

FURNITURE STORIES



NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Furniture is used by people in a variety of ways and even the simplest piece has a story to tell. It may be about the material it is made from, the person who designed and made it, who uses or used it and the history attached to it. Gordon Russell Limited was often commissioned to create special one-off or low production pieces alongside the furniture designed for wider markets.

AIMS OF THIS UNIT

To explore the role and purpose of a furniture designer working in different times and designing for different clients.

CURRICULUM LINKS

KS2

- Art and Design - all units

KS3

- Art and Design - Unit 8C (Shared views)
- Design and Technology - Unit 08f (The world of professional designers)

All Key Stages

- Literacy - speaking and listening, writing reports and design briefs
- ICT - research skills



Gordon Russell, furniture designer

QUICK NOTES

Clients are your customers.

The Gordon Russell furniture company attracted different types of client.

Some bought limited number pieces from 'high-end' furniture shops.

One-off' individual pieces were made for wealthy customers, e.g. the Lloyd George chest or the Eisenhower table commissioned by the Queen.

'Mass-production' pieces were good quality but made at a lower cost through using machines e.g. the Utility furniture made in wartime Britain and made available across the country.

High volume pieces made with other companies like Murphy Radios and also available in many shops.

Furniture made for architects and other designers for specific places e.g. the Coventry Chair made for the architect Basil Spence's new Coventry Cathedral.

The story of how Gordon Russell became a furniture designer started with working in his father's antique

business in Broadway in Worcestershire.

He learnt how to design and make by looking and listening to the Cotswold craftsmen in the workshop and in the nearby villages like Chipping Campden.

He was not a particularly good woodworker but enjoyed all the crafts throughout his life. He knew how things were made.

His work became very well-known and much admired for the high quality craftsmanship and materials.



Coventry Chair, designed by R.D. Russell

DESIGNING - ONE

STARTING POINTS

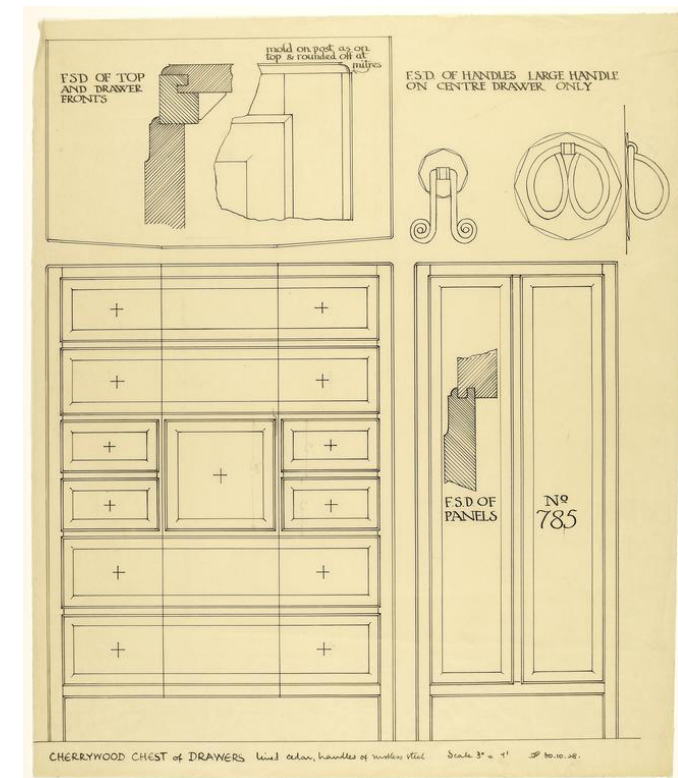
Throughout his career Gordon Russell and his company worked with a variety of clients to create furniture for many different reasons. They included:

- low production pieces for wealthy customers sold through 'high-end' retailers
- one-off pieces made for a single client and to commission.
- mass-production pieces of good quality but lower costs e.g. Utility furniture of the 1940s and beyond
- high volume pieces in partnership with other companies e.g. Murphy Radios Ltd
- pieces made specifically under contract for architects and other designers e.g. chairs for Coventry Cathedral

Many of the pieces on display in the museum have their own stories to tell. Not just of who commissioned them or owned them but also who designed and made the furniture in the Broadway workshops.

