

# DANISH MODERN FURNITURE 1930-2016

For Rikke and Anne

PER H. HANSEN

# DANISH MODERN FURNITURE 1930-2016

The Rise, Decline and Re-emergence  
of a Cultural Market Category

Translated by Mark Mussari

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## PREFACE

I have been a big fan of Danish modern furniture for many years. Then, one fateful day in the late 1990s, I decided to write about it from a perspective inspired by my professional background as an economic and business historian. Combining hobby and professional interest – passion and academic distance – proved a challenge and much harder than I envisioned. The first result was published in Danish in 2006 and ever since I have wanted to publish an English edition. Here it is, at last, in a thoroughly revised version, which, I believe, has benefited from my getting older and wiser, on Danish Modern anyway, in the decade that has passed.

Though it could perhaps be argued that I have in some way deconstructed the traditional narrative of Danish Modern's success, my own passion for Hans Wegner's, Finn Juhl's and the many other fine Danish architects' furniture made by highly skilled cabinetmakers remains undiminished. Nevertheless, I believe this book on the rise, decline, and re-emergence of Danish Modern as a cultural market category provides the most comprehensive, timely, and critical explanation of the history of Danish Modern from 1930 to today.

Now that the book is being published in English, I can no longer control the narrative and I must let go. I sincerely hope and think my book will appeal to the general reader with an interest in modern furniture design and its origins. At the same time, the book should be of interest to historians and other scholars interested in the business and material culture of design, in narratives and cultural entrepreneurship, and in understanding so-called cultural market categories in their social, economic and cultural context.

I first presented my ideas about this book at a seminar at the Department of History at the University of Southern Denmark in 2000 and when I moved to Copenhagen Business School in 2002 my inaugural lecture was on the history of Danish modern furniture design. In 2004-2005 I was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley invited by the late Gerald Feldman who showed an interest in my work. I often think of Gerry and how his invitation for me to spend a year in Berkeley provided the perfect environment for writing and thinking. It also gave me the opportunity to present my research on Danish Modern to economists at UC Berkeley and UCLA who were – on the whole – less impressed by my cultural and narrative ap-

proach to the success of Danish Modern. While I stuck to my approach, their – and many others' – forceful comments have sharpened my thinking, and my argument.

While at Berkeley, I also had the great opportunity to listen to and read stories sent to me from many Americans in the Bay Area who got in touch with me after a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on my research project. They had purchased Danish modern furniture in Copenhagen, Germany and the USA in the 1950s and 1960s, and they took time to share their experiences with me. They gave me a much better understanding of why mid-twentieth century Danish furniture appealed to some but not all American consumers. I thank them all, none mentioned, none forgotten, as we say in Danish.

In the autumn of 2005 I spent a semester at the *Harvard Business School* where I worked on an article on how a social network of organizations shaped the success of Danish furniture. The article was published in 2006 in *Business History Review* (BHR) and once again I benefited immensely from critical comments and advice, not least from BHR editor Walter Friedman. Over the years, I have also received valuable comments from and had conversations about business history, design, material culture, narratives, networks and social movements, and branding with Reggie Blaszczyk, Christopher Breward, Ludovic Cailluet, Teresa da Silva Lopes, Paul Duguid, Kjetil Fallan, Jeffrey Fear, Roger Horowitz, Geoffrey Jones, Pamela Laird, Anders V. Munch, Phil Scranton, Dan Wadhvani and many others. I am most grateful for their help and interest. I hope I have at least partly succeeded in learning from all the comments.

A few other people must be mentioned as well. My colleagues, first at University of Southern Denmark, and since 2002 at Copenhagen Business School, Per Boje, Benedikte Brincker, Kurt Jacobsen, Ida Lunde Jørgensen, Christina Lubinski, Mads Mordhorst and Sverre Raffnsøe all read parts or all of the Danish and/or English manuscript and supplied me with comments, criticisms and ideas. Robin Holt stands out by not only reading and commenting on the manuscript twice but also by helping to improve my written English, and for sharing my interest in furniture and craftsmanship. I also highly appreciate the general support from and discussions about Danish Design with my other colleagues at the Center for Business History and the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy as well as my many international friends and colleagues in the European Business History Association and the Business History Conference.

