Ernest Race (1913 – 1964)

Ernest Race was a key figure in twentieth-century British furniture design; his skill was to use ingenious manufacturing processes to create contemporary furniture from improvised or recycled materials.

Ernest Race was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1913 and after graduating in interior design from London’s Bartlett School of Architecture, he joined the lighting firm, Troughton & Young as a draughtsman. After visiting a weaving village in India in 1937, he returned to London and opened a shop in Knightsbridge to sell textiles and carpets.

Race did not start designing furniture until just after World War II when he answered an advertisement from engineer, J.W. Noel Jordan. Jordan ran an engineering company during the war and believed that new manufacturing techniques could be used in the production of furniture. He opened a factory in Clapham, London and looked for a collaborator to design utilitarian, mass-produced furniture.

Race and Jordan named the new company, Ernest Race Limited (later Race Furniture) to capitalise on Race’s architect and designer contacts. In 1945-46 they responded to the government’s call to manufacture affordable furniture from the limited list of unrestricted materials. The Government Utility Scheme rationed wood, as available timber was to be used for house building.

As well as the shortage of traditional materials, the home was changing with multi-purpose rooms, such as dining/ sitting rooms, and the TV becoming the focal point of the living room. Heavy traditional furniture was challenged by a new requirement for lighter pieces which could create a sense of space and be easily moved.

The BA3

Race & Jordan’s first chair was produced in 1946 for the Victoria & Albert Museum’s exhibition ‘Britain Can Make It’. The BA3 is still on display at the V&A today as an example of iconic British design. The manufacturing process was revolutionary and used salvaged materials, including aluminium from redundant aircraft, which was recast to form elegant sections and upholstered for comfort. The upholstery was originally made from ex-RAF lightweight white cotton duck fabric.

Race & Jordan were designing for mass manufacture, so the products ease of assembly and shipping was vital. The BA3 dining chairs were assembled from a basic selection of five interchangeable components originally produced from sand-cast and hand-polished aluminium. The new metal furniture was very well received and one of the first orders included 1,500 chairs and tables for troop-ships that were bringing home demobilised servicemen. One of the selling points for the shipping sector was that the chair was strong and ‘safe against ticks, bugs, moths, all extremes of climate – and treatment’ (Ship Building & Shipping advert 1957). The BA3 was awarded the Gold Medal at the Milan Triennale in 1955.
DA chair

The DA chair, launched in 1946, was Race's interpretation of the wingback chair. This was upholstered furniture for the modern space conscious home. The 1951 Race catalogue reinforced Race's philosophy stating that, 'Bulk and weight are not synonymous with comfort.'

Tables

Race & Jordan’s ingenuity also resulted in the production of table tops using Holoplast, a panelling of laminated plastic with a scratch-resistant, polished mahogany finish. A thin ribbon of aluminium was heat-shrunk around the edge to conceal the honeycomb edge of the table top. Once again, the products light appearance contrasted with heavier pre-war tables.

Festival of Britain

It was at the 1951 Festival of Britain that Race’s Springbok, stacking steel-rod framed chair with elastic cords for the seat, and the Antelope chair and bench became known to a much wider audience. The simple moulded plywood seat was painted in the Festival colours of yellow, blue, red or grey. Gordon Russell, chair of the judges for the Festival project, and an eminent furniture maker, thought Race’s designs ‘miles ahead’ of his contemporaries.

The Antelope chair became a prominent example of post-war chair design. The Design Council described the chair as, ‘The chair expresses a whimsical and almost frivolous optimism rare in other international designs from the early 1950s. Whilst the ball feet suggest the molecular and atomic imagery characteristic of the period, the outline of the frame appears almost as if a Saul Steinberg cartoon, a fluid freehand movement of continuous line. The vertical slats to the back recall the Windsor side chairs, a folk form popular in both America and Britain from the Eighteenth century onwards.’
In 1953 Race launched the Kangaroo rocking chair, designed for the roof terrace of the London offices of Time Life.

Race also began designing a new concept for the deck chair for the P&O Orient line. The Neptune was designed to withstand salt water on the decks and had only two component moulds, secured by resilient webbing straps so that the structure could fold.

Race continued to investigate new materials and the Flamingo chair, a sister to the Heron, won a Design Centre Award in 1959 due to its skilful use of modern materials. Race’s reputation for producing furniture for ocean liners continued to grow and his Cormorant folding, laminated mahogany chair won a Design Centre Award in 1961 and a Gold Medal at the California State Exhibition in 1962.

During his career, Race was awarded gold and silver medals at the tenth Milan Triennale, three Design Centre Awards, gold awards at the California State exhibition and was appointed to the Royal Society of Arts Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry and a Fellow of the Society for industrial Artists and received the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers’ Design Medal. His designs are now held in various collections including the V&A Museum in London and MOMA in New York.

Race & Jordan designed ingenious new manufacturing processes to respond to the changing needs of the home and workplace. Ernest Race’s legacy is his success in creating beautiful, relevant, contemporary furniture from limited resources and as such his story can inspire the furniture makers of today.

**Race Furniture is delighted to still produce the Ernest Race Heritage Collection.**