MAKING THE MODERN INTERIOR: MARION HALL BEST AND AUSTRALIAN INTERIOR DESIGN 1945–1965

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MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Art History
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I declare that this thesis is entirely my own original work.

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Michaela Richards
Canberra,
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements iv  
Abbreviations v  
Synopsis vi  

**PART I: INTERIOR DESIGN IN AUSTRALIA: 1945-1965**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1</strong>: The Forties: Austerity and Postwar Planning</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2</strong>: The Fifties: Design and Colour for Modern Living</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3</strong>: The Sixties: Bringing the World Back Home</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part I</strong>: Conclusion</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART II: MARION HALL BEST: A CASE STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN INTERIOR DESIGN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 4</strong>: From Decorator to Designer: The Art of Marion Best</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 5</strong>: Marion Best Pty Ltd: The Enterprise of Marion Best</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part II</strong>: Conclusion</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** 123

**APPENDICES** 141

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPENDIX</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX 1</strong>: Chronology</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX 2</strong>: Biography</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX 3</strong>: Commercial Interiors and Exhibitions</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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ABBREVIATIONS:

Archival Sources consulted in research at the National Gallery of Australia and the Historic Houses Trust NSW are referred to in footnotes and Bibliography according to identification systems utilised within each of these institutions. Abbreviations used in footnotes are as follows:

- HHT (Historic Houses Trust, NSW)
- ANG (Australian National Gallery)*
- NLA (National Library of Australia)
- MHB (Marion Hall Best).

Fuller details of archival material consulted in research appear in the Bibliography.

Interviews and correspondence with the author are noted in text footnotes under informant's name and date of interview or advice. They are listed in full in the Bibliography.

Other Abbreviations are as follows:

- SIDA Society of Interior Designers of Australia
- Pty Ltd Proprietary Limited
- Aust. Australia
- Jan.-Dec. January-December

* The Australian National Gallery (ANG) changed its official title to National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in November, 1992. I have chosen to refer to material from this institution with references which use the acronym 'ANG', as this is the most accurate reflection of circumstances which prevailed at the time of the research and preparation of the thesis.
SYNOPSIS:

This thesis is a study of postwar interior design in Australia. The first half of the thesis seeks to establish a general history of interior decoration principles and practice at the close of the Second World War and charts changes occurring during the 1950s and 1960s. Chapters 1-3 describe the rise of modern design, the austere postwar furnishings of the small planned home, the decorative and technological exhuberance of the fifties and the sophisticated internationalism and diversity of sixties style. These chapters also trace the rise of an industry, a profession, the growth of enterprise and literature in a burgeoning market; linking all of these changes with those occurring at a broader level in Australia’s economic and social structure, specifically the modernisation of a culture and a society.

The second half of the thesis seeks to test this general model of postwar interior design by focussing on the life and work of one of its protagonists, Marion Best. Chapter 4 describes her artistic and professional development, carefully considering the influences which shaped her distinctive aesthetic and style and compares them with her immediate peers and her society. Chapter 5 examines the establishment and growth of Marion Best’s business, from 1938 to 1974. It describes her shops, staff, clients and substantial importation network; again comparing these with the general model established in the first part of the thesis.

This study of Marion Best’s career complements the general model of Australian postwar design history constructed in the first part of the thesis. It offers confirmation of many of its broad conclusions, particularly the triumph of modern design, the growth of an industry and a profession, and internationalisation of the Australian market; in short—modernisation. However, it notes a number of significant departures from this model in the life of Marion Best. Her example does not merely confirm the general history, but qualifies and refines understanding of its complexities. In doing so it offers a more sophisticated model of Australia’s design history and enhances understanding of national changes with which it was linked—the modernisation of Australia.
PART 1:
INTERIOR DESIGN IN
AUSTRALIA: 1945-1965

The History of Australian Interior Design:

It is important first to establish a context for Marion Hall's career, to understand her master, Australian wartime interior design and post-war society. It is also important to understand academic debates in the field it addresses.

Interior design history is a long-neglected and controversial field. It falls mainly between design history and art history. Design historians focus on interior design and elevate its products as art, but they argue that this approach does not accommodate the process of combining objects and the specifics that define domestic interior design.

Art historians still focus on the fine rather than the applied arts and dismiss decorative, picturesque contemporary criticism of traditional interior sources. The history of interior design exhibits a long-term interest between these fields and others, including the fields of social history and anthropology, as evident in the works of

Marion Hall.
INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to the first biennial edition of *Interior Designers of Australia* in 1987, the architect Philip Cox described Australian interior design as 'an integral process of architectural thought ... it is now ... recognised as an art rather than merely a retail service.' In his impressionistic account of its history he ventured:

Women have been the pioneers of interior design within Australia ... the Second World War saw the emergence of major talent ... Meree de Baule [sic], Marion Hall Best, Margaret Lovel [sic] were a few pioneers ... demonstrating to Australia a new professional outlook. Marion Hall Best's clean lacquers and transparent colours shocked a conservative Australia previously educated that 'blue and green should never be seen' or that 'pink and yellow were just dreadful' ... colour theory and design emerged for the first time.¹

This study will focus on the life and work of one of the designers mentioned, Marion Hall Best. A professional interior designer and retailer from 1938 until 1974, she is still feted as one of the pioneers of Australian interior design: as Cox's eulogy shows, a legendary figure within its canon.² This study will examine her contribution to the history of Australian interior design and treat her career as a case study for this broader history.

The History of Australian Interior Design:

It is important first to establish a context for Marion Best's career; to understand her metier, Australian postwar interior design and postwar society. It is also important to understand academic debate in the field it addresses.

Interior design history is a long-neglected and controversial field. It sits uneasily between design history and art history. Design histories focus on industrial design and elevate its products as icons, but their object-based approach does not accommodate the process of combining objects and the activities that comprise domestic interior design.

Art historians still focus on the fine rather than the applied arts, despite persuasive contemporary critiques of traditional subject matter. The history of interior design inhabits a marginal terrain between these fields and others—including the fields of social history and antiquarianism so evident in the house

museum, conservation and restoration industry—and remains in a disciplinary 'limbo.'

This study assumes that the history of interior decoration and design is the history of a legitimate form of applied art, and the proper responsibility of art historians. Its investigation of Australian postwar interior design and the work of Marion Hall Best will confirm this assumption.

The interior design historian in Australia writes in something of a vacuum. The industry and profession that has emerged in this century has not been critically appraised. Most accounts are by protagonists: either contemporaries or current members of the profession seeking to trace their antecedents.

Predictably enough, both types of account are hero histories. Self-promotional material written by protagonists are propagandistic and rosy-hued. Margaret Lord's autobiography is a good example:

It was in the early fifties that big changes in interior design began to develop ... Today the home owner can have most things he desires ... Now we have the best of both worlds because there is a wide choice of imported as well as local goods ... At first there was only a handful of interior decorators ... but now their influence can be seen everywhere, ... and each year their number is growing ... (our architecture and design should express Australia in the best terms as the finest of our colonial work once did).³

Accounts by recent practitioners are similar. Babette Hayes was one of the first to attempt Australian design history in 1970 in *Australian Style*. This book was a self-conscious attempt to manufacture 'distinctively Australian Style' and its heroes, in retrospect. Hayes accompanied an impressionistic account of this 'Australian style' with profiles of her 'canon' of design greats. She traced its beginnings to the fifties and sixties and quoted protagonists extensively. Barry Little's comments were typical:

It has taken a long time to bring innovation to the Australian home. When I started working, clients were quite nervous about colour. They looked about for very traditional rooms ... they wanted to buy what their mothers had bought ... to be very safe and to show no initiative. Then the great affluence swept over Australia and interior design was virtually available for anyone who had a reasonable amount of money. The average family now expects to live in a pleasant setting.⁴

Tibor Hubay and Philip Cox expressed similar ideas twenty years later. Writing in 1987, the architect Cox claimed Australia came of age and developed

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sophisticated and mature design taste and distinctive national style after World War II. The designer Tibor Hubay agreed with him about a unique national style:

There has been a lot of debate recently about whether there is a uniquely Australian style. I think there is ... we have taken much from overseas designers ... But the very best design in Australia, that which is uniquely Australian is a direct response to our unique physical environment, our heritage and lifestyle ... The colours are different here, the light is different, the shape of our landscape is different. Our lifestyle is more casual with more emphasis on outdoor activities. So it is inevitable that our built environment should be different. This book puts the work of Australian designers on display ... [and] shows ... the world what Australian style is about.⁵

Lay-persons accounts of Australian domestic interiors are also unreliable. Almost as soon as European settlement was established observers wrote of local practices. Interior vignettes proliferated during the nineteenth century, especially in the boom years of the 1860s and 1880s. They were written by elitist visitors and social commentators or upper-middle-class colonials anxious to improve local standards. If written by the former, descriptions were usually condemnations of local taste.⁶ If written by local gentry, accounts were inevitably provincial attempts to defend colonial honour.⁷ Whether foreign or local, these subjective accounts are of limited use as accurate descriptions of the Australian interior.

In recent years, historians and curators working with historic interiors have utilised historical accounts and the remnant of extant physical evidence to piece together a more scholarly account of the history of furnishing and decoration in Australian homes. The first of these was written by early architectural historians

⁶ For example Richard Twopenny, writing of his sojourn in the colonies in 1883, reflected:

the wealthy colonist has generally been brought up in too rough a school to care to furnish ... even decently ... they are unable to furnish prettily. There is an entire want of individuality about the Australian's house ... The frowsy carpets and heavy solid chairs of England's cold and foggy climate reign supreme beneath the Austral sun. The Exhibitions have done something towards reforming ... domestic interiors, but it will be a long time before the renaissance of art as applied to households, which appears to be taking place in England ... makes its way here in any considerable force ... household goods are terribly deficient and it would not be difficult to imagine yourself in a lodging house.


⁷ Louisa Anne Meredith believed that:

the elegance and refinements of civilized life are as well understood by the best classes in Victoria as in Royal Victoria's loyal old city itself; with perhaps a tint or two more of show.

In Sydney she claimed that colonists lived in:

elegant villas with rooms of noble dimensions, expensively furnished with almost every luxury to be found in a gentleman's residence in England.

such as Robin Boyd.\textsuperscript{8} The most accomplished of recent attempts to trace the history of Australian interiors include works by architectural historians Apperly and Irving, curators such as James Broadbent and cultural and art historians such as Terence Lane and Jessie Serle. Like Boyd's \textit{Australia's Home}, Apperly, Irving and Reynolds's \textit{A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture}\textsuperscript{9} briefly explores the interiors of those buildings whose architectural style they trace.

Richard Irving's collection of recent work on all aspects of house design\textsuperscript{10} includes a promising, if still conventional account of interiors by Suzanne Forge. Yet she remains overly concerned with prosperous interiors and repeats the orthodox conclusions of her predecessors—that is, of a long period of colonial imitation, succeeded by an increasingly confident expression of local conditions as seen in the pioneering work of colonial craftsmen.\textsuperscript{11}

Terence Lane and Jessie Serle have, for now, offered the 'last word' in the field. Their exhaustive survey of Australian domestic interiors from 1788-1914 is acknowledged as the most proficient account yet. Lane and Serle scrutinise the documentation of Australian domestic interiors until the First World War, 'in order to lift the curtain on social history and glimpse the past.' They cast their net wide and consider the conditions which shaped interiors, including 'availability of capital, freehold land, raw materials, equipment and technical skills ... fashion, taste,


\textsuperscript{11} She began her account:

If we could hear the cries and whispers of pieces of furniture in Australian homes for the first hundred years of white settlement we would hear many plaintive moans. Like their owners, for the most part they were out of place in their adopted land. Lamentations for lost companions, past certainties, former grandeur and familiar users ... wafted up from buttoned satin chaise, floated from Chinese vases [and] Georgian dining chairs sentenced to transportation for no other crime than that they were part of the eighteenth century paraphernalia of living.

And concluded,

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Australia's interiors had at last come of age and reflected an acknowledgement of the new country. Overall the decorative offspring of the twentieth century looks different from her bulky busy parents, but it is not in shape or weight that the telling difference lies. It is in the way her eyes are set openly in the direction of the future rather than to the past.

Forge, S., 'Interiors and Decoration' in Irving, R. (comp.), \textit{op.cit}, 213, 231.
chance, cultural baggage, aspirations, aptitudes, and responses to a novel and often unfriendly environment' and give a full record of written and pictorial sources in this field. Despite their protestations, Lane and Serle cannot shake the 'preoccupation with the progress from sod hut to villa ... [and] the progress of improvement' which they criticise in their predecessors. Finally, curators and conservators in the house museum and cultural heritage industry offer focussed and detailed accounts which display a technical expertise which general histories lack, but their work complements, rather than rivals broader histories.

All accounts share a persistent shortcoming; that is, a tendency to remain locked into the terms and debates of their nineteenth and early twentieth century predecessors, particularly their preoccupation with national style. For two centuries this has been a central question for contemporaries, protagonists, commentators and critics—whether and to what extent Australian interiors emulate international styles and practices or express Australia’s particular and unique environmental, economic, social and cultural conditions and character.

Any answer to this question of course has implications for Australia’s design identity; as either a potential pillar of design nationalism or as reinforcement for colonial cultural cringe. Upon this ground the following thesis treads cautiously. It aims to build upon the limited attempts of protagonists, concerned commentators, curators and historians an account of the appearance of the Australian domestic interior and the interior design profession and industry after World War II. It will refine existing knowledge by including broad national developments and replacing the nationalistic preoccupation with the question—‘imitation’ versus ‘indigenous

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12 In their words:

*Australians at Home* examines the physical, economic and social conditions which determined the character of domestic interiors at particular times; it looks at the likenesses and differences between Australia, Britain and Ireland, considers the contribution of other countries, and points to the uniquely Australian elements that went into making our peculiarly British-Australian domestic conditions ... The visual record ... has equal billing with the written record ... texts accompanying illustrations flesh out the picture in terms of changing circumstances, taste, fashion class and personal aberration and focus on pertinent details which the untrained or casual observer might otherwise overlook.


13 The picture that curators such as Clive Lucas, Joanna Capon and James Broadbent build through their coverage of specific houses, particular furnishings or decorative treatments are good examples of this work. A very useful selection of short papers delivered at a symposium on the restoration of historic interiors held in Sydney in 1983 appears in Stapleton, M., *Historic Interiors: A Collection of Papers*, Sydney College of the Arts Press, Glebe, 1983, 9-29. See also Murphy, P., ‘Eleven Layers of Wallpaper from Clarendon Terrace: a Reflection of Social Change’ in *Historical Environment*, v.3, no.3, Council for the Historic Environment, Carlton, Victoria, 1984, 22-29.
innovation'—with a critical assessment of the impact of national conditions and circumstances on the historical development of Australia’s interiors.

Sources and Methods:

The study will focus on the period between 1945 and 1965, though some consideration of early and later developments will be necessary for continuity. Here, a dearth of sources is a major problem. Contemporaries rarely considered the ordinary Australian interior noteworthy and left a sparse record of its appearance and historians are forced as a result to extrapolate from sketchy accounts and remnants of material evidence on Australia’s postwar housing.

The writings and journals of protagonists are valuable records but they reflect the select concerns of an interested minority, the practitioners. The interiors they describe are not the whole range of postwar domestic interiors but rather the upper-middle-class and urban domestic interiors of prosperous clients. They often omit the average domestic interior and their accounts offer a history of the industry rather than the actual appearance of the postwar interior.

The proximity of the period offers one advantage. Contemporary accounts became more fulsome during the period as public interest and literature expanded and the industry and market diversified. Yet the limitations of many sources remain and will be evident throughout this introductory account of Australian domestic interiors after the war.

It is also important to understand the broader cultural, social and economic stage upon which the story of design and decoration was enacted. Contemporary developments in Australian art and society will be admitted to this study along with the international context in which Australia’s interiors were designed and consumed. In any history of Australian art, this is a particularly difficult task, based on a great deal of conjecture about the extent of international information available and its influence on artist and patron—in this instance, the decorator and homemaker.

Another more philosophical question is whether an interior can be regarded as a work of art. While it may be possible to defend a history of the profession or interiors as art history, it is somewhat more difficult to argue this for the average domestic interior. As Tony Fry points out in his study of a 1950s Sydney lounge room:

The house and planned home may be possible to regulate aesthetically ... the socially dynamic domestic space is not ... objects around us arrive as a result of variable flow ... historical deposits of the material culture of the family ... gifts ... accumulated evidence of shifting circumstances, 'tastes' and 'accidents' or
'mistakes' ... the passage of objects carry meaning beyond appearance ... they exist in my life rather than in the aesthetic regime I constitute as my taste and environment.\textsuperscript{14}

According to Fry, the interior is 'remade constantly ... a frame in which life is assembled ... a material ideology ... reconfigured in many locations.' He concludes, 'Without negating its ... physicality as silk and satin, bricks and mortar, formica and stainless steel, the biographical reality of this space ... means that it is portable.'\textsuperscript{15} Fry's domestic interior is not only portable but profoundly fluid, and he perceptively identifies the complex nature of the interior, where its psychological and cultural roles exist apart from its physical and aesthetic reality, but impinge upon both.

These and other questions will recur throughout this introduction and will re-emerge in later chapters. They will not be easily resolved, but every effort must be made to recognise and avoid their traps.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ibid}, 105.
CHAPTER 1:

THE FORTIES: AUSTERITY AND POSTWAR PLANNING

One of Australia's first architectural historians, Robin Boyd, lamented in his summary of Australia's postwar housing, 'The small house ... had reached the blind end of the road.' He described its exterior in the following terms:

Material shortages and economy ruled every detail ... unevenly burnt bricks, standard horizontally designed windows, a hipped cement tile roof. All was square, straight and unpretentious. Within the traditional shape, the ultimate in austerity had been reached.16

Boyd described the triumph of the functionalist aesthetic amongst postwar home builders facing severe shortages in space, labour and materials. Returned servicemen and young marrieds generated a huge demand for new housing in the immediate postwar period. Postwar exigency, severe shortages and restrictions dictated the austere appearance of the housing which was hastily erected throughout the country to service this demand. Functionalism and rational planning were also triumphant inside the home. Boyd's description of the typical Australian postwar interior was masterful in its detail:

Carpets left the floor and the light Australian hardwood floorboards were waxed ... small Indian and lambswool rugs were scattered between the few pieces of blond wood furniture. The sofa of the three-piece lounge suite was discarded. Two or three easy chairs were upholstered in plain colours in square lines. Webbed chairs based on the American Knoll design ... Light plywood chairs ... by Grant Featherston were familiar ... The mantle shelf had vanished ... a set of low bookshelves was built-in beside the fire-place ... instead of pale creams and buffs on the plaster and brick surfaces, they substituted greyed tints, which ... grew stronger until 1950, when an occasional dark tan or bottle-green wall shocked few people and lemon yellow surprised no one.17

Boyd highlighted the coincidence between material scarcity and a sparse, functional aesthetic in postwar Australia. His description tallies with other architectural historians such as Apperly, Irving and Reynolds who also note this postwar enthusiasm for functional, modern housing,18 which is corroborated by contemporary journals and decorators of the period.

Shortages and bulging demand was anticipated. Smaller homes and simpler furnishings in wartime had set the tone for postwar plans. In 1940, the Australian Home Beautiful featured a series by Margaret Lord, one of the few decorators

16 Boyd, op.cit, 84-85.
17 ibid, 87-88.
18 Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, op.cit, 211.
working in Australia at the time, on 'Modern Decoration and the Art of Living'. One-room, multi-purpose spaces and simplified modern design were her perennial concern:

In England at the present time there is a definite movement toward simplified living ... Families ... used to spreading themselves throughout a vast house ... now find themselves having to make do in two or three rooms ... it is quite probable that this trend toward a less formal system will continue when the war is over ... More and more people now favour one very large room rather than a series of small compartments.19

The Australian Broadcasting Commission sponsored a series of radio broadcasts on 'Design in Everyday Things' in 1941, in which designers, planners and architects suggested streamlined and functional design and planned, rational solutions to the problems of reconstructing the postwar world with limited resources.20 Margaret Lord participated, devoting one address to 'living in multi-purpose rooms.'21 She explored its problems and concluded that 'good planning' was the way to overcome the difficulties of combining several living activities in one room.

Lord's example shows how decorators and design apologists worked wartime exigency and the modern design aesthetic together generating an audience for simplicity and utility inside the Australian home. There were a plethora of terms related to the catchphrase 'good planning' which were used by Lord and her peers. They demanded a rational approach to decoration and lumped 'good design', 'functional' interiors, 'utility' and 'flexibility' together under the broad banner of 'good modern design', to confuse rather than enlighten their postwar audience.

Australian householders were not easy to convince. Lord lamented the unhappy fate of 'good modern design' in the antipodes. Trained in Melbourne, but with considerable professional experience in Europe, she was 'surprised and disappointed' on her return to Australia in 1940:

to find how traditionalism persists and how very limited is any real interest in modern design ... the modern movement does not seem to have been given a fair hearing or to have made ... headway. There is still too much 'ye olde' ... in architecture and decoration ... traditional designs which belong not only to an older country, but to a past age ... What is wrong with modern design when so

19 Australian Home Beautiful, 2.9.40, 11-12.
21 Lord explained her concerns:

Nowadays, one doesn't always sleep in what might strictly be termed a bedroom. One-room and bed-sitting rooms are now common and are planned for several living purposes as well as those of sleeping. Lord, M., 'Rooms to Stay Awake In', in ABC Weekly, v.3, no.15, 12th April, 1941, 17.
many people of taste and discrimination refuse to introduce it into their homes?\(^{22}\)

Lord believed the problem was modern mass-produced furniture—inferior copies of the real thing; the true, pure and ‘good modern design’ she had seen from Europe’s modern masters. Contemporary Australian architects and designers shared her enthusiasm for craftsman-built and custom-designed furniture and developed it into an ideology of ‘Australian craftsmanship’; a nationalistic, purist aesthetic which elevated the ‘inherent beauty’ of natural Australian talent and materials as a design ideal during postwar reconstruction years.

A select band of these purists collaborated in utilitarian wartime projects—in hospitals, schools and the like. Lord worked with several Melbourne-based designers; architect Roy Grounds, furniture designer Fred Ward and textile designer Frances Burke, in the refurbishment of Sydney University Union in 1941. (Fig. 1) It was publicised in *The Home* on August 1, 1941 and their review revealed a self-conscious attention to ‘good Australian design’:

> The decorator, Miss Margaret Lord, has attempted to create an atmosphere of light and space suitable to Australian conditions and where possible, to use materials produced in Australia. Too often in buildings of this kind, the style of decoration is merely an adaptation of what one finds in the older English Universities ... slavish imitation of interiors ... evolved to suit entirely different conditions ... [this] shows a poor spirit and a lack of imagination ... the wood used throughout is Queensland maple in its natural colour.\(^{23}\)

Captions praised her use of ‘simple modern furniture and cool colours’ to create ‘a style of decoration suitable to Australian conditions.’\(^{24}\) These ideas confirmed the ethic of national reconstruction, conveniently obscuring the fact that exclusive use of local talent and material was forced upon the Australian populace—it was simply impossible to procure imported goods or materials from around 1940, and this continued for the entire decade.

Writing in the *Australian Home Beautiful* at the close of the war, Lord observed:

> It will be some time before all those new things you’ve been dreaming about will be available ... don’t waste time regretting what can’t be done, make the most of what can ... If you can’t see what you want in the stores, get a carpenter to

\(^{22}\) *Australian Home Beautiful*, 1.8.40, 12.

\(^{23}\) *The Home*, 1st August, 1941, 12-13.

\(^{24}\) *ibid*. Margaret Lord described her scheme in the following terms:

> simple functional furniture was made to order from our designs. The tallow wood floors were largely left uncovered, broken only here and there by natural Indian druggets. The hand blocked cottons for the curtains were designed and printed by Frances Burke of Melbourne ... Everything with the exception of the druggets—was Australian and the effect was fresh and youthful.

Lord, *op.cit*, 110.
make you some built-in furniture. This is possible at the present time ... You'll probably find it difficult to buy the new wall-to-wall carpet you want ... have the boards of your floor machine-sanded and waxed ... and just use one or two rugs where underfoot comfort is desirable ... supplies of English fabrics will start arriving in about two months time. In the meantime, pleasant inexpensive cotton weaves from India can ... be found [in] white or natural colours [not] the faulty dyes ... available during the war.25

Private commissions evaporated in wartime and Lord relied on broadcasts and articles like these for her living. Yet public interest was strong. In 1942 she designed and ran an interior decoration course for the YMCA. Her lectures and notes were enormously popular amongst Sydney's war-weary populace and a distant but eager band of service personnel, so hungry to plan their postwar dream homes that they were prepared to complete the course by correspondence in the outer reaches of New Guinea and at sea. Lord was 'quite moved' by news that the course was dropped to POW's behind Japanese lines towards the end of the war.26

These lessons formed the basis of one of the first guides to Australian interior decoration ever published, by Ure Smith in 1944. Interior Decoration: A Guide to Furnishing the Australian Home celebrated the superiority of 'good modern design' and its place in the Australian home. Again a small band of modern artists and designers had collaborated. The book was published by the influential Sydney patron of modernism, Sydney Ure Smith and designed by Hal Missingham, later Director of the NSW Art Gallery. Illustrations of Roy Ground's Melbourne home were provided by local artist Elaine Haxton. (Fig. 2)

This book and Lord's fortunes convey much about the state of the industry at the close of war. She championed the functional design ethic which predominated in the forties and shared the ideas which formed an influential canon—function, utility, simplicity, honesty, purity, beauty, democracy, rationality and nationalism; these terms were a liturgy for Australian modern design dogmatists.

In this book Lord clarified the question of modern design. She blamed prewar 'moderne' or 'modernistic' interiors for many misconceptions about the term 'modern' which had been wrongly used to describe a conglomeration of styles like Art Deco and Streamlining.27 According to Lord, truly modern furniture would

26 Lord, op.cit, 107.
27 Lord explained:
You will remember ... the sort of furniture I mean ... a modernistic bedroom suite composed of plain surfaces ... streamlined in shape and decorated with fan-like or triangular bits of ornament cut out of plywood and stuck on ... rather like make up badly applied ... or perhaps zig zag lightning.
'perfectly suit the purpose for which it is made, the material used, the process of machine construction and shun unnecessary applied decoration.'  

Her manifesto for modern design was neatly summarised in conclusion:

I'd like to remind you of the qualities ... which should mould a modern Australian style ... Today we want furniture and furnishings that are comfortable and convenient to use, space saving, labour saving, beautiful to look at and cheap enough for everybody.

By the end of the war many homeowners were expert managers of limited resources. Saving money, space or labour was a way of life for a populace recently mobilised for war, and for postwar reconstruction purposes, the spartan philosophy behind ‘good Australian design’ offered a convenient ethic for furnishing the thousands of postwar homes yet to be built.

Homes were to be smaller than ever before, restricted by Government guidelines to 12 squares and occupied by young returned servicemen or couples with limited resources. Rational solutions were compulsory in such straitened times. Planning and design enjoyed unprecedented status and the architect-designed home became one of the most sought after commodities of the decade. Again Lord’s comments were typical:

adequacy of space cannot be expressed in square or cubic feet per person. A great deal depends on how the available space is organised. Modern architects are demonstrating this in house planning. It is not always the house which occupies the largest area which provides the greatest sense of space. It is all a question of how the architect and interior decorator have used the available space. Planning is what counts.

Building and architectural journals were full of advice on home planning and building. Decorating journals celebrated building successes with hundreds of

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28 *ibid*, 43. Lord’s definition was extensive and detailed. She claimed modern furniture must:

a) PERFECTLY SUIT THE PURPOSE for which it is made ... perfectly fit the needs of people here in Australia now, not ... people in England a hundred years ago ... It will be utility furniture, but utility doesn’t mean ugliness.

b) PERFECTLY SUIT THE MATERIAL that is used ... and be used honestly; never disguised to look like something else.

c) PERFECTLY SUIT MACHINE CONSTRUCTION ... they must be designs which the machine can produce, in mass, without any loss of quality or beauty ... thereby bringing good things ... within the means of everyone.

Finally ... ornament should be in harmony with the structural design ... it should be used with restraint only when and where it will enhance the whole effect ... decoration is not essential. Furniture whose design follows the conditions stated ... will be good to look at anyway.

29 *ibid*, 107.

30 Boyd, *op.cit*, 115-118.

31 Lord, *op.cit*, 1944, 108.
features on owner-built or architect-designed modern housing; miracles of economy in space, materials and effort. 32

Many were forced to build themselves and the ‘do-it-yourself’ industry burgeoned. No longer the province of specialists, it became a huge industry during the fifties and sixties as homeowners used new materials on the market which brought home construction within their orbit. The plans and patterns available for do-it-yourselfers were typically modern; houseplans were simple and functional, patterns for double duty, stackable or space saving furniture were described as ‘modern form-fitting design’ or ‘perfect for contemporary living.’ 33

Major metropolitan dailies ran regular columns on small home planning and building. The interest generated by the architect Robin Boyd’s weekly series in The Age, persuaded the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects to join with it in establishing a Small Homes Service in July 1947. Its aim was to bring the well designed small home within reach of its readers. (Fig. 3) Boyd explained:

Most Australian homebuilders want the help of an architect. They realise that their own doodling with jig-saw puzzles of rooms is not the most scientific way of planning. They want direction and the most efficient layout, the best materials and the latest techniques. The only thing that stops them is money. They can’t afford an architect. 34

The decade following World War II was the decade of the architect. It was an era of discovery in the profession. Despite the debates which divided them, the


33 An advertisement for Timber-Packs Pty Ltd in 1954 promised:
any amateur can now make excellent quality modern furniture easily and quickly using only a hammer, screwdriver and a tin of glue ... Each pack is accurately pre-cut from selected quality kiln-dried, blonde furniture timbers, all holes are bored for you and assembly instructions, screws, nails etc. are supplied with every pack.

Australian House and Garden, Dec. 1954, 126.

34 Intending builders bought working drawings and specifications for any of over 100 homes designed by practising members of the Institute for the sum of £5 from the Service and became their own architect builders. Robyn Boyd commended the results to House and Garden readers:

we are ... moving in on a field hitherto the exclusive domain of the designer-builder. Before the war only the merest trickle of architects’ designs penetrated to the outer suburbs ... Now the work of many of our best domestic designers is appearing ... an average of 100 plans per month are supplied and houses in various stages of construction can be seen in increasing numbers in the new suburbs.

Australian House and Garden, July 1949, 23.
unprecedented status and authority granted them by a plan-hungry public encouraged an assertive, self-conscious professional identity.\(^{35}\)

Architects began to look on both the interior and exterior as their concern, in line with new ideas about 'integrated' design. This move was accompanied by the view that decorators were a relic of an over-ornamented Victorian past; amateurs and hindrances in the functional modern interior. This belief, and prejudices against a competing occupational group were tenacious and persist today.\(^{36}\)

Although architects responded coolly to decorators and designers in the fifties, some professional interchange did take place and attempts were made to differentiate responsibilities. Architects included interior design on their agenda at annual national conventions and invited token contributions by established interior decorators or designers. The first so honoured was Margaret Lord\(^{37}\) who tackled the tension head on:

I cannot imagine a more formidable audience than one composed almost entirely of architects: I somehow sense that architects regard the decorator as somebody who comes along after the building is finished and spoils it. I admit that there could be more of the architect in most decorators, but I think that there could also be more of the decorator in many architects. If we can work together in the interests of good design, the result will be better for us all.\(^{38}\)

As Apperly and his colleagues claim in their summary of the period:

Unexpectedly large numbers of returned servicemen had flooded Australian schools of architecture from about 1946, and most of them entered the profession in the early 1950s as ardent modernists, determined to help make a better world by applying their cherished theories of 'rational' and 'functional' design to everything from cities to cutlery ... Often seen as the esoteric creation of an intellectual elite, modern architecture started to reach out to the ordinary man and woman ... what had once been regarded as dangerously radical became the norm. Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, *op.cit*, 211.

Architects persisted in referring to interior designers as 'decorators' well into the seventies. Robin Boyd's comments in *Vogue Living* were typical:

To be brutally frank, most architects shudder at the term 'interior decorator.' If you must have one, your architect would appreciate the chance to advise you who not to go to. *Vogue's Guide to Living*, no.1, Spring-Summer 1967, 65.

Although there was growing incidence and acceptance of professional cooperation, there was little agreement on how this might be achieved. For architects, the answer was to participate in all aspects of house design, interiors and exteriors. For interior designers, it meant collaboration with the architect from the early stages of each project, to marry all its design elements. See *Australian Home Beautiful*, June 1, 1940, 24-27, Jan. 1945, 16, 18, Feb. 1945, 20-21, June 1946, 24. Architects and interior decorator/designers remained wary of each other but architects had the upper hand in a postwar climate sympathetic to notions of reconstruction and technological progress. See *Architecture and Arts and the Modern Home*, Feb. 1955, 22-23, *Vogue's Guide to Living*, no.1, Spring-Summer 1967, 64-65.


Lord elaborated:

In Australia where it is the exception rather than the rule for an interior decorator to be engaged to design furnishings, it is generally the client who is the decorator ... and I am sure that architects often feel sad to realise that their finished building is going to be spoiled by a haphazard and chancy furnishing
For both professions, space-saving, simple, utilitarian, functional, multi-purpose, built-in, honest, natural Australian furniture and furnishings formed the common wisdom.

The testimony of contemporary journals corroborates the fact that interiors and exteriors were ruled by the same functional aesthetic. A particularly forthright example of this decoration dogma appeared in the *Australian Home Beautiful* in 1945. Henry Manne, the journal’s honorary furniture expert, penned a series of articles entitled ‘Furniture for Peacetime’. Each piece focussed on a particular room or furniture item. In the first article Manne warned that good planning was essential if the Australian homemaker was to meet the challenge of the new smaller home successfully. He called upon his readers to:

discard worn out [ideas] ... home layout calls for radical new conceptions ... in the new homes there is no inflexible rule for the arrangement of furniture ... everyone is his own architect. 39

Manne urged readers to dispense with separate dining rooms and replace heavy old fashioned furniture with unit, built-in or multi-purpose furniture. He urged readers to ‘follow up judiciously and intelligently the modern trend, with its feeling for function, rhythm of space and colour, aiming for the creation of a perfect home.’ 40

In February he praised the appeal of simple, modern furniture for smaller homes and straitened times. Modern furniture would be imperative in tiny postwar homes which needed ‘honesty in design and materials that best serve our needs and are an expression of our life and times.’ 41 Suites of conventional furniture were his pet hate. 42 He favoured ‘occasional’ furniture in light Australian woods and devoted his next contribution to it:

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scheme. Perhaps the day will come when architects and decorators can work together from the outset of the job and it is then naturally the responsibility of the decorator to make the more personal contact with the client and gather the sort of information that will enable both the architect and the decorator to plan and design the right scheme for that particular client. Lord, M. ‘Problems of Interior Decoration’, in *Architecture*, April 1950, 57.

40 *Australian Home Beautiful*, Jan. 1945, 10.
42 He claimed:

Good modern design is independent of a fixed system of suites ... To live comfortably in our homes we need much floorspace to move about easily ... as our postwar homes are small ... it will be essential to use pieces of furniture which will serve a few and up to a dozen purposes at the same time ... as we forgo decoration and ornament, this double duty furniture will prove the best. See *Australian Home Beautiful*, Feb. 1945, 17.
Our new homes will show a tendency to smaller sized rooms and these, equipped with modern small appliances and fitments, will create demand for modern plain furniture ... heavy elaborate pieces and shoddy imitations of period furniture [will] be regarded as anachronisms.\(^{43}\) (Fig. 4)

The mood of national reconstruction turned furnishing and housing into an emphatically *Australian* problem. Lord serves again as a good example. *Home Beautiful* commended the Australian bias of her book:

> it is probably the first that has ever been published on such a scale which sets out to deal with Australian furnishing problems as seen by an Australian and which takes into account Australian conditions.\(^{44}\)

Her YMCA course was only one of the first of many formal courses supported by public institutions. Home furnishing and decoration soon found its way into school curricula, government information campaigns and a plethora of guides and manuals. The NSW Department of Agriculture published notes for homemaking students which emphasised rational, functional interior decoration:

> The principles of design, colour and planned coordination are inter-related and form the basis of interior decoration ... design principles ... form, texture, colour, pattern, light and space ... perspective, balance, emphasis, rhythm and repetition and proportion underlies all other principles.\(^{45}\)

*60 Home Interiors: Drawings, Plans, Costs and Colour Schemes* was published in 1948 and went to four editions before the end of 1951. The editor Dorothy Senior attributed its success to its practical approach. It was a companion volume to *60 Home Plans* and according to Senior, its simple and utilitarian schemes illustrated a uniquely Australian preference for simplicity. Detailed plans for every room in the house were provided, with floorplans, colour schemes, maintenance strategies and budgets at four different price levels. The only decision left for the homemaker was which of the four budget levels to opt for. The guide was the epitome of a postwar planned world; decorating the modern home was best achieved via rational formula.\(^{46}\) Paradoxically, although apologists like Henry

\(^{43}\) *Australian Home Beautiful*, Mar. 1945, 12.