My gratitude also extends to others with a private and professional interest in Danish Design. Ole Høstbo has, on numerous occasions, invited

me into his gallery *Dansk Møbelkunst* and allowed me to draw on his deep knowledge of the world of vintage Danish Modern. I have also had many talks with Martin A. M. Feldt of *Galleri Feldt*, and with Jason Kinsella, a Danish Modern enthusiast like myself, who also read the manuscript. They all helped me understand the market for vintage Danish Modern. Anne-Louise Sommer, director of Designmuseum Danmark, showed an early interest in my work and provided me with the opportunity to talk about my quite different take on the history of Danish modern furniture design to a group of Nordic design historians. I know they don't all agree with me, but I have appreciated the opportunity on several occasions to address design historians and students. Needless to say, I haven't agreed with or followed all the proposals, criticisms and ideas I have received over the years, but I am deeply grateful for the assistance. And I am the only person to blame for any shortcomings and errors.

Having a book translated and published costs money. I want to thank the Copenhagen Business School and its former President Finn Junge-Jensen, and the *Scan/Design Foundation of Seattle* for financial support for translation of the first edition of the Danish book. After the first translation some years went by and not much happened until Stig Nielsen, my Danish editor, urged me to revise and expand the Danish book. The second Danish edition was published in 2016 and that gave me the impetus to finally bring an English version to fruition. In 2010 Mark Mussari, who suggested an English version in the first place, had already translated most of what you are reading, but since then I have substantially rewritten and translated chapters 2 and 20, the whole of chapter 21 and parts of other chapters. I thank the director of The University Press of Southern Denmark, Martin Lindø Westergaard for accepting the manuscript for publication and for his patience. I also thank *Den Hielmstjerne-Rosencroneske Stiftelse* and my Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy for financially supporting the publication of this book.

Finally, in the intersection between private and professional life, between Danish Modern as a hobby and an academic interest, I want to thank friends and family who made this book possible in the first place. My friend – and co-author of several guides to modern Danish furniture – Klaus Petersen not only shared my interest in Danish Design, he also sparred with me on numerous occasions and helped finding some of the illustrations for this book. My brother Søren Hansen who is at least as passionate about all things Danish Design as I am and with whom I have had countless discussions about the greatness of Danish furniture. My mother-in-law Grete Skovgaard who went through many back volumes

of newspapers and magazines as well as archives while I spent a year in Berkeley. Without Grete's help I might not have finished the Danish edition, let alone the English one.

Last but not least, my daughter Rikke Lund Hansen has gone from a teenager to a grown up woman while I have obsessed over Danish Modern. Rikke not only translated the book's endnotes; she also endured many pieces of furniture entering and exiting our home whenever I fancied yet another piece of old furniture. So did, and does, my wife, Anne Magnussen, who read the manuscript from cover to cover and commented in detail – several times. Much more importantly, Anne also provided the moral and loving support without which this book would never have been written. Anne also accepts that in our home, I am the decorator. I dedicate this book to Rikke and Anne, the loves of my life.

Copenhagen, October 8, 2017

Per H. Hansen

# 1: INTRODUCTION

The 1950s were the Golden Age of Danish furniture design. Danish Design and Danish Modern had garnered international acclaim, and modern furniture was poised to conquer the market. The cabinetmakers' annual exhibitions in Copenhagen was all the rage, and architects such as Finn Juhl, Hans Wegner, Arne Jacobsen, and Poul Kjærholm were celebrated as designer heroes, both at home and abroad. Danish Modern had become a lucrative business.<sup>1</sup>

What initially drove the success of modern Danish furniture? What explains its failure to endure across subsequent decades? What explains its recent resurgence? Many have attempted to answer these questions. If you ask those knowledgeable about Danish furniture design, you will surely hear some version of the story of Kaare Klint, architect and professor of furniture design, and his – and his students' – collaborative work with members of the Cabinetmakers' Guild Furniture Exhibitions.<sup>2</sup>

In the same breath, you will also hear about simplicity and honest functionalism of form, together with a high quality of handcraftsmanship evincing itself in many famous pieces of furniture. The furniture came to be deemed "timeless" and "classic", because of these qualities frequently being presented as a particularly "Danish" blend of tradition and modernity.

