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Michael Farr
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DESIGN IN
BRITISH INDUSTRY
A MID-CENTURY SURVEY

BY
MICHAEL FARR

WITH A
FOREWORD AND POSTSCRIPT BY
NIKOLAUS PEVSNER



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[More information](#)

TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS	page xi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xxv
FOREWORD BY NIKOLAUS PEVSNER	xxvii
INTRODUCTION	xxix
DEFINITION OF TERMS	xxxvii

PART I: DATA

FURNITURE	3
CARPETS	17
LINOLEUM	26
LIGHT METALWORK	27
SILVER AND ELECTRO-PLATE	33
ALUMINIUM HOLLOW-WARE	42
JEWELLERY	46
DOMESTIC APPLIANCES	51
ELECTRIC LIGHT FITTINGS	62
RADIO AND TELEVISION CABINETS	69
FURNISHING TEXTILES	78
WALLPAPERS	87
POTTERY	92
GLASS	105
LEATHER AND ALLIED GOODS	115
PLASTIC MOULDINGS	122
MOTOR-CARS	129
THE PLACE OF THE CRAFTSMAN IN INDUSTRY	142
Experiment with New Processes	143
Experiment with Better Design Standards	146
CONSULTANT DESIGNERS	148

CONTENTS

THE RETAIL TRADE	page 151
ART SCHOOLS	162
Leicester College of Art, <i>p.</i> 163	Stourbridge Art School, <i>p.</i> 172
Bradford College of Art, <i>p.</i> 165	Kidderminster School of Science and
Birmingham College of Art and	Art, <i>p.</i> 173
Crafts, <i>p.</i> 166	School for Jewellers and Silversmiths,
London County Council Central	Birmingham, <i>p.</i> 173
School of Arts and Crafts, <i>p.</i> 167	Walsall School of Arts and Crafts, <i>p.</i> 174
Glasgow School of Art, <i>p.</i> 169	L.C.C. Technical College for the
Edinburgh College of Art, <i>p.</i> 170	Furnishing Trades, Shoreditch, <i>p.</i> 175
Manchester Regional College of Art,	High Wycombe School of Art, <i>p.</i> 175
<i>p.</i> 170	Beckenham School of Art and Crafts,
Stoke-on-Trent Schools of Art, <i>p.</i> 171	<i>p.</i> 176
Evaluation	176
The Royal College of Art	180
Comparison: The Bauhaus and The Institute of Design	182

PART II: DESIGN ORGANIZATIONS:
PUBLICITY AND PROPAGANDA

THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS	189
THE FACULTY OF ROYAL DESIGNERS FOR INDUSTRY	191
THE DESIGN AND INDUSTRIES ASSOCIATION	192
THE BRITISH INSTITUTE OF INDUSTRIAL ART	198
THE INDUSTRIAL ART COMMITTEE OF THE FEDERATION OF BRITISH	
INDUSTRIES	199
THE COMMITTEE ON ART AND INDUSTRY	201
THE COUNCIL FOR ART AND INDUSTRY	202
THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF INDUSTRIAL ART DESIGNERS	205
THE CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF ART AND DESIGN	207
THE COUNCIL OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN	208
DESIGN CENTRES	222
THE SOCIETY OF INDUSTRIAL ARTISTS	229

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-17595-1 - Design in British Industry: A Mid-Century Survey
Michael Farr
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

THE MIDLAND INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS' ASSOCIATION	page 231
SELECTIVE EXHIBITIONS OF INDUSTRIAL ART	232
The Royal Academy Exhibition of British Art in Industry, <i>p.</i> 233	
The Britain Can Make It Exhibition, <i>p.</i> 235	
Exhibitions for the Festival of Britain, <i>p.</i> 237	
PERIODICALS—BOOKS—THE B.B.C.	240
Periodicals, <i>p.</i> 240 Books, <i>p.</i> 241 The B.B.C., <i>p.</i> 247	

PART III: CONCLUSIONS

EXPLANATORY NOTE	251
SEQUENCE OF INDUSTRIES ACCORDING TO DESIGN STANDARDS, 1953	251
SEQUENCE OF INDUSTRIES ACCORDING TO DESIGN STANDARDS, 1935	252
DESIGN STANDARDS: Reasons for Differences between Industries, Reasons for Changes since 1935	253
OLD AND NEW INDUSTRIES: The Meaning of Tradition	254
SIZE AND ORGANIZATION OF FACTORIES	256
PRODUCTION METHODS	258
MASS-PRODUCTION AND DESIGN STANDARDS	259
THE CREATOR OF DESIGNS	262
THE MIDDLEMAN	269
THE TASTE OF THE PUBLIC	271
MARKET RESEARCH	273
DESIGN STANDARDS AND PRICE	275
SNOB APPEAL	278
PUBLIC DEPARTMENTS AND PUBLIC TASTE	279
CIVIC DESIGN STANDARDS	281
MARKETS FOR BUYERS AND SELLERS	283
UTILITY SCHEMES—PURCHASE-TAX—EXPORT MARKETS	285
ENFORCING DESIGN STANDARDS	287
GOOD DESIGN AND GOOD BUSINESS	288

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978-0-521-17595-1 - Design in British Industry: A Mid-Century Survey
Michael Farr
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

PART IV: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

UNIVERSITY RECOGNITION	<i>page</i> 293
A MUSEUM OF MODERN INDUSTRIAL ART	294
INDUSTRIAL ART TRAINING: A New School for Designers	298
THE RETAILER	303
THE MANUFACTURER	304
THE DESIGNER	305
THE AIM	306
ADDENDA	307
POSTSCRIPT BY NIKOLAUS PEVSNER	310
INDEX	321