\(^{44}\) Editors also praised her democratic approach:

> Miss Lord has not been content to write for the eclectic few who have always made a hobby ... of the furnishing arts, but has sought to attract the attention and arouse the interest of the much larger body of women who are beginning to take more interest than ever before in the subject of home furnishing and who after the war will be anxious to put new ideas into practice. See *Australian Home Beautiful*, Feb. 1945, 18.

\(^{45}\) NSW Department of Agriculture, (Information Services), *Home Furnishing and Decoration*, Sydney, 1947, 1-5, 23.

Manne promised 'a new freedom' with modern furniture, readers were urged to be 'careful to follow its rules.'

In 1948 the Sydney Municipal Library published a guide to its collection on home design. Its editor explained 'it has been found impossible to satisfy this need for literature on the subject.' The Library had bought as many books as funds would permit and listed them in the guide. Literature would not solve the immediate problem of 'providing adequate and pleasing shelter to the house-starved people of Sydney' but editors hoped that it would help the citizen of Sydney to 'acquire an expert knowledge and ... permit him to express an informed opinion on one of the most important subjects affecting his private and social life.'

Modern and Australian themes were not entirely new. Specialists toyed with modernism and Australian decoration from the turn of the century. A survey of journals like The Home and Decoration and Glass suggests that there were many devotees amongst contributors and readers. During the twenties and thirties features frequently celebrated architect-designed modern interiors. Continuous use and abuse of the term modern only encouraged its use. Postwar planners like Lord, Manne and Boyd believed they had at last got it right, but theirs was simply another version of an old refrain.

The writings of Australian protagonists and authorities convinced of the merits of modern functional design reached a wider audience than ever before, in larger cheaper journals, newspapers, schools and public libraries. Yet as the Sydney Public Library's collection indicates, they competed with international opinion and the appeal of tradition. In the Library's collection on modern decoration, Patmore’s Modern Furniture and Decoration, Carrington’s Design and

49 Their guide listed 61 books specifically concerned with interior decoration; a substantial collection within the broader section on home design. Yet despite the nationalistic flavour of postwar design, Australian literature only formed a small part of a collection dominated by British, European and American publications, in that order. ibid, 74-79.
50 Articles in The Home were more enthusiastic about Australian style and materials but both journals were champions of 'Modern style'. As Margaret Lord's comments indicate, 'modern' was a term employed very loosely throughout the first decades of the century to describe almost anything new—it embraced the variety of styles from Art Deco, Streamlined Moderne to Bauhaus-inspired austerity. See The Home, 1.2.25, 31; 1.4.30, 5, 37, 53, 1.3.40, Back Cover, 1.1.42, 14, 37; 1.3.42, 28, and Decoration and Glass, 1.5.35, 5, 1.6.35, 22-23, 25.
Decoration and Ford's Design of Modern Interiors, published in London and New York, comprised a larger and it seems, more compelling proportion of the books available.  

Australian Home Beautiful also featured homes furnished with suites of 'gracious' antiques or with charming 'olde worlde' cottage charm alongside articles on modern Australian furniture, and craft sections devoted ample space to pleated lampshades and tea cosies of which Henry Manne or Margaret Lord would not have approved.  

Nevertheless, simple, functional, flexible furniture for the small home had received unprecedented attention in postwar Australia. The imperatives of the period forced the issue. The postwar effort to rebuild the new world had spawned a simple, modern and mass-produced aesthetic. Later, the editor of Australian House and Garden wrote of a revolution in Australian homes during this period:

postwar exigency spawned a new space saving economy of design with its own aesthetic and philosophical appeal ... Homemakers now cram as much living into twelve squares as they used to in twenty. Good planning bridges the space lack. Small scale furniture, all purpose built-ins and colour add up to getting more living for your money.  

Like Dorothy Senior's Book of 60 Home Interiors, Guertner's book of home interiors for Australian House and Garden offered 'ready to copy interiors, problem solvers, dozens of colour schemes, winning window treatments, designs for built-ins, space saving ideas and many, many do-it-yourself home jobs' indicating that, by 1950, the rational, national reconstruction effort had brought the modern home and interior into popular parlance.

A National Style?—Australia vs. the World:  

While the tussle between traditional and modern styles was fought out after the war, the struggle between national and international styles confused the issue. Both dilemmas were a continuing puzzle. A nationalist design aesthetic was sustained after the war by the practical difficulty of obtaining international news and products. It was strongest in architectural circles throughout the forties, but

52 Australian Home Beautiful, 1.8.40, 29, Sept. 1950, 34.  
54 ibid, 1.  
55 Here, the most pronounced change of the era was the mass conversion of young architectural graduates to 'Modern International style.' Yet the development of
decorating journals also flirted with Australian design. Australian decorative motifs and furniture design received good press, as did local manufacturing achievements.\textsuperscript{56}

As material shortages lifted however, overseas trends and products became accessible and the nationalistic design ethic weakened. The shift towards modern design was the most significant change of the era evident in the popular decoration press, but this was accompanied by a shift in the nature of international influence. Its strength remained but its sources had changed.

\textit{Australian Home Beautiful} featured a series at the close of war which illustrates the broad reorientation of conventional decorating wisdom. Its title ‘Joanna Plans a Home,’ could not prepare the reader for the agonising saga which followed. Joanna, a delightful young lady (who, as a single, fancy-free office girl in an earlier edition of the journal, had refurnished her wartime flat with her rich aunt’s cast-offs), was engaged to a serviceman at the front. While awaiting his return, she was judiciously employed planning the postwar dream home they would inhabit.

The first half-dozen articles described her careful consideration of overall planning. She engaged an architect friend to design her dream home but the realities of wartime shortage, newlywed impoverishment and the rational rules of scientific design meant that Joanna’s dream was transformed into something like the ubiquitous modern small home.\textsuperscript{57} Succeeding episodes detailed her diligent search for pieces of ‘graceful charm and quality’ from the city’s bewildering array of furniture suppliers and craftsmen. Readers agonised with Joanna as she weighed traditional English mahogany against French provincial frills, holding

regional architecture, sympathetic to Australian conditions and climate also featured in professional debate centred in Melbourne and was manifest in the work of Roy Grounds and Robin Boyd. Apperly and his colleagues dub their work ‘Melbourne Regional.’ See Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, \textit{op.cit}, 211, 218.

The earnest search for an authentic, true Australian design was particularly clear in professional forums of debate and specialised journals such as \textit{Architecture and the Arts}. A good example was James Birrell’s dilemma as a ‘young graduate of Melbourne University’ in 1952:

Why should an attempt be made to develop a serious national style? Architecture must deal actively with life ... the architect has a moral role ... to consciously absorb the reality common to our civilization. [Architecture] ... it derives inspiration from nature, the general character of a region and the topographical particulars of a site ... If an Australian architecture is to formulate those influences general to this country, this race and society must be understood by our architects collectively [and] result in a real architecture—truly Australian. Birrell, J. ‘Style’ in \textit{Architecture and Arts}, no.4, 1952, 31, see also \textit{Architecture and Arts}, July 1953, 5.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Australian Home Beautiful}, July 1949, 26, Feb. 1950, 18, Nov. 1955, 25.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Australian Home Beautiful}, Oct. 1945, 14, 35, Nov. 1945, 17.
both in the balance as she toyed with solid Australian colonial in Tasmanian myrtle.\textsuperscript{58}

Her life changed forever in Episode 7, at a cocktail party in the very modern home of an American couple. Joanna attended only out of curiosity; her experience of cheap modern furniture had soured her opinion of modern style. To everyone’s surprise, she was ‘enchanted’ by its layout and furnishings. She found the sense of space indoors ‘a revelation.’ She analysed ‘the expanse of clear glass filling an entire wall ... the staircase of the open kind with treads but no risers ... furniture of light natural coloured woods in a style quite new to her’ and was forced to conclude that ‘it possessed an exciting, dramatic quality which was quite new.’ Joanna suddenly felt ‘she could talk well and look her best in such a room ... that life was fun with lots of interesting things to look forward to.’\textsuperscript{59}

‘Shocked’ by the idea that ‘the joys of collecting might not be comparable to those of creating something entirely new’, she returned in daylight to ensure ‘the magic of indirect lighting or the stimulus of a party’ had not dulled her judgement. She was persuaded to study the recent overseas architectural and decorating magazines her new American friend offered and became thoroughly acquainted with the principles of modern furniture design—‘suitability of purpose, physical comfort in use, lightness and ease of handling, sound construction, correct scale, the natural beauty of material and ease of cleaning.’\textsuperscript{60}

Joanna decided on ‘a complete houseful of furniture made to order embodying really modern ideas’, and successive chapters detailed her accumulation of ideas and plans from an American architect and specialist in modern design. These plans began with custom-built modern furniture; built-in, multi-purpose space-saving fitments in simple, streamlined forms which were arranged in functional groupings which determined the external shape of the house. Room by room Joanna’s architect-designer reshaped her aesthetic and the result obtained Peter’s approval on his return from the front. Readers left Joanna and Peter fixing the wedding date, having completed a detailed costing of their modern home.\textsuperscript{61} (Figs. 5, 6, 7)

Even more interesting than the obvious shift from traditional to modern design in Joanna’s story was the source of her international influences. Joanna’s

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Australian Home Beautiful}, April 1946, 8-9.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{ibid}, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Australian Home Beautiful}, Nov. 1946, 22.
saga illustrates changes in Australia's international outlook during and after the war and evident beyond the decoration sphere. It signalled the shift away from the influence of Britain and towards the 'New World', specifically America, the now internationally persuasive laboratory of social and technological advance. Donald Horne's views in the sixties were typical of the growing identification with America by postwar Australia:

There are dozens of similarities—migration to a new land, the mystique of pioneering ... the turbulence of gold rushes, the brutality of relaxed restraint, the boredom of the backblocks, the feeling of making life anew ... There may be more similarities between the history of Australia and America than for the moment Australia can understand.62

In home design and decoration, this interest in America fostered allegiance to the Bauhaus-inspired architecture and architect-designed furniture receiving attention there, where simple, streamlined, sculptural furniture manufactured with the latest materials and techniques, were miracles of construction in lightness, strength and durability. It is hardly surprising that Joanna found them 'like nothing she had ever seen.'63

By the end of the forties, American design featured regularly in popular Australian decoration journals. The influence of Modern International design was strong. Though it was still balanced by interest in Australian developments, this balance tipped ever more towards America as the decade drew to a close, while European and particularly 'good Scandinavian design', craftsman-built furniture, retained a significant following.64

63 If the character Joanna's experience and the Sydney Municipal Library's collection are indicative, American journals and books were reaching the Australian public soon after their publication in America. Locally, specialised journals like The Home and Art and Architecture had featured news of developments in modern art and design from prewar Britain and Europe while the popular press remained adherents of conventional practice abroad. The Home folded during the war, but Architecture and Architecture and Arts became firm adherents of 'International Modern Style'—a pseudonym for Modern American—with touches of Scandinavian influence and meek protestations about unique Australian design.
64 In March 1945 Australian Home Beautiful featured two examples of modern American home design and commended 'these new young architects for their intelligent use of new materials and structural techniques ... [and] ... the modernity of their interiors, characterised by simplicity, lightness and brightness', Australian Home Beautiful, Mar. 1945, 8. In April 1947 they offered photographs of recent international interiors from England, Europe and America which showed 'how well the simple lines of modern designs can be made to harmonise with almost any decorative scheme.' They included 'ingenious two-way, extendable, convertible' furniture in light beech or birchwood, from the USA, Sweden and Denmark. Australian Home Beautiful, April 1947, 27-28. The slightly more upmarket Australian House and Garden was using the phrase 'designed in the American
The work of the recent emigre architect, Harry Seidler, became a focus for 'Modern International Design' purists in Australia. His first Australian projects attracted unprecedented publicity for their startling rendition of this new architecture. His long-standing battle with municipal authorities began in the late forties with his prize-winning house for his parents in Turramurra. Featured in popular and specialist literature, the 'Rose Seidler House' became a showcase for 'Modern International Style' and was widely and severely criticised for an unsympathetic response to its Australian setting.  

Yet it made its point and was soon a highlight of the Sunday afternoon drive in suburban Sydney. Seidler's mother recalls keeping curtains drawn day and night to avoid the relentless public gaze. Seidler's bold, stark interiors also received attention and did much to publicise the modern American architect designed furniture by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen that were later to become design 'classics' and highly sought-after symbols of modernity.

manner' as a synonym for 'extremely modern design' by the end of the decade.  

Australian House and Garden, July 1949, 30-31.


CHAPTER 2:

THE FIFTIES: DESIGN AND COLOUR FOR MODERN LIVING

Harry Seidler was one of the young Australian designers featured in the abortive journal *Art and Design* in 1949. It was published by Sydney Ure Smith, who was responsible for other influential journals of the time: in particular, *Art and Australia*, a showcase for modern Australian art and *The Home*, a society journal for the modern woman-cum-culturette.68

The editors of *Art and Design* were prominent figures in the field. Professor Burke headed Fine Arts at Melbourne University. Douglas Annand, Alistair Morrison, Arthur Baldwinson and John Amory were all, or later became successful artists or architects. They agreed ‘... design in Australia has been and still is of a low order’ but added, ‘there are hopeful signs of a more informed outlook amongst the populace.’69 In *Art and Design* they would show the development of art ‘as it is now being applied to industrial design and manufactured goods’ and they would feature interior design and architecture.

Yet *Art and Design* represented minority views and preferences in the fifties. Popular journals offer better evidence of the diversity of tastes and styles which dominated the era. Their features entertained different styles and philosophies. Odes to formal British antiques, florid French furnishings and cottage makeovers appeared beside severe lectures on the necessity for ‘good modern design’ and photo graphic features on exciting developments overseas (usually America). The voice of unique Australian style faded into the background with little to commend it over the comfort of tradition and taste or the exhilaration and glamour associated with ‘the New World’.70


69 *Art and Design* 1, 3. Editors called for increased government and private support for young Australian designers and craftsmen to stimulate their efforts.

A sampling of *Australian Home Beautiful* in 1950 illustrates this confused mix, with articles on traditional houses made over in English cottage style,\(^71\) advertisements using both traditional luxury and modern styling as selling points, and a long-running correspondence brief from Keith Dunstan in New York. Dunstan surveyed modern American architecture, planning and decoration and reported the design competitions now proliferating in America, particularly those sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. Winning modern designs were held up as icons to a design-starved Australian public. They became objects of desire, copied cheaply by local manufacturers to cope with the demand these features generated.\(^72\) (Fig. 8)

As postwar exigency lifted, Australians were left with the prospect of expanding their lifestyles and housing growing families in their small postwar homes. Two important passions of the fifties were answers to the problems involved: they were ‘small home planning’ and ‘technological innovation’.

The small home management literature proliferated. The Sydney Municipal Library’s collection was already dominated by titles on the small home.\(^73\) Decorating journals were obsessed with the task of managing ‘minimum scale for maximum living’,\(^74\) or ‘One room with 2 purposes’.\(^75\)

Postwar austerity may have relaxed but the need for a planned home had not disappeared. Planning still promised ideal solutions. The architect-designed house

\(^71\) *Australian Home Beautiful*, Jan. 1950, 22.

\(^72\) *Australian Home Beautiful*, Jan. 1955, 15-18. Implicit tensions were occasionally identified in features like ‘Traditional vs. Modern?’ but competing styles and philosophies did not concern editors. Representing a breadth of opinion presumably ensured their survival by ensuring maximum distribution.

The same issues of *Australian Home Beautiful* offered ample consideration of Australian design and conditions, with features on Roy Grounds—‘they say if there is a truly Australian Architecture, this is it ...’ or ‘Australian Modern—the latest and best from young Australian designers for our lifestyles’. *Australian Home Beautiful*, Jan. 1950, 69, Feb. 1950, 18. This national theme never died, but it lost out in the tussle between tradition and modernity. Young Australian designers identified closely with modern style, and the coincidence of American and Australian conditions and lifestyles—the mutual association of young, light, bright, open, breezy, outdoor, sunny spaces—served to silence many Australianists. The prevailing aesthetic became a sort of hybrid modern; an acknowledgment of peculiar Australian conditions surfaced occasionally in the course of modifying ‘American Modern’ for the Australian market. The point is that within design circles, leadership rested either directly or by default with America, while popular taste remained extremely diverse.


\(^74\) *Australian House and Garden*, June 1949, 48-49.

\(^75\) *Australian House and Garden*, Feb. 1955, 9.
remained the ideal\textsuperscript{76} and householders were exhorted to follow this example, planning every last detail of their home interiors. Journals gave meticulous instructions for planning small home interiors, urging readers to plot their rooms using paper furniture, cut-outs or buildings blocks on graph paper or scaled 3-D models. Pauline Haydon offered step-by-step instructions for plotting room arrangements 'like chess' and promised that 'using paper furniture to plot room arrangements costs nothing and can save endless headaches.'\textsuperscript{77} The architect W. Watson-Sharp agreed, though he preferred working in three dimensions with building blocks and compared it to playing 'Doll's House'.\textsuperscript{78}

The faith in rational, scientific strategies in furnishing, born in the forties, persisted and was bolstered by expanding home technology. War-time advances in materials and mass production had been adapted for peacetime purposes and by the fifties Australian homemakers were faced with a plethora of home appliances, gadgets and furnishings made from revolutionary synthetic materials. All promised to lighten the load, save labour, space, or time; saving money was no longer the first priority. Most of these products emanated from America, even if they were produced in Australia by American manufacturers or made under licence from multinationals.\textsuperscript{79}

According to commentators, the equation between American technology, scientific advance and modern living was established in the popular mind during this period. Richard White claims that the familiar picture of suburban family life

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\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Australian House and Garden} urged readers—'Be kind to your Architect' and detailed a day in the harrowing life of an architect in his dealings with clients and builders. \textit{Australian House and Garden}, Sept. 1949, 26. Both major journals favoured architect-designed houses or furniture, with leaders like 'Good Planning Makes This Carefree House.' \textit{Australian House and Garden}, Sept. 1948, 38, Mar. 1955, 16, 44. The Victorian Small Homes Service was still being feted in the pages of \textit{Australian Home Beautiful} in 1955 and the work of prominent American and Australian architects received particular attention; especially Sir Roy Grounds, W. Watson-Sharp, Walter Bunning, Arthur Baldwinson and particularly 'the young overseas architect', Harry Seidler. \textit{Australian Home Beautiful}, Jan. 1955, 13, 82.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Australian House and Garden}, Sept. 1950, 48-49.

\textsuperscript{78} His feature showed a young couple peering into a tiny house which was captioned 'British Architect, Maxwell Fry and his wife examine the model of a bungalow.' \textit{Australian House and Garden}, June 1959, 15.

\textsuperscript{79} White, R., \textit{Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980}, George, Allen & Unwin, Melbourne, 1981, 164-165, Churchward, L.G., \textit{America and Australia, 1688-1972}, ACPOL, Sydney, 1979, 176-177. Popular decorating journals were peppered with advertisements for the latest products, most of which were American designed or manufactured. Typical copy claimed 'Now in Australia life is easier for you with venetians of Luxaflex wipe clean and snap back aluminium slats ... backed by years of the finest American research and development' or heralded the introduction of Formica with, 'the first choice in America ... now in full supply in Australia in over 45 patterns and colours.' \textit{Australian House and Garden}, Jan. 1955, 5, 77.
with its focus on home and family and a catalogue of possessions was the product of Australia's postwar affluence. He associates this firmly with Americanisation of the consumer market, 'it was the United States which provided the standard against which Australian and other Western nations measured their way of life.' White observes:

houses were changing. As well as radios and gramophones, they were more likely to contain labour-saving devices like electric irons, heaters and toasters, all either imported or made in Australia by American-affiliated companies, like Australian General Electric ... often advertised by American techniques and paid for by American time payment methods.80

A new feature in decorating literature during the fifties were 'Store Stroller', 'Window Shopping' or 'What’s New' columns. Regular monthly inserts previewed the latest home gadgetry, appliances and decorative accessories. Products with modern styling were either labour, space or time-saving. These columns were consumption guides dominated by news of overseas arrivals, particularly American products.81

The scientifically designed kitchen focussed the ideas of the period. Here, the problems of small home planning were most effectively solved by modern American technology and scientific solutions.

Popular journals set the pace with 'Design Your Dream Kitchen' contests and extensive features on kitchen design. One reported the results of recent research which had seen technologists preparing 84 meals in the one space (the equivalent of a week of meals for a family of four) in order to refine the perfect 'work triangle'.82 This 'triangle' became a theoretical model of the ideal work and traffic flow in the average kitchen and informed the plans of builders and decorators, especially small home specialists, throughout the decade, appearing in every guide as the starting point for decisions about the arrangement of fittings and appliances.83 In his advice to the Australian home decorator and painter, B. Brindley claimed:

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80 White, op.cit, 162-164. See also White, R., ‘Americanisation and Popular Culture in Australia’ in Teaching History, v.12, no.8, August 1978, 13. Advertisements for gadgets; radios, refrigerators and later air-conditioning were as common as those for new household furnishings. They promised ‘You’ll be happier with a Hoover’ and explained that Spraycrete ... would ‘make old homes look new and new homes look better, thanks to the modern method of resurfacing and decorating brick surfaces with the latest American process’ and so corroborated the association of modern living with American technology and design. Australian House and Garden, July 1949, 73-76, Jan. 1955, 66-67.


82 Australian House and Garden, June 1949, 36-37.

83 In 1955, Australian House and Garden advertised a buy it and build it yourself pattern house which belonged to ‘the present and the future.’ Its kitchen was ‘the corridor type, fully equipped proudly efficient with direct access to the dining section
the kitchen might well be chosen as the symbol of modern progress toward better and easier living. Every change, every innovation has been designed to answer a problem or need of the housewife. Today we find inconvenience at a minimum and what was once a dull, drab ... room transformed into a bright streamlined unit planned for efficiency.84 (Fig. 9)

The planned kitchen married the decorative themes of the decade: rational design, technological innovation and American leadership and constructed a decorative ideal—modernity; an ethic with which to rebuild the world.

Robin Boyd doubted the extent of American influence in the fifties,85 but rethought his position in the sixties, inventing the term ‘Austerica’ to describe Australia’s Americanisation. He characterised it as a blatant form of copyism which found its expression in ‘a mass of visual and aesthetic trivia’.86

Most general commentators treat Americanisation as a closed issue.87 Boyd’s ‘Austerica’ was probably one of the most incisive contemporary accounts:

on one side and the laundry on the other.’ Australian House and Garden, Jan. 1955, 44.


In 1952 Robin Boyd denied the influence of American technological advance in the Australian Kitchen:

... applied scientific aids to living always remained behind those of America ... the time lag meant that the Australian housewife had to wait many years before new labour saving devices were offered her ... most of the helpful kitchen apparatus which was illustrated in the coloured advertisements of American magazines was ... about ten years in advance of Australia ... in 1950, the American housewife would have revolted at the sight of a kitchen almost bereft of mechanical aids. Boyd, op.cit, 189-190.

Elsewhere in the same book, however he admitted the power and extent of American consumption ideologies and their association with modern lifestyles, innovation and technology:

More and more of the articles and practices which the Australian used in everyday life came from the U.S.A. or were copied from an American model.’ ibid, 181.

His conclusion that ‘these ideas never succeeded in turning the homemakers head’, certainly does not follow. It is inconsistently admitted in his own accounts and is not borne out in contemporary literature on the subject.

According to Boyd, Australia copied the worst and flashiest forms of American culture after its heyday:

The Austerican lives by the law of the American magazine, but not necessarily the latest copy ... he believes that the latest American style is just a little too glamorous for Australia. About two years old is usually just right.


Richard White’s account is one of the most direct. ‘Economic, cultural and military dependence on Britain was replaced by similar dependence on America and the concept of the Australian Way of Life simply disguised the switch.’ White, op.cit, 162. Geoffrey Serle’s cultural history of Australia confirms the completeness of American hegemony. ‘By about 1960 it was clear that Australia had almost become and American satellite.’ Serle, G., The Creative Spirit in Australia: A Cultural History,
in the years after the Second World War the American influence in popular arts amounted to mesmerism. The west coast of the United States was the model in the minds of many people who were in a position to shape Australian development. What Paris was to the nineteenth century land baron, Las Vegas was to the knight of commerce and industry in the middle of the twentieth century ... The American flavouring in Australia is today more evenly assimilated than ... pure English ... It is the American now who comes from Mecca ... The most mesmerised imitators of America ... transform Australia ... into a state which can be called Austerica ... an austerity version of the American dream.88

The association between domestic technology, progressive ideas (neatly combined under the banner of modernity) and American genius was unequivocal. For Australian home decorators and designers the attraction was multifaceted; embodying the typical fifties balance between scientific rationalism and innovative glamour.

**Colour:**

The faith of the forties in functional rational design combined with a newly found flippancy and glamour in the fifties. 'Whimsy' or 'glamour' founded on increased prosperity and optimism. was now admitted to the field. The colour industry flourished. It exploited technological advances, production and consumption patterns, national and international preferences and the prevailing decorative mood.

Until the war a limited range of coloured paint was available. Mixing volatile and improperly understood materials was a risk and expense beyond the scope of most, and long-regarded as the preserve of a thoroughly trained and experienced professional painter or decorator.89 Paint technology now brought any conceivable colour within reach of the average homemaker and manufacturers moved quickly as restrictions lifted to exploit advances in synthetic paint technology, increased production capacities and expanding domestic markets to bring these gains to the home builder and decorator.90 Robin Boyd observed:

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88 Heinemann, Richmond, Vic, 1986, 179. Churchward concludes his detailed study of Australian-American economic relations and trading patterns during the fifties with the observation,  
  Australia was an ally of the United States during 1942-1945; in the fifties she became an American satellite. American cultural penetration of Australia was ... an inevitable accompaniment of American economic and political expansion ... despite some global trappings ... really a form of American cultural imperialism ... the main agencies ... during the forties and early fifties were newspapers, radio, films, records, theatre, books and periodicals. Churchward, *op.cit*, 184.  
89 Broughton, 10.3.91. NSW Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Miscellaneous Files: 'Interior Designers', *Australasian Decorator and Painter*, 1.5.07, 188.  
Ordinary colour-cards grew from six to sixty hues in this period. Multi-colouring brightens the creative task of redecorating for the amateur, and ensures the opening of a profitable number of partly-required tins of paint ... pigment is relished by the pressing and printing machines which produce many modern surfacing materials.91

Advertisements in the popular press boasted a wealth of colours now at the consumer's fingertips—pre-mixed or custom-blended—the prospective decorator had only to specify the grade, tint, value and tone of their preferred hue. Advertising copy was aggressive and firms developed ingenious marketing methods to whet consumer appetite. Free colour charts, booklets and sample-boards were offered in glamorous ads:

This free colour chart will solve your colour worries ... hundreds of lovely colour combinations for every room in your home are at your fingertips with the remarkable match-a-chip colour chart ... this synthetic rubber paint sensation requires only one coat, is non-inflammable, scrubbable, and durable ... its brilliant super gloss finish is even glossier than gloss.92

Colour science was appropriated by the industry and became a basis for publications from most of the leading paint manufacturers. *Colour By Berger* published in Sydney around 1950 was an outright apologia for the colour scheming industry. Its authoritative guide offered all the secrets of successful decoration with colour:

In planning a Colour Scheme you are using colour creatively to achieve certain effects ... restfulness, gaiety, dignity, welcome, coolness, warmth, or a harmony which will express your personality ... we need to master the technique of colour to know how to use colour in harmony, contrast and right balance before we can be sure of getting the result which will express the feeling we are seeking. In short, however great our natural colour sense, we have to set ourselves consciously to acquire color skill.93

While technology had brought colour within everyday reach, its principles and secrets remained a learnt skill. The Munsell and Ostwald Colour Systems were compared and analysed; colour charts and circles were their common language and readers were exhorted to understand both, together the colour principles on which they were based; tone, value, hue, chroma, intensity, tint and shade. All of these

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91 Boyd, *op.cit*, 1972, 44.
92 *Australian House and Garden*, Mar. 1955, 2. Others offered ‘any colour at any time with Nu-Hue ... choose from hundreds of prescription paints, mixed to order’. *Australian House and Garden*, June 1950, 56. The world of colour became a fantasy land, a new world the decorator could explore for the magic of colour: A new world is waiting for discovery ... the vivid sparkling world of colour ... In our lifetime we have seen the dawn of ... a new age. Berger Paints, *Colour by the Berger Group*, Berger, Sydney, 195?, Part 1, 2, Part 12, 10.
terms had specific meanings which, if not mastered, might lead to decorative disaster.\(^{94}\)

Colour psychology was another selling point. Industrial research had established the psychological impact of colour and findings had been used in wartime to motivate workers in factories and soothe wartime casualties in hospitals.\(^{95}\) Colours were now attributed specific characteristics and psychological effects in the home and this enhanced the appeal of colour science.\(^ {96}\)

Interior decorators were quickly converted and the colour literature proliferated. Though the colour industry was not exclusively concerned with paint, it was acknowledged as the single most effective and economical method of colour scheming. Guides were published which were devoted to colour scheming; more general books reserved substantial portions of their text to renditions of familiar colour wisdom. They placed priority on an appreciation of its decorative potential based on a complete understanding of the rules and principles of its application.\(^ {97}\)

Popular journals followed suit. The colour industry soon monopolised discussion there. Its first attraction as a device for rejuvenating and updating postwar homes economically\(^ {98}\) was soon replaced by an emphasis on decorative, psychological or even architectural effects. In 1949 Theodore Muller mused, ‘Colour ... friend or foe?’ and advised flippantly, ‘Planning a color scheme is like planning a party—it’s a certain success if you put together the elements that blend’. He then outlined its serious side:

> tests show that the average householder who slaps paint on a plaster wall can only distinguish between twenty six pure graduated hues in the same spectrum; scientific super-apparatus distinguishes 100,000. These hues create certain emotional reactions, and the whole idea of color can be reduced on the human level to seven unique colors or “psychological primaris”.\(^ {99}\)

Muller warned, ‘before you invite colors to your house, study their characteristics’ and detailed the qualities of each hue and their ideal uses as mood devices throughout the house. In January 1950, Lesley Mitchell challenged her readers—‘Are you Afraid of Color?’ [sic]. She criticised ‘cream walls and the oh-so-safe, if pleasant wall-to-wall green carpet’ and claimed ‘Scientists have proved that color is a positive emotional force and has a definite effect on the nervous system’.

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\(^ {94}\) Berger, *op.cit*, Parts 1, 3, 5-8.

\(^ {95}\) Lord, *op.cit*, 1969, 116-117.

\(^ {96}\) Berger, *op.cit*, Parts 5 and 6.

\(^ {97}\) Brindley, *op.cit*, 12-16.

\(^ {98}\) *Australian House and Garden*, Jan. 1950, 16-17, 1956, 8-9.

She explained the colour wheel, relationships between colours and explored its architectural uses:

Does one of your rooms have a difficult shape? In a too square room an interesting trick is to paint one wall a different shade to the remaining three. Thus a receding (or cool) color will lengthen the room, and in a long narrow room, a warm or dark tone will bring the end wall forward.100

In one of their most explicit marketing ploys of all, paint manufacturers established colour bureaus and consultancies headed by well known decorators and supported by hordes of technical staff. Margaret Lord was employed by Berger paints as their colour consultant.101 British Paints even sponsored a weekly radio program to complement their other efforts.102

Consultants continually up-dated colour ranges, provided clients with fulsome advice and colour schemes free of charge and participated in advertising and promotion. Commonly they would endorse new ranges in ‘decorator colours’ or devise colour schemes which featured, headed by their photo or signature, in popular decorating journals. These endorsements were not exclusive to the colour industry. Decorators endorsed many household items, but colour advice appeared in unprecedented detail.103

One such endorsement conveys the mood of the fifties colour industry well. The ‘leading American decorator’, Mrs Josephine Bull, was brought to Australia in the early fifties by the Australian Women’s Weekly. The ‘writer, author of a well known decorating book, TV and Radio lecturer’ toured Australia. Ms Bull was a colour expert and The Weekly published a special supplement to mark her visit. In it she told readers ‘How to use colour’, outlined its psychological and architectural

100 Australian House and Garden, Jan. 1950, 17, 64. In October Geoff W. Callaghan, designer and decorator, of Modernage Interiors’ advised:

Today, walls are yellow not cream; pink, blues and greens are more interesting as backgrounds than flat dull colours which don’t do anything for an interior ... don’t be drab ... let ‘Modernage’ help! Australian House and Garden, Oct. 1953, 69.

101 Lord recalled in her autobiography:

Colour advisory services have now become a regular part of paint merchandising but my appointment as colour consultant to this company was the first of its kind in Australia ... Requests for the Berger colour service spread from industries and hospitals to commercial organisations—hotels shops and offices ... with the boom in postwar building the service was introduced to the domestic field and soon all the leading paint companies followed suit, in some cases employing people who had worked with me. Lord, op.cit, 1969, 117.

102 British Paints encouraged readers of Design for Colour to extend their knowledge and solve their problems through the radio by listening to their weekly program, “Paint it yourself.” British Paints, op.cit, 78.

significance and provided an extensive list of colour rules to follow in each room of the house. She endorsed her sponsors, British Paints, enthusiastically:

My [visit] has been enriched by the beautiful decorator colors so easily available to home owners in your country ... I have been able to study and compare color ranges in Gloss-Masta, Brilliant Gloss Enamel, Nu-Plastic, Acrylic Plastic, Wall and Ceiling Finish, Supa-Flat and Satin Tone Enamels ... with delighted surprise. Here are hundreds of colors to choose from, some restful, some exciting, all with depth of color that sets them all apart.104

Josephine Bull’s visit and her advice contained all the ingredients of contemporary colour wisdom. She represented the technological and scientific advance, increased production and consumption and marketing strategies of the era. She confirmed their association with American innovation for her Australian audience, combining science with glamour and holding them in a typically fifties balance. (Fig. 10)

The Profession:

The colour industry and Bull’s visit and endorsements convey much about interior decoration in the fifties. They reflect the growth of professional opportunity, the popular audience and the design market.

The profession was by no means new. English and European decorators already commanded a significant following. In Europe, journals such as The Studio and infrequent issues of House and Garden published by Vogue or Our Homes and Gardens published by Country Life, had introduced the subject to an interwar, jazz age audience.105 Elsie de Wolfe and Edith Wharton pioneered the field in America in the late nineteenth century106 and American House and Garden was established there around the turn of the century.107 Calloway and

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104 Bull, J., Home Decoration, (Supplement to the Australian Women’s Weekly), Sydney, c.195?, 9.
105 The Studio was established in 1893; the other journals were issued as supplements to parent ventures after the First World War. Battersby, M., The Decorative Twenties, Herbert Press, London, 1988, 162, 175.
Battersby profile influential figures like Sybill Colefax and Syrie Maugham in Britain and Serge Chermayeff and Paul Poiret on the Continent to illustrate their views.108

The impact of this small but vigorous clique of quasi-professional decorators on the ordinary domestic interior was of course negligible. There was a simultaneous growth in serious ‘thoughtful’ literature during this period which was probably more influential, more accessible and widely disseminated than the work of exclusive decorators. Works by Derek Patmore, Basil Ionides and Noel Carrington in Britain or Todd and Mortimer in America were published by The Studio and the architectural presses. These often featured the work of rising stars in the decorating world—Syrie Maugham’s all-white rooms are probably the best example—and popularised or at least disseminated the tastes and styles favoured in their work.109

These publications reached Australia in limited numbers and snippets from The

1989, 59-63, 141-143. Battersby includes a contemporary account in his coverage; an account which parodied:

Charming young men and formidable ladies ... hopping backwards and forwards between England and the Continent on the benefit of the Exchange ... [who] seldom failed to carry back something for the nest, a piece of stuff from Paris ... or just a headful of other people’s ideas. Battersby, The Decorative Thirties, 61.

