

Da danske møbler blev moderne: Historien om dansk møbeldesigns storhedstid [Danish Modern: A History of the Golden Age of Danish Furniture Design]. *By Per H. Hansen*. Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 2006. 644 pp. Photographs, illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, DKK399.00. ISBN: 8-711-23196-3.

Reviewed by Jan Pedersen

In the early 1930s, Kaare Klint, a professor at the Copenhagen School of Architecture and a gifted designer, launched a new school of Danish furniture design. His own designs were influenced by the American Shaker tradition, the German Bauhaus school, and the works of Le Corbusier and other followers of modernism in architecture. However, neither Klint nor the designers who worked with him adhered strictly to the standards of that philosophy, whose basic tenet was that form follows function.

Still, Klint and his students adopted the same artistic idiom as that of the functionalists, and the young, academy-trained Danish innovators stuck together out of necessity, as they were bucking the tide of customer preferences at the time. Wealthy patrons preferred parlor sets composed of heavy period furniture, and lower-end buyers emulated the established style with less expensive pieces. Cabinetmakers, furniture shops, and factories catered to customers with traditional tastes who were unwilling to experiment when it came to furnishing their homes.



To counter the stranglehold of tradition, some modern designers, progressive cabinetmakers, and industrial manufacturers formed an alliance during the nineteen thirties and began producing alternative furniture designs and, by the end of the decade, were making them available to a more responsive public. After the war, Denmark's economic growth and increased global trade enabled Danish Modern to become an international brand, and Scandinavian design flourished, especially in the United States. Sales expanded as manufacturers promoted the work of these craftsmen through exhibits, showroom facilities, and museum displays, aided by friendly reviews both at home and abroad.

Although only a few designers achieved international status, their less famous colleagues contributed to the talent pool. The golden age of Danish Modern lasted from 1945 to 1960, but eventually its popularity dwindled, in part because the craftsmen did not take the necessary steps to renew the line. With the passage of time, some of the most classical pieces have been brought into the high-end market, and Danish Modern continues to exert its influence, most visibly in mass-market products, such as the furniture offered worldwide by the Swedish company Ikea. The Copenhagen craftsmen who embraced modernism early on enjoyed a period of profits and acclaim, but they were overtaken by mechanization in the end.

This story is brilliantly presented and elaborated in great, but never excessive, detail by Per H. Hansen, who adopts a broad social and economic approach to the subject. *Danish Modern: A History of the Golden Age of Danish Furniture Design* is a valuable contribution to business history literature, and it is written in a straightforward style that makes it accessible to a wider audience. Nevertheless, it is a scholarly work, fully annotated and replete with references to a vast collection of source material. In his introductory chapter, Hansen adds perspective by bringing in the theories of Thorstein Veblen, Joseph A. Schumpeter, Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Porter, and others to frame his ensuing study.

Hansen's interpretation of Danish Modern's historical sequence is interesting, though some of his points are debatable. In the Danish idiom, "in fashion" and "modern" are represented by the same word, and Hansen constructs his narrative on this ambiguity. Thus, on the one hand, he claims that the school's designs embodied true modernism, while, on the other hand, he states that as the new style became appreciated, its fashionable status overtook and displaced its functional meaning. Consumers were attracted to the line's modern design, because they were eager to accumulate cultural capital by displaying "good taste." The brand identity of Danish Modern also hinged on concepts of craftsmanship, notably the tradition of handmade wooden fur-



niture. Advertisers promoted the idea of an alliance between clever minds and skilled hands, between modernity and a congenial Scandinavian tradition.

According to Hansen, this “narrative” helped to boost sales and facilitated the formation of a network of designers, manufacturers, and craftsmen that carried Danish Modern to success. Soon, however, the narrative got in the way of development and became the mechanism that hastened the decline of the line. Young, innovative designers were prevented from working in materials other than wood. Cabinetmakers clung to the original legend and failed to modernize, nor would they acknowledge the legitimacy of furniture-makers who were striking out in other directions. Larger-scale manufacturers refused to accept the costs of such a labor-intensive approach to product development, turning instead to preselected designs in order to maintain their cash flow.

And why should they have done otherwise? A sense of regret that Danish Modern has run its course pervades Hansen’s account. But, surely, such an outcome was inevitable. Instead of dwelling so insistently on the “narrative” of Danish Modern, Hansen could have introduced other perspectives to good purpose. Danish Modern’s slide from prominence to an ordinary position on the world market and the disintegration of the original supportive Danish network exemplify the process of creative destruction described by Schumpeter. The surviving manufacturers’ abandonment of experimental design may have been no more than a rational response to the situation: the end of product innovation, followed by maturity and, ultimately, by market saturation as the manufacturing technology was rationalized and market positions were consolidated.

Certainly, a description of how Danish Modern was branded, and the images that were used to do so, is an important part of the story. The reliance by the line’s promoters on a carefully crafted identity may indeed have had far-reaching consequences. However, Hansen’s point—that the weight of tradition prevented its craftsmen from seizing opportunities—is not altogether convincing. Scandinavian business has kept up with the times and has maintained its international image by claiming that its particular version of mass production methods is an extension of traditional high-quality craftsmanship. Danish goods, including furniture, have thus been thriving with the substitution of a newer “narrative” that is a logical outgrowth of older versions and is not detached from the economic realities of the post-1960 decades.

Hansen’s book is overall an excellent historical account of the subject. In relation to his claim that he wrote it in order to provide a new, alternative narrative (p. 575), it would perhaps be more accurate to say that he has succeeded in adding the reflexive and ironic dimension that

a basic narrative requires in this postmodern age in order to be taken seriously.