ILLUSTRATIONS

BETWEEN PP. 8 AND 9

FURNITURE

- I 1. Cautionary dining-room suite.
2. Cautionary bedroom suite.
- II 1. Utility furniture, 1943. *Board of Trade.*
2. Sideboard. *Designed by Booth and Ledeboer for Gordon Russell Ltd.*
3. Utility furniture, 1945. *Board of Trade.*
- III 1. Dining-room suite. *Designed by R. D. Russell for Gordon Russell Ltd.*
2. Dining-room suite. *Designed by Robin Day for S. Hille & Co. Ltd.*
- IV 1. Moulded plywood chair. *Designed by Eric Lyons for E. Kahn & Co. Ltd.*
2. Moulded plywood chair. *Designed by Basil Spence for H. Morris & Co. Ltd.*
3. Moulded plywood chair. *Designed by Carl Jacobs for Kandya Ltd.*
- V 1. Armchair. *Designed by Howard Keith for H.K. Furniture Ltd.*
2. Three chairs of beech. *Designed by Geoffrey Dunn and made by Goodearl Brothers Ltd.*
- VI 1. Settee. *Designed by Howard Keith for H.K. Furniture Ltd.*
2. Sideboard. *Designed by A. J. Milne for Heal & Son Ltd.*
- VII 1. Unit settee. *Designed by Robin Day for S. Hille & Co. Ltd.*
2. Shelves and storage units. *Designed by R. C. Heritage for G. W. Evans Ltd.*
- VIII 1. Dressing table and stool. Part of a range of unit furniture. *Designed by the Story Design Group for Story & Co. Ltd.*
2. Desk and chair. *Designed by Basil Spence for the Scottish Furniture Manufacturers' Association for the Chairman of the Furniture Development Council.*
3. Bedroom furniture. *Designed by Paul Bridson for Kandya Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 24 AND 25

- IX 1. Wilton carpet. *Designed by Ronald Grierson for S. J. Stockwell & Co. (Carpets) Ltd.*
2 and 3. Abstract and naturalistic carpet patterns. *Made by Blackwood Morton & Sons Ltd.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

CARPETS (cont.)	X	1. Hand-woven rug. <i>Designed by Marion Pepler for S. J. Rybczyk.</i> 2. Carpet showing heraldic motif. <i>Designed by John Palmer for John Crossley & Sons Ltd.</i>
	XI	1. Axminster carpet. <i>Made by James Templeton & Co. Ltd.</i> 2. Two Wilton carpets. <i>Made by John Crossley & Sons Ltd.</i>
	XII	Axminster rug. <i>Made by Quayle & Tranter Ltd.</i>
BETWEEN PP. 32 AND 33		
LIGHT METALWORK	XIII	1. Window for domestic housing. <i>Made by Henry Hope & Sons Ltd.</i> 2. Door closer. <i>Made by William Newman Ltd.</i> 3. Bathroom fittings. <i>Designed by Scott-Ashford Associates Ltd. for W. C. Youngman Ltd.</i>
	XIV	1. Door handle. <i>Made by William Newman Ltd.</i> 2. Wood and metal door handle. <i>Designed by L.C.C. architects Robert H. Matthew and Leslie Martin for the Royal Festival Hall.</i> 3. Companion stand. <i>Made by Marris's Ltd.</i> 4. Dispensing scale. <i>Designed by John Barnes of Allen-Bowden Ltd. for W. & T. Avery Ltd.</i>
BETWEEN PP. 38 AND 39		
SILVER AND ELECTRO- PLATE	XV	1. Cigarette box with engine-turned decoration. <i>Designed by S. W. Robinson for J. C. Lowe.</i> 2. Cigarette case. <i>Made by K. Weiss Ltd.</i>
	XVI	1. Danish vegetable dish. <i>Designed by Sigvard Bernadotte for Georg Jensen (Silversmiths) Ltd.</i> 2. Ogee dish in silver. <i>Made by Wakely & Wheeler Ltd.</i>
BETWEEN PP. 42 AND 43		
	XVII	1. Stainless steel tea-set. <i>Designed by A. L. Wiggin for J. & J. Wiggin Ltd.</i> 2. E.P.N.S. stacking tea-set. <i>Designed by Kenneth Holmes and N. R. G. Poynton for Gladwin Ltd.</i>
ALUMINIUM HOLLOW- WARE	XVIII	1. Three utensils with a basic handle. <i>Made by N. C. Joseph Ltd.</i> 2. Set of saucepans and porringer. <i>Made by Easipower Ltd.</i> 3. Milk saucepans. <i>Made by A. G. Burton Ltd.</i>
BETWEEN PP. 48 AND 49		
JEWELLERY	XIX	1. Gold, sapphire and diamond brooch. <i>Made by H. G. Mautner.</i> 2. German matching chain and bracelet set in gilding metal. <i>Distributed by Walter Graham (Jewellery) Ltd.</i>

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 3. Watch-case. *Made by Dennison Watch Case Co. Ltd.*
- 4. Wrist-watch. *Made by Smiths English Clocks Ltd.*

- XX 1. Bracelets. *Designed by Henning Koppel for Georg Jensen (Silversmiths) Ltd.*
2. Glass jewellery. *Designed by F. Lampl for Orplid Glass Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 56 AND 57

DOMESTIC
APPLIANCES

- XXI 1. ‘Kabineat’ gas cooker, 1935. *Made by Sidney Flavel & Co. Ltd.*
2. ‘Renown’ gas cooker, 1936. *Made by Parkinson Stove Co. Ltd.*
3. ‘New World 84’ gas cooker, 1952. *Made by Radiation Ltd.*
4. ‘Renown Five’ cooker, 1953. *Made by Parkinson Stove Co. Ltd.*
- XXII 1. Portable gas fire. *Made by Bratt Colbran Ltd.*
2. Hearth gas fire. *Made by Radiation Ltd.*
3. Electric refrigerator. *Made by Frigidaire Ltd.*
4. Anthracite boiler. *Designed by G. A. Ridgley for Janitor Boilers Ltd.*
- XXIII 1. Reflector fire, 1931. *Made by Ferranti Ltd.*
2. Reflector fire, 1939. *Made by H.M.V. Household Appliances Ltd.*
3. Reflector fire, 1953. *Made by Ferranti Ltd.*
4. Electric radiant screen heater. *Designed by John Barnes of Allen-Bowden Ltd. in collaboration with Premier Electric Heaters for Hotpoint Electric Appliance Co. Ltd.*
- XXIV 1. Electric kettle. *Made by H.M.V. Household Appliances Ltd.*
2. Electric iron, 1936. *Designed by Christian Barman for H.M.V. Household Appliances Ltd.*
3. Electric iron, 1951. *Designed by D. W. Morphy for Morphy-Richards.*
4. Clock. *Designed by Jack Howe for Gent & Co.*
5. Wall clock. *Designed by Jack Howe for Gent & Co.*
6. Clock. *Designed by W. H. Russell for Thomas Mercer Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 64 AND 65