Battersby describes ‘a new generation of lady decorators’ in the thirties who from necessity as much as inclination developed the toughness of Attila combined with social connections through birth or marriage ... some had titles but all had an unshakeable belief in their own taste and talent.’ ibid.

Calloway places their emergence slightly earlier in the century. He claims that in the twenties ‘in England and France, the pattern of the emergence of the new decorators becomes recognisable, based usually on formal promotion by one individual, small firm of taste, that can be identified with ... friends, often including figures from both society and the world of Art.’ Calloway, op.cit, 62, 141.

108 Calloway, op.cit, 62-63, 141, 213 and Battersby, The Decorative Thirties, 55-59, 73, 80 and The Decorative Twenties, 53, 65, 125, 171-174. Russell Lynes dubbed their mid-century successors 'tastemakers' and described them as:

Men and women who devote themselves professionally to the dissemination of ideas and cultural artefacts and not in the least incidentally make a living on the way ... cultural do gooders, they see their mission clearly and pursue it with determination. Lynes R., The Tastemakers, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1954, 320.

Studio and similar journals were reproduced in The Home in the interwar decades.\textsuperscript{110}

Although Philip Cox maintains that the profession began after the Second World War in Australia, contemporary scholars correctly identify a small, select but very productive group of decorators practising in Sydney and Melbourne during the twenties and thirties. Many were artists whose work embraced home decoration and who taught decoration to support an otherwise impoverished existence in the Depression. The most well known were personalities like Hera Roberts and Thea Proctor.\textsuperscript{111} Molly Grey and Margaret Jaye were their quieter counterparts. Their work was reported in art or society journals, like Art In Australia, The Home and Decoration and Glass, and they emerge from the sparse record as a curious colonial imitation of the lady decorators and ‘tastemakers’ enjoying unprecedented success overseas.\textsuperscript{112}

Marion Best and Margaret Lord began as professional interior decorators in the mid-thirties. Best had expanded into retail activity by the end of the decade and Margaret Lord went to London and worked for Reens Arta. On her return in 1940 she found a small coterie of decorators in prewar Sydney, but her observations suggest the profession was only in its infancy and catered for an exclusive—either prosperous or artistically precocious—clientele.\textsuperscript{113} Before leaving Australia in the thirties as a graduate of several Melbourne Art Schools she ‘had barely heard of it as a profession’:

I did not know of one practising Interior Decorator. There were, I imagined, people working in the field of furniture and textile design, but my experience had not brought me in contact with their names. I did know that Interior Decoration was an established profession in other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{114}

Philip Cox’s ideas about postwar beginnings may be based on the fact that the profession did not formally identify itself until 1951. The establishment of the Society of Interior Designers (SIDA) in that year reflected steady professional

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{112} The Home, 1.3.30, 7, 60B, 2.9.35, 29 and Decoration and Glass, 1.6.35, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Lord, op.cit, 1969, 97-98.
\item \textsuperscript{114} ibid, 13, 100.
\end{enumerate}
growth during and after the postwar building boom. Opportunities had expanded as a growing audience of home builders and occupiers utilised decorator's services. Now the small band of practising decorators in Sydney professedly felt a need to 'get together and swap stories with colleagues' in what resembled a friendly, informal support and information network rather than an official professional association for the first decade or so.\textsuperscript{115}

In the prosperous fifties and sixties the work of decorators spread even further; becoming freely available to any citizen with enough change to pick \textit{Australian Home Beautiful, Australian House and Garden} or \textit{The Homemaker} from the newsagent's shelf. Popular decorating literature in England, America and Australia had proliferated along with the market. This literature promoted the notion that there was a body of expert knowledge and a wealth of professional experience to be tapped and depended on the professional decorating personality to add authority and glamour to their pages.

In 1955 \textit{Home Beautiful} had boasted sales of over 100,000 copies. Reader numbers were anyone's guess. The two major popular journals of the period, \textit{Home Beautiful} and \textit{House and Garden}, emanating from Melbourne and Sydney respectively were competitively priced. Both were monthly publications. \textit{Home Beautiful} ranged from 1/-d. to 2/5d. during the period. Slightly more upmarket in presentation and coverage, the \textit{Australian House and Garden} ranged from 2/-d. to 3/-d. Both were accessible to the average wage earner and there is little doubt that they spurred public interest and awareness.

Decorators, manufacturers and publication houses formed mutually beneficial associations. Endorsements for diverse household products from personalities like Josephine Bull, Roger Smithells and closer to home, Ruth Sloane and Marion Best offered good exposure for new professionals.\textsuperscript{116} Product endorsements, features and regular columns full of expert advice multiplied and journal editors relied on decorators' advice for many of their monthly features.


\textsuperscript{116} Geoff W. Callaghan’s comments on colour in 1953 illustrate the marketing potential of this publicity. Toward the end of his column he offered to help his confused readers:

\begin{quote}
let Modernage help! We offer an Interior Design service to people who wish to be their own home decorators ... We will act as guides to prevent you from falling into the many traps which lie along the path. This service is inexpensive ... You are welcome to call, without obligation and discuss your decorating with us. \textit{Australian House and Garden}, Oct. 1953, 69.
\end{quote}
Choosing a decoration topic of the moment or the latest trend (probably from overseas), editors collected and cropped decorator's comments into tight features lavishly illustrated with photos provided by the decorator, manufacturers or from in-house 'stock'. In October 1956, a feature entitled 'New airs, new flairs to make your decorating easier' in the *Australian House and Garden*, compiled practical tips from Australia's 'best known' decorators. They came from Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, in greater numbers than before and with an impressive array of professional credits and associations. They included Joyce Brown (Anthony Horderns interior decorator), Steven Kalmar, Lady Marion Hall Best [sic], Ruth Sloane (of the Feltex Colour Planning Bureau), Margaret Jaye, Frances Burke, Mr Gibson Smith (of the Mayfair Colour Centre), Geoff Callaghan (Chief Colour Consultant, B.A.L.M.), Beryl Hutchinson, Clement Meadmore, Josephine Shaw, Madame Spindler (Farmers' interior decorator), Tinker Tailor Interiors of Sydney, Phyllis Shillitto (Head of the Design School, National Art School) and Peter Nation. 117

Journals regularly offered designer 'profiles' in their pages which traced creative and professional development and explained their design philosophy to the public. Gerald Stewart wrote a series on decorators and designers to 'keep readers abreast of the theories and practices of gifted Australians who are adding the spice of variety to our homes.' He described the work and opinions of Joyce Brown, head of the contemporary furniture section of a Sydney department store. According to Stewart, Joyce Brown was 'one of Australia's most progressive furniture designers and interior decorators.' He portrayed her as a 'heretic ... fond of breaking decorating rules, an unconventional adviser and dedicated modernist.' The lengthy article included photographs of Brown's furniture designs and extensive quotes in which she broke and replaced almost every conventional decorating rule. 118

Two years later in 1958 the same journal featured eleven prominent decorators or designers in an article entitled 'Our designing men and women.' It offered potted professional biographies of designers from diverse backgrounds. It began by describing many of the changes which had brought professional expansion; that is, alliances with manufacturers and expanding popular markets:

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118 Stewart quoted her:

If Joyce Brown were to plan your living room for you she would advise you against that bulky three piece lounge suite you have had your eyes on for the past few months. She would tell you that the accent in modern homes is on spaciousness, and that the three piece lounge suite, survivor of stuffy pre-war days would clutter up your living room and deprive you of valuable space. *Australian House and Garden*, Nov. 1956, 35-39.
The progress being made in Australia is comparable to anywhere else in the world today. Firms are now employing Australian designers where in the past many big companies sought ideas abroad. Australian homemakers are becoming more design conscious and Australian designers are being paged by firms in other countries that manufacture products for the Australian market because of their knowledge of the local market.\textsuperscript{119}

This article favoured the term ‘designer’ for its protagonists although ‘decorator’ was the common term. As business expanded and decorators became more ‘professional’, employed more of the rational strategies of the day, exploited scientific innovations and developed more sophisticated and technical skills like architects, many believed the term ‘decorator’ no longer adequately described their functions.

Nomenclature became an issue for the Society in 1956. SIDA’s inclusion in the 1956 Sydney Yellow Pages under ‘Painters and Decorators’ provoked the identity crisis. The furore which accompanied this inexcusable misunderstanding and the ensuing debate within the Society left most members firm adherents of the term ‘designer.’\textsuperscript{120}

In line with this trend and the more specialised skills and knowledge required in the profession, training assumed greater significance. In response to the pressure to professionalise, itself a reflection of broader social changes, fledgling courses were established in art schools and technical colleges in major capitals.\textsuperscript{121} Established public educational institutions took on the cause for the first time. In October 1958 Australian House and Garden reported the opinions of local decorators on the best preparation for a career in the field, warning prospective students:

it takes hard work, thorough training and a sound business sense to be a professional decorator ... he must have a thorough knowledge of materials and techniques; know how to use colour purposefully; be able to plan an arrangement that is workable as well as pleasing ... estimate costs, purchase carefully, and ... supervise workmen on the job.\textsuperscript{122}

Alternating the terms ‘decorator’ and ‘designer’ the article distinguished them by defining decorating as one aspect of interior design. It detailed the duties of a designer and listed the handful of courses available. Technical Colleges in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Fremantle employed different approaches but all

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Australian House and Garden, Dec. 1958, 56-57.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} Adams, 1.2.91.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} East Sydney Technical College offered three years of intensive training; an introduction to the general principles of art and design followed by tuition in the technical and creative aspects of interior design practice. Phyllis Shillitto headed the Design School where drafting, engineering and business principles were instilled along with the development of artistic abilities. McElvenny, 19.2.91, Gyngell, 20.2.91, Carney, \textit{op cit}, 50, ANL/Biographical files: ‘Shillitto, Phyllis.’
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Australian House and Garden, Oct. 1956, 54.
\end{itemize}
offered the essentials of interior decorating and this round-up of training options summarised the self-conscious and experimental efforts by a profession to establish national 'standards'.

Nomenclature and training were two aspects of the push to professionalise during the fifties, a push which was also conveyed in popular journals as decorating and design personalities were elevated to celebrity status. The growing literature—decorating guide books, manuals, lavishly illustrated coffee table books and memoirs—enforced the star status of the decorator and even more, the contemporary designer. Though glamour and celebrity status may have been a remnant of early days and the original 'lady decorators', it was more and more associated with thoroughly trained and professionally experienced designers, rather than merely creative 'stars'.

The Industry:

Retail explosion in the field accompanied these changes. Department stores like Myers, David Jones, Horderns and Farmers, together with specialist retailers like Beard Watsons and Art Furnishings dominated public taste. Their catalogues offered the public 'the best taste' and 'the most reliable advice on home decoration' and they monopolised the market by associating fashion with furniture. (Fig. 11)

These large retailers responded quickly to postwar interest in modern furniture, though they preferred the terms 'contemporary' and 'functional'. Anthony Horderns established the lead by opening a contemporary shop in the early fifties, appointing designer Joyce Brown to advise clients on the latest in modern interiors. Their early advertisements promised 'Unique Design and sparkling colours from our exciting Contemporary Shop!':

Entirely new to Australia! A smart new furniture shop within our store, with "5th" Avenue atmosphere ... you'll find every facility for home planners to select


125 David Jones and Co., 'Art Furnishers, Upholsterers and Decorators', *Catalogue*, Sydney, c.1900, Historic Houses Trust NSW, Resource Centre Library.


127 Joyce Brown was actually appointed in the late forties to design and sell 'contemporary' furniture, but Horderns didn't announce their 'Contemporary Shop' until 1954. *Australian House and Garden*, Jan. 1949, 54.
furniture, fabrics, glassware, ceramics, lamps and accessories ... with the aid of
our three expert interior decorators, we can help you create tones and textures
blended in harmonising paints and fabrics with dramatic ... effects. Take our
new fast elevators ... to the Third Floor ... Come in and see our ultra modern
“Contemporary Shop” to-morrow!128 (Fig. 12)

Grace Bros, Mark Foys and David Jones followed suit. All stocked the latest
modern accoutrements, advertised in newspapers or featured in decorating
literature; in ‘Window Shopper’ columns or full-length pieces on the latest
furniture.129

Expansion in the industry, public prosperity and changing preferences
transformed the postwar market. Variety and prosperity also spawned the growth of
small, specialised retail outlets run by independent decorators. Some simply
imported latest merchandise but most were private decorators or designers
supplementing their still limited private commissions and using their shopfronts as
retail outlets and offices. Although postwar shortages and trade restrictions limited
retail activity until the mid-fifties, their advertisements in the popular press
revealed steady growth.130

Artes Studios and Kalmar Interiors opened after the war. They were run by
European refugees, qualified architects and designers who had no prospect of
professional recognition in Australia.131 Joyce Tebbutt opened Cabana on Sydney’s
North Shore in 1948, Merle du Boulay opened an outlet in Castlereagh Street and
Marion Best rejuvenated her Queen Street venture in the late forties.132 Ashfield

130 Small scale, specialist retail was not altogether new. A handful of small decorator
shops operated in Sydney and Melbourne prior to World War II. In Sydney, Margaret
Jaye’s Rowe Street shop was popular amongst Sydney’s social set, artists and even
visiting theatre celebrities. Pearson, M.M., Tales of Rowe Street, Angus & Robertson,
1948, n.p. Marion Best opened her Queen Street shop only a few months before war
forced her ‘to put things on ice’. ANG/3MHB.1-3:9. Margaret Lord writes of others,
including Deric Deane and Merle du Boule [sic]. Lord, op.cit, 1969, 99. Stuart Low
and Jean Little placed discreet advertisements in journals like The Home and
Decoration and Glass, inviting clients to their ‘studios’ to preview their work and
negotiate ‘Interior Decoration assistance for a fee of 5 guineas per room.’ The Home,
1.6.25, 2, 1.3.30, 7, 60B. Most decorators worked in larger department stores. Lord,
op.cit, 1969, 99-100. See Australian House and Garden, Oct. 1950, 79, May 1953, 63,
Jan. 1955, 91, 106 for advertisements placed by the small scale retailers who
surfaced after the war.

131 NSW Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, ‘Interview, 6.9.90’, in Miscellaneous
Files: Kalmar 1986-1991. Steven Kalmar was a Hungarian architect who opened his
shop in Rowe St in 1949 and specialised in custom designed and built, modern
furniture. Advertisements in decorating journals promised ‘Kalmar Originals
designed by Steven Kalmar, faithfully built for use and lasting beauty, for style,
finish and bedrock budgets.’ Australian House and Garden, Mar. 1954, 73.

132 Hayes, B., Design for Living in Australia, Hodder & Stoughton, Lane Cove, NSW,
Furnishings, Modernage and Décor were some of the other small-scale ventures which attracted a modest following and brought interior decoration and the retailing, marketing and merchandising world even closer together. Grace Bros, Horderns, David Jones and Myers continued to employ decorators in large numbers. This served both their interests, offering young decorators valuable industry experience and enhancing market appeal of retail goods through their endorsements.133

Changes in the profession and the retail sector mirrored contemporary styles and tastes and common wisdom. The notion of a rational trained practitioner—a businessperson and professional—complemented the modern functional aesthetic and the popularity of the planned home. Retail expansion reflected shifts in popular opinion and prosperity as well as increased manufacturing capacity, business and marketing opportunity. These changes reflected broader changes; shifts in national and international outlook, specialisation and rationalisation, technological and scientific innovation and expansion in secondary industry, production, consumption and trade.134

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133 Major retailers had large furniture sections in the late nineteenth century and in the interwar period had appointed leading designers and craftspeople to enhance their professed expertise. For example Myers appointed Fred Ward to head their substantial furniture section in the thirties. Lord, op.cit, 1969, 100. See Australian House and Garden, Feb. 1960, 20-21 for evidence of this continuing practice.

134 White, op.cit, 164-165, Churchward, op.cit, 190-191.
CHAPTER 3:

THE SIXTIES: BRINGING THE WORLD BACK HOME

Most of the changes of the fifties were confirmed during the sixties. The profession consolidated its status. Membership of the Society of Interior Designers grew from a loyal core in the early fifties to over a hundred members in 1971. Professional training opportunities expanded and decorating literature grew and diversified. As well as new popular decorating magazines, step-by-step guides and do-it-yourself decorating books proliferated. Glamorous pictorial catalogues of the latest and best interiors in glossy coffee table format invited emulation.

Internationalisation:

This literature reflected expanding prosperity and outlook. The last import and currency restrictions were lifted in the early sixties and commentators regard the period as the climax of Australia's internationalisation and specifically, Americanisation.

Contemporaries greeted the switch differently. Donald Horne claimed in 1965 that Australia was the first country in the contemporary world to be saved by the Americans; he hoped for 'a quite massive relationship' with them. Richard White later despised him for the claim. Horne maintained that a 'unique ability to live with American power' in Australia was the result of the fact that it was one of the few countries that had not received American economic aid. This claim betrayed his complete enchantment with America.

In the cultural sphere, Bernard Smith was offering sneering asides in *Australian Painting*, claiming Sydney's art world had become a south-western suburb of San Francisco. Robin Boyd wrote of an 'Austerican' culture and in 1966, Allan Ashbolt wrote 'America is virtually the new fountainhead of our social...'

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138 White, *op.cit*, 162.
139 Horne, *op.cit*, 82-85, White, *op.cit*, 162.
values ... America is not a country to which I aspire or owe devotion; it is a culture to which I belong.' 141 These contemporary accounts were in fact typical of an embryonic left-wing critique of America's influence. Later Churchward, in his study of American-Australian economic relations concluded:

Not only has Australian society become more American, the dominant ideology has become more American, less British and less Australian. The ideological adjustment has been tuned to the recognition of America's leadership in the capitalist world. 142

Although many disagree on the extent and nature of postwar internationalisation, in decorating and design the market was dominated by imports, promoted by international and local licensees and publishers. Australian craft and design always remained a sub-theme, but the expanding popular decorating literature showed a local market flooded by imports and cheap Australian copies of imported styles.

Australian Home Beautiful told 'style setters of the sixties' that 'with the easing of restrictions on overseas imports, some of the first American piece goods have appeared to show us something new in fabric design and colour. American fabrics are back!' They announced new manufacturing agreements between the 'Fler' Co. Australia and 'Dux' of Sweden, to produce reclining armchairs. 143 Advertisements for locally produced budget furniture with European styling were ubiquitous. 144 Other advertisements revealed the same preference for European design. Phillips advertised lighting by 'the Continentals':

To put the finishing touch to the modern home Lighting by the Continentals—simply beautiful and functionally simple ... exciting and exuberant with new shapes and styles ... modern yet with unobtrusive good taste ... choose between our various styles ... 'Stockholm', 'Brussels', 'Venice', 'Copenhagen', 'Cannes', 'Zurich', 'Rhine', 'Calais'. 145

142 Churchward, op.cit, 195.
143 Australian Home Beautiful, Mar. 1960, 45.
144 In August 1965, Australian House and Garden advertised 'Danish inspired chairs for £25' and Scandinavian inspired 'Danish-line' suites with 'the latest teak finish, dramatic styling, luxury and comfort' manufactured in Melbourne, while Cabana's advertisement of the month heralded the arrival of Swedish wool upholstered sofas. Australian House and Garden, Aug. 1965, 99, 107, 109. Importers, decorators and designers declaimed cheap local copies and one commentator voiced his disquiet:

Australian manufacturers copy each other as well as overseas figures: Artes Studios recently discovered that an upholsterer once in their employ is copying their chairs and in "Design Australia" some firms advertise chairs as their models of the season which were copies of German originals. Anyone can copy and pretend they are simply working in an "international mould" because modern design is a commonplace in other countries. Higham, C. 'The "Inside" Story', in The Bulletin, Dec. 16, 1967, 28.

145 Australian House and Garden, Feb. 1960, 6. Australian Home Beautiful offered 'New Kitchen Beauty' from design conscious Denmark, claiming, 'Scandinavia's genius for
‘Art Furnishings’ now defined themselves as ‘Importers and suppliers of homewares from around the world’, while Artes Studios and Kalmar Interiors were content to describe their merchandise as contemporary and modern—perhaps their European management offered sufficient continental flavour.

American models were pre-eminent. *Australian House and Garden* featured a ‘Melbourne house with the Hollywood Touch ... its interiors sparkle with ideas from Hollywood.’146 In March they featured American architects and designers and their interiors complete with definitive Eames and Saarinen Classics147 and in April announced innovations from Canada and America; pre-cut and pasted wallpaper and synthetic flooring.148

The mid-sixties were the same. In January 1965, *Australian House and Garden* offered readers goods from Denmark, India and Italy in their regular shopping column and in February encouraged them to ‘turn rug shopping into an international renaissance’ featuring rugs from Scandinavia, England, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Spain, America, Japan, and India.149

International sources were diverse. American influence was certainly strongest in household gadgetry and modern materials; glamorous, durable and within reach of the average Australian consumer. In 1960 ‘Patterned venetians’ and ‘linoleum flecked with metallic gold’ from America were featured in February and March editions of *Australian Home Beautiful*.150 In furnishings and accessories, European-styled goods had a slight edge, but traditional European sources like England and France lost ground to imports from Scandinavia and Italy and American architect-designed furniture or copies had a significant share of the market.

The first Sydney Trade Fair was held at the Showground from August 1-12, 1961. Six large exhibition halls featured displays from America, Britain, France, Italy, Poland, Austria, the Netherlands, Malaya, Israel, Korea, Ceylon, Japan,

design lifts the most mundane household articles onto a new plane of beauty’ and in ‘Furnishing and Decoration News’ praised:


Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, China, India, Denmark and Czechoslovakia.\textsuperscript{151} Doubtless, some of its displays found their way to the new Decorator Centre in Edgecliff. Recently opened as an exclusive source of imported goods for decorators and retailers, ‘Dawn’s’ review of its offerings in her monthly column ‘Decorator’s diary’, revealed much about the industry and the contemporary thirst for imports:

I haven’t got over it yet—those \textit{fabulous} things at the new Decorator’s Centre ... the manager took delight in making my mouth absolutely water—he showed me beautiful pure silk velvets straight from Italy ... silk brocades with matching wallpapers; cork wallpaper from Spain; crystal door handles and lamp bases from Scandinavia and quaint round vanity basins we’ve only seen in American magazines till now. It was like a trip round the world in two short hours.

She warned however that:

seeing these things is all you’ll be able to do unless you’ve an architect, decorator or designer helping you with your home ... this new centre has been opened exclusively for architects and designers—only \textit{they} will be able to order any of the merchandise, and it will then be either shipped or air freighted direct from the country of manufacture ... If you can afford it you can have the decorating world at your feet. Australian decorators can now show clients what their brother decorators have in any part of the world—the only difference is the time lag.\textsuperscript{152}

The outlook in the sixties was international rather than exclusively American but this does not disqualify the Americanisation thesis. The popularity of European and other imports was simply one of the ‘global trappings’ Churchward refers to as incidental.\textsuperscript{153} European design was certainly popular in America as well and; its influence in Australia may well have emanated from there.

Aside from shifts within the European bloc—from Britain and France to Scandinavia and Italy—the other noteworthy shift of the decade was towards Asian markets. Furnishings from Japan began to appear in the late fifties. The Japanese Industrial Fair in Tokyo in 1957 generated interest, but the earliest Asian influences reached Australia from American rather than Asian sources. Postwar suspicion of Japan lingered along with an older ‘White Australia’ policy-inspired fear of ‘the Asian hordes’ and ‘the yellow peril’. Robin Boyd summarised it neatly in the fifties:

\textsuperscript{151} Australian House and Garden, April 1960, 61-64.
\textsuperscript{152} Australian House and Garden, May 1960, 61. This was one of the first of Australian ‘Decorator Centres'; a marketing and promotional outlet for designers and industry which were by now ubiquitous in the United States. See ‘Interior Design, 1940-1960.’ in Interiors (USA), v.CXX, no.4. Nov. 1960, 169.
\textsuperscript{153} See footnote 87, page 29.
fraternisation with ... neighbours in Asia is not acceptable. The immigration policy remains rigidly opposed to Asians and even its madly offensive, if unofficial name of 'White Australia Policy' is sacrosanct.154

By the sixties the economic advantages of trade with Asia as well as the contemporary popularity of Asian commodities smoothed lingering prejudices and mistrust.155 Popular literature revealed a definite and accelerating shift in taste and inclination towards Asian goods. 'Exotic Imports from Asia', 'Eastern accessories', 'oriental inspired panels for walls', Japanese grass wallpapers and Indian aloe mats were common fare.156 All were considered uniquely appropriate for Australians' casual lifestyles and preferences for outdoor living. *Australian House and Garden* explained the association in its decorating forecast for 1960:

As the Oriental influence further penetrates Western decorating, there's practical simplicity ... no longer the coldly clinical simplicity of the early modern period ... A balance of beauty in shape and texture with a warm regard for the traditional meaning of home, a place to be lived in, enjoyed and to gain real comfort from—that's the aim in 1960 ... Japanese shoji screens and gay, richly coloured silken cushions are perfect for today's homes.157

Japanese imports were supplemented by homewares from smaller Asian markets—the Philippines, Thailand, India and even China—all welcomed eagerly by the Australian market as the 'budget' accessories of the decade.158

A new Australian aesthetic was beginning to develop which saw the appropriation of diverse imports and their unique blending into a decorative mix of modern Australian suitability, as the 'true Australian style.' As yet embryonic, this resourceful eclecticism became a self conscious decorating strategy in the late seventies and eighties.159

In the meantime, the appeal of Asian goods complemented contemporary shifts. 'Modern', 'contemporary' and 'functional' were by now widely disseminated decorating terms. Small homes, budget decorating and do-it-yourself projects were

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158 *Architecture and the Arts* commended Asian exhibits at Sydney's sixth 'Annual Homes Exhibition' in June 1960. *Architecture and the Arts*, June 1960, 28 and *Australian House and Garden* told readers the following month how to achieve the look in a 'Living Room with an Eastern theme ... with bamboo and grasscloth wallpaper', and in the bedroom with 'rattan wardrobe curtains and Thai silk cushions'. *Australian House and Garden*, July 1965, 16-17.

still on the agenda, but ‘stark modernity’ softened into ‘simple contemporary’ with an emphasis on casual, outdoor living.

Many professional decorators now traded on internationalism. They extended importation and licensing networks through enterprises like Sydney’s Decorator Centre and international trade representatives based in Australia. Enterprising decorators now completed an annual overseas trip to ‘update’; thus maintaining their grip on latest trends and their exclusive arrangements with international suppliers. The well-travelled decorator, inspiring public esteem for their access to design and decoration wisdom from the ‘international centres of design’ emerged as the celebrities of the decade. Charles Higham parodied them in The Bulletin at the end of 1967:

a decorator has to be a shrewd buyer, importing fabrics cleverly so that they do not duplicate what is widely available ... it will often have a discreet label bearing a message like ‘Made in Denmark’ attached to it ... setting the seal of distinction on the purchase ... the Quality look ... means Scandinavian if you’re mod, Italian or French if you’re antique-orientated ... windows are ... jazzy illustrations from a European design magazine come to life ... Artes Studios ... is full of Danish fabrics, Germanic or Scandinavian-style furniture ... the snob-appeal of the foreign product is tremendously powerful among the rich.160

Leslie Walford had a double advantage; international training and extensive travel experience. Higham reported:

He studied at a school run under the auspices of the Louvre, scoured Europe for antiques, and established a name for bringing them to Sydney: much of his success is due to ... skilful importing.161

Barry Little shared the limelight as ‘a young, much-travelled designer who studied design in New York and London and searches out ideas overseas every two years.’ His contribution to SIDA’s 1967 exhibition was ‘a contemporary-styled, outdoor/indoor room with Eastern highlights’, which he chose because ‘The East has made a great impression on me ... I always try to reproduce the feeling of serenity I admired in that part of the world.’162

Marion Best was another great internationalist. In 1969 the Sun-Herald reported her recent trip to New York, Milan, Rome, Finland, Denmark and India. She ‘dropped in’ at Isfahan for a few days’ rest on the way home to enjoy ‘the stimulus of the beautiful architecture’ and even here had found something to buy—‘gorgeous turquoise blue glazed tiles.’163

161 ‘ibid.’
162 Sunday Telegraph, 27.8.67, 50.
163 Sun Herald, 22.7.69.
Internationalism dominated the decorative mood of the sixties. The fifties fascination with new materials and technology broadened to embrace the rare and exotic; expressed through local interest in Asia and its products. Innovative materials and technologies were also highly valued. Moulded plywood and tubular steel gave way to plastic as the material of the moment. This market was almost entirely import-based, as innovations in plastics technology and manufacturing were centred in America and Europe.164

The aesthetic which sold them in Australia and beyond was emphatically modern and strongly identified with London and Italy. Retailers maximised the appeal of sleek streamlined forms and colour by identifying them with one of the strongest cultural trends of the decade—Pop Art and Culture.

'Shopping around' columns in popular journals reported innovative furniture and accessories from London, Italy and America, in that order. Vogue’s Guide to Living reported ‘New ideas from around the world’ in May 1969:

Plastic, plastic, plastic is the stuff to watch, in everything from tableware to furniture. Moulded plastic furniture, in fact, is probably the most striking new development on the international scene, with the most advanced designs emanating from Denmark and Italy. Transparent plastic provides a crystal-foil for objects of heavier substance, strong colour.165

Two years later they showed readers how to use plastics ‘ready, waiting, well priced and all in the shops right now’. They featured a room created by ‘Thesaurus’ of Melbourne with ‘acrylic module shelf units ... from Italy’ and ‘a young fresh look from Grace Bros in Sydney ... featuring two-tone wall units and tables in durable polyurethane lacquer ... a white Formica-topped dining table and clear Perspex coffee table.’166


Perspex is the material to watch. Its lucid good looks are turning up in art, furniture, decoration, architecture. A giant-sized Perspex mural dominates the new office ... of Twiggy’s manager ... dark cut-out jigsaw shapes with bright oranges and white. Harrod’s executive offices boast of desks ... all of Perspex, with immaculate working surface on clear columns, smoked Perspex back and front. Vogue’s Guide to Living, Aug.-Nov. 1969, 52.

The next issue brought plastics to the average consumer, at least the average London consumer:

Going places, finding things, shopping in London ... Perspex, steel, brass, thick plate glass ... Small items, ideal presents ... include Perspex cigarette boxes in thirty dazzling colours, clear Perspex frames—the smartest ever. Best idea: a Perspex lectern for reading in the bath ... stacking side tables in Perspex ... ideal for display. Vogue’s Guide to Living, Nov. 69-Feb. 70, 28.

There was a strong alliance between plastics and the ‘youth-oriented Pop Culture’ which emanated from London and spread quickly to Europe, America and then Australia and Asia in the late sixties.\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Australian Home Journal} featured the flat of one of Pop Culture’s leading protagonists in its August 1967 issue. Naturally the flat was located in London, ‘just off King’s Road, Chelsea’; it belonged to Mary Quant and the dining room designed by Jon Banenberg was ‘all plastic.’ Even the silver concertina blinds were metallised PVC. Quant reflected ‘I was mad on the stuff. Jon even used plastic for the floor tiles with the five-petalled Quant daisy as a motif.’\textsuperscript{168}

Other international furnishing innovations were treated reverently by Australia’s decorating journalists. Blow-up, spray-can and disposable furniture, again emanating from sophisticated centres of international design and technology, captured popular imagination. \textit{The Australian Home Journal} featured blow-up furniture:

The [chair] I sat in was transparent, rather like a man-made jellyfish ... It was comfortable, but despite its obvious toughness I was waiting for the big bang ... Unexpected visitors may soon be arriving with a spare bed rolled up alongside their pyjamas in their overnight bag.\textsuperscript{169}

\textit{The Sun Herald} reported furniture innovations from America exhibited in New York’s Museum of Modern Art, including chairs made of poured polyurethane foam. Museum official Arthur Drexler predicted widespread use of this furniture, concluding that the chair of tomorrow might conceivably come from a spray-can.\textsuperscript{170}

Decorating styles like ‘Pop’, ‘Asian’, ‘Eastern’ and ‘alternative lifestyle’ and ‘hippie subculture’ proliferated in the late sixties, reflecting broader national and international trends; social dislocation, cultural differentiation, expanding production and consumption, advancements in international trade, information, communication and education.\textsuperscript{171}

Though distinctive, these decorating trends were only sub-themes. A quietening of the decorative exuberance of the fifties and softening of the ‘stark modern aesthetic’\textsuperscript{172} was the decorative constant of the sixties. Shortlived flirtations with Asian, Pop and Eastern trends were quickly exhausted. The dominant

\begin{align*}
\textsuperscript{168} & \text{Australian Home Journal, } \text{Aug. 1967, 17.} \\
\textsuperscript{169} & \text{Australian Home Journal, } \text{Feb. 1968, 70.} \\
\textsuperscript{170} & \text{Sun Herald, 15.10.69.} \\
\textsuperscript{171} & \text{Serle, op.cit, 194-196, Whitely, ‘op.cit’, 14-15.} \\
\textsuperscript{172} & \text{Australian House and Garden, July 1965, 16-17.}
\end{align*}
preference of the decade was for ‘elegant simplicity’. Modern and functional interiors featured in the popular literature were now also ‘elegant’ examples of ‘grace and comfort’. Forecasting the furnishing outlook in 1960, Australian House and Garden promised:

softer modern, oriental themes ... white with jewel colours, fascinating fabrics ... as smooth as buttered rum, as cool as Perry Como’s TV show ... new polish, new finish and new sophistication ... comes from good design that begins with materials and builds up to a room that really counts. \(^{173}\) (Fig. 13)

Tradition enjoyed a limited return to favour, and casual outdoor living became a widely acknowledged priority within the Australian home.\(^{174}\) Modern functional simplicity was the ideal, but terms like ‘taste’, ‘discrimination’, ‘sophistication’, ‘personality’ and ‘style’ were admitted to the vocabulary as synonyms for ‘good design’ and ‘commonsense’:

Good taste means being able to tell the difference between the well designed, the aesthetically satisfying and the commonplace, vulgar or downright ugly. A discriminating person will choose objects that are unique and beautiful and will add some special distinction to her surroundings.\(^{175}\)

Protagonists in the sixties valued cultural and aesthetic sophistication above all things. They embraced diverse styles and trends; internationalisation, innovation, as well as traditional elegance, grace and style. In 1965 Australian Home Beautiful’s forty-year retrospective emphased modern simplicity:

Today there’s a far livelier appreciation of ... both color [sic] and light ... Today’s living room is designed ... looks serene, organised. Furniture is purposefully functional ... convenient ... simplicity creates an air of restfulness unknown 40 years ago ... a modern, clean, uncluttered look. Backgrounds are simple ... plain walls with ... well-chosen and well-placed pictures ... plain floors and graceful ceiling-to-floor window drapes ... color schemes ... harmonise with handsome contemporary furniture.\(^{176}\)


\(^{174}\) Guertner, B., Australian Home Book of Furnishing and Interiors, K.G. Murray, Sydney, 1971, 7, Australian House and Garden, Jan. 1965, 9, July 1965, 16-17. In 1965 Australian Home Beautiful was still able to claim:

The present trend in interiors is toward simplicity and the uncluttered look ... we express good taste and common sense when we bypass dust-catching and useless ornaments and temporary junk fashion fads and settle for a few good pieces of quality with real decorative value. Australian Home Beautiful, Jan. 1965, 28.

\(^{175}\) Australian Home Beautiful, Jan. 1965, 9.

\(^{176}\) Australian Home Beautiful, Oct. 1965, 24-25. Editors introduced this revealing self definition with a similarly useful summary of the changes which had taken place over forty years:

The years since [1925] have seen Architectural fashions come and go, decoration tastes turn a full circle, new materials appear in profusion and a new dimension of colour,
While professional training opportunities expanded public access to and understanding of the principles of good design and the secrets of successful home decorating also improved, largely through the efforts of the profession, the media, publishing houses, manufacturers and retailers.