THE LLOYD GEORGE CHEST

Lloyd George was Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1916 to 1922. He commissioned Gordon Russell to design a chest to be made from a holly tree that had blown down in his garden at his house in Churt.

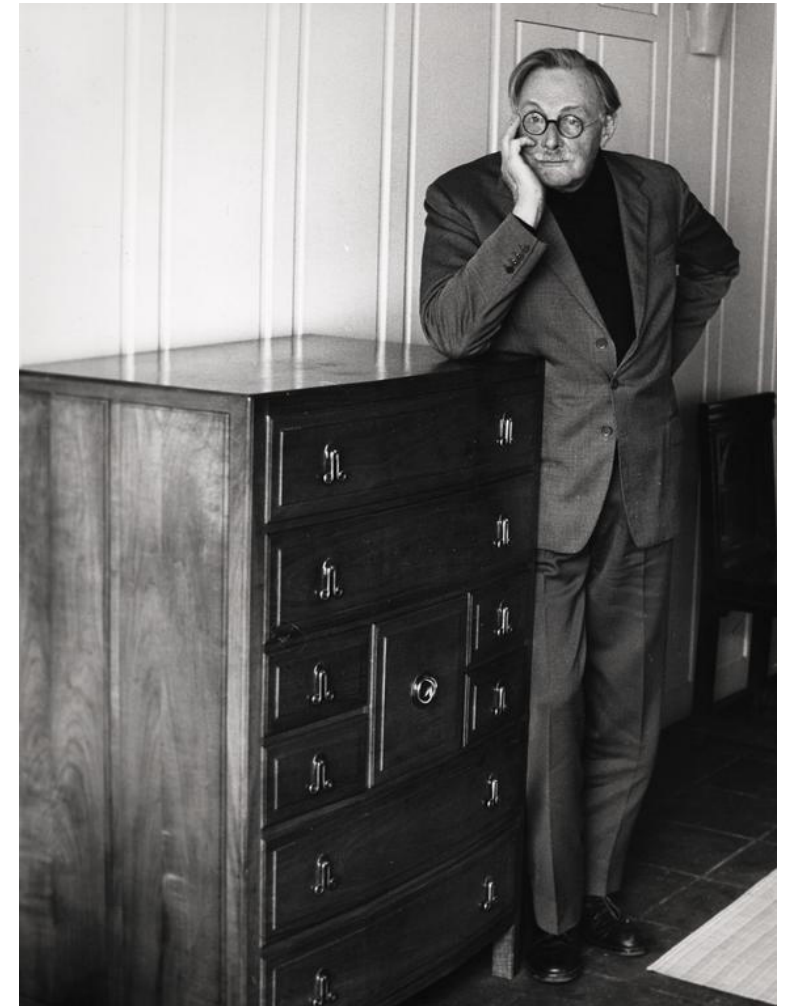


Drawings for the Lloyd George chest

Gordon Russell recalls that it 'was a tricky job as the timber wasn't seasoned and he wanted it at once.'

The design was also produced as a stock item known as the 'Snowhill' chest, usually made in cherry. It has four long and two short drawers and one square central drawer with cambered fronts. The carcass is lined with Honduras mahogany and cedar for the drawers. The cedar would have scented anything stored in the drawers and was good for keeping the moths away!

The chest was made by Cecil Gough and the forged handles of rust-less iron were made by A Fry. The chest was completed in 1928.



Gordon Russell with the completed holly wood chest

MANUFACTURING AND MATERIALS

EARLY MAKING

Gordon Russell's family had moved to Broadway in 1904 when his father bought the Lygon Arms hotel.