When passions truly run high, the use of "distinctly Danish" or "Scandinavian" involves more abstract values. The furniture is presented as democratic, social, and honest, created out of a unique sense of moderation and regard for surroundings and human need. All things considered, no reason exists to believe that these qualities constitute anything specifically "Danish" or "Scandinavian", but it was a good story and a story that sold.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative has been repeated in so many versions and so many times that it is almost impossible to consider any other explanations for Danish Modern's international acclaim after World War II. The narrative offers the impression that the furniture practically sold itself on the power of the beauty and quality that a number of talented architects and cabinetmakers managed to produce thanks to their allegedly unique Scandinavian values.

If we accept this understanding, Danish Design's decline in the 1960s and 1970s must be a direct result of this very contention. If the success was due to a group of uniquely gifted architects and their alliance with certain cabinetmakers, then the decline must surely be due to the fact that they are

no longer active and that no new talents came forward to take over. This narrative focuses almost exclusively on the designer heroes and the skilled cabinetmakers and frames design as an aesthetic activity. However, it is not possible to understand the rise and decline – and rise again – of Danish Modern and Danish Design without analyzing it as a business activity as well.

Accordingly, the purpose of this book is to analyze the rise and decline of Danish Modern as a cultural market category.<sup>4</sup> That is, how and why did Danish Modern and Danish Design emerge as a category in the inter-war and post-war periods, and how and why did it decline in the late 1960s. In addition, I examine how Danish modern furniture re-emerged in the 1990s in the guise of vintage and retro furniture through processes of re-categorization.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that Kaare Klint and a group of talented architects and cabinetmakers greatly influenced the Golden Age of Danish furniture design. Without them, it would most likely never have happened; still, this narrative leaves out a number of significant factors.

First, despite the role of Kaare Klint and the Klint School's design ideals it was not this approach to furniture design that created the breakthrough for Danish Design. Rather it was primarily furniture designed by architects such as Hans Wegner, Børge Mogensen and Finn Juhl that furnished homes in Denmark and abroad. Second, if simplicity, practicality, and quality in design and craftsmanship were the only explanation for Danish Design's success, it would mean that beauty and quality are characteristics of the furniture itself and that these concepts have a stable meaning in time and space. This is what is implied when the furniture is called timeless and classic.

Can a chair in and of itself possess such space- and time-defying qualities? Will all people in all countries for all time think, for example, that Hans Wegner's arm-chair from 1949, which for many years has been known simply as "The Chair" (Stolen), is beautiful? If that were the case it would mean that there is no room for the influence of taste and how taste changes over time, varies from culture to culture and is tied closely to class, social status, identity and to, ultimately, questions of power. Without disparaging either the design or quality of The Chair, taste involves a number of applied meanings that compel certain groups to agree that something is beautiful.

Many people think that The Chair is beautiful, but it remains an object to be used and sat in, and so in talking about its beauty people are ascribing meanings that reflect back on themselves. Objects, such as furniture, carry meanings that certain groups of consumers use to communicate and construct lifestyle, identity and a sense of community and belonging. To understand something like The Chair or modern Danish furniture more

Hans Wegner's "The Chair" from 1949 has been called the "most beautiful chair in the world", but is it an aesthetic quality in the chair itself or meanings ascribed to the chair by people? The chair was executed by cabinetmaker Johannes Hansen and had the model number JH501. Today, The chair is produced by PP Furniture.

generally is to appreciate not only its form but the way it is made and used, and the meaning and categories by which such making and use have been communicated through time.

Taste and fashion are historic and cultural phenomena, which change over time and differ between different groups of people. In the post-war period there arose a sufficient number of consumers, both domestic and foreign, who furnished their homes with modern Danish furniture because for them, at that period, it expressed good taste and embodied values they identified with and could use in their identity projects.

This raises the question, who decides which values or meanings a chair or a specific category of furniture signifies, and where do these meanings come from? It might be the producers and architects and others with ties to the trade who assign meaning to a category such as Danish Modern or it might be consumers. More often, this process of signification consists of interaction between both groups.