ELECTRIC
LIGHT
FITTINGS

- XXV 1 and 2. Lipless opal glass sphere, 1929. *Made by Merchant Adventurers Ltd.* Sphere fitting surmounted by a metal reflector. *Designed by A. B. Read for Troughton & Young (Lighting) Ltd.*
3. Pendant fitting for diffused light. *Made by Best & Lloyd Ltd.*
4. Pendant light fitting composed of standardized fittings. *Designed by A. B. Read for Troughton & Young (Lighting) Ltd.*
5. Pendant light fitting with pleated buckram shade. *Made by The General Electric Co. Ltd.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

ELECTRIC LIGHT FITTINGS (cont.)	XXVI	1. Pendant light fittings with ‘Chrysaline’ shades. <i>Designed by Beverley Pick Associates for The General Electric Co. Ltd.</i>
		2. Pendant light fitting. <i>Designed by Beverley Pick Associates for The General Electric Co. Ltd.</i>
		3 and 4. Two best-selling pendant fittings. <i>Made by The General Electric Co. Ltd.</i>
	XXVII	1. Convertible light fitting. <i>Designed by R. C. Hiscock for Hiscock, Appleby & Co. Ltd.</i>
		2. Three-light table lamp. <i>Designed by R. C. Hiscock for H. C. Hiscock Ltd.</i>
		3. Table lamp with adjustable height. <i>Designed by Peter Bell for Allom Brothers Ltd.</i>
		4. Counterweighted desk lamp. <i>Designed by Paul Boissevain for Merchant Adventurers Ltd.</i>
	XXVIII	1–5. Progressive range of fluorescent light fittings. <i>Made by Thorn Electrical Industries Ltd. (four models designed by Peter Bell).</i>
		6. Louvred fluorescent light fitting. <i>Designed by A. B. Read for Troughton & Young (Lighting) Ltd.</i>

BETWEEN PP. 72 AND 73

RADIO AND TELEVISION CABINETS	XXIX	1. Burndept IV receiver, 1923. <i>From an exhibit in the Science Museum, South Kensington. (Crown copyright.)</i>
		2. Radio, 1934. <i>Designed by Wells Coates for E. K. Cole Ltd.</i>
		3. Radiogramophone, 1936. <i>Designed by R. D. Russell for Murphy Radio Ltd.</i>
	XXX	1. Baffle type table receiver, 1945. <i>Designed by A. F. Thwaites for Murphy Radio Ltd.</i>
		2. Console model with baffle, 1948. <i>Designed by R. D. Russell for Murphy Radio Ltd.</i>
	XXXI	1. Radio with loudspeaker concealed by plastic shutter. <i>Made by Pye Ltd.</i>
		2. Table radio showing contrasting textures. <i>Designed by A. F. Thwaites for Murphy Radio Ltd.</i>
		3. Plastic portable radio. <i>Designed by Wells Coates for E. K. Cole Ltd.</i>
		4. ‘Backless’ portable radio. <i>Designed by A. F. Thwaites for Murphy Radio Ltd.</i>
	XXXII	1. Table television with proscenium surround. <i>Made by Ferguson Division of Thorn Electrical Industries Ltd.</i>

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 2. Table television set. *Designed by Victor Taylor for Ace Radio Ltd.*
- 3. Console television set. *Designed by R. D. Russell for Murphy Radio Ltd.*
- 4. Combined television and radio receiver. *Designed by Wells Coates for E. K. Cole Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 80 AND 81

XXXIII	1. Dobby weave. <i>Designed by Marianne Straub for Warner & Sons Ltd.</i> 2. Dobby weave. <i>Designed by Marianne Straub for Warner & Sons Ltd.</i>	FURNISHING TEXTILES
XXXIV	1. Linear pattern in a Jacquard fabric. <i>Designed by Marion Mahler for Edinburgh Weavers.</i> 2. Jacquard fabric showing linear pattern. <i>Designed by Enid Marx for the Utility Furnishing Scheme.</i>	
XXXV	1. Cotton damask. <i>Designed by Karin Williger for Edinburgh Weavers.</i> 2. Jacquard woven abstract pattern. <i>Designed by Marianne Straub for Helios Ltd.</i>	
XXXVI	1. Jacquard woven curtain fabric. <i>Designed by Marianne Straub for Helios Ltd.</i> 2. Jacquard weaves with fancy yarns. <i>Designed by Tibor Reich for Tibor Ltd.</i>	
XXXVII	A group of Jacquard weaves. <i>Designed by Tibor Reich for Tibor Ltd.</i>	
XXXVIII	1. Four examples of moquettes for railway carriage seats. <i>Designed by the late Ian Colquhoun for the Railway Executive.</i> 2. Moquettes for dining-car seats. <i>Designed by the late Ian Colquhoun for the Railway Executive.</i>	
XXXIX	Silk-screen-print. <i>Designed by Anne Loosely and John Drummond for Story (Fabrics) Ltd.</i>	
XL	1. Screen-print on crepe cotton. <i>Designed by Humphrey Spender for Edinburgh Weavers.</i> 2. Three-colour screen-print on a cotton satin. <i>Designed by Sylvia Priestley for Helios Ltd.</i>	
XLI	1. Screen-print on crepe cotton. <i>Designed by Lucienne Day for Edinburgh Weavers.</i> 2. Three-colour screen-print on fine cotton. <i>Designed by John Barker for Edinburgh Weavers.</i>	

ILLUSTRATIONS

- FURNISHING
TEXTILES
(cont.)
- XLII

1.

Early nineteenth-century roller-print, still being produced. *Made by G. P. & J. Baker Ltd.*

2.

Modern screen-printed pheasant pattern. *Designed by Sylvia Priestley for Edinburgh Weavers.*
- XLIII

1.

Screen-print. *Designed by Karin Williger for Edinburgh Weavers.*

2.

‘Calyx’ screen-print. Judged the best design of the year (1952) by the American Institute of Decorators. *Designed by Lucienne Day for Heal’s Wholesale & Export Ltd.*
- XLIV

1.

Screen-print. *Designed by Graham Sutherland for Cresta Silks.*

2.

Roller-print. *Designed by Jacqueline Groag for David Whitehead Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 88 AND 89

- WALLPAPERS
- XLV

1.

