20TH CENTURY DESIGN

Teachers’ Resource: Key stages 3, 4 & 5
Design & Technology and Art & Design

Garden Egg Chair
Peter Ghyczy, 1968.
©Victoria and Albert Museum, London
The 20th century was a time of great social, political and artistic change. Two world wars, the advent of air travel, television and computer technology transformed the work of artists, architects and designers. Fashion, youth and a focus on the individual became key factors in promoting goods to a growing consumer base. Technological advances like the miniaturisation of electronics enabled entirely new objects to develop.

Explore the 20th century using this resource to support teaching and learning. Visit the V&A’s collections in 20th century (Rooms 74 and 76), Furniture (Rooms 133–135) Fashion (Room 40), Architecture (Room 127) and Britain (Rooms 123 and 125).

This resource supports the National Curriculum for Art & Design and D&T and meets key criteria for AQA, Edexcel, and OCR D&T GCSE specifications by linking with suggested artists, designers, themes and movements.

How to use this resource

Download the accompanying image pack and framework. The objects selected represent key design movements by influential 20th-century designers. Visit the suggested galleries and use the simple framework to support students as they investigate these objects and others in the collection.

Museum visit

The 20th century is defined by its incredible output and diversity. Outlined below are short introductions to some of the major design movements from the time. Use these in conjunction with the suggested framework and image pack to investigate objects on display across a range of design disciplines. Further activities are suggested in the image pack to support extended learning in the galleries (we recommend bringing sketchbooks and creative drawing materials for these). The framework and activities can also be used to explore other objects on display.

Arts and Crafts: Hand vs Machine

The Arts and Crafts Movement developed in Britain as a reaction against growing industrialisation and its impact on design, traditional skills and the lives of ordinary people. Its legacy was long-lasting, flourishing across Europe, North America and Japan. Two of the movement’s most influential figures were the theorist and critic John Ruskin, and the designer, writer and activist William Morris, who advocated the use of handmade crafts and rejected machine-making.

Art Deco: Luxury and Exoticism

Art Deco responded to the human need for pleasure, luxury and escape. Designers borrowed from historic European movements as well as contemporary avant-garde art, the Ballets Russes, folk art, exotic and ancient cultures, and the urban imagery of the machine age, creating a much-needed feeling of optimism.

Modernism: A Utopian World

Modernism is a term which covers a range of movements and styles that largely rejected history and applied ornament, instead embracing abstraction. Emerging in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, Modernists had a utopian desire to create a better world, believing in design and technology as the key means to achieve social improvement. They believed that design and art could, and should, transform society.

Post-war design: Material Innovation

At the end of the Second World War, many countries increased their industrial output as they rebuilt their economies. Design was promoted by governments in various ways to reinforce a sense of national identity. Changes in materials and manufacturing processes encouraged consumers to embrace new affordable designs in their homes.

Postmodernism: Radical Style

Postmodernism shattered established ideas about modern style. It brought a radical freedom to art and design through gestures that were often funny, sometimes confrontational and occasionally absurd. Artists, designers and architects rejected the principles of Modernism and prioritised surface over depth, style over structure and embraced the ‘low’ and the ‘kitsch’.

Discover more

Visit Rapid Response Collecting in Room 74a. This gallery is responsive to current global events, technological advances, political changes and pop cultural phenomena that may have an impact on art, design and architecture today.

Can you draw any parallels between some of the issues discussed here and those confronted by 20th-century designers?

Access further information and research on the 20th century by exploring our online pages at vam.ac.uk
Arts and Crafts

Key design principles: Truth to materials, the vernacular, looking to the past, inspired by nature and simple forms

Consider the success of this textile design. Why has it had such a long-lasting legacy?

Use simple motifs found in this object or from the rest of the gallery to create a textile design that can be used across a range of contemporary applications.

Strawberry Thief (Furnishing fabric)
London, 1883
William Morris (designer), Morris & Co. (maker)
Indigo-discharged and block-printed cotton
Britain 1760-1900, Level 4, Room 125
Arts and Crafts (The Scottish Style)

**Key design principles:** Truth to materials, the vernacular, looking to the past, inspired by nature and simple forms

*Investigate the object carefully from as many angles as possible. Create an exploded diagram of the object to show its constructional detail or assemblage. Make notes on what you can see and how the object has been constructed or made.*

**Chair**
Glasgow, 1897–1900
Charles Rennie Mackintosh (designer)
Stained oak chair with drop-in seat
Britain 1760-1900, Level 4, Room 125
Art Deco

Key design principles: Geometric patterns, exotic references, luxury materials, speed and new technology

Using paper, experiment with cutting, tearing and folding techniques to manipulate a 3D representation of this garment. You may wish to recreate part of the garment’s form like the ruff or cuffs, the surface texture or another detail which you can then incorporate into a more contemporary design. Find the paper dress referenced later in the pack – how does this design compare?

