

Models
from
the *past*
for
the *future*

Collection
Design Museum Gent

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Colophon

EVELIEN BRACKE, CURATOR

“Ce n’est qu’avec le passé qu’on fait l’avenir.” *Mettons sous les yeux de nos artisans les exemples de nos aïeux, nos maîtres, et espérons que, les regardant en artistes, non pour les copier servilement mais pour s’en inspirer, ils trouveront peu à peu, en suivant la nature des anciens, qui est aussi la nôtre, l’adaptation de leur expression d’art à nos besoins modernes.*¹

In 1909, Maurice Delacre, secretary of the Ghent Association for Industrial and Decorative Arts, used the quote “Ce n’est qu’avec le passé qu’on fait l’avenir” from the book *Le livre de mon ami* by Anatole France in an annual report. This quote beautifully sums up the educational

ambition of the then still fledgling Ghent ‘museum of models’: the past provides us with the most important lessons for the future and can be used as a source of inspiration for new creations, adapted to contemporary needs. Rather than merely copying ‘models’ or ‘good examples’, craftspeople and manufacturers were encouraged to produce high-quality work with historically accurate originality.

Today, more than a century later, and with a collection that now comprises more than 24 000 pieces, we – as a design museum – are looking back at our own past. And asking the question: how can a collection that has its roots in a museum of models still inspire us to shape the

future? The museum emerged around the turn of the last century, during a period of crisis when the quality and competitive position of Belgian applied arts were under pressure from industrialisation. In 2026, we once again find ourselves in a time of transition, characterised by various forms of crisis that extend far beyond the consequences of technological acceleration. In a world where designers are looking for new ways to design, produce, distribute and use, a public design collection can serve as both a memory and a source of inspiration, interpretation and imagination. It is precisely this design museum model that we are highlighting with *Models from the Past for the Future*.

The Museum of Models as an exhibition concept

In *Models from the Past for the Future*, the concept of the Museum of Models

is reinterpreted in a contemporary light. More than ever before, we need alternative models to enable possible futures – futures that we can shape ourselves, drawing on inspiration from the past in the form of a design collection.

We are of course looking at it from today's perspective, as the definition of 'good design' is subject to change. What was once considered a model or 'good example' may no longer be so. Every design object from the past acts as a mirror for the world of tomorrow: what do we want to preserve, and what are we not afraid to design in a radically different way? At the same time, models from the past can also embody practices, strategies or attitudes that are once again proving relevant. The educational premise of the Museum of Models, with its focus on materials and techniques rather than on the authors, is also inspiring. It ensures that we primarily



Fig. 1 (left): The Atrium, a central area for new design commissions with the collection as a source of inspiration, architects nord + laura muyldermans, photo by Filip Dujardin, 2026

Fig. 2 (top): Working model of the second floor of Wing 92, with the entrance to the collection presentation at the bottom left and the Atrium in the centre, architects nord + laura muyldermans, 2025

Copy

Copying occupied a central place in the Museum of Models. Although slavish imitation was never the aim, craftspeople and students from industrial arts education came here to study and draw the collection pieces. After all, practice makes perfect. However, copying also raises questions. What about authorship and originality? Shouldn't good design, above all, be innovative?

Using three examples, this book shows that the history of design is steeped in imitation and reinterpretation. There is the literal repetition of forms and styles, sometimes driven by an association with status or renown, as with the nineteenth-century

revival styles, and sometimes in the form of appropriation, as in Italian postmodernism. Another inexhaustible source of inspiration is nature. The drive to imitate expensive natural materials fuelled innovations in plastics.

The collection presentation also explores other imitations of materials and techniques. Craft techniques appeal to contemporary designers, sometimes because they allow them to deliberately keep the scale of their production small. Interest in natural and renewable materials is growing, this time as an alternative to plastics, and experiments from the past can offer inspiration here. Copying is therefore also a source of innovation.



pp. 45–60

**From imitation to replacement:
The ingenious entry of plastics into
the world of design**

The first plastics emerged as manufacturers started searching for an alternative to expensive natural materials such as ivory or marble.

