

THE PROFESSIONALS



NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Gordon Russell began designing furniture for his company by himself but the company grew to include the work of many other designers. There are also designers who influenced Gordon Russell and the influence he in turn had on other designers both nationally and internationally.

AIMS OF THIS UNIT

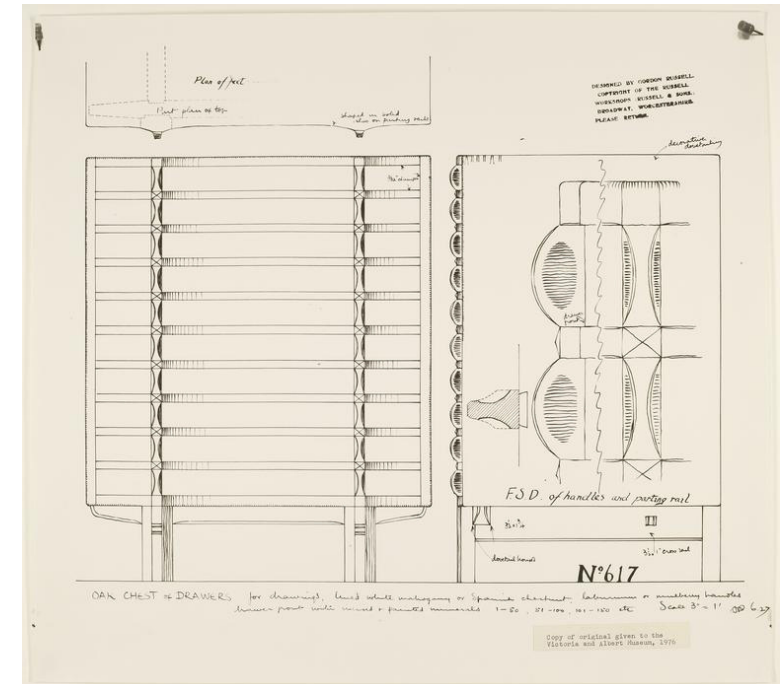
To investigate the work of designers and explore the ideas and shared values communicated through designer's work.

It is also to learn more about the work of designers who have influenced the development of products in the past.

CURRICULUM LINKS

KS3

- Art and Design - Unit 8C (Shared views)
- Design and Technology - Unit 08f (The world of professional designers)
- Design and Technology - Unit 09bii (Designing for markets).



Drawing for one of two plan chests designed to hold 1000 of Gordon Russell's designs, made in oak, 1927

QUICK NOTES

Gordon Russell, the furniture designer, began designing in Broadway, in Worcestershire.

He learnt about the craft of making furniture from the Guild of Handicraft in Chipping Campden, where he went to school and from the workmen in his father's antique business.

His early designs were influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement and the craft skills of the local Cotswold craftsmen.

His ideas about furniture changed over time and he began to use machines to produce pieces of furniture along with handmade production techniques.

He wanted clean modern styles produced using high quality materials and best quality manufacturing.

After the 1930s Gordon Russell spent less time designing in the company so other designers joined the company bringing new ideas with them.

Gordon's brother, Dick Russell, trained as an architect but also produced many designs for the company.



Gordon Russell with some of his favourite things.

Some of the company designers included W. H. 'Curly' Russell (no relation to Gordon), Ray Leigh, Trevor Chinn, David Booth, Eden Minns, Martin Hall, Robert Heritage and many others.

There are four main types of designer: the architect-designer, the designer-maker, the consultant designer and the in-company designer.

Different types of designer have worked for, or with, Gordon Russell Limited throughout the company's lifetime.

DESIGNING - ONE

INFLUENCES ON GORDON RUSSELL, THE DESIGNER

Growing up in and around Broadway in the Cotswolds had a great influence on the young Gordon Russell. From nearby Chipping Campden he was influenced by the work of C. R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft Trust and the Guildsman's Arts and Crafts ideal of handicraft and materials.