When the conversation turns to the historical moment when Danish Modern and Danish Design emerged as a new market category and the origins of its success, this process of signification is relatively easy to identify. It was a wide-reaching social movement of architects, cabinetmakers, furni-



ture manufacturers, journalists, the media, furniture dealers, and their organizations and, with time, also the support of the Danish state that created the meanings and categories by which Danish Modern and Danish Design was to become such a success. Participants of this movement had both economic interests and a strong social and cultural stake in the process. Their activities made Danish Design and Danish Modern a world-renowned category, resulting in many people in Denmark and abroad thinking that this furniture was beautiful and expressed good taste.

But it was not just a matter of good taste. More broadly the social movement was an identity movement and part of a larger social network in the market field of Danish furniture.<sup>6</sup> The movement promoted a specific narrative combining tradition and modernity and promising a better future in the shape of the Danish welfare society. In the words of sociologists Brayden King and Nicholas Pearce identity movements “seek to construct ... alternative market offerings that are aligned with their visions of how the world should be.”<sup>7</sup> In this case, the group of people and organizations that constituted the movement of Danish Modern and Danish Design believed strongly in the cause and advanced it at every opportunity. From the very beginning of Danish functionalism this group constituted an entrepreneurial identity movement actively attempting to influence the taste and lifestyle of consumers.

The construction of the new category and the matching narrative made promotion of Danish Modern possible by creating distinction from other kinds of modern and historical furniture. By the late 1930s this narrative in which Danish modern furniture was established as a new unique category had already been constructed. This innovative and entrepreneurial effort shaped the preferences of certain groups of consumers in Denmark and abroad who purchased Danish Modern. When consumers heard that, for example, a chair was an example of Danish Design or Danish Modern, a number of distinct meanings and associations came immediately into play.

In this way Danish Design was established as a new cultural market category with an attached narrative that framed the understanding of modern Danish furniture and in many ways worked as a cultural brand narrative. The Danish Modern narrative constructed in the 1930s by young functionalist architects, cabinetmakers and others served to theorize and legitimate the new category. While earlier styles of furniture pointed backwards, Danish Modern pointed forwards towards a better collectively enjoyed future.<sup>8</sup>

When the time arrived to conquer foreign markets by the end of the 1940s, the situation had changed. In contrast to efforts in Denmark, modern Danish furniture had to compete with comparable furniture from other countries such as the US or Italy. Nevertheless it remained, basically, the



same narrative used to market the creations of Hans Wegner, Finn Juhl and other architects although without overt reliance on the more normative values being employed in the domestic market.

The construction of a narrative about modern Danish furniture as the standard-bearer of uniquely “Danish” or “Scandinavian” values had particular importance for foreign markets. Danish Design and Danish Modern as a cultural market category came to signify special Danish qualities such as excellent craftsmanship, functional and human designs, and natural materials and at a more abstract level the promise of a better future.<sup>9</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the accepted narrative’s focus on design heroes and the Copenhagen Cabinetmakers’ Guild furniture exhibitions offer at the very least an inadequate and somewhat misleading understanding of the complicated interaction among many differing factors when Danish Modern conquered the world. Typically, focus has remained on the story of great architects and talented craftsmen.

That story had already commenced in the 1930s, and since then has been frequently repeated by people with a vested interest in furthering this narrative. It was an incredibly successful marketing strategy, and it was not entirely inaccurate. It just left out or silenced almost all traces of design as an economic and business activity.<sup>10</sup> Only a few, primarily non-Danish, scholars have emphasized marketing as an important element in Danish Design’s success, and Arne Karlsen, one of Kaare Klint’s devotees, has briefly mentioned the importance of Danish Design as a concept that indicated quality.<sup>11</sup>

None of them, however, has established a more encompassing perspective that views the narrative as essential in establishing Danish Design and Danish Modern as a new category that appealed to certain groups of consumers.<sup>12</sup>

