

## The History of Danish Furniture Design

While there's been a massive postwar output of modern furniture in Norway and Sweden, the streamlined, uncluttered look of modern Scandinavian design is most associated with Denmark.

With their art rooted in early 19th-century classicism, Danish furniture designers in the 1940s and '50s rallied behind the "form follows function" slogan, making functionalism the cornerstone of Danish design. They even gave the concept of functionalism a whole new meaning by basing their designs on the human body, with its countless forms, needs, and variations.

Home design before World War II embodied clunky bourgeois ideals. Following the devastation of the war and its aftermath, the modern design movement emerged from the peculiar corner of the world that was Denmark, a land that during the 1950s found itself uncomfortably positioned between eastern and western Europe.

The style was unusual for what it was, and perhaps even more unusual for what it was not. There isn't a trace of kitsch about it; the very fact that the best examples of the style have endured for almost half a century (with a few alterations or adaptations) attests to its timelessness<sup>1</sup>.

	<b>Hans Wegner 1950</b>
	<b>Hans Wegner 1949</b>
	<b>Arne Jacobsen 1955</b>
	<b>Arne Jacobsen 1958</b>

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<sup>1</sup> Porter, Darwin. Danforth, Prince. (2007). *Frommer's Denmark* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Frommers

## The Revival of Danish Furniture Design

While Scandinavian Design enjoyed a brief rise in popularity during the 50s, it has recently received a great deal of attention from designers around the world. In fact, Scandinavian Design is finding its way into major trend setting cities all over the world.

- *Danish Way of Living*, a 6 week exhibition showcasing some of Denmark's best furniture designers, took place in Vancouver's Gastown hip district in 2007<sup>2</sup>.
- The *Made in Denmark* stand won 2007 award for Best Contribution to the 100% Design show in London, England<sup>3</sup>.
- The "*SuperDanish*" project: The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, renovated and reopened in November 2008, furnished by 15 old and new Danish furniture designers.
- *Danish Design Week* held in Toronto in late 2008, media coverage and events to promote Danish Design in Canada<sup>4</sup>.

So, what is it and why are so many people finding this style to be appealing? Nowadays, people are trading excess for excellence, superficiality for substance. In the home-furnishings market, while cheap chains like Linens 'n Things and Bombay Company have gone bust, high-end and custom manufacturers are still enjoying robust sales. The reason is simple: quality pays. Well-made but expensive items in classic styles offer a few big advantages over trendier, more disposable things<sup>5</sup>.

Despite its name, Danish Modern in many ways transcends the word "modern"—it is a style that can be incorporated successfully into contemporary and traditional interiors, urban and country alike, lending itself to a timeless and universal appeal<sup>6</sup>.

Danish designed furniture uses simple and straightforward materials, including wood (usually walnut, teak oak, and maple) steel, aluminum, silver, and copper. "The best pieces of Danish modern stress flawless craftsmanship, a design that suits the ergonomics of the object's intended use, and subservience of form to function"<sup>7</sup>.

Scandinavian Design has a very unique and easily recognizable look. One of the key components of this aesthetic is the fact that it is inspired by nature. Scandinavian Design also utilizes lines that are very clean and simple. As a result, this style is often looked upon as being a "modern classic" since it utilizes classic design elements with a modern flare.

The growing popularity of green living is one reason for the appeal of the natural look. With green design, home décor decisions are based according to the impact they have on the earth. Those materials that can be easily replaced and that won't have a negative

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<sup>2</sup> Danish Way of Living. (2007). *Cutting-edge modern meets classic iconic as Danish design takes centre stage in Vancouver's stylish Gastown*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.danishwayofliving.com>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. (2007). *Made in Denmark: Wins Award at 100% Design*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.designtaxi.com>

<sup>4</sup> Association of Danish Furniture. (2008). *Superdanish: Unique showcase for Danish design in Canada*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.danishfurniture.dk>

<sup>5</sup> Tepperman, J. (28 Mars, 2009). A Few Good Shirts: Luxury lies not in how much stuff we have but in how well it's made—and how highly we value it. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.newsweek.com>

<sup>6</sup> Hollingsworth, Andrew. (2008). *Danish Modern*. Jones & Bartlett Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> Porter, Darwin. Danforth, Prince. (2007). *Frommer's Denmark* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Frommers

impact on future generations are used with green design. Scandinavian design fits nicely with the growing awareness of nature and the environment. Scandinavian Design has been around since the 1950s. Although it has enjoyed some popularity in the past, it has really become quite popular in the 21st century. Its simplicity and modern look are both perfect complements to today's eco-conscious society<sup>8</sup>.