Decorating journals proliferated during the sixties. Australian Home Journal and Vogue’s Guide to Living were the most successful newcomers to the industry which did most to popularise home design and decoration. The decorating media and popular glossy decorate-it-yourself guides offered the average homemaker all that was necessary to emulate the efforts of expensive professionals:

Decorating is fun ... it stretches the imagination and makes anything possible ... no room is considered too hopeless to be turned from the outmoded to the outstanding. Many housewives are just as effective and as successful as professional decorators at creating this pleasant colourful background to living.

Australian Home Beautiful began a ‘School for Young Homemakers’ which expanded in 1965 to provide reference material for domestic science classes in Victorian High Schools and the journal was now recommended reference material for teachers. Other guides offered similar instruction, with detailed advice on every room, each aspect of furnishing and essential design concepts like ‘space’, ‘aspect’, ‘comfort’, as well as ‘mood’, ‘style’ and ‘atmosphere’.

Journals featured ready-to-copy interiors, arrangements assembled from merchandise in decorating stores, or real life examples—completed commissions by designers or homes of celebrities. Home decorating was treated as an extremely serious matter. Steven Kalmar introduced his glossy guide:

this book is written to help you with the second most important decision of your life—planning your home ... and these pages will show you how ... every word in

undreamt of in 1925 ... The past 480 issues of Home Beautiful have reflected the consequences of Depression, the austerity of war and do-it-yourself vogue the postwar shortages produced. More recently, the boom years have brought their own wealth of things from local manufacturers and abroad. ibid.

178 In 1965, Home Beautiful described their changing role:

In 1925, HB looked chiefly at beautiful but high-priced, mansions. Now it takes readers into a wide range of homes—from the best medium priced architect-designed, to the budget, mass-production from major centres around the country. Australian Home Beautiful, Oct. 1965, 2.

179 Australian Home Journal was transformed from a knitting and sewing journal to a home decoration guide when it was acquired by Australian Consolidated Press in 1965. Vogue’s Guide to Living was established in 1967 by Conde Nast.

180 Australian House and Garden, July 1965, 16.
181 Australian House and Garden, Mar. 1965, 87.
the book is designed to show how you can make your home a more attractive, pleasant and convenient place to live ... in short, happier. 183

This literature complemented the activities of trained professionals by elevating their showpieces as decorative ideals. 184 They served the retailer too by featuring their merchandise. Even though education and publicity had democratised the field somewhat, professionals—decorators or designers—retained their ascendance; secured by intangibles like ‘taste’, ‘style’ and ‘flair’. 185

183 Kalmar, op.cit, 9.
184 Guertner, op.cit, 18, Australian House and Garden, July 1965, 16-17.
PART I: CONCLUSION

Modernisation:

In the decades after World War II Australia changed significantly and these changes were evident in the sphere of interior decoration and design. The cultural changes which accompanied expansion and diversification were profound. Economic expansion: particularly in secondary industry, also in trade, production and consumption patterns; technological advance: in materials technology, information, transport and communication; together with demographic and social shifts, all contributed directly to changes that occurred in the design and decoration of the Australian home.

The sources and impact of these fundamental changes have been documented in detail elsewhere.\(^{186}\) They were worldwide changes which heralded postwar modernisation. In Australia they were evident long after they were evident in America and Europe; occurring here in line, but not in step with the rest of the world.

Modernisation can be loosely understood and used as a term which embraces all these shifts and structures, including the complex impact of expansion in production, consumption, technology, information, internationalisation and diversification. As Marshall Berman and John Thackara have argued persuasively, while it can be used to describe specific changes in decoration and design history, modernisation and modernity must be understood as profound, far-reaching phenomenon and even as 'a state of mind' or 'a total experience'.\(^{187}\)

In Australia's interiors between 1945 and 1965 modernisation involved more than a gradual triumph of a particular style or visual aesthetic; it involved a change in worldview and experience. Its elements both constructed and were constructed by the new lifestyles of Australian homemakers; a minutiae of altered experience and attitudes that went far beyond four walls. As Richard Horn has argued with reference to 'the triumph of Modern Design' in Europe and America in the fifties:

> it was not so much modern design—that is, a distinct style in and of itself—Bauhaus influenced and concerned with simple forms and technological

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innovations—that prevailed; it was the very notion(s) of and rigorous questioning, or vigorous acceptance of modernity itself.188

Modern interior design was only part of broader modernisation, which should be understood as an embracing phenomenon which affects all levels of society. While ‘modern’ describes a decoration and design style, it also describes multiple, diverse and broad social, national and international patterns which together construct an entire ‘states of mind’ or ‘total experience’.189 It is certainly in these broad terms that ‘modernisation’, ‘modernity’ and ‘modern’ will be used in the course of this study.

International Context:

Two elusive variables yet beset this study of modernisation. The first involves the extent of international developments in Australia. A straightforward reading would see Australian developments imitating international or at least Western trends. Certainly, international influences evident in Australia followed a familiar pattern; that is, towards the influence of America and away from Britain, and later, in diversification and acceptance of new European and Asian influences. Local changes reflected international developments, long before the explicit internationalism of the import-dominated sixties.

For example, postwar utility themes in Australia paralleled Britain’s postwar enthusiasm for fitness for purpose, budget furniture and functional design.190 In the prosperous fifties Australia’s homes admitted modern house and furniture design from America at least in coffee table magazines if not in reality. In this, Australia emulated British and worldwide interest in America expressed for instance in the UK in the Festival of Britain in 1951.191

A brief survey of American decoration and design wisdom of the era shows that Australia had assigned leadership there. At least every major theme or development in Australia either originated in America or surfaced there years before. Design aesthetics, decorative trends and professional developments in Australia had their counterparts in America; even the ‘unique national style’ sub-culture originated there.192

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190 Sparke, *op.cit*, 74-76.
191 *ibid*, 54, 59.
A survey of the contemporary international popular literature corroborates this impression. American House and Garden was more decorative, exuberant and glamorous than its Australian counterparts, emphatically modern, whimsical, colourful and characterised by technological fascination. The American journal Interiors did not really have an Australian counterpart, but its subscription to the modern aesthetic and to functional, streamlined modern American design was mimicked to a large extent in Australian architectural journals of the era. Both journals had a significant Australian readership and following.

American guides and do-it-yourself literature was more extensive and glossy design showcases were at once more glamorous and self-congratulatory. The industry and profession's expansion was evident in Britain and America long before Australia, but served as a model for developments here. Differences were chiefly ones of scale and sophistication.

The manner and extent to which Australia mimicked international trends was peculiar to its own national circumstances. Evidence of similar trends should not be used to support a cringing and largely useless time-lag thesis which has often prevailed in Australian historical scholarship. Australian developments occurring after similar changes elsewhere must be explained. They may indicate for example, that the environment and precipitators of these developments did not occur in Australia at the same time as they did overseas. They should be explained with reference to demographic, economic and social developments and thereby enhance an understanding of these broader trends. To dismiss different timing as imitation and as evidence of lag or even backwardness is to use modernisation and modernity as fundamentally progressive phenomenon, which is in turn fraught with difficulty.

196 Pahlmann, op.cit, 5-12.
The other elusive variable in this study—the dearth of useful information and the bias of that which remains—was canvassed earlier. Contemporary accounts by practising decorators, educational or promotional agencies and the prolific decoration and design media offer the most useful glimpse of Australian interiors in postwar decades and have informed this reading of the Australian postwar domestic interior.

However, it is worth remembering their bias. Their views are the views of interested parties; designers, decorators, journalists and writers involved with domestic interior design with an overriding belief in the importance of domestic decoration and the continuance of a fledgling industry. Their views are therefore unlikely to reflect the thinking or behaviour of the general population.

This said, it is important to question whether and to what extent the sources used reflect a majority of postwar interiors. For example, the consolidation of modern design and functionalism is clear within informed debate, but Robin Boyd's description of the 'ultra modern villa' of the fifties offers a timely warning. It casts doubt on the extent of this influence in Australia's postwar homes. Boyd's villa contained 'cream-washed plaster walls which rose from leafy Axminster carpet to the varnished picture rail' and:

- a Genoa velvet three-piece lounge suite ... two water-colours set in wide light-cream mounts and narrow gilt frames. Above the tapestry-brick fireplace was a wide, thick shelf with a fluted edge ... set with a few coloured empty vases, a framed wedding photograph and a silvered blown-glass bird. Two rows of books sat tightly fitted in a walnut case. Three glass shells sprang out of a chromium rod which hung from the centre of the ceiling ... the reading lamp showed a country landscape subtly tinted on parchment ... [and] a beautiful scene sandblasted on the glass of two small, high windows on either side of the fireplace ... A peach-toned oval mirror with a scalloped edge was fixed between these windows ... On the glass top of a nest of wrought-iron framed tables stood a tall bowl of Iceland poppies.198

This 'typical' interior contradicts the testimony in many sources. Yet Boyd's description of the fifties colour industry confirms the picture offered by journals and protagonists:

Suddenly colour was triumphantly elevated as a feature in its own right ... manufacturers began making ... coloured refrigerators and washing machines ... offered 2-tone household equipment and provided feature panels on the front of appliances where one's favourite fashion shade could be enshrined [and] easily changed when fashions palled.199

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199 Boyd, op.cit, 1972, 45-46. Boyd's description of Australia's interiors in the sixties was equally perceptive. He described the 'sunroom'; an Australian version of the newest American innovation—the family room—and claimed its main feature was:
Despite her exalted and disapproving tone, Margaret Lord’s account of domestic interiors in the fifties also corroborates the enthusiasm for colour noted by Boyd and contemporary journals. Admitting that the major intention behind the establishment of colour bureaus was to sell more paint, Lord added:

I personally disapproved of ... the promotion of the idea that every room in a house should be a different colour and even that two or more wall colours could be used within one room. It was at this time that the now overworked term ‘feature wall’ came into common use. The all-white rooms of today are partly a reaction to those multi-coloured rooms the paint companies encouraged in the forties and early fifties.\textsuperscript{200}

Boyd’s and Lord’s views corroborate the ‘real life’ photographic features in journals which showed homes being built or redecorated. Though these examples were probably chosen for their coincidence with editorial views and models, their diversity, the mix of styles and classes shown during the period, does suggest that these journals are the best extant source for understanding of Australian interiors between 1945 and 1965.

This and the complex picture in contemporary accounts confirm that while a stronger and growing emphasis on modern design and decoration emerged in postwar Australia, this was an invariably complex, halting, uneven and never universal phenomenon. It is difficult to balance a history of design, decoration, the protagonists and their industry with the history of their clients, customers, consumers and the appearance of the average Australian domestic interior.

This all points to the urgency of more research into the history of Australian interior decoration and design—in its theory and its practice. Towards this end the

not the feature wall in the yellow vertica v-jointed \textit{Pinus Insignus} boards, not the featured fireplace faced with autumnal stone veneer, not the vinyl tiled floor in marbled grey with feature tiles of red and yellow let in at random, not the lettuce green Dunlopillo convertible day bed set before the Queensland maple TV receiver, not any of the housewifely features hung on the walls, not the floor stand ashtray in chromium and antique ivory, not even the glass aquarium on the wrought iron shade under the window. The real feature of the room is the tea table, groaning with all kinds of good foods sitting in a plastic dream. \textit{ibid.}

The furniture and fittings Boyd remembered also conform to the picture conveyed by contemporary popular sources:

The table top features hard laminated plastic in a pattern of pinks ... tablemats are a lacework of softer plastic, the red roses in the central bowl are a softer plastic, the salt and pepper shakers are the hardest of all ... and soft or hard, all this plastic is featured in the most vivid primary pillar box red, buttery yellow, sky blue, pea green, innocent of any idea of secondary or tertiary tints and all strikingly prominent against the pale hot pastel tints of flat plastic paint on the walls ... all vibrating like a chromotrope beneath the economical brilliance of the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling.

The main feature he identified on the feature window was:

venetian blinds ... in more then one tint: every slat of the blinds is a different pastel hue. And if you look more closely still you may discover, if this is a very up-to-date house, that every aluminium blade of the blind carries a printed pattern, perhaps of tiny animals done in aboriginal style. \textit{ibid.}, 47.

\textsuperscript{200} Lord, \textit{op. cit}, 1969, 118.
following study of the life and work of one protagonist, Marion Hall Best, will offer to illuminate just one small corner of the field—that is, the public and professional context in which she worked—in Sydney, from the thirties to the early seventies, amongst an upper middle class clientele and a wider public audience. Yet a study of her sphere of influence, however limited, is likely to refine and qualify the models suggested here. It will also offer useful detail on processes sketched broadly and incompletely in the first part of this study and extend understanding of interior decoration and design after World War II.
PART II

MARION HALL BEST:
A CASE STUDY IN THE HISTORY
OF AUSTRALIAN INTERIOR DESIGN

CHAPTER 4
FROM DECORATOR TO DESIGNER:
THE ART OF MARION HALL BEST

A journalist writing Marion Hall Best's obituary in 1966 claimed that she had 'changed the direction of interior design in Australia' and was 'probably the most innovative designer this country has produced'. An ex-staff member and more prominent figure within Sydney's interior design fraternity was quoted describing her as 'inspirational'.

Marion Best's work was International and Modern. To be Australian after the war was to be International and Modern, or at least to suggest it, and to be Australian was to persuade many Australians to be International and Modern. She was a woman from the metropolis—that is, an International Modern—at a time when that was novel.

The forces which established 'modernity' in the post war period are the same forces that shaped her individual aesthetic and professional aspirations. To understand their interrelationship, the broad structures which formed an individual life in the task of this study. The historical significance of Marion Best's career is not to be found in her schemes but in what they represent of the particular social, national and even geographical context in which she worked. This is the basis upon which her life and work can be considered as a case study in the history of interior design in Australia—a broader history which itself reflects larger shifts and changes of national and international import.

Hence this is not a conventional biography. It does not regard the subject as 'heroic' or 'glamorous', nor as, or allow the subject to define its terms. There have already been established in Part I an 'innovator' and 'inspirational' image. Marion Best's life and work will serve as a case study in which this model can be tested for
CHAPTER 4:
FROM DECORATOR TO DESIGNER:
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Art History and Biography:

A journalist writing Marion Hall Best’s obituary in 1988 claimed that she had ‘changed the direction of interior design in Australia’ and was ‘probably the most innovative designer this country has produced’. An ex-staff member and now prominent figure within Sydney’s interior design fraternity was quoted describing her as ‘inspirational’.

Marion Best’s work was International and Modern. To be Australian after the war was to be International and Modern, or at least to aspire to such a tag. In Marion’s case, this was expressed in her professional and artistic achievement. She persuaded many Australians to disregard chintzes and heavy brocades of ‘the old world’ and look beyond their Anglocentric origins to the new and ever expanding world; in short, to be International and Modern in outlook. She personified the values of her time and this is why she is hailed as a national hero of interior design. She was regarded as professional, enterprising, energetic, colourful and cosmopolitan—that is, as an International Modern—at a time when these qualities were coveted.

The forces which established ‘modernity’ as the goal of the period are the same forces that shaped her individual aesthetic and professional aspirations. To understand their interrelation, the broad structures which framed an individual life is the task of this study. The historical significance of Marion Best’s career is not to be found in her schemes but in what they represent of the particular social, national and even geographical context in which she worked. This is the basis upon which her life and work can be considered as a case study in the history of interior design in Australia—a broader history which itself reflects larger shifts and changes of national and international import.

Hence this is not a conventional biography. It does not regard the subject as hero or genius per se, or allow its subject to define its terms. These have already been established in Part I as ‘modernity’ and ‘modernisation’. Instead, Marion Best’s life and work will serve as a case study in which this model might be tested for

201 Sydney Morning Herald, 1.7.88, 8.
understanding, refinement, confirmation or modification.

Nancy Underhill writes with insight about biography of in her recent study of Sydney Ure Smith:

biography is no longer ossified into linear narration. Instead, biography offers a framework which mimes the unstructured and interlocking diversions that single lives and cultures act out ... it allows space for those inconsistencies which are the inherent humanity of anyone or any period.\footnote{202}

Underhill believes that Ure Smith's 'individual mastery was to open up spaces for the speech and performance of others' and that this makes biography 'an intimate and immediate literary mode, the obvious vehicle for a study of him.' Her observations may just as easily apply to the case of Marion Best.

This study will recover those aspects of Marion Best's life and work which 'mime the unstructured and interlocking diversions ... cultures act out.'\footnote{203} It will not neglect broad patterns, neither will it allow them to obliterate individual details or contradictions. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that both personal patterns and broad trends are infinitely subtle, complex and sometimes contradictory.

Marion Best cannot be treated as a mirror of broader trends—this would lead to circuitous and eventually meaningless, self-fulfilling history. A more satisfying result will surely accompany a study which allows personal patterns and broad trends a qualified autonomy. Of course, they will not be best understood in isolation, but neither can they be forced into deterministic relation. Instead, they must be imagined as patterns of intersection, possessing certain consistencies and inconsistencies, cohering and diverging in multiple instances. It is through divergence as well as convergence that understanding can be refined and promoted for both broad and individual circumstances.

**The Life and Work of Marion Hall Best:**

By the time of her death in 1988, Marion Best was described by many as the 'founder' of Australian interior design. In postwar Australia she was regarded as an interior decorator of some merit though many held her work at arms' length. Later in her forty-year career she was celebrated by Sydney society as the 'high priestess' of interior design. At the peak of her career, she was a celebrity and her services were highly valued as a sign of new wealth and fashionable avant-garde.
garde. Marion Best's schemes were national icons flashed around the country in the pages of popular decorating journals; vivid, lacquered indulgences. Within industry folklore her memory is a towering totem around which disciples gather from diverse fields.

Her reputation poses some difficulty for the historian of interior design. It is almost impossible to disregard even in the interests of academic objectivity. To discard it completely would be to ignore the ideological role of hagiography in the construction of art and design histories. The 'legend' of Marion Best should be scrutinised as an historical artefact, constructed by and reconstructing our knowledge of its subject and its wider context; that is, the development of the interior design profession in Australia, the emergence of 'modernism' and the multiple national and social concomitants of these smaller victories.

Marion Hall Best did have a remarkable career. She was an artist. She was also a business-woman. Between 1938 and 1974, she combined these qualities and built up a large business. She was always genuinely modest about her achievements. She disliked the publicity associated with her husband's title and turned it into a joke with staff who already fondly referred to her as 'Ma'am'.

Yet it is as if in reflection and the regret forced by failing eyesight, she glimpsed the extent of her influence. During the last decade of her life, Marion Best began to document her life and work. She wrote memoirs in the late seventies and agreed to have her papers archived in the early eighties. Colleagues and family now rue the fact that more was not done to preserve her memory and there is now a growing interest in her influence amongst design history enthusiasts which echoes their regret. The most notable of her latter-day disciples is the Historic Houses Trust of NSW which is at present planning a large retrospective exhibition of her work to be held in 1993 at their premier venue—the Greenway Gallery at the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney.

What this all represents, aside from a fairly predictable burst of posthumous sentiment, is corroboration of her widespread influence and the potency of her 'legend'. In it she is feted as a multi-dimensional figure. She is remembered as an artist who coloured, glazed and orchestrated selected rooms or spaces in Sydney.

205 McElvenny, 8.2.91.
206 McPhee, 5.2.91.
for some thirty years. She is celebrated as a professional, who fought for acknowledgment of interior design and its protagonists within art and design circles and the popular press. She is also revered as a successful entrepreneur, an importer and manufacturer who sponsored the introduction of a whole range of international commodities to Australian markets which became icons, symbols of national aspirations and circumstances for Australia’s ascendant elites and later, her popular audience.207

And yet this is clearly legend. It is based on historical fact, but is much more. Marion Best was influential, but her influence depended on contemporary developments. Her elevation to fame and notoriety closely reflects the changing needs and aspirations of postwar Australia during years which saw the establishment of a profession and the entrenchment of ‘modernism’, increasing anxiety about ‘national’ art and design and ‘international’ influences, and the beginnings of a new collaboration between the fine, decorative and design arts that continues its rather halting progress today.

Marion Best’s aesthetic achievements remain a matter of individual judgement; such assessments are not the proper domain of art or design historians seeking to explain rather than evaluate artistic success or achievement. Furthermore her reputation begins to break down under scrutiny. She is reputed to have sponsored changes that began beyond her sphere of influence and she did not always conform to their pattern. Whether she was a brilliant artist is not the issue. She was not a brilliant business person or entrepreneur and the commodities, the cultural icons she introduced were not in any sense distinctively Australian, as the legend would often have it.208

Marion Best’s artistic and professional achievements were sometimes original, always substantial and often outstanding, but she was not peerless. She was not alone in her art or her profession, but part of wider movements in Australian art and society. Her preference for contemporary art and design and her conscientious professionalism were part of her ‘modernity’. This modernity reflected circumstances and a background which were not peculiarly hers, but characteristic of a society in the process of modernisation.

The manifestation of these broader trends in Marion Best’s life and work warrants study because it offers specific, individual evidence and an enriched understanding of modernity—in her case, not confined to either aesthetic or

207 Historic Houses Trust NSW, Newsletter, no.20, 1989/2, 4.
208 Hayes and Hersey, op.cit, 135.
business achievements, but a motivating source for both. Such examination promises a refined understanding of the fundamental and wide-ranging societal trends it locates in an individual life and work.

**Early Sources and Inspiration:**

Marion Best was an Australian, upper middle-class, married woman. According to contemporary mores, she had a responsibility to furnish and decorate the marital home in a style and manner appropriate to her husband’s aspirations.\(^{209}\) Her use of modern furnishings in her home would have been considered *avant-garde* by some of her contemporaries, but was celebrated as an ‘Anthology of Good Taste’ in *The Home*.\(^{210}\)

Marion Best’s preferences were typical of Sydney’s eastern suburbs social set in the twenties and thirties who flirted with modern art and design. Conservatives regarded it as a pernicious influence on an otherwise unspoiled Australian art and society.\(^{211}\) But for Marion and her peers, modernity was an amusing pastime founded on the more earnest strivings of artists like Roy de Maistre, Roland Wakelin, Norah Simpson and Thea Proctor, their teachers, Dattilo Rubbo and Julian Ashton, and patrons like Sydney Ure Smith, Charles Lloyd Jones and John Young.\(^{212}\)

Marion Best’s interest in the latest and best taste had its roots in her family background and her education at Frensham School in the NSW highlands. There,
with guidance from the inspirational Winifred West, she had responded to a well-rounded education which embraced cultural pursuits.\textsuperscript{213} Art teachers at Frensham were modernists\textsuperscript{214} and Best's parents encouraged their three daughters to develop broad interests in art and design.\textsuperscript{215} While contemporaries often insisted her colour and design sense were intuitive, her ability and interests were clearly products of her background and education.

Settled together in Sydney in the twenties, Marion Burkitt and her sisters, Dora and Muriel were a great influence on each other. Their enthusiasm for art and design was mutual; they encouraged each other to experiment and together pursued an active interest in the local art scene.\textsuperscript{216} They shared a fascination with colour and design, with the work of the ‘Ecole de Paris’, the work of the Fauves and Matisse in particular.\textsuperscript{217}

There is only sparse detail available on Best's artistic development or information on exactly where she saw the modern European art she admired, beyond the few hints in her memoirs or in the testimony of surviving associates. As a student and member of Sydney's art public, she was probably exposed to contemporary art at the classes she attended with Thea Proctor and in books published by prestigious international houses like The Studio and the Architectural Press which found their way to Australia more quickly than is often allowed. She may also have been informed by her sister Dora's artist friends and the few public exhibitions of modern European art which reached Sydney in the late twenties and early thirties.

Bernard Smith claims that knowledge of the modern movement in Melbourne and Sydney at this time spread through reproductions brought back to Australia by young artists or in influential loan exhibitions or published in Colour, the Dial and Orpen's fortnightly Outline of Art. Smith singles out the collection Mrs Alleyne Zander brought out in 1933, the Exhibition of International Art in Sydney in July 1936 and the Exhibition of French and British Modern Art in 1939 as the most influential international exhibitions. He claims the 1939 Exhibition:

created great public interest wherever it was shown and exercised an influence upon Australian taste in the visual arts difficult to exaggerate ... it was one of

\textsuperscript{213} HHT/MHB/D/i:2-4.
\textsuperscript{214} Eleonore Lange, one of Sydney's most influential modernists, 'an indefatigable lecturer on modern art' taught at Frensham. Dutton, \textit{op.cit}, 60.
\textsuperscript{215} HHT/MHB/D/i:2.
\textsuperscript{216} O'Brien, J. 15.11.91.
\textsuperscript{217} ANG/3MHB.1-3:1.
the first of three major events which led to the collapse of the authority of the academic establishment in art in Australia.\footnote{218} Smith also mentions the influence of exhibitions of local modern art collections and Society of Artists' showings of modern European as well as local 'moderns' after 1935.\footnote{219}

In the late twenties Best attended embroidery classes with June Scott Stevenson, an artist from Edinburgh Art School who settled in Australia after many years in Chile. Best was already a proficient seamstress. She worked privately before Charles Lloyd Jones employed her for the ladies and children's wear sections of his expanding department store. It was not this conventional paid work but her teacher's 'large scale motif ... non realistic and in brilliantly coloured, coarse wools which vibrated like Gaugin's paintings,' which inspired Marion, 'I took to it like a duck to water'.\footnote{220}

In the early thirties, Best began art and design classes with Thea Proctor. She started with flower arrangements. Proctor's arrangements were regularly featured in The Home and Best's classmate and close friend Helen Blaxland went on to publish a number of very successful portfolios of local arrangements which included Best's work.\footnote{221}

Marion Best attended performances by the acclaimed 'Ballets Russes' in the late thirties. She was intrigued by Oliver Messell's stage design for 'Francesca da Rimini' from which she learnt:

> the importance of the design and grouping of dancers, the unfolding of the pattern in movement through space and the second moving pattern of the related colour harmony of the costumes to the decor, and of course all one with the music.\footnote{222}

She returned to Thea Proctor for stage design classes after her taste of the Ballet. Best learnt her first colour theory there\footnote{223} and studied it again years later with

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{218}{Smith, \textit{op.cit}, 1991, 206-207.}
\item \footnote{219}{Geoffrey Dutton concurs with Smith in his account of the rise of modernism in Sydney. See Dutton, \textit{op.cit}, 26, 31-32, 60-62.}
\item \footnote{220}{ANG/3MHB.1-3:1.}
\item \footnote{221}{Blaxland, H., \textit{Flower Pieces}, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1948. See also Eagle, \textit{op.cit}, 118 for a summary of Proctor's influence in postwar Sydney through her classes and diverse artistic pursuits.}
\item \footnote{222}{ANG/3MHB.1-3:2. Michelle Potter believes that the Russian Ballet tours to Australian capitals between 1936-1940 were a major source of information and a spur to local interest in modern art. See her unpublished B.A.Hons thesis, Potter, M., 'The Russian Ballet in Australia, 1936-1940: Sources for Modernism in Australian Art', B.A.Hons thesis, ANU, 1987, 59.}
\item \footnote{223}{She later recalled 'Thea taught me about how colours could be jumpy. How adding a little bit of a complementary colour, such as green into red, stops harshness but}
\end{itemize}
Anne Gilmore Rees from the Central School in London.\textsuperscript{224} She was also intrigued by Roy de Maistre’s colour theory which was based ‘on the major or minor chord in music, always in three dimensions.’\textsuperscript{225}

Later Best used musical analogy to explain her philosophy of colour and design. She described colours and their combinations as major and minor chords and decorators as ‘conductors’ of a performance or scheme. She understood the colour wheel and various colour theories as a set of fixed principles, natural laws and systems to be mastered just like musical systems, theories and scales.\textsuperscript{226}

Her published advice often included references to musical concepts. Her address to a national convention of architects was reported thus:

\begin{quote}
\textit{she is a firm believer in the importance of tone values over color[sic] variations and insists the vital thing in all decoration is the ascending arpeggio of color, going from dark to light.}\textsuperscript{227}
\end{quote}

It made good copy in decorating magazines:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Colour is to me what music is to others. I hear music in colour ... and I love it ... clear bright colours are young to me, like the music of Rachmaninov, Stravinsky.}\textsuperscript{228}
\end{quote}
These were just some of the influences which Marion Best brought to the task of decorating the marital home. Her scheme for her new home in 'The Grove', Woollahra in 1934 was widely admired by peers and reached an even wider audience with its publication in *The Home* the following year. Four pages of photographs were entitled 'A Brief Anthology of Good Taste' and a detailed account of its furnishing—including 'modern Sundour cretonne curtains, a Marion Dorn rug and a Franz Marc print over the fireplace'—was included in accompanying captions.\(^{229}\) (Fig. 16)

She was soon well known locally for her decorative aptitude. Friends asked her to decorate their houses and her fame spread. Her first clients were usually peers—ascendant middle-class young marrieds with much to prove in their interiors, in a society where the style of one’s home, inside and out, could reflect and even enhance one's social position, as a gauge of one's command of taste and fashion.

Her increasing workload forced expansion. She moved her decorating activities to the small front room of an antique shop nearby. Here she began to make her transition from happy homemaker to lady decorator, thence to professional designer, retailer and importer. The circumstances and pattern of this transition is an excellent case in point; an exemplary individual instance of the same transition amongst many of her peers at the same time, which eventually led to the establishment of an interior design profession in Australia.

**Training and early career:**

Her early training was loose and unfocussed. Embroidery and design classes had provided inspiration and enough knowledge for her first projects, but once established as a retailer in the late thirties, she required more expertise and inspiration. At the suggestion of friend, associate and architect of changes at No. 3, 'The Grove'—Professor Leslie Wilkinson—Marion completed first-year architecture at Sydney University in 1936. She used the drafting and design skills she learnt there throughout her career, first in plans for her earliest public commission, No. 7 Elizabeth St, Sydney. This was a block of fifty double flats owned by an associate, Thynne Reid, businessman and fellow member of the Elanora Country Club which Best refurbished to national and international acclaim the year before. (Figs 17, 18)

Colour is like music and provided you orchestrate your colours, you can have any number playing in your orchestra. *The Housewife*, Feb. 1953, 15-19.

She was gratified by the directors’ response to her proposals. For the first time she presented her ideas ‘professionally’ using newfound drafting skills:

on this job presentation ... I used the simple isometric projection from 1st year Architecture ... they knew exactly the volume, layout and every detail of design and colour. The scale could be easily assessed and it could be used as a working drawing.230

Without professional role models and structures in Australia, Best searched overseas for her interior design education. In 1939, she took a year-long international correspondence course. The New York-based interior design course gave her a thorough grounding in conventional theories and principles of decoration and the historical development of styles, followed by lessons in the new and still controversial ‘modern design’. She completed lessons promptly and with distinction. Her work book and examiners’ comments reveal an assiduous worker, hungry for knowledge, a quick, perceptive and increasingly confident student.

Her growing impatience with conventional decorating was evident as briefer answers and personal opinions replaced copybook responses during the course. Her explanation of walls and their structure offer an example of her early copybook replies:

The dado extends from the baseboard on the floor to about half way up the wall ... it is panelled in wood or plastered and bounded by a rail, originally called a chair rail, slightly heavier than the moulding used elsewhere. The dado was designed to protect the wall surface ... Cornices are an Architectural feature ... they should be of wood or plaster, the depth being determined by the character, height and style of the ceiling—a heavy cornice belongs to high and decorated ceilings and a narrow simple one to the lower walls and ceiling.231

As she learnt her answers and opinions became bolder:

I think it is essential to have a complete set of chairs and a table and sideboard of the same style or period ... I like some repetition of shape perhaps ... a Chesterfield and one chair of one type and 2 or 3 chairs of another but matching in themselves. Or if one is faced with a 3 or 4 piece suite then cover at least one chair in something different if not two ... Otherwise monotony bores one horribly.232

She even disagreed with the textbook:

Actually I have never felt that a large pattern on coarsely woven material is “heavy” in scale. The pattern demands a large room but it does not seem to influence the scale of the material itself and yet a big pattern on a coarse weave does seem to add even more weight.233

Of etchings and engravings she volunteered, “They have a habit, I think, of looking

230 ANG/3MHB.1-3:6.
231 HHT/MHB/C/ii:lesson 3.
233 HHT/MHB/C/ii:lesson 8.
rather lifeless and spotty on walls—(but I am biased by the no. of bad ones we get out here)'.

Her interest was renewed by the lessons on modern design. Here, her answer papers were detailed; a combination of ‘correct’ replies and personal opinions which revealed her preference for modern design. Yet she disagreed with some modern trends, describing subtle, monotone schemes as ‘90% ... monotonous and uninteresting.’

Best completed this course in 1939-40 during the early stages of war and professional opportunities were limited for several years. The exclusive private club schemes and domestic interiors she did in the thirties were replaced by public, educational, medical and service projects with functional and economic constraints.

Lady Gowrie Kindergartens at Erskineville and the Rachel Forster Memorial Hospital were well publicised wartime commissions. According to The Home, the Lady Gowrie Kindergartens were distinguished by ‘a fresh and delightful use of colour ... the signature of Mrs Best’s decorating.’ The journal praised her use of colour ‘pale blue with red, apple green with rust pink, lime and blue, clear soft yellow with silver blue and cerise’ approving their aesthetic appeal and pedagogical importance.

Her colourful interiors in the Rachel Forster Memorial Hospital were also admired. They were a welcome departure from traditionally sterile, all-white hospital schemes which had been favoured as ‘hygienic’. Yet the architect Walter Bunning could not admire the ‘ostentatious gold’ on cabinets and beds which ‘introduced a jarring note to an otherwise subtle colour scheme.’

So despite the exigencies of wartime, Best sustained the reputation as an unconventional modern decorator which she had established in prewar commissions for private clubs and clients. Elanora Country Club at Narrabeen had

235 HHT/MHB/C/ii: Modern Design, lesson 2. Her opinions became more earnest and broad ranging:

No arts can be completely divorced from each other, particularly those of painting and applied art. We see the same aims in such people as Picasso as in our modern furniture designers. It has been the aim of artists to reduce art to its fundamental laws of design. Every line has a meaning, every colour its force, a purpose for each mark and nothing superfluous. Their meaning is frank and endowed with the great beauty, that simplicity and rhythm of all things. So also do our designers of modern interiors aim at reducing their lines to the fundamentals of use and construction ... the same parallels can be found in each period of art. HHT/MHB/C/ii: Modern Design, lesson 1.

236 The Home, 1.12.40, 40-43.
237 Art in Australia: Art and Architecture, 1.6.42, 84.
established this reputation, receiving favourable reviews in Australia and overseas, in elite journals like *Decorative Art*.\(^{238}\) Colours and furnishings here ranged from aubergine through to mushroom pink and cream, with Chinese red, pale and mid-blue accents: an ‘unusual colour scheme’ which added ‘a lively interest’ to the Clubhouse.\(^{239}\) (Fig. 17)

Italian terracotta pink with copper bronze and green accents, relieved by white Chinese Chippendale wrought iron and copper bronze with slate blue and yellow pink were characteristic schemes in the late thirties.\(^{240}\) ‘Rousseau green’ walls with green and white striped canvas curtains and cane furniture covered with bold tartan wool outraged residents of a Convalescent Home in Bowral.\(^{241}\)

Colour was the common outlet for her modernity in wartime but she used other strategies as well to impart this style. Once it became impossible to import her favourite British textiles, Best used the best quality Australian manufactured article. She introduced Melbourne designer Frances Burke’s ‘gay, modern prints’ in cotton and linen to Sydney in the late thirties and began to print her own in the forties.\(^{242}\)

Appalled and frustrated by the dearth of locally made quality fabric, Best’s first venture with textiles was prompted by the Red Cross Exhibition ‘An Englishman’s Home 1700-1941’ held in 1941 at the David Jones’ Art Gallery. Best was responsible for ‘Young Modern’ and ‘Classic Modern’ schemes and produced a limited run of the curtain fabrics designed for them by local artists, Thea Proctor and Dora Sweetapple.\(^{243}\)

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\(^{240}\) ANG/9MHB.1.3:6.

\(^{241}\) The scheme was in fact the brainchild of Mary Hordern of nearby Milton Park; friend and fellow member of the Red Cross Committee with oversight of this Home. See ANG/3MHB.1-3:10-11.