Hannah Hendrickx explains how imitating the appearance of natural products gradually gave way to developing materials that were strong and easy to maintain. The versatility of some of these plastics opened up new possibilities for imitation. With others, any resemblance to their natural predecessors vanished completely.



pp. 61–81

New rooms, old tastes: The Belgian bourgeois interior in the second half of the nineteenth century

From a contemporary standpoint, nineteenth-century interiors can sometimes seem un-inventive. However, **Bart Nuytinck** argues that the concept of originality was understood differently at the time. Residents were expected to create a personal atmosphere in which they thoughtfully combined historical styles. They did not hesitate to make new objects, textiles and wallpaper look old. And in the showrooms of interior decoration shops, antique pieces and new objects based on old models were offered side by side.



pp. 82–99

Banality, bricolage and memory: Strategies of redesign in Italian postmodernism

Colourful and playful, the furniture designed by Alessandro Mendini and Ettore Sottsass was also a bold example of creative reuse. Behind their wide-ranging cultural references lay a 'joyful pessimism' about the designer's role: inventing no longer made sense; only re-assembling what already existed. **Catharine Rossi** suggests that this approach can offer inspiration amid today's social unrest – from an ecological point of view, but also because of the power of design as a visual language, as long as it remains grounded in craftsmanship.

Banality, bricolage and memory: Strategies of redesign in Italian postmodernism

CATHARINE ROSSI

*"For a future of at least ten years of design one can do nothing but redesign."*¹

In 1978 Alessandro Mendini set out his position on design. The architect, designer and magazine editor was writing in relation to work undertaken with Studio Alchimia, a gallery-studio established in Milan two years earlier.² Redesign described the application of surface additions – including colourful flags, spikes, patterns and shapes – to

existing objects, from everyday supermarket items to revivalist historic furniture **[1986-0055]** (Fig. 1) and modern design chairs. For Mendini, to redesign was not to improve the existing but to reduce design to an act of banal decoration. It was a provocation; a nihilistic call to arms amid uncertainty over the value and direction of design in the late 1970s.

In many ways redesign captures Italian postmodernism's design strategy

Fig. 1: 'Poltrona di Proust', Alessandro Mendini, Studio Alchimia, 1978, 115 x 80 x 105 cm **[1986-0055]**

more generally, defined by pluralistic cultural and historical references, bricolage and art direction. Redesign was a highly communicative design mode that recognised the power of an image-led media and challenged conventions of authorship and functionality. It expressed an ambition to reject a dominant modernist design ethos and identify a new design language to replace it, one that would emerge in the self-described 'New International Style' launched with the Memphis design collective in 1981.

Redesign was not just relevant for late twentieth-century design. Amid seismic societal shifts and growing disquiet at design's impact on people and planet, the question of which strategies design should adopt for the next ten years is now ever more pertinent. Perhaps surprisingly, Mendini's redesign could provide a

model for the necessary reinvention of design today.

Origins of redesign: the radical avant-garde

Redesign didn't come out of nowhere: it was itself the fruit of at least ten years of rethinking and challenging design. From the mid-1960s onwards, a new generation of Italian designers started to question the ethos that had driven the nation's remarkable post-war design prowess – one defined by desirable commodities designed by established architects such as Gio Ponti, Gae Aulenti and Franco Albini and crafted by companies such as Cassina, Flos and Venini. In a wave of dissent at 1960s mass consumer and industrial society, architects associated with Italy's emerging Radical Design avant-garde



Polished Past

2026

Victor Verhelst

Victor Verhelst delves deep into the collection and translates it into an impressive tapestry. The decorative elements, motifs and structural lines of the collection items do not simply form an archive to be mined. They are taken out of their context, fragmented and reworked into digital patterns that together form a new visual narrative.

To provide a material dimension to this digital universe, Verhelst collaborates with B&T Textilia in Waarschoot. Using the Jacquard weaving technique and various types of yarn, they transform the digital image into a textile work with a rich tactile layering.

