputation for high quality led to orders from retailers such as Heals, Harrods and Liberty's. The success of the company ran parallel to the golden age of retail in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

A separate 'contracts' side of the business was set up in 1946 with an impressive showroom in Stratford Place in London. They tapped into the post-war demand for new furniture for universities, schools, hotels, churches and other public buildings.

The company worked with the new architects of the 'Modernist' movement, including Arne Jacobsen and Basil Spence who admired the Broadway ethos and Gordon Russell's own achievements in design.



Cover Illustration of the contract showroom extension at Broadway for Interiors, Gordon Russell Contracts Ltd., August 1978.

By 1972 Gordon Russell had withdrawn from the domestic furniture market, turning towards the contract sector where design and quality were both appreciated and called for by 'specifiers' and architects engaged in corporate and public buildings.

INNOVATION - TWO

POST WAR

The shortages of materials and capacity during the Second World War resulted in the setting up of the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee with Gordon Russell joining the panel. The government imposed control on the use of materials by establishing precise specifications and standard designs for manufacturing. Initially the designs were not well received by the public looking to spend their ration coupons.

When the war finished the Board of Trade wanted to convince manufacturers, retailers, buyers and the buying public that post-war design would be exciting and aspirational. The standardisation and design came to influence later designers such as Terence Conran, who subsequently developed these ideals with the launch of his chain of stores, Habitat, aimed at young buyers.

'Britain Can Make It' exhibition was established in London with a committee (including Gordon Russell) selecting the exhibits from across the country. It was estimated to have been seen by over one and a half million visitors, despite the one shilling entrance fee!

Gordon Russell Ltd. took one of the stands as part of their drive to get the workshops in Broadway back to making and selling fine furniture after years of producing aircraft parts and ammunition boxes.

The Festival of Britain in 1951 was a bid to 'quicken the pace of change in the design of British-made goods'. The exhibition was optimistic and progressive in both the building programme by the Thames and the content selected.



The Lion and Unicorn building designed by Dick Russell (Gordon Russell's brother) and Robert Gooden, Festival of Britain 1951

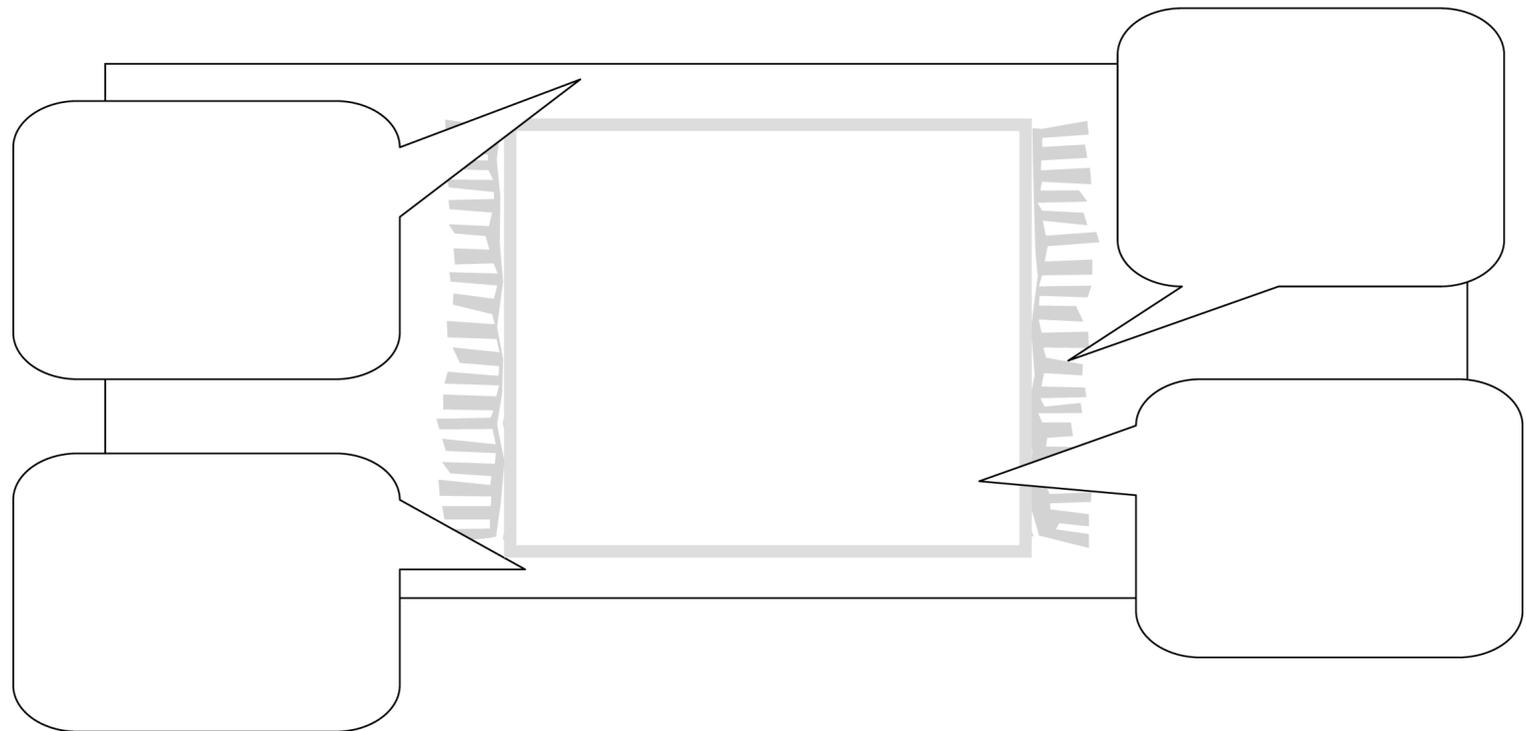
As soon as the company was free of war work it joined the Utility furniture making scheme. Work began to flow in from government contracts as the major furniture and building replacement programme began.