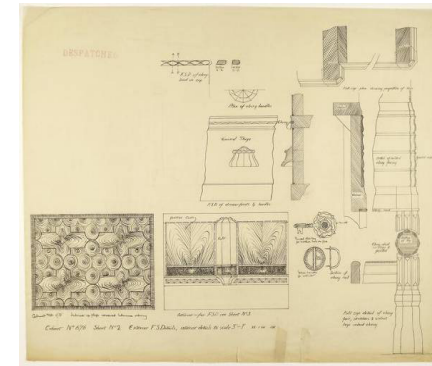
It was whilst at Chipping Campden Grammar School that Gordon Russell was introduced to the craft of woodworking. Under the instruction of the woodwork instructor, George Badham, he made a small set of bookshelves out of the old oak floorboards from the school.

'Planing these was a heavy task as the wood was nearly as hard as iron, with many nails, and the dust of centuries had been ground into it.'*

Gordon Russell

He kept the oak bookcase all his life and it is now on display in the Gordon Russell Design Museum in Broadway.

(*planing is smoothing the surface of the wood by shaving it with a sharp tool)



One of Gordon Russell's early designs

At just 16 he ran his father's antique business also housed in the Lygon Arms, working alongside the craftsmen drawn from the local area. This grounding in craft skills greatly influenced Russell and he never lost his admiration for physical labour and manual skill.

His close relationship with workshop craftsmen showed him the value of knowing how objects were produced so that his drawings of designs corresponded to the making process.

The rather poorly made early bookcase shows that Russell was never going to be a 'master-maker' but he understood the importance of knowing how to make furniture before attempting to design it.

INNOVATION

THE EISENHOWER TABLE

This occasional table was presented to President Eisenhower by Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh during a state visit to the United States of America on 19 October 1957.




It was designed by Gordon Russell's brother, Dick Russell who had trained originally as an architect and became Professor of Wood, Metal and Plastics at the Royal College of Art in London.

The table frame is in English walnut. The map is of Eisenhower's 1944 D-Day landing plans which have been printed onto formica. The inscription is tooled in gold leaf on black calf leather and the top is covered by a half inch plate glass sheet.

The most innovative and surprising material used was the Formica – now linked to café bars and everyday kitchen worktops. It was invented in Cincinnati in 1913 and is a plastic laminate with a melamine layer. The Formica can be printed as it is here.



ACTIVITY 1 - WHEN WAS IT MADE?

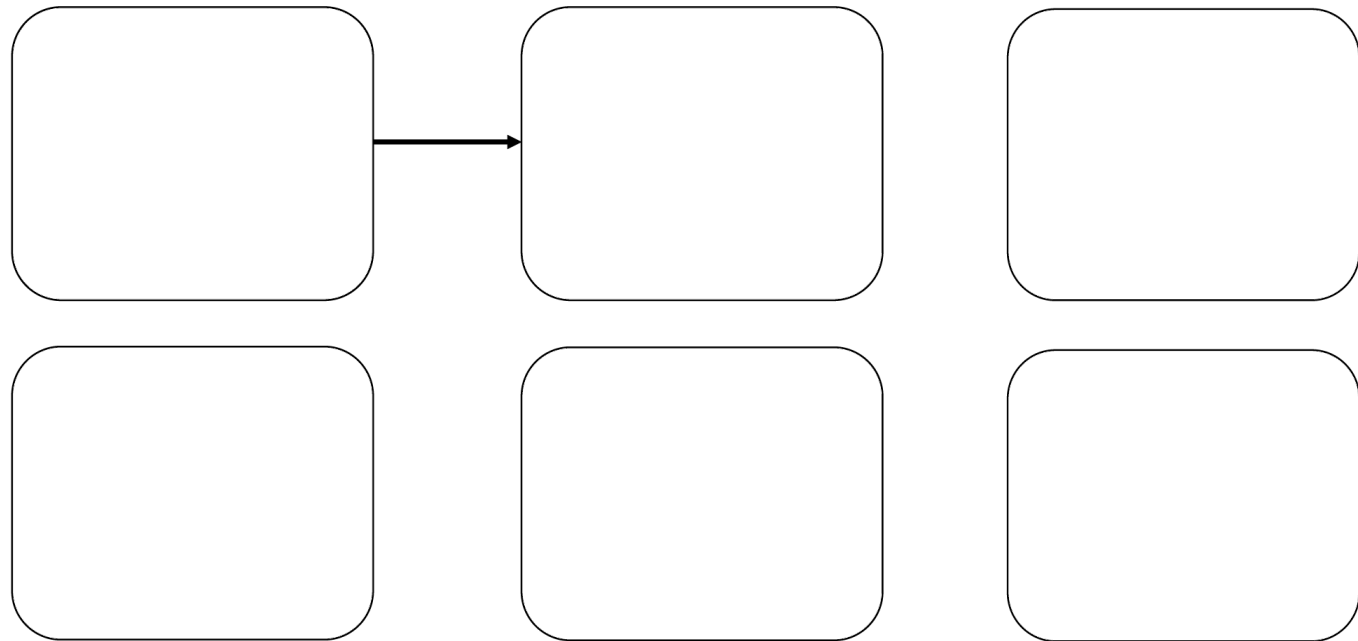
Furniture	When was it made?	Who do you think it was made for?
		