His early work owes a stylistic debt to Ashbee and to Ernest Gimson, also working in Gloucestershire in the early 20th Century.



The Paris Cabinet, 1925



The company style by 1935, showing the influence of Modernism.

As the furniture business dramatically changed during the 1920s, Russell's ideas were looking at innovative ways of creating high quality furniture using machine manufacturing. His brother Dick brought a different design culture to the business with new ideas being influenced by Europe and the United States of America.

By the 1930s Gordon Russell was concentrating on managing the company and its designers. In 1942 he was appointed chairman of the Utility furniture Design Panel where he could argue that modern design was the only way to meet the wartime demand for 'pleasant furniture which was economical to produce and robust in performance'. He later became a founder member of the Council of Industrial Design which opened the Design Centre in London in 1956 and thus became an influencer of other furniture designers.

DESIGNING - TWO

Throughout the 20th Century there were four categories of furniture designers:

THE ARCHITECT-DESIGNER

By the end of the 19th century many architects were designing furniture to furnish their buildings. Notable figures of this time were Charles Voysey, Ernest Gimson, Sidney Barnsley, Edwin Lutyns, Philip Webb and Baillie Scott. There were also Charles Rennie Macintosh in Glasgow and Frank Lloyd Wright in America - all working in the Arts and Crafts style. They were interested in all aspects of design within the building as well as furniture. They had a passion for quality and fine materials. More recently many of the large architectural firms employ a furniture designer working within the practice.

THE DESIGNER-MAKER

The Designer-Maker usually works on their own or with a small group of craftspeople. A 20th Century example is Edward Barnsley who set up his workshop in the mid-1920s in Froxfield, Hampshire. Fine furniture making has been kept alive in the post-WW2 era by distinguished Designer-Makers like John Makepeace and Martin Grierson. These workshops often train their own apprentices, vital in ensuring that cabinet-making skills are not lost.

The designer guides the client on matters of design and detail. The client in return is acting as 'patron'. A successful commission depends on the strength of this relationship.

THE CONSULTANT DESIGNER

This category emerged after college began offering furniture and product design courses. They are often not a maker but understand a wide-range of manufacturing techniques, technology and the nature of the materials.

Commissions range from a 'one off' special to large scale production for furniture manufacturers. The very best designers are innovative, challenging and continually embracing new technology.

THE IN-COMPANY DESIGNER

In companies aiming to reach 'designer markets' the designer has an important role to play in workshop direction and policy. They may be working alone in a small company or as a leader in a larger manufacturing concern.

In well-organised companies the designer's role has responsibilities beyond solely designing. They may be involved in marketing, engaged in developing the promotional material including catalogues, photography and advertising. They should also participate in the design of the show-rooms and exhibitions. In best practice firms that adopt a high level of corporate identity will be successful when facing fierce competition.

DESIGNING - A CASE STUDY

GORDON RUSSELL LIMITED - 1920-1980

The firm, from its start, had always had a drawing office and an 'in-house' design team. The Gordon Russell Design Museum is now housed in this building in Broadway, Worcestershire.

The first designer was of course Gordon Russell himself but as the company grew so did his team. Led initially by W.H. 'Curly' Russell (no relation to Gordon) the team was then headed up in later years with great distinction by Trevor Chinn. With increasing number of large furnishing contracts a separate team was created lead by head designer, Martin Hall.

Part of the company's policy was also to commission outside design consultants. Reasons for this were to:

- a) bring innovative ideas from the wider design world
- b) stimulate and challenge standard workshop practices

Following the practice in Scandinavia, designers were paid on a royalty basis - receiving payments for each piece of furniture of their design sold. The designer benefited from the success of their designs and the company would benefit from greater market research and cost awareness!

In the 1930s the principal consultants were Dick Russell

(Gordon's brother), Eden Minns and David Booth, all architects and they influenced the company's move towards Modernism.

Dick Russell became Professor of Wood, Metals and Plastic at the Royal College of Art and his architectural practice brought much work to Broadway.