## Contributions to Research

The main thesis of this book is that Danish modern furniture became an international success in the post-war period as the result of an act of innovation and cultural entrepreneurship.<sup>13</sup> The innovation was the construction of a new cultural market category and its concurrent narrative that framed the new style in a way that came to appeal to a growing group of consumers in the post-war period. The entrepreneur was not a Schumpeterian heroic individual but a group of passionate people who participat-



ed in an identity movement within a larger social network in the market field for design and furniture.<sup>14</sup>

It is an important point that the identity movement did not discover an already existing entrepreneurial opportunity or market. They enacted this opportunity by imagining a different future and acting on that vision. In this process the movement and its members contributed to the creation

In addition to its functional qualities, consumption of furniture is also about lifestyle, identity and belonging. It is a complicated process that is shaped by many factors including marketing and the culture industry such as lifestyle magazines. The two pictures (pp. 6 and 8) are from the Danish women's magazine *Femina* in 1957 and 1958 respectively and they illustrate how different consumer preferences and taste can be. During the 1950s Danish modern furniture by Hans Wegner and other modern architects gained market share while traditional furniture lost out. Lifestyle magazines contributed to this development through frequent illustrated articles on home furnishings.

of both monetary and cultural value.<sup>15</sup> It is also a crucial point that these changes occurred in a context of significant institutional change and conflict in the inter-war period that made the framing of Danish Modern as a new category with specific meanings possible but also contested.<sup>16</sup>

However, as time went by and the institutional context once again underwent significant changes in the 1960s, the predominant narrative's central elements and values turned into a constraint that made it difficult for the social movement to change its worldview and practices.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on Kaare Klint's scientific method, simplicity of design, wood as the primary material, and excellent craftsmanship as the most important elements in the development of Danish furniture design worked as a cognitive frame (see chapter 2) that made it difficult for architects and producers to change methods of production, use new materials, and make new designs.

When industrialization and innovations in technology, materials, and changing patterns of consumer behavior surfaced in the 1960s the movement, because it had been so successful in associating itself with a strong narrative of using traditional materials, promoting functional forms and espousing collective values, had no adequate response. The category of Danish Modern and Danish Design became irrelevant to many consumers and went into decline while the power relations within the social network shifted.

A conflict between tradition and modernity pervades the history of modern Danish furniture design and production. Success rested entirely on the paradoxical alliance between the beleaguered, traditional cabinetmakers' Guild and a modern approach toward both design and production. Following World War II, this conflict gradually intensified, and within the network the furniture industry eventually took control of the broader situation, including the architects. Meanwhile, cabinetmakers were left behind, and the social movement that had secured the success was reduced to a fashion system with a commercial focus.

This development occurred just as Denmark became even more industrialized and market-oriented, and consumer patterns, lifestyles, and identities became more fluid. By the mid-1960s, the movement was in a state of crisis. The Golden Age of Danish furniture design was over.

The approach in this book is not based on art or design history but on a "business economics" or "business administration" perspective. More specifically, this book is a work of business history.<sup>18</sup> I draw on literature on institutions, social movements and cultural market categories as well as



material culture and consumption. And I use a narrative approach to analyze the rise and decline of Danish Modern.<sup>19</sup>

To be clear, the purpose of this book is not to verify or falsify theories. Rather I use theory as a heuristic tool in order to guide and focus the analysis and to explain and understand a diverse body of empirical material. Accordingly, the presentation and discussion of the conceptual framework in the next chapter does not aim to be exhaustive. Instead,

the purpose is to present my approach and make it useful for the analysis of Danish Modern as a business historical phenomenon. Just as I am not testing theories, the case of Danish Design is not generalizable, since other countries had different experiences and different institutional frameworks. In fact this is a basic assumption of most institutional theory, since institutional frameworks are time and space specific and cannot be generalized.<sup>20</sup> What can be generalized, however, is this book's narrative approach to understanding processes of framing and categorization by social movements within a market field and in a long-term historical and contextual perspective.