Block-print. *Designed by Edward Bawden for Cole & Son (Wallpapers) Ltd.*

2.

Block-print. *Designed by John Minton for John Line & Sons Ltd.*

3 and 4.

Two roller-printed floral wallpapers. *Made by The Wall Paper Manufacturers Ltd.*
- XLVI

1.

Block-print. *Designed by Graham Sutherland for Cole & Son (Wallpapers) Ltd.*

2.

Block-print. *Designed by Armfield-Passano for John Line & Sons Ltd.*

3.

Roller-print. *Designed by Roger Nicholson for The Wall Paper Manufacturers Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 96 AND 97

- POTTERY
- XLVII

1.

Eighteenth-century earthenware shapes still in use. *Made by Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.*

2.

Earthenware shapes, 1935. *Designed by Susie Cooper for Susie Cooper Pottery Ltd.*

3.

Earthenware beer or cider mugs and jug. *Designed by Keith Murray for Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.*
- XLVIII

1.

Fine bone china coffee-set. *Designed by J. F. Goodwin, decoration by Victor Skellern, for Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.*

2.

Bone china coffee-set. *Designed by Susie Cooper for Susie Cooper China Ltd.*

3.

Bone china teapot, plate, cup and saucer. *Designed by Susie Cooper for Susie Cooper China Ltd.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

- XLIX 1. Earthenware tea-service. *Designed by John Adams for Carter, Stabler & Adams Ltd.*
2. Earthenware tea-service. *Designed by Keith Murray for Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.*
3. Earthenware tea-set. *Designed by William Moorcroft for Moorcroft Ltd.*
L 1. Earthenware jug and beaker using traditional shapes. *Decoration by Richard Guyatt for Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd. for Liberty's.*
2. Jugs and beakers showing well-known 'Garden Implements' design. Late eighteenth-century shape. *Decoration by Eric Ravilious for Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 104 AND 105

- LI 1. Earthenware dinner plate with engraved print and enamel decoration and china dinner plate with engraved print decoration in gold. *Designed by Eric Ravilious for Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd.*
2. Earthenware dinner plate with silk-screen decoration. *Designed by A. Sayer Smith for Johnson, Matthey & Co. Ltd. for Alfred Meakin Ltd.*
LII Bone china coupe shapes. *Made by R. H. & S. L. Plant Ltd.*
LIII 1. Coupe shapes with silk-screen decorations. *Designed by Colin Haxby for Johnson, Matthey & Co. Ltd.* (One design in the range of T. G. Green & Co. Ltd.)
2. Silk-screen transfer. *Designed by Colin Haxby for Johnson, Matthey & Co. Ltd. for Simpsons (Potters) Ltd.*
LIV 1 and 2. Vase, decanter and glass in lead crystal glass. *Designed by W. J. Wilson for James Powell & Sons (Whitefriars) Ltd.* GLASS
3. Decanter and glass in lead crystal glass. *Designed by David Hammond for Thomas Webb & Sons.*
4. Lead crystal glass ice-jug. *Made by The Stourbridge Glass Co. Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 112 AND 113

- LV 1. Vase in lead crystal glass. *Designed by Clyne Farquharson for John Walsh Walsh Ltd.*
2. Bowl in lead crystal glass. *Designed by Irene Stevens for Webb Corbett Ltd.*
3. Bowl, jug and tumbler in lead crystal glass. *Designed by Irene Stevens for Webb Corbett Ltd.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

- GLASS (cont.)
- LVI

1. Pressed glass. Machine-made imitation of hand-cut glass popular since the late nineteenth century.

2. Fruit bowls in machine-pressed glass. *Designed by R. Y. Goodden for Chance Brothers Ltd.*

3 and 4. Machine-pressed bowl and glasses, mass-produced and inexpensive. *Designed by A. H. Williamson for The United Glass Bottle Manufacturers Ltd.*
- LVII

1. Heat-resisting glass casserole, 1953. *Designed by Milner Gray and Kenneth Lamble of Design Research Unit for James A. Jobling & Co. Ltd.*

2. German ‘Pyrex’ dishes, 1935. *Designed by Wilhelm Wagenfeld for Jenaer Glaswerk Schott & Gen.*

3. Heat-resisting glass dishes, 1953. *Designed by Milner Gray and Kenneth Lamble of Design Research Unit for James A. Jobling & Co. Ltd.*

4. Tea-set in ‘Pyrex’ glass, 1932. *Designed by Wilhelm Wagenfeld for Jenaer Glaswerk Schott & Gen.*
- LVIII

1 and 2. Two fireproof coffee percolators. *The first designed (1934) by Wilhelm Wagenfeld for Jenaer Glaswerk Schott & Gen; the second designed (1949) by Abram Games for Cona Ltd.*

3. Hand-blown vases. *Designed by Wilhelm Wagenfeld for Württembergische Metallwarenfabrik.*

4. Pressed glass vase. *Designed by Wilhelm Wagenfeld for Vereinigte Lausitzer Glaswerk.*

BETWEEN PP. 120 AND 121

- LEATHER AND ALLIED GOODS
- LIX

1. Valise with zip-fastener. *Made by Papworth Industries.*

2. Suitcase with moulded plastic shell. *Designed by John W. Waterer for S. Clarke & Co. Ltd.*

3. Matching suitcases with special locks and carrying handles. *Designed by Scott-Ashford Associates Ltd., for Papworth Industries.*
- LX

1. Matching suitcases with soft sides to save weight. *Made by Parker, Wakeling & Co. Ltd.*

2. Fitted suitcase. *Designed by John W. Waterer (lining by Enid Marx) for S. Clarke & Co. Ltd.*
- LXI

1. Suitcase handle in light metal alloy. *Designed by John W. Waterer for S. Clarke & Co. Ltd.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 2. Travelling beauty case with special plastic containers. *Designed by T. C. Maylor for W. A. Maylor Ltd.*
- 3. Typewriter case with zip-fastener. *Designed by John W. Waterer for S. Clarke & Co. Ltd.*

- LXII
- 1. Pigskin handbag. *Made by Bagcraft Ltd.*
 - 2. Pigskin handbag with zip-fastener. *Designed by F. M. Jennings for J. Jones & Sons (Birmingham) Ltd.*
 - 3. Pigskin wallet. *Made by Mark Cross Ltd.*
 - 4. Pigskin purse, typical of Walsall work. *Made by George Sheldon (Walsall) Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 128 AND 129