\(^{242}\) See ANG/Frances Burke Archive, ANG/9MHB.1.3. (typewritten note). Frances Burke’s fabrics were in fact the first of Best’s firsts. Claims like this became a Best catchcry, along with ‘the finest taste’, ‘good design’ and ‘quality’. The phrase ‘firsts’ was overused, repeatedly employed as a marketing and publicity device by Best and her peers. Such claims were long-established clichés of interior decorating rhetoric.

\(^{243}\) See *Exhibition of an Englishman’s Home from 1700-1941. Loan Collection of Furniture, Pictures, China, Glass, Silver, and Early Chinese Art*, David Jones’ Art Gallery, Sydney, May 6-May 31, 1941. (Catalogue) in HHT/MHB/C/iii. ‘The Englishman’s Home’ was a fundraiser for the Red Cross held on the top floor of the George Street store. It was a social highlight for Sydney’s war-weary populace, widely publicised and attended by audiences keen to sample the treasures of their endangered civilisation. The show was dominated by conventional and traditional interior schemes and decorative objects. The Chippendale and Edwardian rooms
The vivacious ‘Young Modern’ room had ‘purely functional furniture’ and *The Home* praised its ‘Custom-designed curtaining by artist sister, Dora Sweetapple’, in a ‘brightly coloured design of red hibiscus on a shelf in front of a window, with open shutters and sea beyond.’ They also admired Thea Proctor’s curtains in the ‘Classic Modern’ room which had ‘Grecian columns and vines in purple grape colours in soft white satin.’244 (Fig. 19)

These fabrics were centrepieces of the collection Best marketed under the name, Marion Best Textiles. To these she added designs from the same artists and others like Douglas Annand, Elaine Haxton and even her five year old daughter Deirdre, who had designed curtains for the Lady Gowrie Child Care Centre in Erskineville, Sydney.245

During its short life Marion Best Textiles was feted by nationalistic press which praised its role in promoting wartime manufacture. *Australia: National Journal* commended ‘her enterprise in commissioning Australian artists to design gay and original furniture fabrics.’246

International design journals remarked upon a sort of antipodean precociousness:

Australian artists are creating individual designs for fabric printing, distinguished by genuine local feeling ... Mrs Best is one of the outstanding interior decorators in Australia ... under the name of Marion Best Fabrics, she is putting on the market a series of furnishings ... prints by vital and interesting architects, she selects, designs, supervises the printing and arranges the marketing ... Distributors have seized them with enthusiasm and there is a gratifying demand for these fabrics.247

Just how popular or commercially successful these designs were is not certain. Public taste was unpredictable but largely conventional. Even without production difficulties, Best’s modern styles may not have secured widespread public acceptance. One of the designers, Douglas Annand, later reported that his textiles were rejected by retail buyers because ‘they were too advanced for the Australian

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244 *The Home*, 1.7.1941, 30-31.
245 *The Home*, 1.12.40, 43.
246 *Australia: National Journal*, v.7, no.8, July 1946, 47.
During the thirties and forties, Best also designed furniture and accessories herself. Isolated pieces were used in many early projects, especially those completed for her family. They were responses to the shortage of local designs and the specific requirements of ‘family’ jobs. Her tables, lamps, bedheads and chairs were usually either red lacquer, ‘Chinese Chippendale’, or cane and shell. Yet Marion Best was an interior designer not a textile or furniture designer. She preferred to combine the work of others with her own distinctive colour combinations into a scheme. This was her strength.

**Architecture and Art:**

Marion Best embraced architecture and design. Her training had furnished a selective grounding and along with most of Sydney’s ‘aesthetes’ at the end of the forties, she was intrigued by the ideas of the recent emigre architect, Harry Seidler.

She attended Seidler’s lectures and there is evidence that they were acquainted. In 1984 a journalist quoted her reference to Seidler as a friend who invited her to attend a lecture given at the University of Sydney by visiting American architect Buckminster Fuller. Marion Best was impressed:

> It had the most profound effect on me. He talked about how colours vibrate, how the pure colours of red, yellow and blue are so forceful together that they bounce the walls apart.

Best was particularly impressed by Bauhaus interior design and it inspired her

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248 *Art and Design*, I, 29. Other Australian textile enterprises were more successful and longlived but all shared financial and production difficulties in a very limited market. Even if well disposed to these efforts, the public were unable to pay for exclusive runs of fabric in a bleak wartime climate and this frustrated the best designers and manufacturers.

Two enterprises did survive long enough to establish workable production schedules and pricing structures. It is not clear whether their relative success related to their assertive Australian flavour, something Marion Best consistently eschewed. Frances Burke in Melbourne and Annan Fabrics in Sydney relied on Australian flavour for notoriety. Both employed popular indigenous emblems, Australian flora, fauna and Aboriginal design motifs and their ‘Australianness’ gave these ventures an edge in the local market over competitors like Marion Best Textiles. Marion Best’s motive was to bring ‘quality’ material and ‘good design’ to the Australian market rather than to promote indigenous forms or design. Best’s fabrics conformed to European norms and styles rather than indigenous Australian forms and motifs. Annand’s work was considered ‘Picassoesque’, Proctor’s employed either Grecian classical or European fruit and flower motifs.


250 *Mode*, June 1984, 27.
own experiments with strong bright colours. She saw Bauhaus interiors for the first time during travels in Europe after the war:

    when I went to London in 1948 I visited with students from the A.A. the then very modern primary schools, which were scarcely completed. I became terribly excited as I walked into colour schemes exploding confined areas by the vibration of one colour meeting the other.251

She responded to ‘Prussian blue, cerise red and orange in panel sections ... with strong prints hung on them’ and followed up these ideas at Harry Seidler’s lectures:

    Later back in Sydney, I was to hear Harry Seidler lecturing on the Bauhaus theory of exploding boxlike areas by painting these areas in brilliant primaries ... where they met, the vibration was so strong it virtually blew the walls apart, opening up the area, leaving the walls as screens, defining space not confining it. This was the start of my success with very strong colours for a purpose.252

She followed international architects with interest and sponsored bright young Australians.253 She was particularly impressed by architectural exhibits at the Milan Triennale in 1954, including Buckminster Fuller’s experimental housing—two Geodiscs—folded heavy craft cardboard hexagons, with interiors which inspired her professed allegiance to good modern design.254

Her interest in the fine and performing arts never waned though she never claimed ‘expert’ status. When pressed she would sometimes describe herself as an artist and declared as much once when describing her wall glazes: ‘I just did to architectural finishes what friends who were artists were doing to their paintings’.255 Her descriptions of schemes certainly read as formalist analyses of artistic compositions. She took painting lessons and art classes and attended openings and lectures diligently, but declined Sir Charles Lloyd Jones’ offer of the directorship of the David Jones Art Gallery in 1947 because she ‘knew nothing of painting’.256

At his insistence she finally accepted the directorship for a year. Best held the

251  HHT/MHB/G/4:4.
252  ANG/3MHB.1-3:21.
253  ANG/3MHB.1-3:39-40, 45, 52, Broughton, 30.1.91, 20.2.91, Single, 20.2.91.
254  Directional modules, graduated floor levels, space demarcation and partitioning had been ‘masterfully’ handled by another American architect, Robert Mango. ANG/3MHB.1-3:37.
255  Vogue Living (Australia), Mar. 1985, 74.
256  ANG/3MHB.1-3:12.
position longer, from July 1947 to the end of 1948, as an ever more distinguished devotee of the modern and decorative arts. She refurbished the gallery with boldly coloured hessian screens\textsuperscript{257} and installed the first and only show by ‘the Merioola Group’ held in Sydney before their postwar exodus to Europe. The journal \textit{Australia} previewed the exhibition in October 1947 and the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald’s} Women’s News reported its fashionable tone:

guests seemed reluctant to leave ... the main store entrance was kept open an hour longer than usual. From a fashion point of view ... [it] was one of the most interesting of recent shows and the party itself, one of the most amusing for some time ... Sherry was served to guests who adjourned later with many of the artists to a buffet dinner at the home of Mrs Hall Best, Woollahra.\textsuperscript{258}

During her directorship, Best also featured the work of ‘the Sydney Group’, the Studio of Realist Art, the Society of Artists, including Hal Missingham, James Cant and Sali Herman, ran solo shows for Frank and Muriel Medworth, Justin O’Brien, Sidney Nolan and Frank Hodgkinson and devoted considerable space to a diverse range of the decorative and applied arts.\textsuperscript{259} The local art critic, Harry Tatlock Miller, regularly praised the work displayed at the Gallery under her direction in \textit{The Daily Sun} and approved of her policy of ‘combining art with decoration.’\textsuperscript{260}

Best’s artistic and practical leadership was strong and her management was sound.\textsuperscript{261} Internal correspondence suggests that she enjoyed the most cordial relations with management and staff for her entire term.\textsuperscript{262} Attendances fluctuated widely; the average was just short of comparable figures under previous and subsequent directorships. It is impossible to determine if this reflection waning

\textsuperscript{257} Best put a fresh ivory wash over the rather dreary hessian walls and painted 6'x6' screens:

\begin{quote}
I used earth colours—Indian Red—Earth Yellow—Olive Green—Terracotta Pink—Burnt Orange. These I could use at right angles from the walls making bays, so that it would be easier in my inexperience to group paintings in smaller isolated groups. ANG/3MHB.1-3:12.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{258} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 28.11.47, in David Jones Archive/Scrapbook 1947.

\textsuperscript{259} David Jones Archive/BRG1:48.


\textsuperscript{261} David Jones Archive/BX1595, BRG1:470.

\textsuperscript{262} David Jones Archive/BRG1:48.
The tastes of a conservative Sydney public were catered for in Best's line-up. She balanced her innovative profile with one eye on the market and the other on management support, though she remembered being given a free hand in planning the Gallery's program.264

Most gallery reviews followed the pattern set with the Merioola show. They combined informed commentary on the work with glamorous social chit chat. Some even reported the physical discomfort of jostling crowds at popular shows, where to avoid congestion and argument collectors were given numbered tickets which showed their position in the sales queue.265

Best always remained a modernist. She built on her long standing devotion to 'l'Ecole de Paris', the Fauves, early Australian modernists like Thea Proctor, Grace Cossington Smith and Roy de Maistre, by establishing close personal associations with Sydney's post-moderns and neo-romantic artists after World War II.

She was particularly impressed by the work of the Merioola Group or the 'Sydney Charm School' which she exhibited at David Jones. This loose circle of artists included Donald Friend, Loudon Sainthill, Jocelyn Rickards and Justin O'Brien. They combined diverse talents and a high fashion profile and their private escapades were as interesting to the public as their work, if contemporary newspaper columns are any indication.266 This 'innovative' work and international experience encouraged their youthful and bohemian image. As Dutton describes it:

The Meriooola creative spirit was welcomed in Sydney, where the group not only sold their works with success but were taken up as something cheerful and exotic after the drab war years ... the Merioola artists not only provided good

263 Only one or two surviving reviews hint that innovative shows held a limited appeal. Her exhibition of design for the theatre 'seemed to be making very little stir indeed, judging by the few stragglers enjoying its merits.' Her exhibition of abstract art received some unfavourable publicity. The Sydney Morning Herald's art critic found 'Mrs Elsie Nicholls of Ryde wandering in a dazed fashion in David Jones' Art Gallery trying the understand the ... exhibition.' Her review may have warned the Sydney public off:

There's only one picture here that does anything at all to me. It is the one with a couple of strips sort of suspended in mid-air which look as though they have been blown by a breeze. It's a hot day today and I can't help thinking how a little breeze like that would help me just now. Sydney Morning Herald, 22.10.48.

Yet the Daily Sun was able to report that 'curiosity value and the patronage of those art connoisseurs who are enthusiastic about abstractions are combining to roll up splendid attendance figures.' Daily Sun, 23.10.48: See David Jones Archive/Scrapbooks 1947-48.

264 ANG/3MHB.1-3:13.


266 Dutton, op.cit, 101-102. See also David Jones Archive/Scrapbook, 1947.
copy for the papers and magazines but accustomed Sydney people to thinking
that art could be part of society and not in constant conflict with it.267

Although Bernard Smith and Robert Hughes dismiss their achievements as
superficial if not completely illusory,268 Merioola held the limelight in postwar
Sydney; darlings of the arty social set with which Marion Best associated.

She was still writing of Roy de Maistre’s colour theories as late as the
seventies269 but her abiding fascination was Justin O’Brien’s work. O’Brien in fact
recalls their first meeting at one of Loudon Sainthill’s parties at the old Merioola
mansion, the ‘hangout’ for artists of the ‘Sydney Charm School’:270

at that time Loudon Sainthill, Harry Tatlock Miller, Donald Friend and many
other artists were living at Merioola and brought a lot of very interesting people
to the house ... people like Claudio Arrau Rafael Kubelich etc ... I met Marion at
one of Loudon and Harry’s parties. They were amusing affairs and very
enjoyable. Marion must have begun to be interested in my work about that time
and she asked me to paint a triptych for her.’271 (Fig. 20)

O’Brien was then Art Master at Cranbrook School, where Best’s son Michael was a

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267 Dutton, op.cit, 101.
268 Robert Hughes is attributed as author of the derisory tag, ‘Charm School’. He is said
to have coined it in 1970 in The Art of Australia. Here he revealed a strong distaste
for ‘a decade of luxury art ... the romantic poeticism of the forties to give it its official
name: or more succinctly, the Charm School.’ Hughes, R., The Art of Australia,
Pelican/Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1970, 170. Hughes described ‘luxury art’ as
devoid of ‘ritual and dynamic character’, ‘decorative’, ‘passive’, ‘no longer an outlet for
emotion and ideas. Its works ... exist on pleasantly equal terms with the bureau
above which they hang.’ He characterised the Merioola approach without sympathy,
describing:

‘prescribed “poetic” subjects, emphasis on sophistication of style and technique,
admiration for the classical past, narrow range of emotional projection, and belief
that London and Paris were the sole centres of human culture’

and finished his account by dismissing some of them altogether, naming them:
‘various decorators and designers, whose work is generously regarded as painting—
Elaine Haxton, Loudon Sainthill, Wolfgang Cardamatis and William Constable.’
ibid, 176 (see pages 170-180) and also Smith, op.cit, 271-276.

Geoffrey Dutton defends their art and influence:

they were too talented to be guilty of basic triviality. They imparted a sense of
style to Sydney, even if it was transitory, and that did no-one any harm. They were
avant-garde of a new kind and their internationalism heightened awareness of
modern art in Sydney.

Dutton, op.cit, 114. See also Serle, op.cit, 166-167 and Art and Design 1.

269 McElvenny Collection, 1968-91: Christmas Card.
270 Hughes, op.cit, 170, Smith, op.cit, 226-228, 275-276.
271 Their friendship was exceedingly close and long-lived. Best spoke with extraordinary
fondness of Justin O’Brien to the end of her life, while Justin O’Brien still refers to
her as,

a very enthusiastic, brilliant and most lovable human being ... with an absolute
brimming love of colour. She could almost go into a trance looking at certain
combinations ... Marion was a superb companion, she loved and enjoyed everything
... About 2 years before she died I had a most loving letter from her telling me how
she had enjoyed our companionship—I hope I gave her something of value. She,
indeed, gave me double of what I could have given her. O’Brien, 15.11.91.
private boarder. O’Brien’s work became a model for her own palette and wall-glazes. She carefully studied his technique:

he used brilliant colours ... I noticed the subtlety ... of overlaying contrasting transparent colours on each other ... olive green over brilliant yellow ... scraping it down so it became like shot silk ... overlaying a singing colour over a light one then scraping it off to a varying scale of transparency ... the same with reds overlaid on pink or light greens on rich yellow, whichever he had in mind.

Like her Merioola friends, Marion Best regarded Europe as the centre of human culture. Her first visit in 1949, the year after her directorship at David Jones, was a voyage of discovery for an antipodean disciple. She grasped the opportunity to immerse herself in Western art from the Renaissance on. Best toured Italy with her friend and Merioola artist, Justin O’Brien, discovering ‘lyrical and magical’ frescos of the Italian Quattrocento—Giotto’s, Raphael’s, Bottecelli’s, Francesco’s, Ghirandhaio’s, Michelangelo’s and Leonardo’s—intrigued by their use of colour and tone. The work of post-impressionists and French moderns fuelled her admiration and inspired her own colour exploits.

Best’s travel diary offers a detailed record of her enthusiastic impressions. Its emphasis reveals her preoccupation with colour. Even in everyday jottings, her colour sense dominated the narrative. She described landscape and village views as colour compositions:

We sat on the wall and looked down on the most exquisite of views—mountains far away in a blue haze the town in front and between us and ... a valley dramatic in its rich terraces of olive trees, intermingled with chartreuse shrubs and in the foreground far below us, dark cypress pines planted by some superb designer. The sun, a brilliant pink ball going down in all this loveliness.

She was enchanted by the colour of mediterranean houses:

houses and shutters are coloured turquoise with yellow, green with strawberry pink ... deep strawberry pink with chartreuse, deep mustard with green, terracotta with jade, white with china pink, turquoise.

In England she travelled with her husband, a keen church historian and her diary reveals a well trained architectural eye. Her visit to a public school in

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272 Broughton, 20.2.91, Hall Best, 29.1.91.
273 ANG/3MHB.1-3:29.
274 She was transfixed by the colours of the Italian Renaissance masters. Of Giotto’s ‘Death of St Francis’ at Santa Croce in Florence, she remembered:

St Francis lay on a mustard yellow bed, a pink background and all the brothers in greys of brownish tint—the whites and the lovely soft greenish blue sky behind were a most lovely picture. HHT/MHB/C/i/1949:291.

275 HHT/MHB/C/i/1949.
277 ibid:52, 76.
Hertfordshire converted her to Bauhaus colours and interior design principles and her diary records her strong views on design and interior decoration. Although some entries employed a ‘housewifely’ gossipy tone—their technical, detached accuracy reveal the workings of a well-versed mind and expert eye. Her descriptions displayed a thorough knowledge of period and contemporary styles. In Edinburgh she found:

A Victorian house of good appearance ... the walls were white with rather ugly oak columns which Catherine had wisely left to blend with J's furniture ... the stairwell was blue and very nice. The D.R. [sic] had gunboat grey paint wall with lacquer red fitment and white other walls. My room had deep pink—C is not afraid of colour and her house was very nice.

In Gloucester, the inn she stayed in had ‘a very nice blue bedroom—too blue—emerald and white would have looked lovely with its blue ... walls.’

Similar descriptions appeared on every page of her diary, revealing the mind of a well trained decorator. Yet the artist and colourist spoke even more eloquently in its pages. Interior vignettes were surpassed by her striking descriptions of colour in landscape and village views and in Renaissance art.

Wall-Glazing:

O’Brien had introduced her to Italy and its colour; scenery and sacred frescos heightened her awareness. His painting techniques had also inspired her, but it was not until she visited Paris that she realised the full possibilities of combining her passion for colour and painting. Her French agent, Nanette Mahoney, took her to the Exhibition of ‘Artistes Décorateurs’ at the Grand Palais. While there, arranging her first imports, she saw a photograph of a room which provided her with ‘a new direction for the 50's ... a small modern study which appeared to have gold leaf walls covered by a transparent black glass-like glaze’.

She decided her next project would be to emulate this treatment and wrote immediately to her associate in Sydney, John Richards, enlisting him and her housepainter Fred Russell, to unlock the ‘secret’ of this finish on her return from Europe. They experimented with house paints, clear gloss and artists’ oils until she achieved the glazed effect she desired.

278 ANG/3MHB.1-3:21.
279 HHT/MHB/C/ii/1949:228.
280 She bought ‘a Dresden coffee service and a Queen Anne ladle for punch—£9 for the two’ and saw ‘a nice crystal candle sconce for which I shall write and make an offer.’ HHT/MHB/C/ii/1949:244.
281 ANG/3MHB.1-3:19.
The technique they developed was to use colourful undercoats with contrasting translucent glazes, in different colours on adjacent walls; yellow over red, pink, tangerine or black or a range of blues and greens—aquamarines and chartreuses:

we learnt to overlay certain translucent artists’ oil colours mixed in a clear Dulux base, over different coloured undercoats. These glazes dried very quickly, like nail varnish.282

The undercoat was an equal mixture of flat and enamel house paint. The contrasting glaze was a coat or coats of Dulux gloss stained with translucent artists’ oils. This final coat, the glaze, was stippled to heighten its reflection. This textured the finished surface by ‘hammering’ the still wet glaze, with the end of a broad brush to disturb the smooth surface and heighten its reflective qualities.283

The process was technically and financially quite demanding. Best always supervised colour mixing, either doing it herself or watching Fred Russell closely.284 Considerable skill was required as the gloss dried very quickly once applied. For the crucial final coat, painters worked first with ‘bold quick free flowing strokes to avoid heavy lines’ and then frantically hammered large 6 inch square brushes across vast areas to stipple them before they dried ‘like beautiful ceramic.’ Best claimed that much depended on the painters’ ability and ‘a sensitive touch’, even though stippling involved great physical effort—this is underlined by the fact that brushes wore out constantly.285

Technical problems were common. Too much artists’ oil turned the gloss into sticky enamel, ruining its all-important translucence. Occasionally the finished colour was simply ‘wrong’. Small amounts of linseed oil or turps could be used to thin the glazes back, but the only remedy for a colour mismatch was to start again—which she occasionally did.286

Glazing was also an expensive process. It was labour intensive, elaborate and used huge amounts of expensive artist’s oils. Best had to buy her favourite ‘Windsor and Newton’ oils by the boxload, but sometimes resorted to commercial stain as a ‘back up’ to contain costs.287

282 ANG/3MHB.1-3:3, notes.
283 Stephenson, op.cit, 42, Broughton, 10.12.91.
284 McElvenny, 20.2.91.
285 Broughton, 10.3.91.
286 Broughton, 13.12.91.
287 Broughton, 10.3.1991.
By the late fifties her glazing techniques were well established and commanded a significant following in Sydney's decorating circles. Best loved her glazes; they marked a high point of her creative development and for her 'made colour sing with freedom and varying depth':

Working with glazes became the most exciting and fascinating extension of colour theory—studied and intuitive ... there was no end to this beautiful discovery ... the variety and contrast of scale from light to dark was thrilling ... reflections bring flow of movement to the eye, space can be even more flexible and responsive to the vibration of colour ... with colour over colour there can be endless variety of movement and depth.

With her glazing Marion Best rode first on the crest of the feature wall craze, later, on the bright gloss finish of Pop Art interiors of the late sixties and early seventies. They epitomised her Sydney-side modernity. She often argued that strong colour was essential in Australia's light, but she decried feature walls of the fifties and garish glosses of the seventies applied by 'amateurs' imitating her style:

The thrilling new experience of the fifties was ruined by the inane multicolor schemes and feature walls, worked out by paint manufacturers and consultants, regardless of person, purpose, aspect or function and mostly in the same depth of tone for each colour.

Best's wall-glazing formula remained a well-guarded secret until gloss enamels and human ingenuity defeated their mystique and their exclusive mirror finish. Bright glossy walls, referred to as 'lacquered' rather than glazed, were ubiquitous by the early seventies and illustrated copiously in Australian decorating magazines. Yet Best's palette remained exclusive; olive, chartreuse, aquamarine, Indian yellow, tangerine, alizarin red, cerise, Prussian blue and burnt umber were used together and in abundance, though 'never with abandon'. The translucent qualities of her multi-layered and 'dirtied' colour; glazes 'greyed' by a drop or two of

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289 ANG/3MHB.1-3:31.
290 ANG/3MHB.1-3:31. After explaining her application of colour to architects in Adelaide in 1956, she qualified her comments:

Unfortunately the commercial paint firms and much of the public took this ‘different walls, different colours’ as a new trend and followed it without any understanding of the reason behind it and without any application of theory of colour and created the vogue for handing out ready made schemes in toned down colour combinations, with neither vibration nor analogous harmony ... with no relation to any specific job or structure and with no thought of tone values ... From this, the latest idea of a “feature” wall has grown, which is now a slick commercial byword ... the idea is rather appalling. HHT/MHB/G/4:5.

291 Marion Best and her admirers claimed her colour sense was instinctive, a 'gift', but it was based on a thorough knowledge of colour theory and contemporary art and design. She expressed a preference for 'analogous schemes with complementary contrast' or 'harmony by analogy' and defended her exuberant use of colour:

We were always experimental but not irresponsible ... risks were always calculated and colour was never thoughtlessly used ... One can't just stab around with entirely different colours. ANG/3MHB.1-3:29.
their complement, eluded her imitators. Colours and combinations changed with fashion, client demand or context, but a consistent formula and palette are repeated in her archived papers and by her successors.

Marion Best launched her glazes at the first exhibition held by the Society of Interior Designers of Australia in 1953 at the Woollahra Art Centre and Library. She was criticised by a bewildered press for combining nine colours in one room ‘around the carcass of a dead horse—Sidney Nolan’s ‘Drought’.

No accurate colour reproductions survive but Marion remembered ‘small areas of incident in deep dirty pink, lacquer red, chartreuse and olive green, held together by an Indian yellow glazed ceiling.’ (Fig. 21)

Marion Best’s decorating had often been pilloried by conservatives but her wall glazing drew particularly strong criticism. She was not impervious and remembered: ‘I used to cry at night about it ... they said “Marion puts spinach in the paint.” I was desperately hurt, but I never doubted what I was doing.’

Less than five years after this controversial wall-glazing debut, she was widely acclaimed for transforming the Regent Theatre Wollongong into ‘Australia’s most beautiful theatre’ with her ‘brilliant translucent glazes.’ After supervising substantial structural alterations to the original theatre she organised a team of twelve painters to glaze its cavernous interior with varying colours and shades; aquamarine ceilings, alizarin pinks and reds on side walls, olive green and mustard elsewhere. The aquamarine ceiling was enhanced with a geometric mural finished in contrasting ‘light romantic glazes’ of chartreuse, pale and deep alizarin pinks, with black and white accents. (Fig. 23)

This was probably Best’s favourite commission. She regarded the result ‘magical’; the combination of wall-glazing, lighting, sculpture, murals and fabric had produced ‘a very functional, intimate and romantic interior’ and satisfied clients’ demands for an ‘alive glamorous atmosphere that would make it a place to see and in which to be seen.’ Owners were extremely pleased as crowds

292 McElvenny, 18.6.91.
293 For example Broughton, 19.3.91.
294 Courier Mail, 6.5.53, 3.
295 ANG/3MHB.1-3:55.
296 Vogue Living (Australia), Mar. 1985, 74.
297 Illawarra Mercury, 12.10.67, 10, Daily Mirror, 1.5.58, 7.
298 ANG/3MHB.1-3:55.
299 Broughton, 18.6.91.
300 ANG/3MHB.1-3:54.
returned to the Regent and years later they reported that the hard-wearing glazes never dulled.\textsuperscript{301}

Not all Best’s clients were as pleased with these glazes. Two important commissions in the second half of the fifties were replaced with embarrassing haste. Best refers only briefly to the accompanying controversies in her autobiography, but her bold and colourful glazes were not popular with members of the Elanora Club or Elizabeth Arden’s management.

At Elanora deep alizarin pinks, dark olive, charcoal and ‘burnt orangey-red striped walls’ overwhelmed the club executive. They commissioned redecoration only eighteen months later. Best concluded ‘I realised then that I could never be the right person for clubs, I am too uncompromising when principles of design are vital to me.’\textsuperscript{302}

Soon afterward at the opening of Sydney’s first Elizabeth Arden Salon, management were embarrassed by Best’s Prussian blue walls which apparently ‘yellowed’ clients’ complexions. The scheme lasted only several months, despite the popularity of its butterfly and fern-encrusted ricepaper ceilings backlit with fluorescent globes.\textsuperscript{303} She remembered:

Anthony Horderns’ decorating department ... replaced F sharp with B flat, so to speak, in trying to drag it to mediocrity. It had a short life ... St James building fell to the wreckers not so long after.\textsuperscript{304}

\textit{The Nation} reported the incident anonymously some years later:

The best story is of the city premises of an international cosmetics firm, which were decorated in the stark colours of the best interior aesthetic. A few months of that and the cosmeticians as well as the customers had complained so much that the painters were called in once more to change the colour scheme.\textsuperscript{305}

Taken as a whole, wall-glazing was nonetheless an unqualified success; a significant achievement in artistic, technical and professional terms. It was Best’s consistent and distinctive modern decorative signature, before and after it became popular. Self-styled pioneer and later past master, Best considered it her most satisfying artistic achievement—‘glazes produced my original desire ... to use volume in interior design to the maximum by the excitement of bounce and

\textsuperscript{301} ibid:56.  
\textsuperscript{302} ibid:59.  
\textsuperscript{303} Sydney Morning Herald, 9.4.57 in ANG/9MHB.1, Australian House and Garden, Jan. 1959, 79.  
\textsuperscript{304} ANG/3MHB.1-3:47.  
\textsuperscript{305} The Nation, 17.10.64, 11.
reflection ... extension of and movement in space.306

Yet they were only one feature of her work, certainly not the only medium she used to achieve her aims. The furniture, fabric and fittings framed by her brilliantly coloured walls, were also emphatically modern. She was also distinguished by extensive retail and importation activity and only together did these elements comprise the sum of her impressive artistic and professional identity.

As well, wall-glazing was part of a long tradition of wall-painting and glazing which she only revived within a modern aesthetic. Her reasons for doing so must be understood as a product of her experience and context; of family, friends and fashion during the first decades of the century.

**The Professional: Marion Best and the Society of Interior Designers of Australia**

Best had begun her career as a decorator but ended it as a designer. Changing terms reflected contemporary usage. By the time she opened her Queen Street shop she consistently used the term ‘interior designer’ but her critical and popular audience preferred to use ‘decorator’ for many years.

The first public acknowledgment of her designer status was made in Sydney Ure Smith’s abortive journal *Art and Design* in 1949 which included a profile of ‘Marion Best: Interior Designer’.307 Around this time she began to seek professional recognition for herself and her peers. Along with Leslie Walford, Don Johnson, Cecily Adams, Mary White and Dr George Korody (Artes), Best worked from 1951 as a founding member of the Society of Interior Designers of Australia (SIDA) to secure national public recognition and improve professional status and standards.

The Society’s first exhibition catalogue announced their intention:

to group together all those Interior Designers who specialise in the many and varied fields of the profession and to work as a body to promote and effect a better standard of design ... the Society of Interior Designers is endeavouring to help guide Australians towards a more comfortable, enjoyable and attractive way of life.308

Best’s struggle for artistic acceptance was difficult, but her quest for professional
recognition was equally fraught. Local press and public used the terms 'decorator' and 'designer' carelessly in the fifties. Ten years later 'interior designer' was the preferred term, but 'decorator' was used as a synonym. By then training and skills had been formalised in design courses in most capitals and the technical and professional ability of graduates warranted the label 'designer' in the popular mind. (See Chapter 1)

Most of her peers welcomed the prestige of the 'designer' label with its connotations of rational and scientific application of specialised skills and knowledge. Marion Best took a lead here. As a foundation member of SIDA, star pupil of early colour theorists, friend of artists, designers, architects and exponent of structural effects in interiors, Marion Best was not content with the tag 'decorator' and maintained a strong, consistent commitment to the term 'designer'. She worked in close cooperation with craftsmen and professionals and by the end of her career was described as an "interior architect". Her description of her work at an architect's convention in 1956 portrayed a designer rather than a decorator. 'We look on designing for interiors as a medium in its own right.' Marion referred to 'space relationships', 'horizontal and vertical planes':

our use of colour pattern and texture have structural value ... and are never ... features in themselves. Most rooms architecturally have a natural axis—they may pivot round their windows, fireplaces or built-in bookshelves. If they haven't we create it or they remain meaningless boxes ... this axis is provided with a feeling for structure and not just an artificially contrived feature.

The shift from decorator to designer was more important to Marion Best than some of her peers because she was a representative of international modernity. Colleagues who recreated conventional or period interiors did not rely as heavily on scientific rationalism, functionalism and innovation for their reputation. Yet these were compulsory qualities for the international modernist and the tag 'designer' evoked them much more effectively than 'decorator.'

In 1958 Best stated that at least two or three years of architectural or design training was essential background for interior design:

Experience has shown us that the best type of background for the would-be Interior Designer is an Architecture course—or at least the first two or three years of it ... the inside of the house is part of the whole and it is essential that the person who has charge of the job is capable of doing accurate scale drawings.

309 *Sunday Telegraph*, 15.10.72, 128.
310 HHT/MHB/G:i:1-5.
311 *Daily Mirror*, 1.5.58. Her comments reflected her training and acquaintance with architecture and design. Some commentators made a great deal of her wish to pursue architecture as a career. Evidence of this youthful aspiration is ambiguous. In
She considered architects as colleagues, but many architects did not share her view and held 'decorators' at a distance.312 Yet as mentioned in Chapter 1 some interchange took place and attempts were made in the fifties to demarcate their responsibilities.

When Margaret Lord was unavailable for the annual convention of Australian architects in 1956, Marion Best was invited to serve as the spokesman for her profession. The invitation came from friends and colleagues in the architectural profession, namely Sir Roy Grounds, Gavin Walkley and Robin Boyd.313

Best was petrified by an invitation to address the architectural establishment but proceeded on her husband's insistence.314 Her address described her understanding and application of spatial and structural principles in the creation of functional and practical interiors. It was paraphrased in the special publication issued to mark the success of the Adelaide Convention.315 Afterwards she felt it had contributed to the opening of crucial inter-professional dialogue:

I look back still with much gratitude to the architects who were responsible for my small part of that convention. It gave me fresh courage for the future and it was extraordinarily open minded and generous of the architectural profession to do something so radical.316

Marion Best's role and approach to the interface between architects and interior designers illustrates broader trends. Her obsequiousness revealed widespread professional insecurity amongst interior designers during this decade of changing roles and status. It also underlines the contemporary ascendance of the architectural profession. It serves as evidence of the importance she and her society ascribed to the qualities perceived in architects—namely, rational and scientific means and methods. Like her art, her professional ideas and practices were contemporary; of the moment, modern.

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312 See Chapter 1, pages 15-16.
313 HHT/MHB/G.
314 John Hall Best was a prominent member of the Australian dental profession and a leading participant in formal professional associations throughout his career.
316 ANG/3MHB.1-3:45.
Professional Exhibitions and the 'Best' style:
Best's many private commissions received little publicity although some of her most prominent clients' homes were featured in design and decoration journals and coffee table books.\(^\text{317}\) In fact, her own homes received more attention. Successive redecorations at 'The Grove' regularly featured in profiles of her life and work in the popular press and decorating journals throughout her career.\(^\text{318}\) (Frontispiece, Figs 20, 21) Her ski-lodge 'Moonbah' at Thredbo was also widely admired; well reviewed in local and international journals like *Vogue* and *Domus*.\(^\text{319}\) (Figs 24, 25)

The rooms she designed for SIDA Exhibitions (organised to benefit various charities during the fifties and sixties) were probably her most emphatic personal artistic statements and the best known. Successive contributions represented her unhindered aesthetic, her ideal compositions. Here, Best expressed her design fantasies, untroubled by client specifications, budgets, or market demands and bound by the nature of the event to produce a strong, unequivocal identity statement. Her exhibition rooms clearly marked her as the modernist, if not the futurist amongst her fellow exhibitors and SIDA peers.\(^\text{320}\)

Best's first SIDA exhibition room 'The White Room,' designed in 1953, combined diverse pieces and sources. Australian furniture by Clement Meadmore, etched tiles by Douglas Annand, 'tweed' wallpaper from England, a painting by Sidney Nolan—'Drought'—and fine cream curtaining from France were tied together with vibrant wall glazes.

Later exhibition rooms featured decorative wall murals or sculpture. In 1955, she designed her second SIDA exhibition room to evoke the 'witty and whimsical mood of the fifties' which she had just seen so eloquently expressed at the Milan

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\(^\text{320}\) The popular influence of SIDA shows is a topic worthy of separate treatment along with a history of the Society itself. Such a study would have to distinguish between different aspects of public response, consider the impact of these exhibitions on the popular view of the profession, the activity of decorating itself and its actual influence on the appearance of Australia's homes during the fifties and sixties—all complex and difficult issues to address.
Triennale. Entranced by suspended displays there, she commissioned sculpture from Gordon Andrews which emulated it and a mural from Dora Sweetapple which underlined its excitement.