As mentioned, the construction of Danish Modern as a new category was an act of innovation and entrepreneurship that contributed to value creation in Danish society. As already indicated it was not the result or an act of one or a few heroic designer heroes, though they were part of and contributed to the story. Rather it was the result of the work of an identity movement of impassioned people and the organizations they instituted in order to promote their cause: persuading the Danish people to live with modern furniture and in doing so contribute to a better future and the development of the Danish welfare society. I analyze the rise and decline of Danish Modern as a case of cultural market category emergence and decline through a narrative approach to the empirical material. This approach is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In contrast to much of what has been written on Danish modern furniture so far by architects, art historians and others, this book is based on a large body of empirical material ranging from journals, magazines and newspapers to archival material that, at least to my knowledge, has not been used before for this purpose. This material allows me to follow closely the process (as opposed to the results only) of categorizing and framing Danish Modern and Danish Design and ascribing specific meanings to it by a diverse group of actors.<sup>21</sup> My analysis of the rise and decline of Danish Modern shows how the narrative constructed by the identity movement in order to promote Danish modern furniture worked as a cognitive frame that was, at first, a resource but later constrained the actors' worldview and perceived options.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, this book presents a new interpretation of Danish furniture design as a social, cultural and business phenomenon. As such the analysis demonstrates the potential in looking at design as a business activity, but from a social and cultural perspective. It also provides a new and more adequate foundation for understanding Denmark's present competitive advantage in the furniture and design industries.<sup>23</sup> This revision should





Danish Design and Danish modern furniture emerged as a category from the 1930s and in the post-war period department stores and furniture dealers contributed to the circulation of the concepts and the attached narrative. The department store *Magasin* primarily aimed at tourists and other visitors to Denmark while cabinetmaker Poul Dinesen diversified into selling modern industrial furniture. Dinesen even made a showroom in a trailer, which he parked outside of American military bases in Germany in order to sell Danish Modern to American soldiers.

encourage other scholars of design to apply similar approaches to other national design movements.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this study offers a detailed, longitudinal and micro-level analysis of, first, how a new cultural market category is created, institutionalized and made successful with consumers. Secondly this study analyzes the, until now, unaddressed question of category decline and re-emergence through a process of re-categorization. I show how the category of Danish Modern declined in the mid-1960s only to be successfully re-categorized from the 1990s in order to appeal to new consumer preferences. Thus, in terms of theory, this monograph contributes to the existing literature on market fields, identity movements and categories in terms of analyzing how these concepts and processes actually played out in a longitudinal perspective at the empirical level. In



addition, this book argues that a narrative approach can contribute to understanding identity movements and processes of categorization and framing.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, in the context of the literature on material culture and consumption, the present analysis demonstrates how an identity movement managed to construct an entirely new category in such a way that the category worked as a frame that appealed to a large group of consumers in Denmark and abroad by addressing their identity and lifestyle needs in a modern society. In addition, the study also demonstrates how this process was essentially a narrative one. Through a detailed micro-level study of the narrative constructed by an identity movement it is shown how successful narratives may turn into a constraint on actors' choice set, when contextual changes result in new identity needs among consumers. Thus while other studies have focused on discourse analysis and "key binary contrasts", and

called for more comparative and theoretical research it is only through a longitudinal and micro-level thick description and in-depth analysis that the narrative framing process of a “de novo” category can be understood.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in contrast to most other studies on categories and social movements this study has analyzed the “full” identity movement within a social network and not just one group or profession. This study in other words offers an empirical micro-level case study spanning several decades of how an identity movement constructed Danish Modern as a completely new category from the 1930s.

A number of central ideas have already been introduced in this chapter and if your main goal is simply to read about how modern Danish furniture design became a success, you may skip the next chapter without doing too much harm to the overall story.

After the introduction to my theoretical framework in chapter 2, the book offers a partly chronological account. It begins with a description and analysis of the current narratives about Kaare Klint and the cabinetmakers in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 5 focuses on the narrative concerning the presumed special national character of Danish Design and then ties those threads together. Chapters 6 through 11 follow the development from the end of the 1920s to the end of the 1940s, when modern furniture finally began to establish itself. Finally, chapters 12 through 19 deal with the Golden Age during the post-war period and the decline in the 1960s, with all threads gathered together in chapter 20. Chapter 21 should be read as an epilogue, in which I consider the re-emergence of Danish furniture design in recent years.