- LXIII
- 1. Two condiment sets of 1932 and 1945. *Designed by A. H. Woodfull for The Streetly Manufacturing Co. Ltd.*
 - 2. Condiment set, 1952. *Designed by W. Bruce Brown for Halex Ltd.*
 - 3. Compression-moulded plastic colander, and other articles. *Designed by Gaby Schreiber for Runcolite Ltd.*

PLASTIC
MOULDINGS

- LXIV
- 1. Tableware in melamine. *Made by The Streetly Manufacturing Co. Ltd.*
 - 2. Three-course meal tray. *Designed by Gaby Schreiber for Runcolite Ltd.*
 - 3. Handleless milk jug. *Designed by R. E. Brookes for Brookes & Adams Ltd.*

- LXV
- 1 and 2. Modernistic and modern door furniture. *Made by Evered & Co. Ltd.*
 - 3. Door furniture. *Designed by Rodney Hooper for Lacrinoid Products Ltd.*
 - 4. Case for electric shaver in leather and plastic. *Designed by A. H. Woodfull for The Streetly Manufacturing Co. Ltd.*

- LXVI
- 1. Studebaker, 1946. *Designed by Raymond Loewy for the Studebaker Corporation. (Photograph: Alexandre Georges. From the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951 exhibition, 8 Automobiles.)*
 - 2. Cisitalia, 1946. *Designed by Pinin Farina for Automobile Cisitalia. (Photograph: Alexandre Georges. From the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951 exhibition, 8 Automobiles.)*

MOTOR-
CARS

BETWEEN PP. 136 AND 137

- LXVII
- 1. Aston Martin DB2-4 sports saloon. *Designed by Frank Feeley for Aston Martin Ltd.*
 - 2. Allard sports coupé. *Made by Allard Motor Co. Ltd.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

MOTOR-CARS (cont.)	LXVIII	1. Austin A.40 sports coupé. <i>Made by Austin Motor Co. Ltd.</i>
		2. Bentley Mark VI saloon. <i>Made by Bentley Motors (1931) Ltd.; coachwork by H. J. Mulliner & Co. Ltd.</i>
	LXIX	1. Ford ‘Consul’ saloon. <i>Made by Ford Motor Co. Ltd.</i>
		2. Humber ‘Super Snipe’ saloon. <i>Made by Rootes Ltd.</i>
	LXX	1. Austin-Healey ‘Hundred’ sports car. <i>Made by Austin Motor Co. Ltd.</i>
		2. Rover 75 saloon. <i>Made by Rover Co. Ltd.</i>

BETWEEN PP. 140 AND 141

LXXI	Jowett R4 ‘Jupiter’ sports car with laminated plastic bodywork. <i>Made by Jowett Cars Ltd.</i>
LXXII	1. ‘Car of the Future’, at the Festival of Britain, 1951. <i>Designed by E. G. M. Wilkes, Hugo G. Poole and Peter J. Ashmore for the Council of Industrial Design.</i>
	2. ‘Tropfenauto’: the first streamlined car, 1921. <i>Designed by Dr H. Rumpler.</i>

BETWEEN PP. 144 AND 145

THE PLACE OF THE CRAFTSMAN IN INDUSTRY	LXXIII	1. Experimental weaves with fancy yarns. <i>Designed by Margaret Leischner for R. Greg & Co. Ltd.</i>
		2. Cast aluminium chairs and table. <i>Designed by Ernest Race for Ernest Race Ltd.</i>
		3. Sample fabric to exploit fancy yarns. <i>Designed by Margaret Leischner for R. Greg & Co. Ltd.</i>
		4. Bent plywood and steel rod furniture: the joint first prize winner in the International Competition for Low Cost Furniture Design, held by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1948. <i>Designed by Robin Day and Clive Latimer.</i>
	LXXIV	1 and 2. The original tubular steel chairs. <i>Designed at the Bauhaus by Marcel Breuer (1925), and Ludwig Miës van der Rohe (1927).</i>
		3. Experimental moulded plastic chair. <i>Designed by Dennis Young.</i>
		4. Experimental chair to exploit Latex Foam. <i>Designed by Dennis Young for the British Rubber Development Board.</i>
	LXXV	1. Laminated wood chair. <i>Designed by Peter Hvidt and O. Mølgaard Nielsen for Fritz Hansens Eftfl, Denmark. (Photograph by courtesy of Heal & Son Ltd.)</i>

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 2. Chair using light alloy die-castings. *Designed by J. W. Leonard for Educational Supply Association Ltd.*
 - 3. Chair of plastic reinforced with glass fibres. *Designed by Charles Eames for Herman Miller Furniture Co. U.S.A.*
 - 4. Chair of steel rods with plastic supports. *Designed by Ernest Race for Ernest Race Ltd.*
- LXXVI
- 1. Silk-screen ceramic transfers. *Designed by Colin Haxby and Jacqueline Groag for Johnson, Matthey & Co. Ltd.*
 - 2. Lead crystal glass with sandblast decoration. *Designed by Irene Stevens for Webb Corbett Ltd.*
 - 3. Deck chair of laminated wood; first used by the Orient Line. *Designed by Ernest Race for Ernest Race Ltd.*

BETWEEN PP. 162 AND 163

- LXXVII
- 1. Ceramic lithograph decoration. *Designed by Eric Elliott at Burslem School of Art.*
 - 2 and 3. A cruet set for B.O.A.C. and flatware for Mitchells and Butlers Ltd. *Designed by Kenneth Holmes and N. R. G. Poynton for Gladwin Ltd. at Leicester College of Art.*
- LXXVIII
- 1. Cut glass decanter. *Stourbridge Art School.*
 - 2. Silver tea-service. *Designed by Alexander Wilkie at Glasgow School of Art.*
 - 3. Stainless steel tea-service. *Designed by Kenneth Holmes and N. R. G. Poynton (assisted by students) for Andrew Brothers (Bristol) Ltd. at Leicester College of Art.*

ART
SCHOOLS

BETWEEN PP. 166 AND 167

- LXXIX
- 1. Prototype door handle. *Birmingham College of Art and Crafts.*
 - 2. Prototype table lamp. *Birmingham College of Art and Crafts.*
 - 3. Desk. *Designed by J. Padiak at L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts.*
- LXXX
- Hospital lighting fitting. *Designed and made under ‘factory’ conditions. Designed by D. M. Pearson, W. Schejbaal, P. J. Farrell, J. W. Cooper and C. R. Cheetham at School of Industrial Design, L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

BETWEEN PP. 170 AND 171

ART
SCHOOLS
(cont.)

