

DESIGN

More form than function

Design collectors 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. Long-standing collectors of design, some of whom have been active for over 30 years, have tended to see works of design as both beautiful and utilitarian, while a newer group of collectors are emerging who view design objects in much the same way as they view contemporary art, and are less bothered about its use-value.

Public/private

Collectors including the late Yves Saint Laurent and Micky Wolfson, founder of the Wolfsonian in Miami Beach, thoughtfully, but assiduously, collected key 20th-century pieces of design (and in some cases contemporary works) before the likes of Jean Prouvé, Eileen Gray and Charlotte Perriand commanded today's high prices.

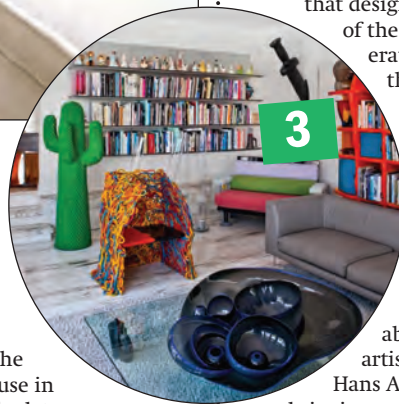
Their primary aim has been to create alluring and stimulating environments in which to live, marking them out as distinct from some of the most high profile contemporary art collectors, such as Los Angeles financier Eli Broad and French luxury goods magnate François Pinault, who acquire major works that – 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 knick-knacks” in flea markets. Now, his collection, part of which is housed at his New York office, includes works from every decade of the 20th and 21st century: Marc Newson, Jean Prouvé, Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne, Maria Pergay and Joris Laarman are among the designers represented. “Design collectors are not as status conscious; a painting is more recognizable than, say, a coffee table,” Krakoff says.

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

Everything Eiber collects, he shows, with nothing going into storage. “We live, sit, and eat on it,” he says. His home in Miami Beach, designed by the Ukraine-born architect Morris Lapidus, is crammed with prime 20th- and 21st-century pieces by Memphis, the 1980s Italian design and architecture group led by Ettore Sottsass, and other leading Italian designers such as Giò Ponti and Gaetano Pesce, along with contemporary figures such as the Dutch designer Joris Laarman and the UK's Ron Arad. The effect is of a *kunstkammer* of decorative arts items. Such collectors are often meticulous and methodical in their approach and Eiber is no different, stressing that he waited two years for Laarman to deliver a chair (“Bone Chaise”, 2006).

His collecting strategy is, he says, essentially instinctive. Modern and contemporary art does not excite him: a stunning chair gives him “goosebumps” but in spite of efforts to “educate myself, I have no gut feelings about works by



1. Reed Krakoff's home, New York; 2. Oscar Niemeyer's Strick House, 1964, restored by BoydDesign; 3. Alberto Eiber's Miami home

Damien Hirst and Francis Bacon, for instance”. It was a gulf, he adds, on both sides: “The art collectors [more than two decades ago] did not know about design, and they had lousy furniture.”

Building coherent collections

The French art and design adviser Rozen Le Nagard argues that many design collectors are as rigorous in their approach to building a collection as most contemporary art collectors. The US philanthropist Ronald Lauder, who buys both modern and contemporary design, collects specific designers within that timespan in depth, acquiring, for example, 25 pieces by the architect Isamu Noguchi.

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, Ponti and Prouvé. But he too is determined to stay as focused as possible.

“Collecting is all about building a narrative. I'm more interested in the functional, engineering aspect of design, more in the purist Utopian mode, and less interested in the decorative aspect. Design, after all, is art that has a function,” he says.

“Design does change 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 collector, who mixes works by Peter Doig 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 me firmly, as she opened the doors to her drawing room, that we should look at, but not touch, the Mattia Bonetti table and the Georg Baselitz paintings. Design, it seems, can be enshrined, just like art).

What differentiates these collectors from some of their predecessors is a more 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 the design experts consulted reiterate like a mantra that buyers in the field very rarely enter it 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 £50,000 and £100,000,” he says.

Treger, who collects Modern abstract and contemporary artists including Bridget Riley, Hans Arp and Rachel Howard, is bringing a similar aesthetic eye to collecting design: works by contemporary practitioners Marcel Wanders and the Campana brothers feature in his collection. “I have a bench by Thomas Heatherwick which is offset by a number of Hirsts, a contemporary master. If you have beautiful art, why not have beautiful furniture and architecture to complement it.”

Treger says that he was initially attracted to design items because of their inherent formal qualities. “I've always liked sculpture and when the [contemporary] art market took off and 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 magpie 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 nudes by Helmut Newton, the floors were made of black rubber and the eye-popping, 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.

Enveloping himself in design schools has enabled the fashionista to construct a highly stylised 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?

Significant projects undertaken by Boyd's company, BoydDesign, include the restoration of the Strick House in Santa Monica designed by the late Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Boyd recommends that his clients acquire pieces that are “conceptually advanced and technically challenged rather than technically advanced and conceptually challenged. Gerrit Rietveld and Rudolph Schindler over Maria Pergay and John Dickinson any day,” Boyd states in *Collecting Design*, by Adam Lindemann (Taschen, 2010).

“Buying design is not really a monetary thing,” he says, despite the stratospheric prices of the past decade. “You can still get a museum-quality piece for \$100 at a flea market.” For Boyd, the essence of a great design object is “authenticity” – in terms of provenance, but also intent: his admiration for the visionary architects and designers of the Modern era, with their progressive, Utopian social ideals, remains undimmed.

Art or design?

Boyd and Eiber have both been collecting design for over 30 years. But in the past decade, Modern and contemporary art collectors have become increasingly attracted to high-end design. “Some people with great art collections have realised that they basically have bad furniture,” says Peter Loughrey, founder and director of Los Angeles Modern Auctions. As well as being a sound investment, the best 20th- and 21st-century design items mix artistry and functionality.

Dakis Joannou, the Greek shipping tycoon and contemporary art collector, started collecting design in the 1990s, simply to furnish his extended home. About a decade ago, he began to think about collecting design in the same way he collected contemporary art: out went the Art Deco and early Modern furniture, and in came what he calls his “1968” collection, from Superstudio and Archizoom to Cini Boeri and Ettore Sottsass, and newer designers too.

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