Selection of inspirational pieces:



Stacking and building game, 1915, Albert Van Huffel
[1996-0015_1-2]



Plate from the 'Service Rousseau', 1867,
Felix Bracquemond [FH-0021]



Curtain tieback, ca. 1800-1899 [6469]



Fragment of the upholstery for a chair backrest,
1916-1918, Albert Van Huffel [4314]



Pull out or fold up: A brief cultural history of folding furniture

IRENE CIERAAD

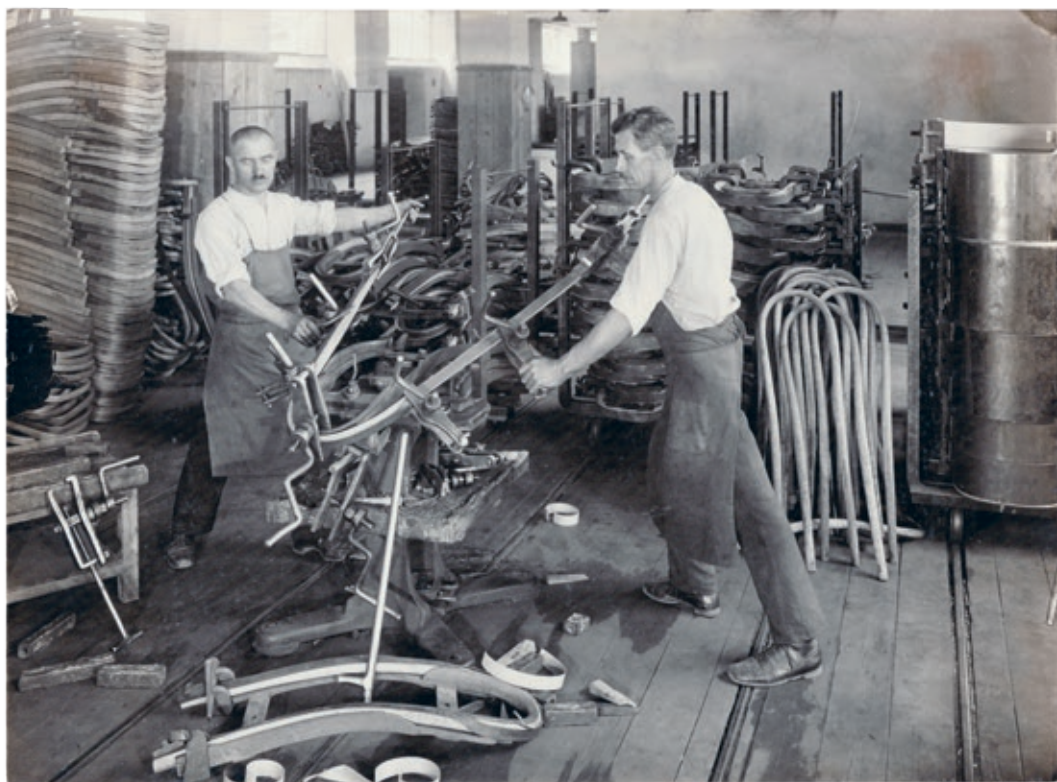
Like me, you may have thought that folding furniture was a modern development. But you'd be mistaken. The folding chair has been around since the Roman and Chinese empires. The folding bed also came before the four-poster bed or the cot. A three-part fold-out bed was even found in Tutankhamun's tomb that, when folded up, could also serve as a chair (**Fig. 1**).¹ In terms of folding beds, roll-up sleeping mats or hammocks are undoubtedly even older.² Tutankhamun's bed is actually more an example of

a multifunctional piece of furniture, as it can be used in both the folded-up and folded-out states. The same cannot be said of the folding chair, as it can only be used as a chair when it is not folded up. When it *is* folded up, it is no longer a piece of furniture but at best an object that is easier to transport or store.

Most people do not realise that multifunctional furniture has a surprisingly long history. Tutankhamun's tomb was not discovered until 1922, precisely the period in which compact modern living



Fig. 1: Three-part fold-out bed from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun, ca. 1345–1327 BCE, photo by Harry Burton. Grand Egyptian Museum Collection



The arch screwed to the back as padding, which was already used in the No. 8 chair, serves a purely practical rather than decorative function. The front legs have also lost the characteristic capitals of the earlier models and are screwed into a round seat. This round seat could be produced more easily than the trapezoidal seats that were previously common. To improve the stability, usability and durability of the mass-produced chairs, an additional foot ring was added from 1861. Then, from the mid-1870s, reinforcing brackets were added on the left and right between the outside of the seat and the backrest.⁵

These chairs, with their components reduced to their essence, were admittedly budget-friendly but did not necessarily appeal to the taste of historicism, which was characterised by a preference for abundant ornamentation. The Thonet

Brothers therefore also included numerous lavishly curved models in their range – chair designs with curled back padding, exuberantly curved rocking chairs [3057] (Fig. 6), clothes racks [2024-0027] (see Fig. 6 on p. 168) and cradles [1976-0162] that demonstrated both the decorative and typological potential of bentwood. However, these difficult-to-produce pieces of furniture proved not to be very profitable, as they were sold only in small numbers. The company's core business was clearly focused on the massive demand for restaurant and coffee house chairs.