Dining Group designed by Dick Russell and 'Curly' Russell in 1975

During the post war years a succession of designers were engaged on specific projects:

- Professor Robert Heritage - who succeeded Dick Russell at the RCA as head of the renamed School of Furniture
- Ron Carter
- Henry Long
- Professor Jorgen Kastholm - head of the Wuppertal School of Furniture in Hamburg

The first two designers, along with Dick Russell were all appointed Royal Designers for Industry, as was Gordon Russell himself in 1940.

By the late 1970s the company was enjoying a strong international reputation and was awarded the Presidential Award for Design Management by the Royal Society of Arts.

The company was admired not only for its design legacy of Gordon Russell but also for the Broadway factory's expertise and respect in their selection of materials.

An international design competition was organised with the Design Council and 'Architectural Review' in 1984 with over 120 entries from 17 countries. The three main prize winners all reflected the 'refined English Modernism' of Gordon Russell himself.

The acquisition of the company by chair-maker Giroflex in 1986 and the emergence of Gordon Russell PLC continued the commitment to fine design and manufacture and commissioned the designer Adrian Stokes to create several ranges of furniture. These included office suites and conference furniture.

The company was again acquired by Steelcase Strafor in 1989 and the name 'Gordon Russell' has recently been bought by the furniture company Hands of Wycombe.



Group Three dining room designed by Trevor Chinn, Ray Leigh and Martin Hall, 1971.

ACTIVITY 1 - DESIGN TRAIL

TASK! Explore the displays and list the objects you find for each designer in the boxes.

Arts & Craft Designers of the C19th who influenced Gordon Russell were Ashbee, Gimson and Bamsley

Gordon Russell

R. D. Russell
(Gordon's brother Dick)

W.H.'Curly' Russell

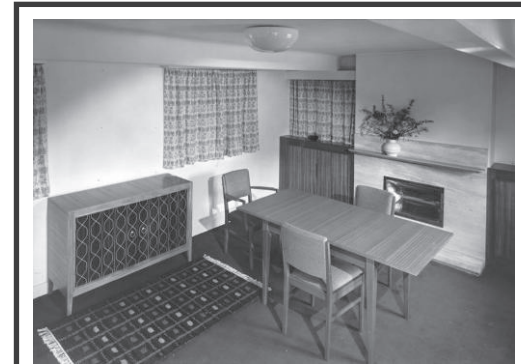
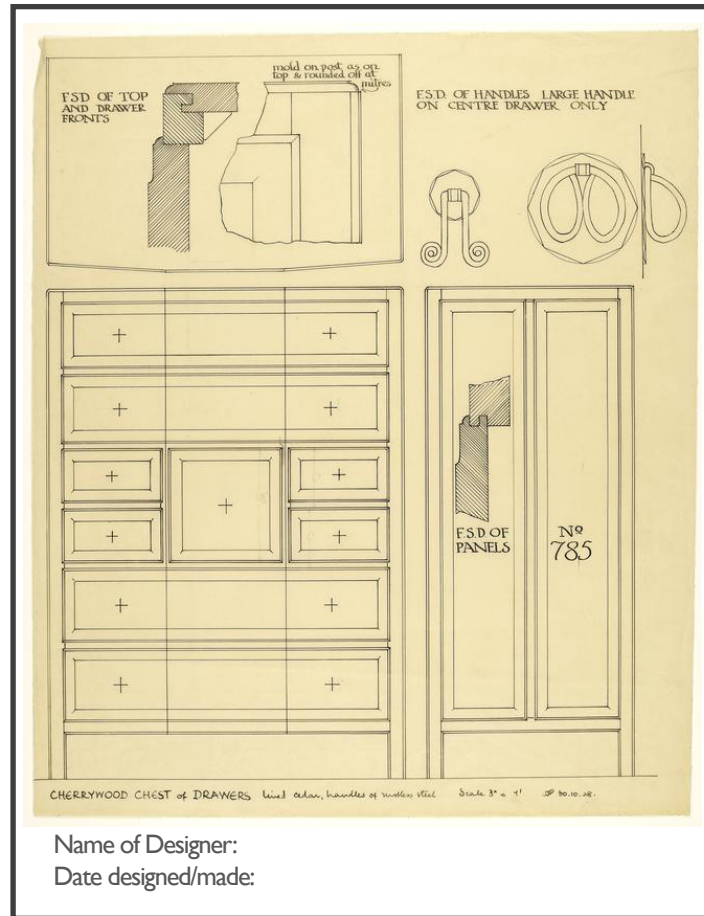
Eden Minns