		
		

TASK! Imagine you are in the 1920s and buying some Gordon Russell Furniture. Look at the dates of the furniture, either online or in the displays, and see what you might choose.

ACTIVITY 2 - DESIGN PLAN

TASK! Have a go at working out a flow chart for designing and making a piece of furniture.
Start by thinking about the customer or client (who buys the piece), the designer, the maker and the retailer (who sells the piece) and what will happen to the furniture in the future.

START

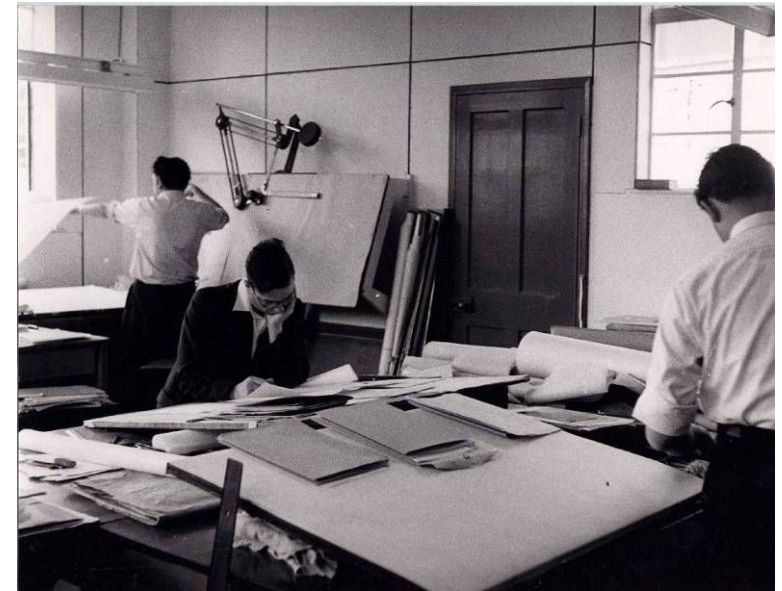


WHERE DOES YOUR FURNITURE END UP?

FOLLOW UP IDEAS

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

- Collect a range of images of furniture from different eras. Then create a series of client 'profiles' e.g. age, gender, background, style etc and try to match each of the profiles with particular examples of furniture.
- Choose one piece of furniture you like or admire and create a storyboard about the piece. You could use samples of the material it is made from, details of where the material came from, who might buy and use the piece, where it might be used in a building (or outside a building), etc.
- Work with a partner with one taking the role of designer and the other as a client. Think up a list of questions to ask each other to help you plan a design. Designers then draw up their ideas, clients make decisions about which to choose but have good reasons for your choice.



Drawing studio, Gordon Russell Limited, 1960s.



GORDON
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DESIGN
MUSEUM

www.gordonrussellmuseum.org