What makes Danish design unique is the fact that it never really goes out of style. Danish furniture - from Jacobsen's stylishly simple chairs to Wegner's rounded, organic ones - is still displayed in design showrooms across the globe as the ultimate image of modernity. The timeless allure of Danish design is due mostly to its simple lines, a deliberate lack of decoration, and a consistent pursuit of functionalism.

### **The Danish Mindset**

Denmark is renowned for its furniture industry and when it comes to design, form, functionality and aesthetics the Danes are global giants. This helps explain why massive global furniture makers use many Danish designs, including their Swedish neighbours IKEA.

What sets Denmark's \$3.2 billion annual furniture industry apart from its competitors is its ability to incorporate its own style and traditions into its designs, including the Danish way of life. Throughout the 20th century it has become a fundamental principle for Danish designers to emphasize user need and functionality and as a result, the use of design-driven "green" products, wherever possible, has become part of the industry's very fabric.

In short, design is an inseparable part of daily life in Denmark. "Danes are born with designer genes it seems," says Poul E D Kristensen, Denmark Ambassador to Canada. "We are a design nation. Everything that is produced in Denmark has a high level of design and good quality. It is why we are a world leader in design".

"The global industry is very competitive and the Danish philosophy is about creativity and simplicity of function. We have to create something that will endure," he says. To remain successful global players, many Danish companies elevate design to an art.

### **A few Numbers**

The Danish furniture industry is impressive for a tiny country and draws its strength largely from boutique producers. It is the Danish genius for design that is closely watched by its competitors. Furniture production and exports are significant on the global market, says the Association of Danish Furniture Industries (ADFI). It points out that more than four fifths of the production is exported, making it the country's sixth-largest export industry. According to Eurostat data, the Danish furniture industry comprises

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<sup>8</sup> Campbell, C. *Incorporating Scandinavian Design In Your Home*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.ezinearticles.com>

around 1,300 companies with over 90 per cent of them employing less than 50 employees. Totally, it employs around 26,000 workers<sup>9</sup>.

There are 450 manufacturers of Danish furniture employing around 20,000 people. The industry generated a revenue of \$3 Billion in 2002, of which nearly \$2.5 Billion in exports. The share of the US was \$170 Million, while the UK's share was \$400 Million. Germany is the largest importer of Danish furniture with \$700 Million in 2002<sup>10</sup>.

Just like Canadian and U.S. companies, Danish furniture manufacturers face low-cost competition, not only from Asia but from the emerging market economies in Eastern Europe. And like the best U.S. companies, the most successful Danish companies are staying in business by focusing on what they do best. In their case, it's design.

Even small producers are part of a big global economy. Denmark imports two-thirds of the furniture it consumes, but exports 85% of the furniture it produces. Total Danish production is about twice the size of the domestic wholesale market. Compare that to the United States for example, where their production is roughly two-thirds the size of their domestic wholesale market, because they import a lot and export little<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Danish Way of Living. (2007). *Cutting-edge modern meets classic iconic as Danish design takes centre stage in Vancouver's stylish Gastown*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.danishwayofliving.com>

<sup>10</sup> *Danish Furniture Guide*. Accéder le 30 Août 2009. Site web : <http://www.danish.com>

<sup>11</sup> McIntosh, J. (31 Mai, 2004). Danish manufacturers elevate design to an art. *Furniture Today*. Retrieved August 30th 2009. Website : <http://www.allbusiness.com>