The room was a popular success; it featured on the *Sun Herald* cover on 15th May, 1955. Best had combined the sculpture and mural with locally designed furniture and fabric and linked it all with glazed walls and ceilings in Prussian blue. The boldly coloured mural was particularly appropriate as the exhibition was sponsored by Taubmans, at the height of the feature wall craze and at the same time as many of Australia's first colour bureaux were established.

Best often named her exhibition rooms in accordance with her SIDA peers. Shows were given catchy titles like 'Best Dressed Rooms' or 'Rooms on View' and they featured settings created for specific local and international celebrities and their lifestyles; custom-designed 'personality' rooms. The professional and artistic profile of decorator/designers was glamorised by this association with celebrity lifestyles.

Over the twenty years in which Best contributed to public exhibitions, the public profile of the profession and popular appreciation of interior design strengthened. Attendance figures climbed, reflecting complimentary societal shifts and changing needs as well as a broader appreciation of and access to interior decoration. Although exhibitions were essentially charity fundraisers, they offered participants valuable publicity and marketing advantages and provided good newspaper copy for weeks before and after each show.

Contributors were touted by the daily press and became local design heroes and decorating stars. From the mid-fifties Marion Best was known for her consistently controversial, innovative, modern schemes. Best had marked out 'modernity' as her œuvre and although others encroached on her 'patch' from time

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321 She wrote of the Triennale:

It seemed to be the age of suspension. From the incredibly high ceiling of one of the Italian and Spanish areas a whole wall, hessian covered, was hung in the traditional everyday green glass. All on fishing line from the ceiling not from the wall, there would be a whole block of carafes, then claret jugs, decanters and so on. The block areas themselves staggered to make telling design ... In the Spanish section a heavy piece of open rhythmic shaped iron sculpture, hung from this vast height with a couple of feet from the ground by 1 single piece of piano wire; making a beautiful shadow on the floor. It was strangely still and timeless, just floating there, above the simple rush matting.

322 ANG/3MHB.1-3:42.

to time, their work never threatened her reputation or leadership in modern design.

Best's exhibition rooms typically employed a youthful and contemporary aesthetic. The label 'young modern' typified her sixties schemes just as well as it had for her first exhibition scheme in wartime in 'The Englishman's Home.' Her line-up of personalities for the sixties shows were all young artists: Australia's Gordon Andrews, international fashion plate and goddess of modernity, Mary Quant and the unconventional young composer Peter Sculthorpe. All were modern, youthful and widely identified with innovation and contemporaneity. (Figs 26, 27, 28)

Although Marion Best's schemes were consistently modern, they were rarely similar. Over forty years, what was considered 'modern' in Australia, or elsewhere for that matter, changed radically. What looked 'modern' in 1920 did not necessarily appear so in 1970. Modernity did not dictate a permanent content in her decorating in the way that adherence to a specific period style would have. Instead it demanded continual change; contemporaneity and innovation was compulsory if Best was to be consistently modern.

Between 1950 and 1970, modernism demanded functional and minimalist design, the progressive elimination of excess and simultaneous elevation of lean, spare, essential forms in all design fields. Best's schemes from the thirties and forties would not have been regarded as modern then. Her first exhibition room for the Red Cross in 1941 looked quite different from the space age interior that represented Peter Sculthorpe's den in 1971. Classic wooden furniture, wool carpeting, wallpaper and fabric curtains were replaced in her œuvre by metal and synthetic furniture, acrylic shag pile, glossy painted walls, an electronic mural and curtaining in 'mylar' aluminium foil.

Yet as different as they could be, these show rooms were both modern. The design constants, contemporaneity and innovation, served their good purpose. Historically specific secondary qualities, like functionalism, minimalism, eclecticism and internationalism, featured differently in each, but both rooms expressed Best's modernity. Their differences reflected the different societies in which they were created. Internationalism was more evident in the Sculthorpe Room of 1971 than the Englishman's Home of 1942 and this highlights Australia's contemporary circumstances rather than a change in Best's fundamental style.

Few of Best's peers shared her modernity and many specialised in 'period' or
'national' styles. Marion therefore commanded a professional advantage for most of her career because of her 'modernity': because the principles which underlay it—contemporaneity, rationalism and functionalism—were also part of the rationale behind professionalisation. Other decoration or design principles, including 'fashion' and 'taste' had a perennial appeal, but these modern principles, particularly rationalism and functionalism, reigned and were crucial for any claim to semi-scientific or expert professional standing at the time.

324 Lesley Walford and Merle de Boulay both adhered rigidly to specific period styles. Walford made much of his expertise with 18th century French Provincial furniture. Walford, 20.2.91.

325 Marion used them too even though they contradicted modern principles of scientific rationalism to some extent.
CHAPTER 5: 

MARION BEST PTY LTD: The Enterprise of Marion Best

Marion Hall Best's artistic achievements reflected her times. Her aesthetic had to do with modernisation. At the height of her career this meant streamlining, functionalism, new materials, innovative forms, space, light, colour. Yet this was only one aspect of her modernity. Her professional and entrepreneurial activity complemented her modern aesthetic. Both revealed much about the society in which she worked. On the business side, the very existence and ubiquity of Marion Best Pty Ltd; the growth and expansion of an independent interior design company and an ever broadening clientele over forty years, offers evidence of the establishment of an entire industry and profession during this period.

A number of compelling portraits of Marion Best the businesswoman contradict each other in the historical account. One has her as a resourceful and effective manager of staff and money, a shrewd entrepreneur and pioneer importer. Another account with substantial informal support conveys a more erratic and even careless attitude to money. Some informants question her entrepreneurial reputation. They describe instead her extreme generosity, her sometimes ill-considered approach to money and impatience with tedious financial matters which they attribute to family loyalty and an artistic temperament.326 These contrasting accounts bear further consideration in any attempt to assess her professional experience and financial portfolio and compare her with contemporaries and peers.

The Shop:

Marion Best Pty Ltd opened its doors at 153 Queen Street, Woollahra, on the 15th September 1938. The flyer she issued explained, ‘I am expanding my work and opening a depot to show a limited range of fabrics, lamps and many other small furnishing accessories.’327 Private commissions had been handled from home but growing demand forced expansion; ‘necessity demanded that we open a small shop to provide working space ... and display for Australian designers’ work.’ Best rented a room ‘in a delightful terrace house already turned into a shop’ outside her...

326 Broughton, 30.1.91, ANG/3MHB.1-3:60, Vogue (Australia), Apr./May 1968, 120.
327 ANG/9MHB.1:1.
front gate, for one pound per week.\footnote{328}

She was forced to ‘put the shop on ice’ during the war which soon followed,\footnote{329} but never closed completely. She and her artist friend Mary Tooth juggled shifts at the shop with war work at the De Havilland aircraft factory.

Marion Best Pty Ltd was one of the first modern design studios in Sydney.\footnote{330} During its life it became a notorious ‘venue’; regarded nationally and eventually internationally, as an authoritative index of the latest modern trends in interior design which Best gleaned from overseas buying trips. Social pages and decorating reviews described its display with curious admiration. In her newspaper column ‘Dots and Dashes’ in the early fifties ‘Andrea’ enthused:

only in Copenhagen and perhaps in the heart of San Francisco have I seen any thing quite so stunning in the same style as Marion (Lady Hall) Best in Woollahra ... a one time shoddy old terrace is now the most modern studio in Sydney.\footnote{331} (Fig. 30)

Best opened another outlet in Rowe St—inner city hub of artistic and cultural activity—in 1949. It was a small art gallery and studio, stocking an eclectic mixture of \textit{objets d'art} and interior accessories in contrast to the design studio and office located in Queen St.\footnote{332} (Fig. 31)

Shopfronts were an important part of Marion Best’s marketing and promotion for forty years of trading. She gave her display priority. It was crucial for her reputation as an antipodean representative of metropolitan modernity. She relied on Mary Andrews, whom she described as a ‘great artist at display ... with a natural knowledge of design’\footnote{333} for ‘witty and ingenious’ window displays which were a drawcard. Her shops were the first and primary point of contact between

\footnotetext[328]{ANG/3MHB.1-3:9.} 
\footnotetext[329]{ibid.} 
\footnotetext[330]{Best’s shop at 153 Queen St was not the only design studio established in postwar Sydney which purported to define modern ‘taste’ and ‘style’ for its audience. Artes Studios, run by Dr George Molnar and Kalmar Interiors in Rowe St were amongst her few competitors in the ‘modern’ \textit{œuvre}. In the fifties the market remained small and Marion Best Pty Ltd held its secure position. \textit{Australian House and Garden}, May 1953, 63, NSW Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, ‘Interview notes’ in Miscellaneous Files, 1986-1991: Kalmar, Steven.} 
\footnotetext[331]{ANG/9MHB.1:42.} 
\footnotetext[332]{In its cover story on Rowe St in 1953—‘the most picturesque thoroughfare in Sydney’ \textit{Pix} featured a large photograph of two of Sydney’s ‘darlings’ perusing the Marion Best window. The caption, ‘Glamorous top model June Mallett and Ron Levy (both recently returned from Europe) look in Marion Best’s Art Shop’ underlines its image as a sort of arty salon. \textit{Pix}, 2.5.53, 23. In her journal, Best noted: Rowe St always attracted young talented designers who would bring their work in ... good and bad of course but Dora Sweetapple was very knowledgeable and we had many contacts. ANG/3MHB.1-3:48. See also Pearson, \textit{op.cit}, n.p.} 
\footnotetext[333]{ANG/3MHB1-3:9.}
Best and her clients. They were also diversions for Saturday afternoon strollers; a showpiece to which the public were drawn to partake vicariously of trends they dared not follow.334

The Queen St shop took over the small terrace and interiors were remodelled every decade. The building was first renovated years before, but Marion Best's first shop 'facelift' was in 1950. Both outlets were rejuvenated in preparation for the first imports she had arranged in Europe the year before. She launched them at the Queen Street shop with an Exhibition 'A Walk through Europe' and a reception attended by Sydney's socialites, artists and designers.335

(Fig. 30)

Six years later Gordon Andrews, designer, friend and colleague, redesigned the shop and offices and furnished with lean, sculptural furniture and fittings.336 (Fig. 32) Ten years later Marion commissioned the young architect Peter Hall to redesign again. More structural alterations expanded shop-space and areas were linked with broad arches and a huge ground floor mirror. The old terrace was now typical sixties Pop Modern—all white interiors with lots of spherical shapes and contrasting, colourful furnishings and fabrics—Asian, Eastern and Scandinavian accents against the futurism of leading Italian, American and Scandinavian design.337 The sixties studio was recognised internationally and renowned British

334 Broughton, 20.2.91.
335 The Daily Telegraph's women's pages reviewed the opening in December:
GOOD TASTE CORNER: ... Marion Hall Best's exhibition in Queen St Woolahra of things to beautify the dwelling and therefore the mind ... I wandered from room to room in a crescendo of exclamation as my eye lit upon one and another example of the best that is being done in modern design and decor in Europe. Daily Telegraph, 6.12.50, in ANG/9MHB.1:13.

Best also redecorated at Rowe Street:
I took a successful walk down Campbell Street looking for Chinese newspapers—choosing those with plenty of advertising ... in red large scale print scattered through the black and white. We had it hung as wallpaper in the tiny office section and it all looked fun and different! ANG/3MHB.1-3:28.

336 ANG/3MHB.1-3:48.

Gordon did clever things—he painted the too high ceiling of the important room and display window black ... suspended floating rectangles of various sizes ... glazed in ... aquamarine ... The main wall ... was glazed in deep Indian yellow behind the long black narrow table suspended by brass ceiling pendant supports ... Over the table a large painting by Frank Hodgkinson ... Surrealist ladies busts with open headed tops for daisies looked well on the suspended black table ... criss cross wire fitments for the masses of wallpapers and so on. ANG/3MHB.1-3:48.

The Rowe St shop was also remodelled:
we pulled out all static fitments from the window ... brainwashed by the Triennale's approach to display ... we organised blocks of suspended merchandise from the ceiling giving a more sculptural movement ... floating in space instead of on fixed shelving—Dora did ... brilliant displays ... Rowe St ... became very alive and advanced with a new Exhibition every week. ANG/3MHB.1-3:48

337 The architectural journal, Cross Section announced:
decorator Mary Gillatt claimed it was one of the world’s finest.\textsuperscript{338} (Fig. 33)

By the sixties Marion Best Pty Ltd was advertising widely in home and decorating journals. The furniture, fabrics, giftware and household accessories retailing at Queen St were regularly included in the decorating schemes they published as examples for the Australian home decorator. Combined with frequent newspaper reports and ‘Women’s Pages’ features on openings, launches and latest trends on show in the window, these journal features and Marion Best’s advertising kept the shop in the public eye for most of the period.

The Staff:

After the war, Marion Best and Mary Tooth were joined in the shop by family, friends and associates. There was no attempt to establish formal staff structures or relationships. Mary Tooth, Isobel Craig and Marion’s sister Dora Sweetapple formed a core of loyal staff. Staffing was ‘ad hoc’ and remuneration was often disregarded ‘for the love of it’ by family, friends and artists motivated by loyalty or the novelty of ‘playing shop’. All of Marion’s early associates, Mary Tooth, Isobel Craig, Eula Bronowski, her daughter Deirdre and her niece Janet Single (née Halliday) corroborate this picture of a loosely organised and committed staff who disregarded remuneration during and after the war.\textsuperscript{339}

The small, informal nature of the enterprise militated against formal staffing policies. As well, conventions about women’s work were tenacious. War work was acceptable as patriotic duty; running a shop or business after the crisis was more questionable.\textsuperscript{340} In Sydney’s eastern suburbs a working wife invited stigma; casting doubt on her husband’s ability to provide an adequate standard of living as judged by exceedingly sensitive social indicators of fluctuating wealth and

\begin{quote}
Gillatt reported:

The shiny white aesthetic comes to Sydney! ... At Marion Best’s, a warren of tiny rooms has been converted by arches to form a series of separate but intimately related spaces ... Walls ... in shiny white paint with glazed ceilings in chartreuse, mango and vermilion ... a light stair in steel with terrazzo treads and oiled pine handrail leads upstairs ... Tatami covers the floor and arched mirrors create a positive Casbah of arched space. \textit{Cross-Section} 1.1.69, in ANG/9MHB.1.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{338} Gillatt reported:

In Sydney, Marion Best’s Shop at Woollahra, with its cool display, its clear coloured glazes, its stock of international fabrics and furniture, particularly Italian, its Architectural fibreglass planters and good looking McGuire cane furniture is still the best small area of its kind I have seen anywhere in the world. \textit{Australian Home Journal}, Aug. 1972, 22-23.

\textsuperscript{339} Tooth, 19.2.91, Craig, 19.2.91, Bronowski, 22.11.91, Broughton, 30.1.91, Single, 20.2.91.

prestige. The taint of ‘the market’ had to be reckoned with and helps to explain the subtle resistance to formal staffing arrangements and remuneration in the shop.

At first, staffing operated on a sort of ‘family’ model. The close circle of friends, relatives and associates which staffed the shop during the first decades widened during the sixties to include graduates from Australia’s first interior design courses. Some of Best’s staff were privately tutored but many were the first of East Sydney Technical College graduates or the architects she preferred.

Staff numbers expanded in the late fifties and sixties. A core of about a dozen qualified staff supported an increasingly wealthy and optimistic clientele. Staff numbers reflected workload as it fluctuated during the fifties and sixties, but relations apparently remained as informal and friendly as they had been amongst the ‘hotch potch handful’ of earlier years. By the late sixties journals reported a staff of sixteen. Other estimates ranged between 10 and 23. Numbers tapered off as Marion Best began to wind operations down in the early seventies.

Rowe Street closed in the early sixties; thereafter Best consolidated operations in her expanded Queen Street premises. Staffing was stratified after a management review in the late fifties. Juniors and seniors were assigned different responsibilities.

342 Dora Sweetapple, her artist sister, ran the Rowe St store almost single-handed during the fifties and her daughter Deirdre became her architectural consultant after her graduation in 1956. Her niece Janet Single was another key staff member. Also trained as an architect, Janet worked in the Queen St office during the late fifties and sixties, but remembers her earliest days there as a school-girl helping out in the shop during her holidays. Mary Andrews, then wife of one of Marion’s favourite designers, Gordon Andrews, was friend and staff member. She came and went as she pleased, enjoying Marion’s unequivocal support. Neighbours, friends, and friends of neighbours’ friends served as shopgirls on vacations from Frensham or Abbotsleigh. Caroline Knott corroborates the local, family flavour of the Queen St shop she worked in during the late fifties. Single, 20.2.91, Knott, 9.7.91. Andrews, 19.2.91, ANG/3MHB.1-3:48.
343 A few private ventures had operated throughout the fifties but these courses tended to offer general art training or advice for the home decorator rather than any specific design training. This arrived in the sixties when Phyllis Shillitto and Mary White established their schools of interior design. Australian House and Garden, Oct. 1956, 54, McGrath, ‘op.cit’, 106.
344 Marion preferred staff with an architectural background; ‘I prefer them to have done architecture ... they’ve got to realise it’s space they’re dealing with’ but was content with design graduates, ‘Phyllis Shillitto or Mary White ... run the best design schooling.’ HHT/MHB/A:107.
345 Broughton, 30.1.91, 20.2.91, Hall Best, 29.1.91.
346 Higham, ‘op.cit’, 17.
347 Mode, June 1984, 27.
roles. Juniors—unqualified friends or inexperienced design graduates—served in the shop, advising clientele on merchandise and straightforward measuring and estimation. Their duties were mundane: cleaning and dusting, waiting on clients, running errands, and providing background support for large, lucrative private commissions. This was an apprenticeship for young graduates awaiting promotion to the positions for which they were trained. One remembers her 'apprenticeship' clearly; 'Ma'am was absolutely meticulous about shop display ... everything had to be perfect ... fresh flowers every day and woe betide the one who missed the dead fly in the window.'

Once qualified juniors had established their credentials in the shop, they were slowly initiated into the complexities of the design business. Commonly they were attached to experienced staff working on specific accounts. They would shadow 'Ma'am' or a senior designer, witnessing client liaison, the planning and execution of a project, assisting with elementary duties and 'learning by doing'. Over approximately eighteen months they acquired the experience and repertoire of skills deemed necessary for the independent role of a senior designer.

Exactly what this repertoire of design skills consisted of was never formally defined. It changed according to client demand and contemporary design wisdom but Best enforced her finely honed aesthetic and technical standards carefully. Ex-staff speak of her impeccably high standards—some venture dogmatism—in design and presentation.

It is possible to discern a gradual tightening of technical standards and attention to detail in working papers which survive. Many commissions only involved refurbishment or one-room makeovers and did not receive the same attention as large commissions. Yet by the mid-sixties formal plans and samples

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348 McElvenny, 18.6.91. Mardi McElvenny began as a junior but graduated to senior designer status in the late sixties.

349 ibid.

350 ibid.

351 Mardi McElvenny corroborates this description and the precision enforced by 'Ma'am's watchful eye. ibid.

352 Only one floorplan and a handful of working drawings remain as evidence of the design procedure followed in Marion Best's enterprise. These consist of A4 size sheets of paper with samples of fabric, rattan, carpet and colour swatches, together with skilfully executed floorplans, scheme proposals and costings or estimates. These papers were the work of staff who used them as a crucial means of negotiating final commission with clients. The storyboard which remains dates from May 1969 and consists of a board measuring 96 x 73 cm on dyeline paper with a floorplan, furniture layout and fabric samples for each room in the house. Cater, 31.1.92, HHT Site Visit Report, 'LeWarne' and HHT/MHB/1.

353 Broughton, 20.2.91, Quinn 18.6.91.
accompanied most schemes and large public and private commissions were always the subject of detailed and technically exact proposals.\textsuperscript{354} (Fig. 33, 34) Best described her practice to architects in 1956:

we start with their floor plan, whether the building is old or new, large or only one small room. We have ... blueprinted scale units, representing all the furniture we supply or recommend ... which we select and group on the plan to help the client visualise the most practical and balanced arrangement ... from this ... we prepare a layout of colour and texture samples, of wallpapers, fabrics, floor coverings ... to help the client visualise colour and understand the gradation of tone values in relation to the planes on which they will be used.\textsuperscript{355}

Despite the procedural formalities and technical discipline of later years, the ‘family model’ never disappeared completely. ‘Ma’am’ took great personal interest and responsibility for her staff, regarding them as extended family. Once young design graduates were approved, they were included in Best’s circle; artists, professionals and socialites. Their futures were thus secured by exposure to Sydney’s establishment and nouveau riche; business and professional families, comfortable eastern suburbs clientele or newly rich manufacturers, doctors, or lawyers, who were building large houses on Sydney’s northern beaches.\textsuperscript{356}

Best’s affection for her staff is evident in her memoirs. Her notes include a long list of her favourites.\textsuperscript{357} Those who still live and work in Australia corroborate the family model and recall her genuine interest in their affairs. Contemporary accounts echo this story. There are only hints of cracks in the family idyll in the inevitable discord occasioned by infrequent personality clashes or tight deadlines.\textsuperscript{358} Some contemporary accounts characterised the tightly knit staff as an elitist clique though, bound together in an aesthetic and social huddle. A Bulletin journalist ventured into the Queen St Shop in 1967 and found ‘tailored youngish women with well bred manners ... talking to customers in genteelly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[354] For example No. 7 Elizabeth St, The Regent Theatre, Wollongong and the new wing at Elanora Country Club were large projects which were fully documented.
\item[355] HHT/MHB/G'i:2.
\item[357] Anne Gyngell, Gail English, Julia McFarlane, Jacqueline Castaing, Aya Van der Heyden, Libby Bryant (Peter Hall’s wife) and Mardi McElvenny stand out from this list. The first-mentioned is now one of the most successful interior designers working in Sydney and the last reputedly Ma’am’s favourite colour artist. Others pursued successful design careers in diverse parts of the world, on the basis of their initiation under Marion Best’s wing. ANG/3MHB.1-3:notes, McPhee, 5.2.91, Broughton, 18.6.91, Knott, 9.7.91.
\item[358] McElvenny, 19.2.91, Broughton, 20.2.91, 18.6.91.
\end{footnotes}
subdued tones ... of 'divine' fabrics and 'poetic' chairs—very much the thing at the moment.359

The Stable:

Marion Best's shop began as an important outlet for young Australian furniture designers. Artist/designers like Clement Meadmore, Gordon Andrews, Douglas Annand, Elaine Haxton, Thea Proctor, Frances Burke, Amie Kingston and Dora Sweetapple among others, all received exposure in Marion's shops or commissions which they could not otherwise have anticipated in a restricted postwar climate. Best preferred their work to the conventional and generally poor quality mass-produced furniture available in Australia after the war. She believed their furniture and fabrics were simply 'the best to be had in Australia at the time.'360

Postwar reconstruction had sponsored a self-conscious attention to local conditions and style and an often uncritical belief in the solid honesty and worthiness of Australian design,361 but Marion Best did not participate in this design nationalism. Her support for Australian design and designers, although consistent for forty years of professional life, was always selective and motivated by a search for 'the best in style and taste' rather than any belief in the inherent worth of the local product.

One of her few self-consciously Australian projects was 'the Australia Room' at the Hong Kong Hilton in 1962.362 The brief was explicit—each suite was to be fitted exclusively with furniture and accessories from the neighbouring country represented. Best glazed walls olive and orange and featured sculpture by Vaughan Davidson and Clement Meadmore, traditional Aboriginal burial poles, paintings by John Coburn, Mittie Lee Brown and Leonard Hessing and ceramics by Marea Gazzard. Furniture was all designed by Gordon Andrews in Australian materials; wool upholstery, rugs and curtains were woven at Sturt Workshops in Mittagong.363 (Fig. 36) Although she received national and international praise for

359 Higham, 'op.cit', 19.
360 ANG/3MHB.1-3:8, HHT/MHB/A:20, 40, The Nation, 17.10.64, 10.
361 Lord, op.cit, 1944, 1, 3, 44, Australian Home Beautiful, Feb. 1945, 18, Birrell, 'op.cit', 30-33.
362 She was commissioned by American architects, Dale and Pat Keller, whom she had met during her travels, to design the Australian room in the International wing of the Hotel. Suites were designed for all Hong Kong's neighbours in South East Asia and the Pacific. Best was hailed as a national hero—'our best export'—for her unmistakeably Australian composition. HHT/MHB/H, South China Morning Post, 20.7.63, 7, Far East American, 22.8.63, 1, ANG/9MHB.1.
363 Best supervised the local Chinese artisans applying her rich wall glazes in 'Justin O'Brien' olive and orange. Gordon Andrews designed a hexagonal dining table in
this project, ‘the Australia Room’ and a few Aboriginal artefacts used in shop display were her only gestures towards Australian design nationalism, indigenous or otherwise.

Nevertheless her original intention in opening a shop was to provide a ‘space for the display of Australian designers’ work’, and she became an Australian hero. If she liked the work she often took substantial financial risks to produce and market it.364 Her foray into textiles in the forties was an economic disaster:

A firm called Gilkes were our screenprinters and we used calico mainly as there was nothing else ... there was a disaster which was hard to get over—Gilkes’ was burnt to the ground, we lost all our screens and original designs. Gilkes didn’t have any money either so that just had to be the end of Marion Best Fabrics—and all our loyal and helpful designers. No stock of fabrics was left ... I only had 20 yards printed at a time as these tables were small and saved too much outlay. Anyway by this time good designs could be imported and the designers made as little out of it as we did.365

Once wartime exigencies lifted, Marion Best Textiles could not compete with cheaper, traditional imports which began to resurface—while other Australian enterprises may have survived because of their indigenous novelty appeal. She was lauded for her sponsorship of young Australian designers, labelled as a pioneer:

Her original aim was a pioneering one—to bring the best in Australian design and fabric to the fore ... Marion Best ... welcomed her opportunity to promote Australian talent ... [she] ... commissioned various local artists to execute designs ... she also had her own furniture made up to artists’ designs.366

She endeared herself to designers by promoting their experimental work; sculpture and ceramics, one-offs as well as functional furniture. Those who succeeded later left the Marion Best stable to establish independent design

Queensland walnut and surrounded it with his rotating ‘spider’ chairs upholstered in kangaroo hide. A cantilevered bench seat had black and white calf skin cushions and tapered black and white calf skin stools. Marea Gazzard’s ceramic ash tray pots hung ‘in a horizontal repeat of flowing pattern round the room’ and Andrews’ ‘Rondo’ chairs and low hexagon tables served the lounge area. Upholstery, a huge coarse unspun natural sheepswool rug and fine white wool sheer screens on doors were all woven at Sturt Workshops in Mittagong. ANG/3MHB.1-3:62.

364 Broughton, 30.1.91. She would often underwrite risky production runs for furniture designs or commission pieces from young anonymous artists and craftspeople for her display. See also ANG/3MHB.1-3.

365 HHT/MHB/A:184.

366 Sunday Mirror, 4.7.62, Daily Mirror, 20.4.61. A brochure included in the University of Sydney’s Architectural Bulletin that year elaborated:

In the early years and just after the war, the then very young Australian industrial designers supplied the firm with their first furniture. The firm depended on Gordon Andrews with his brilliant and prolific ability to produce furniture and whimsical accessories—a designer indeed of world standard ... Clement Meadmore contributed much then as now in furniture, sculpture and mobiles, in designs which have been very influential on those today. ANG/10MHB.1:3.
profiles. In the sixties Gordon Andrews and Clement Meadmore were both dismissive of early furniture design efforts, regarding them as expedient postwar survival strategies.367 (Fig. 37, also 27, 36)

Other local advertising, theatre and graphic design artists were commissioned to produce or inspire some of Marion’s more ambitious schemes for her wealthier clients, for shop display or for one of her SIDA showpieces. She used paintings, murals and ceramics by artists from Merioola and young aspirants such as Elaine Haxton and Douglas Annand.368

Marion Best was probably the first and certainly amongst Andrews’ earliest outlets (Horderns and Farmers soon caught on); she was the first to sell Clement Meadmore’s furniture in Sydney. Meadmore Originals, Catalogue, 26pp, Pacific Printing Company, Melbourne, c.1953. Historic Houses Trust NSW, Resource Centre Library, Lyndhurst, Glebe. Architecture and Arts, no.5, July 1953, 1. Australian House and Garden, Mar. 1954, 11, Mar. 1955, 41.

Andrews and Meadmore went on to pursue active careers in art or design. Andrews travelled widely, worked and trained in Britain and Europe and was acclaimed for his work for Olivetti. He returned to Australia in 1954 and worked with David Jones, Olivetti and various governments, the Commonwealth and Reserve Banks. His fame was secured by the commission to design Australia’s new decimal currency in 1966.

His innovative popular furniture was now marketed by ‘top of the range’ manufacturers and was regarded as ‘the latest in Australian Contemporary Design’. Andrews’ furniture was ubiquitous in doctors’ surgeries and advertising agencies by the late fifties and early sixties; his ‘Rondo’, ‘Spider’ and ‘Gazelle’ chairs have now passed into Australia’s furniture design canon as icons of early antipodean achievement. Art and Design 1, 42-43, Australian House and Garden, June 1957, 26-27, HHT/NSW, Newsletter, no.25, 1990, Vogue (Australia), Mar. 1966, 136. Andrews left the anonymity of postwar furniture design behind. He regarded himself as ‘an all-rounder ... master of design’ but remained fiercely possessive of those furniture pieces which became icons. Caban, G., A Fine Line: a History of Australian Commercial Art, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1983, 73-78, NSW Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences/Miscellaneous Files, 1986-91: ‘Andrews, Gordon’. HHT/NSW, op.cit, 1990, 3.

Meadmore travelled too. Leaving a modest but successful contemporary furniture business in 1963 for ‘the art world he wanted’ in New York, he remembers, ‘in those days there was a pressure about an Australian Style which I never believed in.’ Field, M., ‘Being There’ in Vogue (Australia), Sydney, Nov. 1990, 142. Meadmore always preferred free sculpture to furniture design and the drudgery and difficulty of manufacture in a backward climate. Architecture and Arts, June-July, 1958, 64-65. He achieved fame with his prizewinning sculpture for the Mexico Olympics in 1968 and settled eventually in New York as an internationally successful sculptor.

Douglas Annand and Elaine Haxton worked extensively with Marion Best. Douglas Annand was a well known commercial artist by the time of their association; Elaine Haxton was still an unknown decorative and advertising artist re-establishing her profile after extensive overseas travel and work experience. Art and Design 1, 27-29, Art in Australia, 1.6.42, 85-86. Paintings by Sydney Nolan, Donald Friend, Loudon Sainthill and Justin O’Brien were centrepieces for many interior schemes. Douglas Annand’s tiles, Meadmore and Andrews’ sculptures, ceramics by Muriel Medworth and Marea Gazzard, murals by Dora Sweetapple all featured in shop display, in important public commissions and interior design exhibitions. The room she designed for Peter Sculthorpe for the 1971 SIDA show featured an electronic musical sculpture designed and constructed by artist/sculptor Jack Meyer. A perspex shell revealed the vivid internal electrical apparatus; in fact, a giant cassette player.
Her philanthropic nurturing of young and innovative staff and designers continued throughout the fifties and sixties. Though her young aspirants were usually successful, their success was often the result of her sponsorship; beneficiaries of her generous, some would venture foolhardy retailing, especially in early years. This and the substantial financial risks she took producing their work, qualifies her reputation as a shrewd businesswoman and entrepreneur.

Clients:

Marion Best’s clients completed this exclusive and loyal circle. Her first projects were usually favours for friends and family during the Depression, an extension of her personal interest and training in art and design and her own success with No 3 ‘The Grove’.369

Even her first large commissions were secured through personal associations. She was a member of the Elanora Country Club and the invitation to refurbish it came from friends on the Board. The Queen’s Club Cocktail Bar and the Royal Exchange Club were commissioned by acquaintances and her first professional project, a block of flats at No. 7 Elizabeth Street, was arranged by the same influential friend who had secured the Elanora commission, Thynne Reid.370

Public and private commissions overlapped. Wealthy, influential and loyal clients, friends and family were an important ingredient of her early success. They provided contacts for large projects like the refurbishment of St Andrews College, Sydney University, and the Elizabeth Arden Salon, as well as private projects and secured her strong commercial base for forty years.371

Best handled hundreds of commissions and clients. In the thirties her private clients were peers; young eastern suburbs professionals, society and family friends or artists. Most were young enough or courageous enough to sponsor innovation,
while operating within comparatively modest Depression or wartime budgets. During the fifties they formed a secure, prosperous if now conservative core.

Clients were not all exclusive or prosperous. Postwar recovery, building boom and retail expansion brought a more diverse clientele from Sydney’s professional middle class. They had a youthful and status-seeking response to the new ‘modern’ aesthetic touted by the home and design journals. The identity of hundreds of these clients is lost, as is the audience who partook vicariously through design journals and shop windows.

Yet some names appear repeatedly in Best’s memoirs and contemporary literature. When private clients prescribed anonymity, she guarded it fiercely on ethical and professional grounds. Not all were publicity-shy. Nan Warren, Peter Playfair, the Northams, Coles, Stewarts, Marcus-Millers, Murray-Walkers, Buckinghams, Fairfaxes, Symonds, Fells, Foysters, Horderns, Blaxlands, Dame Zara Holt and latecomers to the fold, the Crebbins all had their interiors published and attributed.

The Crebbins are a good example of the prosperous clients who formed the firm financial base for Best’s work. She furnished and refurnished their mansion ‘Penhallow’ with her most innovative, extrovert and expensive international imports throughout the sixties. Their cooperation and mutual respect never faltered in an unusually close and consistent association. Best remembered them as generous and sympathetic patrons:

with this family, one never stated the obvious, the mind was fully stretched ... they were such generous people and had us looking after so many of their relatives on both sides ... it was [an] enriching experience working with a client who so readily and generously gave opportunities to the artists ... [who] could add so much to ... these jobs.

Marion refurbished their first, relatively modest home in Chatswood. They then built ‘Penhallow’ at Castlecrag in Sydney’s northern suburbs and transformed it into an ever-changing Marion Best display. The original house on

372 Broughton, 30.1.91, 10.12.91.
374 The Crebbin’s interiors were featured regularly in the decorating press. Hayes and Hersey, op.cit, 132, HHT/Site Visit Reports, ‘Crebbin’, Quinn, 31.1.91.
375 Crebbin was an avid art collector and ran a gallery from the basement of ‘Penhallow’. The work of Robert Klippel, Leonard French, Bernard Lessing, Meadmore, Andrews and Vaughan Davidson was often the key for Marion’s schemes for the family. Crebbin, 20.2.91, Hall Best 29.1.91, Hall Best, ‘Crebbin Typescript’:1, 3.
this site was a fairly modest Cape-Cod American lookalike, which she altered, extended and refurbished under Richard Crebbin’s direction into a large expansive beachside house with a private art gallery beneath and a separate guest cottage/studio. White fibreglass and metal furniture from Knoll in New York, leather and glass from Milan, blinds and fabrics from Asia and Scandinavia transformed what might otherwise have become a nondescript Australian family home. In the literature it became an icon; a favourite image of the Marion Best approach. (Fig. 38)

Dick Crebbin was the Managing Director of Marrickville Holdings and he commissioned Best to remodel his Randwick headquarters in 1962. (Fig. 39) The project launched her expansion into office and commercial design in the sixties boom. Best attracted many corporate clients including Clyde Industries, Lorne Scott in Toorak, Melbourne and Lend Lease in Gordon. Marion also furnished leisure and sporting venues. These commissions began in the late fifties and proliferated in the sixties. A chain of ten-pin bowling alleys and the Lobby Restaurant in Canberra, then known for its parliamentary clientele, were but two of her valuable clients.

Though her monied clients could often afford the most exclusive furniture she imported, Best did not maximise her opportunity, as she rarely if ever charged for her services but merely received a commission on goods sold. Design advice, the arrangement and procurement of goods came free as part of the service: installation costs and the purchase of furnishings were the clients’ only responsibility and Best received her ‘cut’ there. This apparent generosity is explained by many informants as either an old fashioned distaste for mercenary means or her customary impatience with financial concerns. Whichever, her policy on charging for services does little to support the notion that Best was a shrewd or prosperous entrepreneur.