- LXXXI 1. Wallpaper pattern which won Royal Society of Arts Bursary Competition, 1953. *Designed by Margaret M. Stewart at Glasgow School of Art.*
2. Woven fabrics. *Designed by Margaret Broadbent and Jean Falding at Bradford College of Art.*
3. Moquettes and a tapestry winning Royal Society of Arts Bursary Competition, 1953. *Designed by Constance Mary Holt at Leeds College of Art.*
- LXXXII 1. Occasional chair. *Designed by L. Dandy at High Wycombe School of Art.*
2. Dressing table using laminated wood for construction and decoration. *Designed by D. Wellstead at Beckenham School of Art and Crafts.*
3. Occasional chair. *Designed by students at L.C.C. Technical College for the Furnishing Trades, Shoreditch.*
4. Laminated table with decorated surface. *Designed by students at Beckenham School of Art and Crafts.*

BETWEEN PP. 174 AND 175

THE
ROYAL
COLLEGE
OF ART

- LXXXIII 1. Dobby weaves. *Designed by Ann Jennifer Bell and W. A. Brook at School of Textile Design, Royal College of Art.*
2. Jacquard weaves. *Designed by Ann Jennifer Bell, Margaret Foster, F. Hoswell, Sheila Hankinson at School of Textile Design, Royal College of Art.*
3. Layout for sample Dobby weave. *Designed by Edna Penniall at School of Textile Design, Royal College of Art.*
4. Stacking chairs. *Designed by V. A. Hindley at School of Wood, Metals and Plastics, Royal College of Art.*
- LXXXIV 1. Teapot. *Designed by James Rushton at School of Ceramics, Royal College of Art.*
2. Glass dishes. *Designed by G. P. Baxter at School of Industrial Glass, Royal College of Art.*
3. Silver coffee-set. *Designed by David Mellor at Sheffield College of Art.*
4. Silver coffee-set. *Designed by David Mellor at School of Silversmithing and Jewellery, Royal College of Art.*

ILLUSTRATIONS

5 and 6. Flatware prototypes in silver; production models in stainless steel and E.P.N.S. *Designed by David Mellor at School of Silver-smithing and Jewellery, Royal College of Art.*

BETWEEN PP. 192 AND 193

LXXXV The Design and Industries Association: exhibition rooms (modern; and best-selling designs, according to the trade).

THE
DESIGN AND
INDUSTRIES
ASSOCIATION

- LXXXVI 1. The Britain Can Make It exhibition: the ‘Sport and Leisure’ section.
2. The Britain Can Make It exhibition: kitchen and dining-room for a modern house.

BETWEEN PP. 208 AND 209

LXXXVII Exhibits in the Homes and Gardens pavilion, Festival of Britain.

THE
COUNCIL OF
INDUSTRIAL
DESIGN

- LXXXVIII 1. The Council of Industrial Design: stand at the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto.
2. The Council of Industrial Design: portable showcase to explain pottery design.

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It is impossible for me adequately to convey my sincere gratitude to Professor Pevsner. From the first he has taken great active interest in my work. He has advised, corrected and suggested at all stages. It is to the pattern of his book, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*, that any clarity which may be found in these pages must be attributed. It is to him alone that the chief of any merits in my text belong.

This book is the result of the kind and interested help of many people. But above all I must thank my wife for her unceasing encouragement and for her willing transcription of the text.

I was prompted to begin the work by Ian Colquhoun, a very close friend. It is with great sorrow that I record my gratitude to this designer and writer whose tragic death in 1954 cut short a most promising career.

I should like to thank Mr W.L.Cuttle and Dr F.R.Leavis, both of Downing College, Cambridge, for helpful advice in the early stages. Most welcome but unlooked for patronage came towards the end of my research, and it is with sincere gratitude that I take this opportunity of recording the generosity of Mr H. de C. Hastings and Mr M. A. Regan. My grateful thanks are due to the staff of the University Press, Cambridge, who have taken the book untiringly from manuscript to printed page. I should also like to thank Mr T. Culverson for his help and Miss A. Bartlett who worked under great pressure to produce the index.

I am unable to thank all those manufacturers, designers, retailers and art school principals who devoted time and energy to my inquiries. Many of them would, in any case, wish to remain anonymous. But I am glad of this chance to thank Mr Leslie Hardern and Mrs Harvey of the Design and Industries Association, Mr Gordon Russell, Mr Paul Reilly and Mr Hartland Thomas of the Council of Industrial Design, the late Mr Arnold Selwyn of the Design and Research Centre for Gold, Silver and Jewellery, Mr D.H.Tomlinson of the Cotton Board Colour, Design and Style Centre, Mr Kenneth Luckhurst of the Royal Society of Arts, Sir Charles Tennyson, Mr R.D.Best, Mr John Radcliffe, Mr John Gloag, Sir Ambrose Heal, Miss Enid Marx, The Hon. Margaret Lambert, Mr Victor Skellern, Mr and Mrs Eden Minns, Mr John W. Waterer, The Hon. Lady MacGregor of MacGregor, Mr Hyla G.Elkington, Mr E.M.O'R. Dickey and Mr Walter Keesey.

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[More information](#)

NOTE

The text was completed in the spring of 1952, but wherever possible I have attempted to keep it up to date. Amendments and additions which could not be included appear as addenda on p. 307 to which readers are referred by an asterisk (*) in the text.

M. F.

AUGUST 1954

FOREWORD

BY NIKOLAUS PEVSNER

A few words must be said on the origin of this book. In 1934 Professor Philip Sargant Florence of Birmingham University asked me to undertake an investigation into the conditions of industrial design in this country and chiefly in the Birmingham area. I carried out the work in 1934–5, and it was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1937. In 1948 the Press approached me for a second edition. I had to answer that it would be useless to attempt what could strictly speaking be called a second edition. Too much had happened in the dozen or so years. If the Press wished to see the book reappear up to date, it would have to be rewritten. My own work had shifted into different fields in the meantime and I could not do more than find an author and help him as much as possible.