Evening trouser suit and blouse
France, 1937–38
Coco Chanel (designer)
Net applied with sequins and lined with silk chiffon, and silk chiffon trimmed with lace and mother-of-pearl
Fashion, Level 1, Room 40
Art Deco

**Key design principles:** Geometric patterns, exotic references, luxury materials, speed and new technology

*Take a piece of A4 paper and fold it into four, then unfold it again. In the first box, make a freehand sketch of the object. In the second, make a continuous line drawing of the object without removing your pencil from the paper. In the third box make an accurate 3D perspective drawing of the object, moving around the object to get an interesting angle if helpful. In the fourth box, make a 2D plan drawing of the object.*

**Table lamp**
Copenhagen, 1927 (designed)
Poul Henningsen (designer) and Louis Poulsen (maker)
Nickel plated brass, aluminum, white opalescent glass and Bakelite
20th Century, Level 3, Room 74
Modernism

Key design principles: Rejection of ornament, preference for abstraction, industrial materials, modular designs, social mission

In pairs or small teams, use card and tape to form a basic model of the object. How many components do you need to make it and can it be built up using modular sections? Trial different approaches to modelling the chair. How might you adapt the chair if you were redesigning it?

Chair
France, 1938
Eileen Gray (designer)
Laminated wood, painted, with canvas
Furniture, Level 6, Room 135
Modernism

Key design principles: Rejection of ornament, preference for abstraction, industrial materials, modular designs, social mission

Consider how you might communicate an important message in a simple way. Use the accompanying grid and, utilising only two colours, map out your message in this style. Use tracing paper to retrace some of the elements of the design you have created and trial re-positioning them to make the message even more effective.
Post-war design

**Key design principles:** Futuristic forms, new materials, bright colours, mass produced

*Recreate this object to scale in paper by creating a simple pattern – you may even wish to try modelling it on a partner.* What are the benefits to using paper as a material? What are the failings? How could this be improved while maintaining the spirit of the design?

**Paper dress**  
London, 1967  
Dispo (Meyersohn & Silverstein Ltd, manufacturer)  
Bonded & printed paper  
Fashion, Level 1, Room 40
Post-war design

**Key design principles:** Futuristic forms, new materials, bright colours, mass produced

This object is intended to be mass-produced in high volume. There are many benefits to manufacturing furniture in this way, but mass manufacturing also has its downsides. Discuss with a partner what these might be. Make some annotated notes about how you might adapt the design of this object in order to make it a more sustainable option.

**Polyprop Armchair**  
London, 1967  
Robin Day (designer) and Hille International Ltd (manufacturer)  
Injection-moulded polypropylene on metal base, blue upholstery  
20th Century, Level 3, Room 76
Post-war design

Key design principles: Futuristic forms, new materials, bright colours, mass produced

Use three different coloured pencils to create a contour drawing of the object. Use the first colour to draw the outline of the object, the second colour to draw low relief elements on the object and the final colour to draw in any moving parts of the object.

Phono super, radiogram, SK55 (Radiogram)
Taunus, Germany, 1963
Dieter Rams & Han Gugelots (designers) and Braun AG (manufacturer)
Metal, wood and acrylic plastic
20th Century, Level 3, Room 74
Postmodernism

Key design principles: Pastiche style, radical, humorous, subversive statements, bold forms

*Divide your page into four. Design four new iterations of the existing kettle by making small adaptations. What would you change about this design if anything?*

*Kettle*

Milan, 1985
Michael Graves (designer) and Alessi (manufacturer)
Stainless steel, polyamide
20th Century, Level 3, Room 76
Postmodernism

Key design principles: Pastiche style, radical, humorous, subversive statements, bold forms

It is not immediately obvious what the function of this object is – do you think that is important? Discuss in which scenarios it is key to understand an object’s function purely by looking at it. Find an example of an object in the gallery which does this. In what ways does it differ from this design? What do you think this tells us about who this design is for?

Casablanca (Sideboard)
Milan, 1981
Ettore Sottsass (designer), Memphis (manufacturer)
Plastic laminate over fibreboard
20th Century, Level 3, Room 76
The objects selected in this pack represent key design movements by influential designers of the 20th century. Visit the suggested galleries and use this simple framework to support students to investigate these objects and others in the V&A’s collections.

Through exploring a range of objects in this way, students will uncover the significant designers, styles and movements from this period, and understand how they have helped shape design and manufacturing both in the 20th and 21st century.

**Consider an object’s lifecycle when analysing its narrative:**

- **AESTHETIC**
  What does it look like?

- **TECHNICAL**
  What is it made from?
  How does it work?

- **INDUSTRIAL**
  How and in what volume is it manufactured?

- **CULTURAL**
  Who or what is it responding to?

- **CONCEPTUAL**
  Does it tell a story?

- **BEHAVIOURAL**
  How do you interact with it?

- **ECONOMIC**
  How does it financially impact the consumer and/or manufacturer?

- **ENVIRONMENTAL**
  Is it sustainable?
  What is its lifespan?

**Extend your research**

Explore 21st-century objects by designers and architects who began working in the 20th century to see how their work developed. On display you will find examples by Norman Foster, James Dyson, Philippe Starck, Zaha Hadid, Alexander McQueen and Katharine Hamnett.