376 HHT/Site Visit Report, ‘Crebbin’, Quinn, 14.11.91.
377 Most office environments received a quieter treatment than her most emphatic statements at exhibitions or for other public venues. Nevertheless, the distinctive wall glazing and use of imported fabric and fittings still marked her achievements in this field. HHT/MHB/B, Hall Best, ‘Crebbin typescript’:3. See also HHT/MHB/ B/20, 21, 27.
378 The Brunswick Bowl at St Leonards was furnished with Bertoia’s skin and bone chairs, large Marimekko hangings, rattan temple blinds and a monumental sculptured bar by Gordon Andrews. The Lobby received quieter treatment with Scandinavian and Asian wallpapers and furniture. See MHB, ‘Crebbin typescript’: 3-5, Canberra Times, 29.6.68, at HHT/MHB/A/91. See also HHT/MHB/B/24.
379 Broughton, 30.1.91, 18.6.91, Hall Best, 29.1.91.
Imports:

The Australian context in which Marion Best began her career was certainly different to that in which she ended it. A small provincial public had changed substantially. Wartime austerity was succeeded by a chauvinistic drive for domestic reconstruction which was replaced by an optimistic thirst and unanimous drive for reorientation and participation on the world stage, for knowledge and experience of developments in Europe and America. This was accompanied by growing awareness of southeast Asia. The extent and reasons for this national reorientation have been suggested. They lie beyond the scope of this study, but involved a complete restructuring of Australia's economic and demographic profile, and its political, social and cultural institutions.

Marion Best emulated these shifts. After the war she replaced her exclusive preference for English and European decoration with fascination for American design and Asian materials. She staked out a claim as Australia's pioneer importer, bringing 'the best from overseas' to enlighten her antipodean clientele—consistently 'first off the mark' with the latest from the metropolis. She was

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380 The attraction of the metropolis was not new. It was evident from colonisation amongst artists who yearned to rediscover their cultural heritage and to participate in its authoritative institutions. In the decades following World War II, Australian artists were still entranced by its authority. They all took extended working holidays in Britain, Europe or later, America and sought news of latest overseas developments. Keith Dunstan's monthly reports of American design shows and competitions, architecture and town planning in Australian Home Beautiful during the late forties and early fifties provide evidence of this interest. Australian Home Beautiful, Mar. 1950, 34-35, June, 15-17. Pringle, op.cit, 178, Serle, op.cit, 178-179. The Vietnam War was pivotal in this regard. It persuaded the broader Australian populace of Australia's proximity to the South East Asian world and its problems. See also White, op.cit, 168-169.


382 Best's training was international in focus. The philosophy informing modern international trends and developments were clearly an advance on most Australian efforts at the time. In fact it is almost meaningless to attempt comparison, so derivative were Australia's home decorating and design efforts. HHT/MHB/C/ii, in particular, lessons 12-22; see also her travel diary, HHT/MHB/E and autobiography, ANG/3MHB.1-3:13, 19-20.

383 A browse through the advertising portfolio in papers housed with the Historic Houses Trust at HHT/MHB/H:1-58, gives the best picture of this consistent and emphatic projection of the enterprise as the Australian importer par excellence. See also Vogue's Guide to Living, no.1, Summer 1967, 6, no.2, Winter 1968, 109, Sun-Herald, 22.7.69, Australian Home Journal, Mar. 1970. She related her memory of the import business in 1981:

I set off alone all over the world with ... very little money and bought everything ... from modern furniture to the handicrafts and glass in Europe ... launched the great Florence Knoll ... all the European designers—Magistretti and the lot (we were to launch them here)—we ploughed everything back into the business so we could buy the most exciting designers from all over Europe and the USA ... Finland we discovered ... we introduced Russell Whitechurch to Finland. HHT/MHB/A:184.
virtually peerless in her anticipation of overseas trends and proud of her reputation for introducing them to local markets and by the end of the sixties she had established a solid import business.

The press regularly reported international ‘firsts’ available exclusively from her shop.385 (Fig. 40) This was trade cliché, but Best’s claims were often accurate. She often was the first with the latest merchandise, not because she was particularly unique or inspired, but often simply because she got there first as her circumstances allowed. Her ‘firsts’ were soon picked up or copied by other Australian firms.

Marion Best began to import merchandise in 1950 after her first overseas trip. In France she secured an agent, Nanette Mahoney, and arranged contracts for French fabric and wallpaper.386 At the Milan International Fair she established an association with the Gabianelli firm and in Florence she arranged ‘a nice agent to look after me for the next twenty years’.387 In Vienna Best obtained licenses for lamps, furniture and ashtrays and crossed Austria to visit the obscure ceramicist Wittke Baudische, arranging for her terracotta angels and decorative tiles to be imported.388 In London she shopped for antiques at Crowthers for specific clients, finalised contracts with the English textile manufacturer, Sundours and bought wallpapers for the shop.389

Her search for new products for the Australian market took her on frequent trips to Europe, America, Asia and Scandinavia. Her network of agents and international professional contacts kept her informed of latest trends and she organised international buying trips to coincide with important design fairs or cultural festivals which supplemented their advice.

On her second overseas trip in 1954 she visited the Tenth Milan Triennale390

386 Chintzes and voiles from Susan Fontan, Pierre Frey and Paul Marot and coordinating wallpapers from Susan Fontan for Nobilis were complemented by ceramics, sculpture and lights from Georges Jouve and Jacques Lenoble. ANG/3MHB.1-3:14.
387 ibid.1-3:14. Gabianelli supplied her with ceramic tiles until 1970. Her agent in Florence arranged importation of traditional flower china from Tuscany and heavy green glass from Venice and Murano which she had seen at the Milan International Fair.
389 ANG/3MHB.1-3:26.
390 The Tenth Triennale was the first to incorporate industrial design within its ambit. Best was entranced by it and saw some of her most successful imports there. She
and returned home through America, visiting Florence Knoll's Showrooms in New York to arrange imports.\(^{391}\) In Los Angeles, she established an association with the furniture maker John McGuire who thence supplied his expensive rattan furniture through Marion Best in Australia and became her West Coast agent.\(^{392}\)

At the 1957 Tokyo Industrial Fair she secured direct agreements for the rattan blinds, grass wallpapers and decorative rice papers she already imported.\(^{393}\) She found a Japanese agent, Mr Nakamura from the Fuji Trading Company, who arranged imports of Noguchi paper sculptures and Akari lanterns, Japanese lacquered tableware, tatami matting and temple blinds.\(^{394}\)

Once wartime restrictions finally lifted, her first shipment of Eero Saarinen's 'pedestal' furniture range arrived from Knoll. She featured it in her '20th Century' scheme for the exhibition of 'Rare and Beautiful Things' which opened at the NSW Art Gallery the following day.\(^{395}\) (Fig. 41) Saarinen's fibreglass dining settings were soon ubiquitous in Australia's modern interiors. Although they were her discovery, exclusive rights were impossible to secure in such a small market and her monopoly was soon eclipsed.\(^{396}\) (Fig. 42)

\(^{391}\) sent Dora Sweetapple to Scandinavia to arrange for import of Marimekko fabrics.

\(^{392}\) Continuing wartime restrictions on currency, imports and exchange delayed their introduction until the early sixties.

\(^{393}\) John McGuire, Gretel Packer and Scandinavian architectural firms previously supplied her with these products.

\(^{394}\) Mr Nakamura and the trading network secured through the Fuji Trading Company was one of the most profitable and prolific for Marion during the sixties. Hall Best, 29.1.91.

\(^{395}\) The Crebbins were also waiting on the shipment for their latest redecorating project. ANG/3MHB.1-3.

\(^{396}\) Latchfords of Melbourne began Australian production the following year in association with Marion Best Pty Ltd. The *Australian Home Beautiful* announced them:

> The first Australian made pieces and settings from one of the world's most famous furniture design groups, Knoll Associates Inc., were shown to leading architects and designers in Melbourne recently ... called the "Architect Range of Furniture", it has critics as well as enthusiastic admirers ... certainly a symbol of modern design. *Australian Home Beautiful*, Oct. 1962, 59.

The same year Knoll launched their own company, Form Pty Ltd as Australian distributor and corporate consultant. Their range included Harry Bertoia's 'skin and bone' and 'diamond' chairs. Cheap Australian copies soon proliferated appearing in the 'Shopping Around' columns along with originals. *Australian Home Beautiful*, Oct. 1962, 59. See also the 'skin and bone' chair advertised in *Australian House and Garden*, Sept. 1959, 6, made by Wests in Brisbane.

Best was Knoll's first and principal Australian client. Original designs by Saarinen and Bertoia were supplemented by the work of other Knoll designers. The Warren Plattner range of furniture and Mies van Rohe's 'Barcelona' chairs were used in corporate settings but hefty price tags precluded widespread distribution. Other American furniture was introduced in the late sixties by Best's son Michael Hall Best. As Spectrum Pty Ltd, he secured exclusive rights to corporate furniture from...
She revisited Europe after the Montreal Expo in 1967 to arrange contracts with Italy's most innovative design studios. In Scandinavia she arranged for importation of exclusive designer furniture, Danish wools and Ittala glassware. These accessories were much more accessible and influential in Australia than the designer furniture she imported. In line with the contemporary trend towards informal and exotic decorating, her Japanese accessories, cane and shell from Asia and Scandinavian furnishing fabrics became extremely popular.

Her first imported fabrics were Jim Thompson's Thai silks in 'vibrant jewel-like colours' and bold checks. Later, bold Marimekko prints distinguished her decorating schemes in domestic and corporate settings. New fabrics from Asia were also popular. In the late sixties she introduced Indian fabrics designed and coloured to her individual specifications. She also imported Indian clothing Herman Miller including Charles Eames' leather armchairs. With design classics like the 'Barcelona' Chair and The Eames armchair Marion Best and Spectrum were importing a very exclusive range of furniture for a very limited clientele. Higham, 'op.cit', The Australian, 6.8.69; see also HHT/MHB/ B:18, 20, 27, 30. At the lower end of the range Saarinen's pedestal setting and Bertoia chairs were priced from $100 to $125; tables were around $350-$450. The Barcelona Chair was $755, the Plattnner range began at $525, the Eames armchair was $518 in Palisander. ANG/10MHB.1:2-5, Hall Best 29.1.91. (Fig. 42)

These included Magistretti, Scarpa, Frattini and Jo Columbo tables and chairs in leather, glass and hide. She also arranged for Flos lights which were amongst the few Italian imports with accessible prices. ANG/3MHB.1:3-69, 10MHB.1.

Askol's fibreglass 'Globe' chair made a spectacular impact in 1967. It enclosed cushions and client in a fibreglass cocoon but its exorbitant price—$A895 in 1967—precluded widespread acceptance. Higham, 'op.cit'; see also HHT/MHB/A:60-65, 77, ANG/10MHB.1 and Fig. 42.

These were competitively priced. Accessories like Ittala glass and Italian ceramics were within reach of the average House and Garden reader in the late fifties and her Asian matting and ricepaper lamps were similarly accessible in the sixties. Wentworth Courier, 15.12.65, 124, 2.10.63, Australian House and Garden, June 1957, 29, Sept. 1956, 6, Mar. 1952, 82, Australian Home Journal, 15.12.61; the last three sources are in HHT/MHB/H.

International Herald Tribune, 27.11.69, Helsingin Sanomat, June 16,1967, Suomen Sosialidemokraatti, June 16, 1967: (translations in HHT/MHB/A:50, 51). First sighted at the Milan Triennale in 1954, Marion had dispatched Dora Sweetapple to arrange for their distribution in Australia. It seems the shop was selling selected prints for many years prior to their widespread introduction in the late sixties. Broughton, 20.2.91. HHT/MHB/A:50-52.

Her source, Jim Thompson, was a rather mysterious ex-RAAF veteran who established an extremely lucrative and ever expanding trade in Thai silk after the war, which continues under his name into the present. Daily Telegraph, 30.3.67, in HHT/MHB/A:40.

They were popularised by Russell Whitechurch and Marion followed through with a range of clothing and small scale accessories from the range, rendering them one of her most accessible imports during her entire career. (Marimekko fabrics retailed for around $4.50 per yard.) ANG/10MHB, HHT/MHB/H, Hall Best, 29.1.91, 9.12.91, Byrne, 11.12.91; see also Australian Home Journal, Mar. 1972, 25.

The first range was produced for her by Webbing and Belting Co. in Gazzabad. Fabrics produced for the Indian market 'needed zip' in her opinion. HHT/MHB/A:124.
designed by a 'young and promising Indian designer', Prince Marthand Singh to compliment them.\textsuperscript{404} Singh’s work was widely publicised and popular but only reached a select market for one-off designs. Meanwhile her cheaper Indian fabrics imports received wide exposure in decorating schemes and journals, fuelling the contemporary yen for Asian exotica.\textsuperscript{405}

Marion Best always combined her imports with local designs and merchandise. When Gordon Andrews and Clement Meadmore left she recruited new artists and designers.\textsuperscript{406} Yet from the late fifties her outlook was international and her merchandise reflected international design norms. She had become one of Australia’s largest importers. Her aesthetic and role as an antipodean representative of modernity had led her overseas; a substantial importation network, supplemented by local production and distribution efforts was the inevitable result.

Although family and friends maintain she had an aversion to the tedium of financial management, her import network functioned smoothly for twenty-five years. For the first fifteen she relied on a number of accounting firms for oversight and advice. A member of staff, Mrs Hickey, discharged day-to-day bookwork. She ruled with an iron fist and subverted Best’s adventuresome approach.\textsuperscript{407} By Best’s own account financial affairs were troublesome:

\textit{the overdraft always a nightmare ... every telephone ring I expected to be the bank manager ... Rationing, quotas, coupons had been frustrating controls and often meant begging trips to Canberra ... we needed a good overhaul.\textsuperscript{408}}

Best and her daughter Deirdre consulted their own colour charts and advised Indian manufacturers. Best was ‘thrilled’ by the silks and cottons in bold colours and designs they produced for her and dubbed ‘the "M" Collection’ in her honour. \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 6.11.69, \textit{Australian Home Journal}, Feb. 1970, 31-32. ‘Fab India’ based in New Delhi, was her other supplier of Indian textiles. Byrne, 20.2.1991.

\textit{Sunday Telegraph}, 15.2.70, 101.


These included sculptors like Robert Klippel and Vaughan Davidson, architects Peter Hall and Bill Lucas, ceramicist Marea Gazzard and photographer David Moore. Moore replaced the increasingly exclusive Max Dupain as Best’s favoured photographer. She recorded each project religiously. Her one slip was the cause of considerable distress. One of her favourite commissions—for the Foysters in Queensland—was destroyed by flood before it was photographed. \textit{The Nation}, no.15, 17.10.64, 10. Broughton, 20.2.91.

Mrs Hickey’s conservatism was not always effective. It frustrated Best and smooth management. While Best was inclined to be impetuous and haphazard with financial matters, Mrs Hickey’s ‘mysterious’, subversive strategies apparently hindered efficiency altogether. Hall Best, 29.1.91.

ANG/3MHB.1-3:60.
Chapter 5

A management review in 1955 by Sam Cullen’s management consultancy established the enterprise and its growing importation network on a sound financial footing. Recommended changes were implemented gradually over the next few years. New staff and management structures were established, responsibilities were clearly delineated and business procedures rationalised and defined.

In 1960 Mrs Hickey was replaced by the young and promising accountant, Frances Byrne. Professionally trained and sympathetic with Best’s aesthetic aims, Byrne assumed major responsibility for the procedural and financial intricacies of Best’s extensive importation network, freeing her from its responsibility and worry. Thereafter Best was able to travel extensively, establishing contacts and leaving bookwork and formal financial arrangements in Byrnes’ care. Their relationship grew closer and more cooperative each year and by the late sixties few design and importation decisions were made without Byrnes’ advice.

Best’s impatience with financial management is underlined by her involvement with proposals for the Paddington Art Centre in 1964. The centre was to house diverse cultural and artistic activities, theatres, workshops and retail outlets. Best and a number of her contemporaries formed a Board of Trustees to oversee fundraising. The Orange Tree Cooperative as it was called, was bitterly disappointed by a poor response and were forced to abort their efforts and the venture.

Family and colleagues regarded it as an ill-conceived plan in which little attention was given to the realities of sound financial planning and investment in a volatile field of enterprise. Considered along with her risk-taking with young Australian designers, her involvement challenges the view that was a shrewd master entrepreneur. Best’s unease with the practical and often harsh rigidities of sound financial management and her continuing discomfort under its demands

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409 Hall Best, 29.1.91, Gyngell, 20.2.91, Byrne, 20.2.91.
410 Sydney Morning Herald, 11.12.69, ANG/3MHB.1-3:60, 82, Byrne, 20.2.91.
411 She related the story:
    We formed a group to work for raising the money and the purchase of the land ...
    Mrs. Gerbode came in ... she donated $17,000. We were all dedicated to the project.
    The story received good publicity and beautiful photos of the model of the complex of buildings and planting were published. ANG/3MHB.1-3:41.
412 HHT/MHB/332.6.PAD
413 Something of her dismay was evident in her autobiography:
    The same sad Sydney story, the conception was unconventional, it was too early (now it would be acceptable plus). We failed to get the $70,000 we were aiming for and so monies were returned. ANG/3MHB.1-3:41.
414 They were relieved to see it abandoned. Hall Best, 9.12.91, Broughton, 10.12.91.
modifies the myth which confuses an account of her life and Australia's interior design history. In its small way it also reveals that the modernisation of Australia's economy and society was not smooth, consistent or trouble free.

Just as her aesthetic and professional identity reflected her commitment to modernity, so her retail and importation network mirrored contemporary developments; the modernisation of the society of which she was part. That an Australian enterprise with comparatively modest resources could establish and sustain an importation network of such dimensions, reflects many of the important changes in Australia's economic and social structure at the time. It speaks loudly of Australia's increased participation in international fora and the growing prosperity of her populace. It marks the attitudinal changes which accompanied this postwar reorientation. A new receptiveness to the metropolis, increasingly open views, heightened consumer expectations, commodification and popularisation of the interior aesthetic were attitudinal symptoms of modernity evident in Marion Best's changing profile. Her example further refines our understanding of Australia's modernisation; in conformity and contradiction, confirming a complex phenomenon and deserves consideration in any attempt to construct a history of Australian postwar interior design and Australia's modernisation.
PART II: CONCLUSION:

MARION HALL BEST AND
AUSTRALIAN INTERIOR DESIGN: 1945-65

In March 1991, the cover of Vogue Living claimed ‘Architecture: Modernism is Hot’ and featured Greg Anderson’s house for the nineties in harbourside Sydney. Davina Jackson described it as ‘a bold vision’:

“The clarity of purpose that distinguished early Modernism is revived in this house ... composed like a cubist sculpture.”

Its ‘remarkably open and sunny’ rooms, wide corridors and overscaled steel staircase linking ‘zones’ were designed in bold colour for sequential flow in ‘intense blues and greens ... sizzling orange-red and a slash of yellow ... against a white background sharpened by black window frames.’

The same issue featured eight colour pages on a Potts Point penthouse, admiring ‘the visual feast of colour’ which had transformed an old apartment into ‘a modern artful eyrie’. Rooms ‘flowed’ and colour created ‘a sense of repetition like themes of music.’ (Fig. 44)

To an observer familiar with Marion Best’s story or the growth of modernism and modern design in Australia after the war, the script seems not to have changed. The article explained the designer’s rationale:

“Ann’s is a spontaneous and practised eye for colour, initiated, in the early sixties, during her years working with Australian colour doyen, Marion Hall Best ... The rooms flow one from another, the colours contrasting, complementing and creating “a sense of repetition like themes in music”.”

These words do not so much prove Marion Best’s abiding influence or a continuity in Australian decorating, but rather the tenacity of modernist codes constructed in postwar Australia by a fledgling profession and an industry. Its confused supports; internationalism, eclecticism, rationalism, nationalism, functionalism, consumerism and futurism persist; pillars of the doctrine of Modernism in Australia’s postwar interiors.

This doctrine is by now familiar and Marion Best’s life and work confirms

416 ibid.
417 ibid, 55-56, 61.
418 ibid, 61.
many of its themes and sources. Her social origins and circles were similar to those
described by Martin Battersby and Stephen Calloway as characteristic of emerging
quasi-professional 'lady decorators' in Europe and America: a mix of well
connected and artistic devotees of progressive, if not modern cultural forms. Best
shared their styles and methods. While there is no specific evidence that she read
the international publications of the era,\textsuperscript{419} she did read \textit{The Studio} occasionally
and her American correspondence course in the late thirties offered her a
complete education in traditional and modern decoration styles. Her early work
and design philosophies were centred on colour, taste and style rather than design,
space and structure and reflect the early influence of teachers, peers and
international models.\textsuperscript{420}

Her first public exhibitions—'An Englishman's Home' and 'A Walk Through
Europe'—showed her awareness of both contemporary European trends and
traditional decoration principles.\textsuperscript{421} Later, her emphasis on professionalisation,
her confident adoption of terms like 'space', 'structure' and her semi-scientific
colour theory, mirrored the changes of the day. Her work illustrates broader
trends nicely; particularly in her move away from elitist notions of 'taste', 'style'
and the practice of mixing modern and antique, towards a more democratic belief
in learnt principles of design, adherence to professional ideas and practices, to
colour theory, architecture and modern style.

Marion Best was never the consummate business person or importer many
would have us believe, but her search for and establishment of domestic and
international markets also mirrored national trends. Her postwar reorientation
towards America from Europe and thence to Asia, back to Scandinavia, Italy and
South America, all reflect contemporary international patterns.

Although publicly hailed as a pioneer importer, her alleged leadership was

\textsuperscript{419} For example Derek Patmore's works on Modern Decoration, also Ionides' and
Carrington's works referred to earlier or comparable American books and journals.
See Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{420} For example, her interest and tastes in flower arrangement coincided with Constance
with those of her peers and her teacher, Thea Proctor on page 50 of Blaxland's book
with international leaders like Constance Spry, seen for instance in Calloway, \textit{op.cit},
258.

\textsuperscript{421} Her 'Classic Modern Room' for David Jones' Exhibition 'An Englishman's Home' in
1941 and early schemes in the Queen St shop resembled well publicised rooms by
Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell of the Omega Workshops in Britain and Syrie
Maugham, Elsie de Wolfe and other international luminaries discussed by Stephen
Calloway in impressive detail in \textit{Twentieth Century Interior Design}. Compare
Marion's 'Classic Modern Room', (Fig. 19) with those included in Calloway, \textit{op.cit},
234.
almost certainly part of shifts in the national economic and trading profile and her own socioeconomic circumstances. There is even something eloquent in her uneasy assumption of these new financial roles which reflected the broader national unease with the economic roles Australia assumed as a participant in new international fora.

However it is not enough to use Marion Best’s career as a mirror of contemporary trends. Her experience diverged significantly from major themes and this is as important as the similarities between her case and the general history. She never shared the ardent nationalism of peers. Her only concession was her occasional attention to light and climate and she only used this as an argument between different international sources—against the heavy materials of the old world and towards American or Asian imports—rather than as an argument for anything uniquely Australian. Her disagreement with local wisdom here offers insight into the unevenness and fragility of national identity in postwar Australia.

**Colour, Internationalism and Modernity: Marion Best’s Philosophy, Postwar Interior Design and Modernisation**

Marion Best used colour in a consistent way for forty years while national and international trends shifted. Her palette revealed her origins and the milieu in which her modernist aesthetic took shape—in Sydney during the twenties and thirties. Her aesthetic was shared at times in her career by parts of a diversifying market and audience. Her exuberant colours were anathema in a sober wartime climate or in purist postwar reconstruction but were followed later in the colour frenzy of the fifties and celebrated and copied as high style modernism in the sixties. Then her aesthetic triumphed, and was incorporated into popular parlance for a relatively short period of her forty-year practice.

The association between colour, internationalism and modernity in Best’s work offers an insight into the nature of modernism and Australia’s modernisation. The popularity of Best’s palette, glazes and imported furniture in the sixties were not a salute to her personal artistic genius or inspiration. They mark an historical moment in which this aesthetic conformed with broad national and international trends and ascendant interests.

In the sixties economic boom, internationalisation, mass communication, mass production and mass markets spurred Australia’s modernisation. Newly prosperous manufacturing interests and rising professional elites wielded increasing economic, social and political power, bolstered by significant
international supports. Economic modernisation was their first priority, but this spawned a culture of modernity which influenced all aspects of Australia's social and cultural life.

Richard White believes economic and cultural life were intimately related:

The desire for sophistication and cultural maturity were closely linked to the new industrialism ... It was in the interests of the manufacturing sector as it grew more powerful to promote an image of Australia which could compete with the old rural myth ... companies were looking to markets outside the traditional trading relationship with Britain ... [and] They encouraged a view of Australia which stressed industrial progress, cultural maturity and urban sophistication ... they [associated] ... self contained urban manufacturing society and a more complex sophisticated and vital cultural life.

White's terms offer one way of fitting Marion Best's story into Australia's general history. The popularity of her palette, wall glazing, innovative materials and international sources with clients from ascendant economic groups and later, more widespread audiences, confirms the supposed link between specific economic circumstances and certain cultural forms. Using White's terms it is possible that Best's colourful internationalism, echoed in Australia's homes in the sixties reflected national prosperity and even modernisation.

Robin Boyd supports this association between colour and prosperity:

irrespective of ... practical influences, strident colour is a direct popular cultural expression of easy living. It is a reflection of the money in the modern pocket, just as equally intense, but heavier, richer colours in wallpaper and gilded plaster reflected the last boom of the 1880 decade.

Colourful internationalism then may well have denoted progress and international cultural sophistication for protagonists; a visual expression of Australia's modernisation. Internationalism demanded the latest, best and boldest imports; colour was congruent with the mood of modernity itself in the energy and optimism of bright hue and reflective surfaces. If cultural and visual forms can be understood in this way as linked to broad social phenomenon, modernisation and modernity in postwar Australia can then be properly understood as an encompassing experience and a lifestyle, an 'experience', a 'state of mind' and even as 'an eye.'

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423 White, *op.cit*, 148-151.
424 Boyd, *op.cit*, 1972, 44.
Marion Best's ideas were as contemporary as her merchandise. They embodied the preoccupations of the era. 'Taste' and 'Good design' were popular terms amongst decorators and Best used them both. 'Good design' was probably her favourite phrase, used constantly as her justification for modernity and internationalism. As Mary White explained in 1968:

her belief in Good Design has led her, over many years, to import modern and exciting new furniture by designers who were then only just becoming world names.426

A commitment to good quality and good design were parallel pillars of her philosophy.427 Taste was different. She distinguished it from 'Good design':

Good design is not just a matter of personal opinion like taste. It is a standard arrived at through research by architects, designers and industrialists and deals with the relationship of appearance and function.428

For Best 'Good design' was rational and scientific while 'taste' was a matter of personal opinion, subject to whim, fancy or mood. ‘Good design’ was a universal principle which could be learnt. ‘Taste’ was a personal quality, a foible or a gift.

In contemporary decorating literature the terms were often confused. Distinctions also blurred in the Marion Best credo. At first, and in line with her theories, she referred to her personal preference or 'taste' for modern design.429 Within this definition, other styles and tastes were valid:

There are things from every era which reached perfection in design and which remain timeless, so that they often fit in wonderfully well with modern interiors.430

Yet elsewhere she described modern design as 'Good taste':

Good taste is literally an appreciation of good design, from the simplest form

426 Marion referred to it constantly. 'I love design and was trained in design' and was celebrated for 'her courageous approach to design, ... space, planes of color, and controlled use of reflection.' HHT/MHB/A/117, Australian Home Journal, Jan 1968,49. ‘Good design' was often touted in her advertising as the mark of her merchandise; 'Everything for the Home—the best of International and Australian design.' Vogue's Guide to Living, no.1, Summer 1967, 6, no.2, Winter 1968, 109.

427 She spoke of 'the primacy of shapes, the use of volume and movement through space.' One reporter commented, 'this tidal wave of ... technical jargon is a sort of warming up process.' HHT/MHB/A:117.

428 HHT/MHB/G:7. Elsewhere she reiterated her view: 'Good Design may be interpreted not as matter of opinion, as taste is, but as a standard arrived at through research by architects and industrial designers and involves the combination of appearance and use.' ANG/10MHB.1.3.

429 Vogue (Australia), Apr.-May 1968, 121.

and the least expensive article to the most complex and costly ... The real challenge in working in a modern vein is developing an awareness of good taste.\textsuperscript{431}

She abandoned her ‘style pluralism’ and argued that modern design was superior; ‘there is always more intrinsic worth and a far greater reward in doing something that hasn’t been done before.’\textsuperscript{432}

Marion Best’s inconsistency was typical. It highlights her dilemma in seeking to marry postwar scientific rationalism with traditional decorating, which elevated ‘taste’, ‘style’, ‘eye’, ‘flair’. Her solution was common amongst contemporary decorators, who combined and confused terms, leaving a bewildering and contradictory literature.

Yet this did not appear to reflect badly on decorators or threaten their status or role. Instead it rendered them even more indispensable. Many decorators were masters of both sides of debate; of good design, planned and rational decoration which could be learned through popular literature for the home decorator. Meantime many retained a claim on ‘taste and style’ which could not be learned; it was personal and intuitive. This complicated formula and confusion secured their expert status and leadership in a market which was more interested and educated in these matters than ever before.

Marion Best shared this double standard in her views on colour. She had studied its theory and painting techniques and chose colour schemes according to learnt theories:

We were always experimental but not irresponsible. ... it wasn't as reckless as it seemed to some ... Anne Gillmore Rees ... lectured on the eight colour circle and the various psychological meanings of colour ... theoretical background is always steadying even if one doesn't consciously think about it ... Colours were never thoughtlessly used ... one can't just stab around with colour.\textsuperscript{433}

Yet her reputation in the popular press was for an instinctive and intuitive colour sense—a gift for colour and a personal passion with which she claimed to have been born:

There are many theories of colour. But I feel that all theories are useless unless you're born with it. ... I think of colour in terms of living ... In looking at anything, I see colour. While it's terribly important to learn at an early age, it can be latent ... and emerge later.\textsuperscript{434}

Or, using her familiar analogy:

\textsuperscript{431} ibid, HHT/MHB/A, 37.
\textsuperscript{432} Australian Home Beautiful, Feb. 1967, 18.
\textsuperscript{433} ANG/3MHB.1-3:29, 32.
\textsuperscript{434} HHT/MHB/A:118.
colour is like music—I do not think one can learn colour without an inborn intuitive vision of it any more than one can learn music without ear and great depth of perception.435

Yet elsewhere and in line with her systematic approach she claimed colour could be learnt:

while taste is something you are born with you can learn good design, good colour. There are design courses, colour courses, correspondence courses, painting ... You can develop ability.436

Marion Best used the same vocabulary as the colour industry which employed a whole mix of contemporary wisdom to promote its product. Colour was both rational and irrational; it was both scientific, based on formal laws and principles, yet it also admitted personal whimsy, permitted personal expression and was regarded as a 'God-given gift'.437 Contradiction and confusion of these terms and principles did not appear to matter in a postwar Australia besieged by a previously inconceivable array of new ideas and experiences; a modern world.

In this Marion Best was exemplary. This account of her life and work has shown how she reflected the preoccupations of her era; not just in her work as an interior designer but also her wider aesthetic, professional and personal activity. Her example intersects contemporary developments in her profession. She was in many respects the harbinger of modernity there, introducing many of its attributes to her peers. Her enterprise mirrored moves to professionalisation and all that this involved—expansion, enhanced training and expertise, rationalisation, internationalisation and accompanying shifts in outlook and markets.

Her own aesthetic development also chartered a common course, at least amongst those with similar backgrounds; that is, towards modern art and design. And her persona was quintessentially modern. With arguments about the heuristic value of 'individual character' or 'psyche' aside, Best's personal qualities had much to do with the rest of her story. Dynamic, forward looking, energetic, often touted as young-at-heart even in old age, she personified modernity for an audience of Australian homemakers.

This study of Marion Best's life and work has added to Australian design history. As well as documenting the career of one of its major protagonists and thereby adding to a fledgling Australian interior design history, it has also highlighted areas of intersection and departure from broader societal trends,

435 ANG/3MHB.1-3:2.
436 HHT/MHB/A:118.
437 Berger, op.cit, Parts 1-4.
illuminating them and refining previous models. It thereby offers an integrated model of Australia's art and design history. By highlighting areas of divergence between Best's life and work and that of her peers and her society, this study has also suggested the complexity and extent of the phenomenon with which it has been concerned—the broad modernisation of Australia—and suggested many areas for further investigation.
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1MHB.1 Grey Vinyl box of colour slides
179 colour slides.


5MHB.1.1-22 Yellow envelope: photographs, transparencies and slides—black & white, colour, various dimensions.

6MHB.5 Photocopy from Australian Home Journal, September, 1971: “Rooms on View 1971” Exhibition (20th Anniversary, SIDA)

7MHB.1-25 Box (Kodak): transparencies of interior design projects and shop displays.

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ii) *Arts and Decoration Home Study Course in Interior Decoration*, N.Y., includes lesson notes, examination questions, MHB’s results in binder.

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v) A Walk through Europe—*Catalogue*, Exhibition, 153 Queen St Woollahra, Nov. 1950.


viii) *Hong Kong American Hotel Magazine* v.1 no.1 ‘Dale and Pat Keller’.

ix) *Vogue Australia*, April/May, 1968 ‘Marion Best’.


xiii) *Vogue Living (Australia)*, 15.11.73.

xiv) *Hidden Gardens of Sydney*, National Trust, Australia (NSW), 1977.


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Items i)—vi) Typed notes and audio cassette.


**MHB/E Marion Hall Best—Travel Diary.**

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**MHB/F Marion Hall Best—Stationery.**

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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>PRINCIPAL</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nursing, NSW Coast Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Edmund Buckett died</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Amy Buckett moved to 'Fairleigh', Palm Beach</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Marion settled in Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Married John Hall Best</td>
<td>Embroidery and Design Classes with Thos. Proctor and Jane Scott Stevenson</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td></td>
<td>Embroidery for David Jones</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
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<td>1953</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>1905</td>
<td>Born, Dubbo, NSW</td>
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<td>1920-22</td>
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<tr>
<td>1926</td>
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<td>1927</td>
<td>Married John Hall Best</td>
<td>Embroidery and Design Classes with Thea Proctor and June Scott Stevenson</td>
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<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td></td>
<td>Embroidery for David Jones</td>
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<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Deirdre born</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
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<td>Elanora Country Club, Narrabeen</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Royal Exchange Club, Member’s Lounge and Gallery</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No. 7 Elizabeth Street</td>
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<td>1934</td>
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<td>Opened retail outlet, 153 Queen St, Woollahra</td>
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<td>1935</td>
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<td>1936-38</td>
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<td>International Correspondence Course, New York, 'Interior Decoration'</td>
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<td>1938</td>
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<td>1939</td>
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<td>1942</td>
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<td>DATE</td>
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<tr>
<td>1943-</td>
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<td>Director, David Jones Art Gallery</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
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<td>1947</td>
<td></td>
<td>Travel—Europe: 4th Milan International Fair, 'Exhibitions des Artistes Décorateurs', Paris</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td></td>
<td>Opened second retail outlet, Rowe St, Sydney</td>
</tr>
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<td>1949</td>
<td></td>
<td>Exhibition at Queen St shop, 'A Walk through Europe'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td></td>
<td>Establishment of the Society of Interior Designers of Australia (SIDA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td></td>
<td>SIDA's first Exhibition, Woollahra Arts Centre: 'The White Room' by Marion Best</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td></td>
<td>Travel: 10th Milan Triennale, Milan, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Amy Burkitt died</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Deirdre graduated, Architecture, Sydney University</td>
<td>SIDA second Exhibition, Taubmans, North Sydney</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956-58</td>
<td>John received knighthood</td>
<td>Elanora Country Club, Stage II/New Wing St Andrew's College, Sydney University Deirdre married Peter Broughton Elizabeth Arden Salon, St James Building, Sydney Exhibition: French Fair, Sydney and Melbourne Travel: Tokyo Industrial Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Michael married Barbara</td>
<td>Regent Theatre, Wollongong Arthur Murray School of Dancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Moonbah Ski Lodge, Thredbo, completed</td>
<td>Exhibition: 'Rare and Beautiful Things', Art Gallery of NSW ('20th Century' by Marion Best)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE</td>
<td>PERSONAL</td>
<td>PROFESSIONAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Travel: USA, Japan, Philippines and Hong Kong—'The Australia Room', Hong Kong Hilton Exhibition, David Jones, Sydney: 'Breakfast with Gordon Andrews'</td>
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<td>1963</td>
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<td>1964</td>
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<td>1966</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Travel: Expo, Montreal, Milan, Europe, India and Asia SIDA Exhibition: 'Room for Mary Quant' by Marion Best</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>Travel: World Craft Conference, Lima, USA.</td>
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<td>1970</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>SIDA 20th Anniversary Exhibition, 'Room for Peter Sculthorpe'</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Moved to Darling Point</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Marion Best Pty Ltd closed</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Private consultancy</td>
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<td>1978</td>
<td>Wrote autobiography Retired</td>
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<td>1979</td>
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<td>1982</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>Archived Papers, Australian National Gallery</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<td>1987</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Died (June)</td>
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ORIGINS AND EARLY LIFE

Marion Burkitt was born in the N.S.W. country town of Dubbo, in April, 1905, the youngest daughter of the local doctor, Edmund Burkitt and his wife Amy. Dubbed ‘youngie’ and referred to as such by close family and friends throughout her life, two elder sisters and a brother provided ample company for her relatively happy and fairly typical outdoor, carefree country childhood. At fifteen, she was sent to Frensham Boarding School in Bowral—as yet a new and slightly experimental school for children of the N.S.W. rural establishment.438

Marion Burkitt wanted to be an architect, but at her father’s wish trained as a nurse, enduring the considerable physical and emotional hardship of this profession for two years at the Coast Hospital—now Prince Henry. The following year was devoted to nursing her father through his final months of life and accompanying her mother and sister on a recuperative visit to relatives in Ceylon.439 Her sisters, Dora and Muriel had settled in Sydney by then and Marion joined them. She resumed her nursing career—working as a dental nurse for the young dentist, John Hall Best, whom she married in 1927.440

Marion Hall Best devoted herself to the tasks of homemaking during Depression years in support of her ambitious young dentist husband. They had two children, Deirdre and Michael, born in 1929 and 1931. Best reared them while negotiating five changes of residence in the late twenties and early thirties. She settled with “JHB” as she called him, in a refurbished Wilkinson Mediterranean mansion off Queen Street, Woollahra in 1933, along a laneway affectionately dubbed ‘The Grove’.

