



Attractive display of Midwinter including Zambesi, Primavera, Red Domino, Homeweave, and Saladware. Rodney Smith Antiques.



Simplicity patterns from Woman Magazine in the early 1950s.

New Series. The Designer Decades - 1950s to the 1970s Part One - The Flamboyant Fifties by Judith Clarke



The increasing emphasis on leisure and holidays at home and abroad shown in this advert of 1951. At home none became more popular than Butlins.



Poole Freeform contemporary style 1950s large vase.



Poole Pottery caraffe designed by Alfred Read.



Elvis - the ultimate 1950s male idol. Early Elvis records on original labels are always sought after.

Alternating comfortably between kitsch and contemporary the 1950s offers collecting potential for every pocket and has been fully embraced by our own time as a cult design decade. Not only have homes and interiors magazines enthusiastically championed the 1950s but mainstream manufacturers have gambled on a mania for all things retro and contemporary. If anything the 1950s was about bringing colour, frivolity and fun back into the lives of many. It is the kitsch clutter, so typical of the 1950s, that has come to embody the spirit of the age. It can be seen in the images used on these pages. A wide range of items are available to the collector brought about by the consumer boom which followed the austerity of the war years.

The influences on 1950s style were numerous - America, Europe, new break-throughs in science, technology, space exploration and the use of many new materials in industry. Additionally, as if to set the scene we had the Festival of Britain in the summer of 1951. The American influences on music, fashion, food and leisure pursuits have been lasting, manifesting themselves in the fifties as coffee bars, rock n' roll, fast food, big gas guzzling cars, bowling alleys and the like. On the other hand were the continental and Scandinavian influences, apparent in new-found holiday destinations, cuisine and the styling of the home. The 1950s younger generation with their ever increasing pay packets had plenty to spend their money on and a period of increasing affluence was catered for by products both frivolous and functional, chic and cheap.

As with any period of collecting it is furniture that commands some of the highest prices. Furniture of the 1950s made innovative use of many new materials including polyester, plywood, fibreglass, rubber foam and wire. Traditional upholstery and geometric, regular wooden shapes were moved to the sidelines by sculptural and organic furniture, still functional but with the emphasis on fun and experimentation.

One of the most popular advertising buzz words of the 1950s was 'contemporary'. Pieces of furniture designed by such people as Charles and Ray Eames (the American husband and wife team), Robin Day (a British designer), Arne Jacobsen (Danish architect), Harry Bertoia and Verner Panton now regularly appear in trendy sales devoted to design classics of the twentieth century. Storage units and room dividers by some of the top designer names have commanded prices between £5,000 and £20,000 at recent auctions.

Most examples of 1950s designer seating are now in the expensive category (between £100-£300 each and up to several thousand pounds for very rare pieces) though some designs such as the Eames 'Barcelona' chair are still in production today. At a much more affordable level are the familiar kidney and palette shaped occasional tables and no fifties style kitchen would be complete without its formica tabletops and brightly coloured units and cupboards.

On the ceramics front one or two British firms have emerged as extremely desirable because they most embody the 'spirit of the age'; - Midwinter Pottery in the realms of tableware and Poole Pottery. Strongly influenced by the changes in the North American market Roy Midwinter rapidly revolutionised the shape and appearance of crockery (the rimless plate was one of the ideas he exported from America) and with talented designers and vibrant patterns his Stylecraft and Fashion ranges are extremely sought after by collectors. Among the most desirable Midwinter patterns are Festival, Plantlife, Zambesi, Riviera, Cannes, Cherokee and Gay Gobbler. Also very high on the wish list of the serious collector are the vases designed by Jessie Tait for the pottery during the late 1950s. They are very scarce and between £150 - £250 apiece has not been uncommon in collecting circles. Poole Pottery from this period is equally desirable and vases, table lamps and large decorative plates and chargers in contemporary patterns by designers such as Guy Sydenham and Alfred Burgess Read can easily command around £100 each if not more.

The most familiar piece of 1950s tableware remains the Homemaker pattern designed by Enid Seeney for Ridgway. Its black and white design featuring contemporary home furnishings is one of the most familiar popular culture images of the 1950s. A couple of years ago very high prices could be achieved for a single item in this pattern but this has very much levelled off now. Other pottery firms who also produced distinctive 1950s designs include Denby, Beswick,

Broadhurst, Wedgwood, Wade, Crown Devon and Alfred Meakin. In price terms though you could probably pick up a whole tea set by someone like Meakin for the same price as one substantial Midwinter item in a desirable pattern. For the fashion-conscious collector the 1950s also offers some fabulous items. Dior's New Look of the late 1940s inspired a swift transition from ugly Utility to smart tailored Chic and the frivolous patterns and styles of the rock n' roll generation were a breath of fresh air and gaiety. Fashion accessories of this period also make great collectables - compacts, hats, scarves and costume jewellery with desirable 1950s motifs can still be found for as little as a couple of pounds each. A really nice pair of batwing sunglasses and a see-through plastic Lucite handbag may set you back between £50 - £100 each.

The style of the 1950s appeals above all because of its accessibility. You can take the high road of contemporary designer fashion and furniture or the low road of kitsch and cheerful. Bordering very much on the kitsch are coffee tables with tacky designs of ballerinas or large flowers. There is an abundance of Parisian motifs, Carmen Miranda dolls brought home from package holidays in Spain, images of bullfighting and cowboys as well as a profusion of cats and poodles as opposed to Scotties which had dominated the Art Deco period. The kitsch or the common touch continues with the use of flimsy brightly coloured plastics, flying mallard wall plaques, the pin-up posters, tins and playing cards and, the ultimate hospitality accessory, the home bar. Bright, fun and consumer based at one end of the spectrum yet seriously concerned with design principles the 1950s continues to appeal.

Thanks to Tremayne Applied Arts for permission to publish photos of the Ant Chair and Butterfly Chair. This shop specialises in fine examples of Twentieth Century Design and can be found at Street an Pol, St. Ives, Cornwall. TR26 2DS. Tel: 01736 797779.

Thanks also to Rodney Smith Antiques for Midwinter ceramics and to Poole Pottery Museum.



The Festival of Britain showing the South Bank Exhibition with Skylon near top right.



Butterfly chair - extremely popular in the 1950s though first designed in 1938.



Homemaker saucer detail showing contemporary furniture and accessories.



A typical 1950s Spanish scene on ceramic tile and iron work.



Ant chair designed in 1952 by Arne Jacobsen and made of plywood.



A popular collectable 1950s pattern by Midwinter - Red Domino - from an original advert.