ACTIVITY ONE - ROOM DESIGN

TASK! Take a look around the displays in the museum or visit the website for ideas. Then add the furniture you would like to add to your room plan. What date is it and which room in the house or building?

Room plan of:

Year



ACTIVITY 2 - INTERIOR FURNISHING

This is Lobden House in the Malvern Hills, Worcestershire. It was designed by Dick Russell and his wife Marian Pepler in the 'International' modern style in 1932.

It had a flat roof, geometric furnishings (clean, straight, lines) and white walls.



TASK! Look around the displays and in the catalogue on the kiosks in the museum or the website. What furniture would you have bought to go inside this house?

SHOPPING LIST

Furniture Name	Description

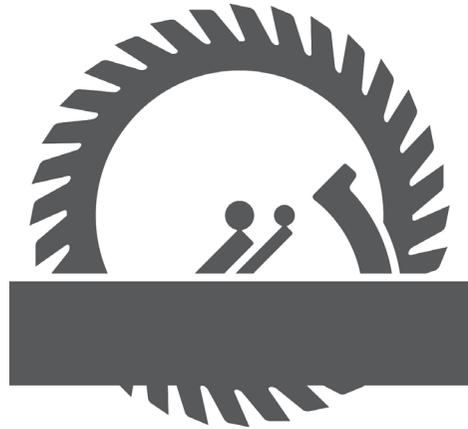
FOLLOW UP IDEAS

These are ideas to try out back in the classroom or studio

- Research pictures of houses from different decades in the twentieth century, 1930s, 1940s etc. Then check through the museum's online catalogue and information pages to select furniture you feel 'go' with each of the houses. Create a storyboard for each.
- Make collections of current furniture catalogues. Find out what their 'key messages' are - is it based on cost, lifestyle, or something else?
- Using the same catalogue set everyone the same financial budget and challenge groups to work to furnish a room or house within the budget. Compare each group's solution.
- If you have created models of furniture as part of your art, design and technology studies then extend the project to include creating three dimensional room-sets and research the interior designs you think go with your ideas. Look at wallpaper, carpet, floor and curtain ideas. Use shoe boxes or cardboard boxes with one side removed for instant rooms.



Interior of the Gordon Russell showroom at 40 Wigmore Street, London, c. 1938.



GORDON
RUSSELL
DESIGN
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www.gordonrussellmuseum.org