David Booth

Marian Peplar

ACTIVITY 2 - DESIGNER MATCH

TASK! Match the designer to the piece of furniture.



Name of Designer:
Date designed/made:



FOLLOW UP IDEAS

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

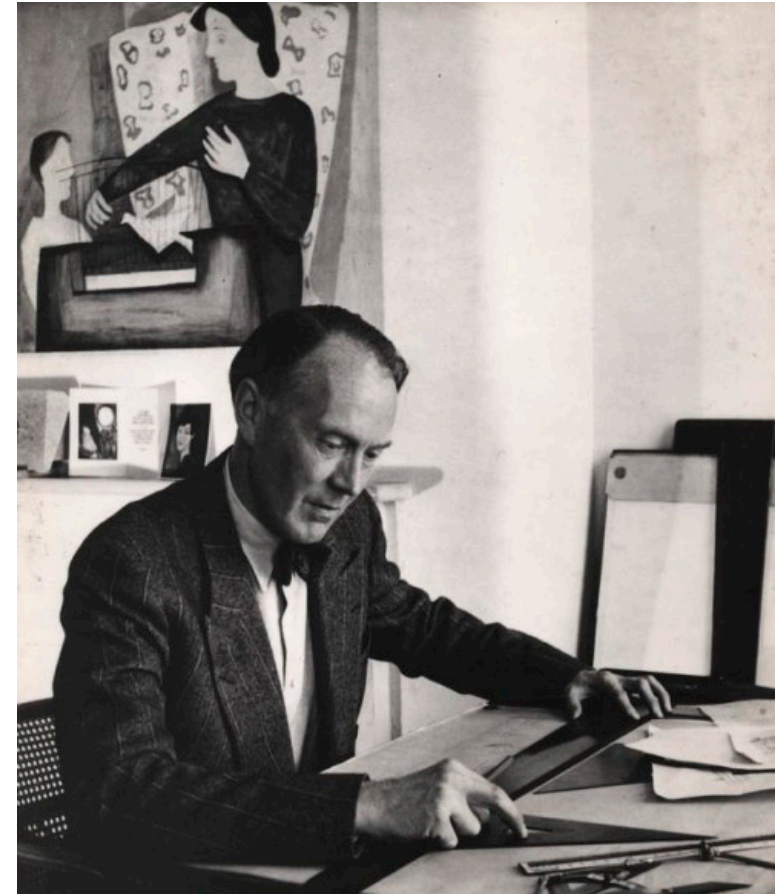
Individually create a personal storyboard about the product design and designers you like. What is it that appeals to you? Who influences what you like?

Research furniture companies on the web and in magazines to create a class exhibition showing the different 'furniture markets' - are they country style designs, hi-tech modern designs or another type?

Can you find out who is designing furniture today - many companies use consultant designers so start with looking at contemporary furniture and designer-makers. The Sunday newspaper magazines often feature designers.

If you are interested in training to become a designer there are lots of product and furniture design courses at colleges around the country. They are all looking for talented students!

You can also learn how to design and make furniture as an apprentice (learning 'on the job' with a craftsperson).



R. D. 'Dick' Russell in his studio at the Royal College of Art.



GORDON
RUSSELL
DESIGN
MUSEUM

www.gordonrussellmuseum.org