In the course of these moves and in an attempt to reflect their aspirations, Best refurbished each residence with energy and flair. Her efforts were notorious amongst friends and colleagues and her final coup de gras at ‘The Grove’ were featured in the fashionable journal, The Home in 1935.441

Despite the burden of child rearing and homemaking during the Depression years (middle and upper middle classes also suffered some erosion of their
accustomed comfort during these years)—Marion Best took design, embroidery and art classes from prominent Sydney artists and craftspeople. Best had become interested in art and particularly colour during her childhood. She and her sisters apparently absorbed much of their mother’s enthusiasm for colour and their parent’s mutual love of Art. Yet these first classes in Sydney were her first practical training ground and the first evidence or tangible record of any attempt to explore her own creative skills.

Under the influence of teachers and tastemakers like Thea Proctor, Ailsa Lee Brown and Mrs June Scott Stevenson, Marion Best became an accomplished embroiderer and flower arranger. She kept herself ‘financially afloat’ with commissions for children’s and ladies’ clothing from Sir Charles Lloyd Jones, then chairman of the David Jones empire.442

Her appreciation of European and Australian art grew appreciably through these classes and her exposure to the influential artistic friends and contacts she and her sisters established at the time. Above all, she was entranced by colour and design: ‘I was swept up with excitement by the Fauves’ and was inspired by June Scott Stevenson’s ‘large scale motif type of design, non-realistic in brilliant colours, which vibrated like Gaugin’s paintings.’443

As the young wife of an upwardly mobile dentist, counting artists and tastemakers amongst her family and friends, Marion Best surrounded herself with visual stimuli and responded to it with energy—absorbing the principles of stage and theatre design and colour theory in formal classes as well as through the informal tutelage of endless art shows and visits to theatre and ballet.

**EARLY CAREER**

Her reputation for furnishing beautiful houses and for exquisite embroidery grew along with her connections within the Sydney social circuit. In 1935, when the Elanora Country Club burned to the ground, she was commissioned by her connections there to decorate the new clubhouse which opened in 1937/8.

The rather innovative scheme which eventuated was well publicised in *Australia: National Journal* in 1940, by which time her use of strong colour and modern design had attracted a string of equally notable and increasingly lucrative commissions. They included relatively elitist private establishments like the Royal Exchange Club and the Cocktail Bar at the Queen’s Club as well as more public,

442 ANG/3MHB.1-3.;1.
443 ibid.
high profile commissions like Berida Convalescent Home at Bowral, an entire block of flats at No.7 Elizabeth Street, the Lady Gowrie Kindergarten and the Rachel Forster Memorial Hospital for Women.444

Her success with these established Marion Best as one of Sydney’s leading decorators. Initially she worked from home, but found the pressure and volume of her work overwhelmed the space available there. She rented the front room of a small terrace less than 100 yards from ‘The Grove’ and Marion Best Pty Ltd opened its doors to the public on 15th September, 1938, claiming ‘Now is the time to prove the value of the artist to industry in creating new areas of good design’ and announcing ‘a depot to show a limited range of fabrics, lamps and small furnishing accessories.’445

In the meantime, Marion Best pursued her creative development. She wanted to work with ‘big areas of colour in a three dimensional way, which belonged to living spaces’ and saw her work as a way of ‘colouring a transparent box ... a room ... through colour harmonies, discords and vibrations ... achieving visual expansion ... and movement in space.’446 During the late thirties she pursued her education as a designer and artist—completing first year Architecture at Sydney University and a weighty year long Diploma of Interior Decoration by correspondence from New York.447

The war years dampened enthusiasm on all fronts. A national war effort left few funds for luxuries like art, design or decoration and the shop was ‘put on ice’ while Marion Best divided her time between the de Havilland aircraft factory and a kindergarten for local children which ran from ‘The Grove.’

The war left some room for commissions of ‘public utility’—hence the Lady Gowrie Kindergarten and Rachel Forster Memorial Hospital—and for a burst of frivolity in 1941 with an exhibition of interiors held on the top floor of David Jones for the Red Cross. (Just how frivolous is questionable, of course, given the backward looking and Anglocentric sentiments which motivated it). Still Marion Best injected an energetic note in two rooms—the ‘Classic Modern’ and the ‘Young

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445 ANG/9MHB.1:1.
446 ANG/3MHB.1-3:1.
447 HHT/MHB/C.ii.
Appendix 2: Biography

Modern.' Both displayed her distinctive use of colour and provided the impetus for her pioneering efforts in textile design.448

Aside from her own efforts as a colourist and in furniture and fabric design, Marion Best was distinguished from the very earliest years of her career by her enthusiasm for young Australian furniture designers and artists—selling their pieces and commissioning work for private and public jobs and exhibitions and sometimes at considerable expense in time, unpopular publicity and money. She introduced furnishings from innovative Melbourne-based artists as well during the late thirties and continued to collaborate with them throughout the lean war years and into the fifties.449

Postwar optimism and opportunity gradually wakened a war weary populace. However, postwar reconstruction remained an overwhelming priority during the late forties and the loosening of wartime economic stringencies remained a distant hope. Marion Best Pty Ltd had survived the war and although there is very little record of her postwar activity, one presumes that some considerable energy was devoted to rejuvenating business.

By now established within the Sydney world of art and design, Marion Best reluctantly accepted the Directorship of David Jones Art Gallery in 1947. She took the reins tentatively, protesting ignorance as her defence, but succeeded in bringing a year of innovation and change to the Gallery. Redecorating and designing a 'contemporary' space on the top floor, Marion Best showed an eclectic mix of fine, decorative and applied arts and remembered some years later that she had brought 'a new generation of artists' to the attention of Sydney's buying public.450

In 1949 her long planned overseas trip to the Milan International Fair and the 'Exhibitions des Artistes Décorateurs' turned Marion Best's outlook around for good. In Europe, Best found her aesthetic appetite satiated for the first time. From this trip she found the inspiration for the method of painting and glazing for which she was to become nationally and internationally renowned. She received her first

448 Boldly coloured and patterned prints by Thea Proctor and Dora Sweetapple, printed mainly on linen and cotton, were the first of a limited collection of fabrics by the short lived 'Marion Best Fabrics' for which she was commended in Australia: National Journal, July 1946, v.7, 108.

449 ANG/9MHB.1:5.

450 ANG/3MHB.1-3:13.
Appendix 2: Biography

A dose of innovative contemporary furniture design in Italy and her international and modernistic orientation remained firmly fixed for the rest of her career.\textsuperscript{451}

She returned to Australia fresh and full of discovery, and apparently transformed from an Australian interior decorator to 'a designer of interior spaces'; an importer and businesswoman of some standing. As such she travelled widely and frequently for many years, branching out from Australia, first to Europe then America and Asia.

**POSTWAR BOOM**

Her return to Australia in 1950 was marked by a burst of energy and frenetic activity. She perfected the paint glazing techniques she had glimpsed overseas and negotiated the introduction of furniture and fabric imports she had arranged while there.

Marion Best Pty Ltd had now expanded into a second retail outlet closer to the hub of Sydney's *avant garde* in inner city Rowe Street—and both outlets were revamped in preparation for the arrival of these first imports.\textsuperscript{452}

The following year she sponsored the establishment of a Society of Interior Designers of Australia (SIDA) and shocked her audience at their debut exhibition at the Woollahra Arts Centre by designing a room around 'a painting of the carcass of a dead cow', combining nine different colours in the process.\textsuperscript{453}

Although a founding member and firm believer in the Society's aim to 'promote and effect a better standard of interior design' and an enthusiastic and popular contributor to their sporadic exhibitions, Marion Best retained a certain distance from the more mundane aspects—meetings procedures and the like.\textsuperscript{454}

Her frenetic creativity remained unchecked throughout the fifties. She was by now the darling of the 'Palm Beach push' and according to *Tatler* in 1959, Sydney's most fashionable interior designer.\textsuperscript{455} She continued to energetically sponsor the work of young and innovative Australian designers and graphic artists. Furniture designers like Clement Meadmore and Gordon Andrews, artists Elaine Haxton, Dora Sweetapple, Douglas Annand, ceramicists Muriel Medworth and Marea Gazzard and architects Bill Lucas, Tony Moore and her daughter Deirdre

\textsuperscript{451} ibid.
\textsuperscript{452} ibid.
\textsuperscript{453} *Courier Mail*, 6.9.53.
\textsuperscript{454} S.I.D.A., *op.cit*, 1953, 3.
\textsuperscript{455} *The Tatler and Bystander*, 11.11.59, 338-339.
Broughton, were amongst those she sponsored as part of her huge and growing creative enterprise.

While continuing to work in a private capacity for some of Sydney’s most well known and prosperous citizens, Marion Best launched into a series of prominent public commissions on her return from the Milan Triennale in 1954 which had sharpened her already acutely self-conscious preoccupation with modernism and ‘Good Design.’ St. Andrew’s College, Sydney University, the Regent Theatre and the Arthur Murray Dancing Studios were refurnished under her hand. New premises at Elanora were decorated with controversial colour applications and the Elizabeth Arden ‘Dream Salon’ foundered in Sydney when the New York sponsors took a pronounced dislike to the Prussian blue used liberally throughout.\(^{456}\)

Nevertheless, or perhaps as a result, Marion Best’s reputation grew and the second half of the fifties were boom years. Her reputation was built on her courageous use of colour along with a rather mysterious glazing technique which made highly reflective painted walls of shocking colour and intensity of hue ‘sing with light and colour’. Her palette featured the most intense chartreuses, purples, pinks, reds, oranges and blues—all used together, glazed in mirror-like finishes on walls or murals, in stripes or richly coloured fabrics and furnishings. Lean stark contemporary pieces offset her finely balanced (sometimes precarious) colour schemes, defining, for those in a position to want to know, the latest look in interiors.

Her advice was published widely in the popular press, took its place with arbiters of style in the art and design world and was even acknowledged (hesitantly) in architectural circles.\(^{457}\) Private commissions and clients of course often chose not to employ her most dramatic schemes which instead featured in successive SIDA exhibitions or large public works.

Frenetic activity did not inhibit her search for stimulation and new imports. Marion Best turned her attention from Europe to Scandinavia and through the U.S. to Asia in the late fifties. Travelling to Japan for the first time in 1957, she was entranced by the simplicity of the Japanese aesthetic and its interior applications. She later pioneered the importation of rattan blinds, rice paper lanterns, decorative screens and tatami matting as a result of these discoveries.

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456 See ANG/3MHB.1-3:45-47, 54-56 and 9MHB.1, also Quinn, 30.1.91 and The Bulletin, 16.12.67.

457 Art and Design 1, 22, South Australian Institute of Architects, op.cit, 20-24.
In the meantime, during the late fifties and early sixties, she sponsored the introduction of contemporary Italian and American furniture to Australia under licence to firms like Magistretti, Knoll and Herman Miller. She combined its sleek lines and new age materials with exotic Asian materials and vibrant Scandinavian prints, turning it into the ‘swinging sixties’ look for which she is now most commonly remembered. This ‘look’ extended her bold use of colour and glazing and her preference for ‘modern’ if not ‘futuristic’ furniture. Her textile imports from Scandinavia and India were based on the same palette as her wall glazes; limes, pinks, purples and oranges. They were marketed along with popular accessories like seagrass matting, rattan blinds, Saarinen furniture and ricepaper lanterns.

CONSOLIDATION AND CANONISATION

Business boomed. Most of her commissions in the sixties were for private monied clients whose tastes often forced a modified version of her most adventurous work. Marion Best consolidated her retail enterprise again in the main Queen Street shop, renovating in the late fifties and again in the sixties in order to keep up with the modern aesthetic. She remained an active member of the Society of Interior Designers and participated energetically in their irregular but well publicised Exhibitions in 1955, 1967 and 1971. Her contributions were typically acclaimed as the most startling and original elements of these shows, by press and public alike. Her reputation for innovation and daring was enhanced by the widespread publicity attached to the construction and decoration of her own ski lodge at Thredbo, completed in 1961.

Designed by the young architect Bill Lucas, friend and colleague, its triangular construction and stark Japanese-inspired furnishings were featured in local design and prestigious international publications like Domus and Abitare. ‘Moonbah’ marked her final conversion to stark, Asian-inspired simplicity which became popular from the mid to late sixties. A personal project in its conception, Moonbah did not remain so. Its innovative profile kept it in local fashion shoots for most of the decade.

She was celebrated again as a national hero in 1961, when commissioned by leading American designers to create ‘the Australia Room’ at the Hong Kong Hilton

458 ANG/10MHB.1, see also Hayes and Hersey, op.cit, 135.
459 HHT/MHB/A.
460 ANG/3MHB.1-3:56-57.
Hotel. She was invited to participate in the same year in an Exhibition of 'Rare and Beautiful Things' at the NSW Art Gallery which was an Exhibition of 'arrangements' from the private collections of exhibitors chosen for their 'connoisseurship and good taste'. Best's elevation to the status of 'Interior Design legend' appeared to be complete.

Marion Hall Best coasted through the sixties (like many Australians) on a rising tide of prosperity and a glut of private money; while pre-packaging and popularising a 'look' that became quite ubiquitous in Australian homes. By the end of the decade, her rooms and arrangements featured regularly in Australia's newest and most prestigious decorating journal Vogue Living; pages were plastered with her boldly glazed rooms and vivid arrangements.

Business was booming. She employed over twenty staff during particularly busy periods of the sixties and numbers rarely dropped far below this. Staff were predominantly architecture and design graduates, or talented friends and family as well as a small loyal coterie of seamstresses and upholsterers. A very able accountant, Frances Byrne, handled the business side of the enterprise from the mid-fifties on, enabling Best to complete her forays overseas into new and different design territory, and to import and market her discoveries with characteristic energy and equanimity.

Writing of her in Australian Style in 1970, Babette Hayes referred to her as 'by far the most important Interior Designer in Australia ... Marion Hall Best has done more to change her Australian environment and create beauty in the home than any Australian decorator in the last 30 years.'

Her contribution to the SIDA 20th Anniversary Exhibition in 1971 was her final public design statement. She described it as the 'Alpha and Omega' of her original and abiding creative vision. An impressive and thoughtfully conceived room, startling in its futuristic flavour, it was designed for the young musician, Peter Sculthorpe. In retrospect her description may well have been apt—it was certainly the Omega, the swansong, for Marion Hall Best—her last public demonstration of her aesthetic and professional ability.

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461 Far East American, 13.10.63.
462 Art Gallery of NSW, 'Rare and Beautiful Things', Catalogue, 1961, 2 in ANG/MHB Misc.
463 Hayes and Hersey, op.cit, 132.
464 ANG/6MHB.5, HHT/MHB/D:iii.
John Hall Best died in 1972 and the Marion Best phenomenon foundered. Business was still huge. One of the furniture manufacturing interests her work had spawned—under licence in Australia as 'Architectural Fibreglass' and managed by her son—landed the lucrative and very public contract to supply the Opera House with moulded fibreglass outdoor and indoor seating. (Fig. 42)

Marion Hall Best retired on the crest of a financial wave and the fortune that this commission brought. For several years she continued to work in a freelance capacity with a number of selected family and colleagues from her new flat at Darling Point. Yet failing health and eyesight frustrated her creative drive; her characteristic vigour began to flag. She wrote memoirs and had her papers archived, but her final years were marred by failing sight and she died nearly blind at the age of 83 in an Eastern Suburbs nursing home.

465 Broughton, 31.1.91.
1. ELANORA COUNTRY CLUB, NARRABEEN, NSW, 1938.

LOUNGE:
- Walls—Italian terracotta pink
- Ceiling—Chinese orange
- Curtains—hand screen-printed from Canada: shaded in a large scale horizontal of deep eggplant, medium and pale pink all joined with off white waving line
- Chairs—silver ash: covered in oak-leaf pattern in deep eggplant, dark red, cream.

DINING ROOM:
- Walls—Italian terracotta pink
- Curtains—cream ground, with trellis design in Chinese red, trimmed with a matching fringe
- Tables—Queensland ash, ‘French blue’ leather tops, blue linen tablecloths cut to size.

SITTING ROOM:
- Walls—Italian terracotta pink
- Venetians—Italian terracotta pink
- Chairs—Austrian beech
- Sofa—Chesterfield: upholstered with smoky blue patterned with silver and white.

2. BERIDA CONVALESCENT HOME, BOWRAL, NSW, c.1938.

MAIN LOUNGE/SITTING ROOM:
- Walls—Dark grass green
- Curtains—White and green striped canvas
- Awnings—White and green striped canvas
- Chairs/sofas—Cane: upholstered with woven wool, patterned in large tartan design
- Screens—Cane: split dowels with heavy canvas covers.


- Ceiling—copper bronze
- Walls—glazed: copper bronze and ‘yellowish-pink’
- Curtains—slate blue, patterned with copper pink
- Tables—copper bronze, slate blue cork tops
- Stools—copper bronze (painted)
- Ionic columns—white, bronze accents.

4. THE ROYAL EXCHANGE CLUB, SYDNEY, c.1936-38.

GALLERY AND STAIRCASE:
- Ceilings—Italian terracotta pink, copper bronze, green
- Walls—warm pale oyster
Balustrade—wrought iron, Chinese Chippendale.

LOUNGE:
- Walls—grey
- Venetians—yellow
- Hangings, blinds—silver, bronze, dark green.

5. NO. 7 ELIZABETH ST, SYDNEY, c.1937.
   - Curtains—Francis Burke, linen.
   - Built-in Furniture—Beard Watson’s
   - Prints—'Franz Marc'.

6. LADY GOWRIE KINDERGARTENS, ERSKINEVILLE, SYDNEY, 1940.

   CORRIDORS:
   - Walls—pastel
   - Doors—rust pink/deep coral.

   ROOMS:
   1. Walls—pale blue
      - Venetians: pale blue, red tapes
      - Curtains—unbleached calico ground, screen-printed
      - Chairs and tables—pale blue painted wood.
   2. Walls—soft yellow
      - Blinds—wood lathe, painted yellow
      - Ceiling alcove—silver blue
      - Cornices, doors—cerise pink, silver blue
      - Curtains—unbleached calico ground, screen-printed diagonal design: giraffes and palms in cerise and silver blue
   3. Walls—'Adam' green/bright 'granny smith'
      - Blinds—Wood lathe, painted 'Adam' green, cords in rust pink
      - Ceiling Alcove—rust pink
      - Cornice—rust pink
      - Curtains—'conventional' floral design in rust pink, lime and blue.

7. AN ENGLISHMAN’S HOME, 1941.

   'YOUNG MODERN ROOM' (arranged by Dora Sweetapple and Marion Best)
   - Furniture—designed by Marion Best
   - Bedspread—designed and woven by Mrs Havva
   - Curtains—designed by Dora Sweetapple
   - Pictures—Helen Stewart.

   'CLASSIC MODERN ROOM' (arranged by Marion Best)
   - Curtains—Thea Proctor, ‘Grecian trellis’ design
   - Lights, lamps—Marion Best
   - Picture—'Still Life' by Roland Wakelin or William Dobell?
   - Mirror—Queen Anne lacquer mirror (Victorian reproduction)
   - Chairs—Queen Anne lacquer (Victorian reproduction)
   - Card Table—Stuart Low Furnishing
   - Lacquer Table—Marion Best
Hepplewhite chairs
Modern Chesterfield
Indian Rug.

8. **RACHEL FORSTER MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, 1942.**

**WARDS:**
- Walls—soft greyed green, blue
- Chairs—upholstered, ‘ultramarine blue’ leatherette
- Beds, cabinets—gold.

**NURSES SITTING ROOM:**
- Floor—parquet
- Walls—‘flesh pink’
- Ceiling—‘flesh pink’
- Carpet—mushroom
- Tables—bleached maple
- Chairs—bleached maple
- Cushions—intense violet, yellow striped upholstery.

**NURSES LOUNGE:**
- Floor—parquet
- Walls—pale blue
- Carpet—dark grey-blue
- Tables—bleached maple
- Chairs—bleached maple
- Cushioned seats—cyclamen, various shades.

9. **‘A WALK THROUGH EUROPE’, 1950. 153 QUEEN ST, WOOLLAHRA.**

- Fabrics—Paule Marot, Pierre Frey, Fedi Cheti

10. **‘THE WHITE ROOM’, 1ST SIDA EXHIBITION, 1953.**

- Walls—glazed, various colours: deep, dirty pink, lacquer red, chartreuse, olive green, Indian yellow
- Desk, easy chair—Marion Best Pty Ltd
- Desk chairs—Clement Meadmore
- Bookshelves—Clement Meadmore
- Table Lamp—Clement Meadmore
- Standard, pendant lamps—Ernest Syka
- Tiles—Douglas Annand
- Wallpaper—Arthur Bond, Melbourne
- Painting—‘Drought’, Sidney Nolan
- Curtains—cream silk jersey.

11. **2ND SIDA EXHIBITION, 1955.**

- Walls—glazed, Prussian blue
- Mural—Dora Sweetapple
- Sculpture—Gordon Andrews
- Chairs—Bill Lucas/A.E. Moulen
- Carpet—black and white stripe.
12. ELANORA COUNTRY CLUB—NEW WING, STAGE II, c.1956.

- Walls—various
- Ceilings—orange-red canvas stripes
- Cornices—white
- Curtains—Woodweev concertina blinds
- Tables—Clement Meadmore, bleached wood
- Chairs—Clement Meadmore, black iron frame, ‘cord’ seats
- Bedcovers—Sundour Morton, linen: print in dark green oakleaf on natural linen
- Cushions—Thai silk, various shades


- Walls—glazed various colours: Indian red, deep green, mustard feature walls with pale and mid-blue corridors
- Blinds—venetians
- Beds—coachwood, built-ins
- Bedcovers, cushions—Frances Burke, printed duck, geometric design
- Chairs, tables—coachwood.

14. ELIZABETH ARDEN SALON, ST JAMES BUILDING, SYDNEY, 1956.

- Feature Wall—blue and silver leaf Japanese grass cloth paper
- Walls—various glazes: citron, delphinium blue, deep fuschia and white
- Ceilings—handmade Japanese ricepaper, inlaid with butterflies and ferns
- Couches—upholstered, French chintz, floral design: pink, turquoise, vermillion, yellow
- Wall Units—yellow painted wood.

15. REGENT THEATRE, WOLLONGONG, 1956-57.

FOYER:

- Walls—various glazes: pale and deep alizarin pink, aquamarine, chartreuse, olive
- Floors—white terrazzo tiles
- Wall Tiles—Douglas Annand: white glazed, black etching
- Ceiling Mural—Various glazes: alizarin pink, red, aquamarine, chartreuse, black and white.
- Fountain—aquamarine glass
- Lights—aluminium.

UPSTAIRS FOYER:

- Wallpaper—French, floral design and Japanese irridescent silk: emerald green on black ground
- Curtains—Thai silk: pink and cerise check.


- Walls—alizarin pink
- Ceilings—alizarin pink
- Tables—Clement Meadmore, bleached wood, iron frame
- Chairs—Clement Meadmore, iron frame, sashed cord.

Furniture—white fibreglass ‘pedestal’ dining setting: Eero Saarinen for Knoll Associates
Lights—Tapio Wirkkala, Finland
Painting—‘Sunbleached landscape’, by Carl Plate
Rug—Chinese
Fabric wallhanging—Maija Isola (Marimekko), Finland
Ceiling—Chinese red
Feature Wall—black


Mural—Gordon Andrews: bamboo
Mobile—Gordon Andrews: perspex discs, various colours
Hexagon Table—Gordon Andrews
Easy chair—Gordon Andrews, ‘Rondo’
Dining chairs—Gordon Andrews, ‘Spider’
Rug—cream, green wool.


Ceilings—glazed: red-orange
Walls—glazed: olive green and rendered white cement
Tables—Gordon Andrews: Queensland walnut, iron base
Dining chairs—Gordon Andrews ‘Spider’ rotating chairs, upholstered in kangaroo hide
Lounge chairs—Gordon Andrews ‘Rondo’ rotating chairs, upholstered in wool
Stools—Gordon Andrews: black and white calfskin
Ashtrays—Marrea Gazzard, ceramic
Light—Vaughan Davidson: aquamarine glass
Paintings—Mittie Lee Brown
John Coburn
Leonard Hessing
Rugs—wool, Sturt Workshops, Mittagong
Curtains—wool, sheer cream, Sturt Workshops.


Lounge chairs—Mies van Der Rohe ‘Barcelona’, Herman Miller, USA: black leather
Desk chair—Harry Bertoia, Knoll Associates, USA: fibreglass, leather
Curtains—Thai silk, red and orange check.


Wallhanging—Marimekko: cotton geometric
Sofa—upholstered with red wool
Rug—red wool, shag pile
Cushions—Marimekko, Thai silk.

22. RICHARDSON AND WRENCH, LINDFIELD, SYDNEY, c.1965.

Ceiling—straw lined, dropped ceiling
Lighting—concealed strip lighting
Walls—Japanese grass wallpaper, natural
Carpet—burnt sugar brown
Screens—cerise, orange print
Chairs—upholstered in wool: white and orange
Tables—Gordon Andrews, blackbean
Wall tiles—olive green.

   Rotating ‘Globe’ chair—Asko, Finland: white fibreglass
   Lights—chrome: Karhula Iittala, Finland
   Small chairs—Jo Colombo, Italy, ‘Sella’ chairs: ponyskin upholstery
   Tiles—Gabianelli, Italy: white ceramic
   Rug—orange/red wool: ‘Rya’
   Fabric hanging—‘Seireeni’
   Curtains—plastic beading
   Walls—orange, red.

   Walls—Japanese grass cloth wallpaper
   Blinds—Japanese rattan blinds
   Chairs—Harry Bertoia, ‘diamond’, Knoll Associates
   Bar—Gordon Andrews, metal
   Pots—Cane.

   Walls—Danish wallpaper: olive green, velvet, stylised floral motif
   Blinds—Japanese rattan: olive green
   Chairs—Eero Saarinen, Knoll Associates, white fibreglass
   Pots—Natural terracotta, steel frames.

26. ’ROOM FOR PETER SCULTHORPE’, 20TH ANNIVERSARY SIDA
    EXHIBITION, 1971.
    Walls—glazed, lime green
    Musical sculpture—‘Industrial Revolution’ Jack Meyer
    Lounge chairs—Tobia Scarpa, Italy: brown leather
    Outdoor chairs—Architectural Fibreglass, USA: white fibreglass
    Low glass table—Magistretti, Italy
    Blue Glass bricks—lent by James Sandy Pty Ltd
    Lights—Flos, Italy
    Rug—Portugal: green, lime wool
    Ceiling, screen—‘Mylar’, USA: silver foil.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:


Appendix 3: Illustrations


18. 'Rear flat' by Marion Best from 'No. 7 Elizabeth Street': Prospectus, 1937, 12pp, 6. Collection: Australian National Gallery Research Library, Marion Best Archive.

19. 'Classic Modern Room by Marion Best', from *The Home*, July 1, 1941, 30. [Room designed by Marion Best for 'An Englishman's Home 1740-1941', David Jones, Sydney, 1941.] Photograph by R.E. Moffat. Collection: David Jones Archive, Scrapbook, 1941.


25. 'Moonbah' Ski Lodge, Thredbo Village, NSW, 1961, [Living/Dining area], Photograph by David Moore/Bill Sweetapple? Collection: Australian National Gallery Research Library, Marion Best Archive, 1MHB.1.3.14a.


Appendix 3: Illustrations


32. 'Marion Best Pty Ltd', 153 Queen Street, Woollahra. The Shop, c.1956-58. Photograph by Antonia Blaxland. Collection: Historic Houses Trust NSW, Resource Centre, Glebe, Marion Best Archive, MHB/B/iii/(l).


34. 'Samplesheets' by Marion Best Pty Ltd for Mr and Mrs M. Cater, Red Hill, Canberra, 1965. Collection: Mrs Barbara Cater, on permanent loan to Historic Houses Trust NSW, Resource Centre, Glebe.

35. 'Floorplan' by Marion Best Pty Ltd for Mr Clive Foyster, Queensland, 1965. Collection: Historic Houses Trust, NSW, Resource Centre, Glebe, Marion Best Archive, MHB/B/I.


42. 'Chairs' [Imports and local designs sold through Marion Best Pty Ltd], Photograph by Mary White. Collection: Australian National Gallery Research Library, Marion Best Archive 8MHB.12.
43. 'Outdoor seating' c.1970 by Architectural Fibreglass USA, imported by Marion Best and later manufactured under licence in Australia by Marion Best Pty Ltd and Spectrum Pty Ltd in association. Photograph by Michael Andrews. Collection: Australian National Gallery Research Library, Marion Best Archive 2MHB.1.2.47.


Collection: John McPhee, Australian National Gallery.
This bed-couch, with particularly well thought out bedside table arrangement, has a drawer for storage of the bedding. Note the strip lighting and easy access to radio and books.

5. 'Floorplan', from Seymour, M.J., 'Joanna Plans a Home', *Australian Home Beautiful*, June 1946, 12.

[This new plan, showing the living area ... and furnishing detail, was drawn for Joanna by the designer whose studio she visited ... By pushing out the living room walls at an angle a more compact result, with equal space, was obtained. The hall became larger and the need for building a future dining room avoided altogether.]
Proposed furnishing scheme for dining section of the lounge (see last month's plan). It can be made private and cozy by drawing the curtains across. Floor covering might be carpet or, as suggested, rugs. Sideboard has glass sliding doors. Double doors open on to terrace.


Appendix 3: Illustrations

From another source Joanna sketched into her notebook these designs of unusual chairs. Top row, left to right—1: Dining chair of bent plywood. 2: Stained oak with straps of natural saddle leather. 3: Bleached walnut with handwoven fabric. Bottom row—1: Upholstered chair with laminated spring arms in natural light maple. 2: Bridge chair in natural tan suede steerhide, dark blue mustard and gold striped seat. 3: Reclining chair, natural pear-wood with wool fabric, described by Marcel Brewer as “almost anatomically designed support for reading, handwork or relaxation.”

Two international furniture design competitions that have just gone on display in New York attracted entries which were original to the modernists and downright startling to many a man-in-the-street.

Entries were startling because the designers used materials which a decade ago most people would have thought impossible for furniture. Yet the entries did not win prizes for the sake of originality alone. All were practical and mostly inexpensive.

One competition was run by the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum Design Project Inc., which represents leading retail stores in 160 cities throughout the United States. The other was run by the American Institute of Decorators.

The Museum of Modern Art's show took three years to organise, and there were 3000 entries from 33 countries, including Australia. The winners were chosen early last year, but part of the programme was to put the winning designs on the market through the sponsoring retail stores. It took a year to do this, and because it was feared that the designs might be "pirated" by

Photographs for this feature were supplied by courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York Museum Design Project Inc. and American Institute of Decorators.

The Australian HOME BEAUTIFUL, June, 1950, 15.
In the kitchen shown above, skilful repetition of color has been used to great advantage; the floor color being repeated on bench tops and cupboard interiors.

Few combinations of color can produce an atmosphere as fresh and clean as the blue and white scheme shown above. The red accessories add a gay note.

Dear Reader,

My coming to Australia has been enriched by the beautiful decorator colours so easily available to home owners in your country. British Paints Limited, of course, has been known to me as one of the world’s largest paint manufacturing companies, always with a reputation for quality.

I have been able to study and compare colour ranges in Gloss-Masta Brilliant Gloss-Enamel, Nu-Plastik Acrylic Plastic Wall and Ceiling Finish, Super-Flat and Satin-Tone Enamels, and Supalusta Exterior Gloss Paint ... with delighted surprise. Here are hundreds of colours to choose from, some restful, some exciting, all with a depth of colour that puts them in a class apart.

In Australia, too, I have been so pleased with the British Paints Limited’s Marquarie Colour Centres and their feature of free colour advice for everyone. I have been deeply impressed with the decorating skill of colour stylists on their staff, and with the really genuine desire to give only the best of advice and service.

Whether you are planning a new home, redecorating an old one ... or are just looking for a change ... next time you have a colour problem, do call on the experts of the Marquarie Colour Service. The service is free, and they like to see you.

Yours truly,

Josephine Bull

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Unique design and sparkling colours
from our exciting Contemporary Shop!

Entirely new to Australia! A smart new furniture shop within our store, with 5th "Avenue" atmosphere. Here you'll find every facility for home planners to select furniture, fabrics, glassware, ceramics, lamps and accessories. In our "Contemporary Shop" we can assist you with colour schemes, furnished rooms and occasional furniture. Come in and see our ultra modern "Contemporary Shop" to-morrow!

Free Colour Advisory Service

With the aid of our three expert interior decorators, we can help you to create tones and texture blended in harmonizing paints and fabrics with dramatic monotone effects. Take our new fast elevators (George St. entrance) to the Third Floor.

12. 'Horderns Contemporary Shop,' Advertisement from Australian House and Garden, February 1954, 57.
13. '1960', from *Australian House and Garden*, January 1960, 16
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[Chairs: Asko ‘Globe’ Chair, Jo Colombo ‘Sella’ chair, upholstered in ponyskin, Tiles: Gabbianelli, Lights: Karhula Ittala, Finland.]

[Exhibition organised by the Silver Lighthouse Committee for the Royal Blind Society. Table and chairs: Gordon Andrews ‘Spider’ and ‘Rondo’ chairs, Mural, mobile, candelabra and carpet: Gordon Andrews.]

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Marion Best Pty. Ltd.

FURNITURE AND FABRICS
EVERYTHING FOR THE HOME
THE BEST OF INTERNATIONAL
AND AUSTRALIAN DESIGN

FINLAND      ITALY      U.S.A.
DENMARK      INDIA      JAPAN
FRANCE       THAILAND   MEXICO

153 Queen St., Woollahra, N.S.W.
32 6500


42. ‘Chairs’ Imports and local designs sold through Marion Best Pty Ltd, Photograph by Mary White. Collection: Australian National Gallery Research Library, Marion Best Archive, 9MHB.1.

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