The author was duly found, Mr Michael Farr, fresh from the war and an English degree at Cambridge, a pupil of Dr Leavis and a man with faith in modern design. I put at his disposal the material collected for the first edition and added what had accumulated in odd envelopes since. Armed with this he began, at first supervised, as it would be called in Cambridge, by me in exactly the way that post-graduate research is supervised. This arrangement was carried on through the earlier parts of the present book. The other parts I never saw until I received the complete typescript. Mr Farr in the course of the work had found his own level and his own standards. The book as it is, must be considered entirely his, although the improbable reader who would wish to waste his time by comparing in detail the 1937 volume and this would find occasional paragraphs and more retained—especially in the semi-historical sections of Part II. Also, the general framework remained the same, and that perhaps more than anything else makes Mr Farr’s the direct descendant of my book. That is as it should be. Readers of the survey of 1935 should be helped in preserving the feeling that they are now watching the same survey conducted again.

In looking at the two books in that way, they will notice at once numerous differences, superficial as well as essential. Mr Farr’s book is not only up to date, it is also considerably longer and better illustrated. The expansion is specially noticeable in the chapters on plastics, motor-cars, and art schools. Entirely new sections have also been added, the most important being that on the design-consultant—a profession which, when I wrote my book, did not exist in Britain and had only just come

FOREWORD

into being in the United States. The Cambridge University Press, recognizing the position as I have described it, decided to my great pleasure that I should be excused from a joint authorship which could not have been more than nominal, and that the book should appear as Mr Farr's whole responsibility. Since, however, I had so much to do with its inception and growth, and since there are certain general points which are not made by Mr Farr or which appear in a different light to me and to him, or which had not found adequate attention in my own book of 1937, or which, finally, had changed their significance in my mind since, I ventured to suggest that I might add some comments and conclusions of my own. This the Press accepted, and they will be found as a postscript, beginning on p. 310.

JANUARY 1953

INTRODUCTION

‘It is to be noted that when any part of this paper appears dull,
there is a design in it.’ RICHARD STEELE, *The Tatler*, No. 38

We live in a world created by nature, but partly re-designed by man. The composition of our environment is divided between natural things and artificial things. Most of us, in our hours of work and leisure, find that we are much more intimately concerned with artificial things than with natural things. We live in man-made houses, walk on man-made roads, drive in man-made vehicles, work in man-made offices, and so on.¹ The greater part of our immediate environment has, in all its physical aspects, been conditioned by human thought and feeling. We are responsible for the artificial things in our environment, though each of us has had different and varying shares in their design.

This book is concerned only with those things which industrial factories and work-shops have made for domestic use. They constitute the largest and, inevitably, the most important part of our artificial environment. But here one hesitates. Are they inevitably the most important part of our man-made environment? The answer, I assume, would be ‘yes’, but on looking round for proof of this importance, doubts would soon arise in many minds. The more one looks the more depressing becomes the scene. What is the reason for this? There is no shortage of domestic articles. In terms of quantity their importance is adequately stressed. But as regards quality there are wide and seemingly illogical differences between all groups of products. By describing the quality of an article we are, in fact, referring to its utilitarian and artistic elements, in other words its design. And it is in connexion with design that the importance, which we are attempting to assess, appears to have a confusing number of different interpretations.

In order to begin the discussion I am asking the reader to agree that the articles in his home do not all conform to one standard of design. In the shops also there is no single standard expressed in the design of every article. The point can be made with irresistible force by spending a few hours at the British Industries Fair. To be aware of differences we must be able to judge designs according to our preferences. The chief of these is personal; the others, social, ethical, moral, etc., need not detain us

¹ *The Architectural Forum*, November 1948, quotes a recent study in the United States, which affirms ‘that urban man spends 88 per cent of his day in an artificial atmosphere, suburban man 70 per cent, rural man 43 per cent’.

INTRODUCTION

here. When we judge a design we estimate its value to us according to our likes and dislikes. We like it, we partly like it, we do not like it; we judge it to be good, indifferent, bad.

I have written this book because I do not like the designs of between 80 and 90 per cent of British domestic articles. I have also written it because I am assured that my opinion is shared by a large number of people living different lives in all parts of the country. I am convinced that dissatisfaction with the prevailing design standards is widespread. Amongst the majority of people this is not expressed, simply because sufficiently rewarding comparisons between good and bad designs cannot be made. This fact has become my central theme. While no one can tell what each individual member of the public wants, it does seem reasonable to suggest that he should be given an opportunity to make up his mind. This means that every shop should offer a choice, which in turn implies, as I shall show later, that many more good designs must be produced. Indeed, the pressing need for good design will be evident to all those with faith in the life-enhancing value of art, and in fact to everybody who believes in the value of education as a means of deepening, enriching and ennobling life.

To plead for better design standards is not new. There are many people who feel that enough has already been said. They remember the exhibitions, the lectures, the questionnaires and all the propaganda on behalf of the Modern Movement in the 1930's. Now, since the war, they are hearing less about the Movement but even more about contemporary design standards. London has always been the favoured centre for design propaganda and for witnessing its results. It is no exaggeration to say that there are more good designs in London than anywhere else in the country. So it is in London, chiefly, that one gains the impression that things are not nearly so bad as they were. This complacency is often found amongst those who were most devoted to the campaign for better design before the war. In some limited circumstances it can be amusing; but in all other respects it is a serious hindrance to the work of those who can appreciate objectively the situation as it is.

The fundamental cause of so much bad design can be briefly dealt with here.¹ It concerns the already familiar story of the Industrial Revolution. From the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards craft-work was progressively mechanized. The intimate contact between men, materials and the market, which is essential to all creative design, was broken by the intrusion of machines. Standardization of designs led to greater production of cheaper articles. New markets were created where quantity rather than quality was valued for its profitable returns. After the defeat of

¹ For detailed analysis see N. Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1949, chap. 1; S. Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, Harvard, 1950.

INTRODUCTION

the craftsman the artist turned and fled. In his imagination he was above the mean standards and mechanical methods of the manufacturer. But the public followed the advances of the new industries and forgot the artist, who in turn became progressively separated from the living thoughts and feelings of his time. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century the situation got steadily worse. The change in attitude which we can now detect had its origin in William Morris who showed, in some of his craftwork, how contemporary vitality could return to manufactured articles by bringing the artist back to the workshop. At a succeeding stage in this development, which took place in Germany between 1905 and 1930, the artist was persuaded to enter the factory and design articles for quantity production. In this country the Modern Movement, as it was called, began to establish itself after 1930. Its success with British manufacturers and British artists was never complete. But its underlying belief that works of art can be produced by machinery for the benefit of thousands has been proved conclusively. Today, although we have this proof, we do not sufficiently realize how pressing is the necessity to put it into practice.

This book offers a survey of the conditions and the standards of design in British industries serving the domestic market. To discover the conditions I had to interview manufacturers, designers, retailers, teachers in art schools and a number of other persons. To discuss design standards involves criticism of present methods and suggestions for practicable improvements and that is the main reason why those interviewed remain anonymous in the text. I began my research in September 1949, and continued it throughout 1950. Since then I have completed my material while attempting to keep it up to date. I have personally visited 214 firms in 27 industries; 56 retail stores; 15 art schools; and 38 designers working outside industry. Approximately 48 per cent of the interviews took place in the Midlands; 7 per cent in Scotland; 24 per cent in London; 21 per cent in the rest of the country. I did not attempt to visit or get in touch with all the firms or even all the important firms in each industry. It proved sufficient to visit a selection of characteristic factories covering as far as possible all types of production and all types of markets. However, I must admit that I was mainly concerned with design in mass-production for the general market.¹

It should be emphasized that I did not confine my inquiries to articles of exemplary design. It seems to be a flaw in most of the publications on art in industry that by dealing only with good design, regardless of price, they are compelled to leave out between 80 and 90 per cent of the national production. To plead for better design in manufactured articles will remain a futile task unless the commercial aspects of the

¹ In the year 1947, out of 20,400,000 wage-earners almost 18,000,000 earned less than £500 per year. To them must be added the several million wives and families dependent on this income group.

INTRODUCTION

problem, unpleasant as they may sometimes be, are carefully taken into account. Such considerations induced me to listen to the views of all people concerned, particularly those of the manufacturer.

With manufacturers, as a rule, the following questions were discussed: general aspects of the trade, usual conditions of design in the trade, history, growth and size of the firm, number of employees, existence of design department or drawing office, existence of head designer, his qualifications and status, firm's reaction to other designers not on the staff, payment of designers, sequence of events in the production of a new design, participation and responsibility of other persons, such as the manufacturer himself, managers, salesmen, foremen or workers, number of new designs produced each year, sales figures and prices of best-sellers, methods of market research, opinion of the manufacturer on the standard of the designs produced, his opinion on public taste, methods of distribution, influence of export markets on design standards, relation to art schools, influence of organizations for design propaganda.

In department stores, chain stores and privately owned shops I discussed general aspects of the trade, methods of presentation, available choice between good and bad designs of comparable price, market served, average rate of stock turnover, methods of payment and training for buyers and salesmen, value of special exhibitions of good designs, opinions on the design standard of stocks, opinions on public taste.

I have not carried out a similar programme of research amongst representative groups of the public. The task would be complex and difficult, and however painstakingly performed would, I believe, be of very little value. The results of interviews in peoples' homes and the answers to questionnaires filled in at exhibitions of industrial art are liable to gross inaccuracies. When confronted with a tempting selection of designs people are apt to forget what they can afford, what they need and what their families need. On such occasions one often finds that people express a gratifying predilection for good designs, but when they are faced with paying cash they seldom feel able to confirm their first choice.

In my interviews with principals and teachers in art schools, I was concerned with these questions: the extent of their co-operation with industry, amount of machinery and equipment, connexion between design, craftwork and fine art, full-time and part-time courses for design students and apprentices, teaching methods, extent of participation in civic affairs, the demand for trained designers, other possible sources of employment. With architects, consultants, free-lance and commercial designers, working outside industry, I was mainly concerned with the design standard of their work. Points discussed were: training, experience of industrial production methods, results of work undertaken for manufacturers, fees charged.

INTRODUCTION

I have compared my material with the evidence presented in *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* by Nikolaus Pevsner which relates, in general, to the year 1935.¹ I have also studied the reports compiled by institutions with aims similar to my own. Most of them were concerned with the years before the war: of chief importance are the Board of Trade Committee on Art and Industry, 1931–2 (Gorell Committee), and the Board of Trade Council for Art and Industry, 1934–9 (Pick Council). Some useful evidence is contained in the working party reports on the future of certain industries, which were published between 1945 and 1948 by the Board of Trade. In addition I have paid close attention to the work of the Design and Industries Association, the Industrial Art Committee of the Federation of British Industries, and the Council of Industrial Design.

On the whole I found that manufacturers and others were interested in my research and anxious to help. In no less than 80 per cent of the firms visited I had a private interview with the managing director. This rarely took less than one hour, and frequently lasted all the morning. With very few exceptions I was shown over each factory, retail store and art school I visited. Only 4 per cent of the firms to which I wrote refused to see me. Nevertheless, it may well be that my results in some industries are one-sided and only partly true. I was for instance seldom able to check what I was told. Manufacturers, designers, retailers and teachers may have made wrong statements, they may not have told me the exact truth or the whole truth. I need not say that in cases where I had the feeling that something of this sort was happening, I preferred not to use the evidence at all. The other shortcomings in my report are evident. But I still hope that the facts which the following chapters contain may in the end be of some use. In all cases I have attempted not to assert too much and to prove too little. So often we hear that popular taste is abysmally low, or that designers in firms are not sufficiently well paid, or that artists are inaccessible to commercial propositions, or that manufacturers are not willing to risk experiments, etc., but hardly anybody has seriously attempted to examine what objective truth there is in such contentions.

In Part I of this book I have presented the facts concerning materials, techniques, design, methods of production and distribution and training for designers. I have included historical data where relevant. Part II describes the organizations and institutions concerned with design research and propaganda. It also includes designers' associations, exhibitions and publications. Part III is devoted to conclusions which represent an evaluation of the foregoing evidence. In Part IV I have made some suggestions for improvements, based on the conclusions.

¹ On the relation of that book to mine, see the Foreword, p. xxvii.