Jacob & Josef Kohn and the origins of architect-designed furniture

The great economic success of the Thonet Brothers did not go unnoticed, of course. As early as the 1850s, the first

Fig. 4 (top left): Two-dimensional curving of a solid backrest in a Thonet workshop, photo by Herman Bramer (Lisa Workshop), 1929. Wolfgang Thillmann Collection

Fig. 5 (bottom left): Three-dimensional bending of a solid backrest in a Thonet workshop, photo by Herman Bramer (Lisa Workshop), 1929. Wolfgang Thillmann Collection

Fig. 6 (right): Rocking chair 'no. 1', Gebrüder Thonet, ca. 1860 (this example 1900–1910), 98 × 58 × 115 cm [3057]



OS_PlayStation VI

2026

OpenStructures

OpenStructures (OS) is an open platform used by designers to exchange modular components. In the exhibition, Christiane Högner and Thomas Lommée activate OS as a space for play and experimentation. Among other collection items, Josef Hoffmann's 'Fledermaus chair' is disassembled, standardised and reconfigured into an expandable family of objects.

Visitors are invited to try out the OS system themselves. This creates connections, not only between the object components, but also through the interaction between designers and between users, while they explore new ways of assembling objects together.

Selection of inspirational pieces:



Chair 'no. 728', known as the Cabaret Fledermaus chair, ca. 1905–1906, Josef Hoffmann
[1988-0016_2-2]



'Flavia' mini totem, Ettore Sottsass, 1995–1996
[2005-0147_2-5]



Side table with split legs, Albert Van huffel, 1914
[1999-0092]



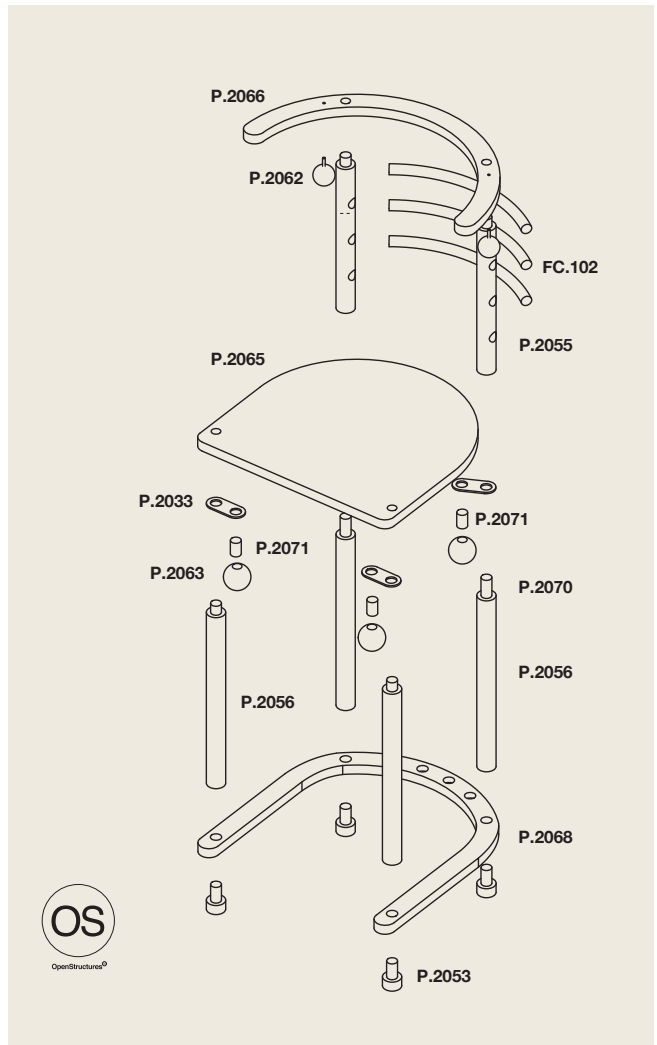
A.845 Wood Screws & Frills totem
Diane Steverlynck and Maud Vande Veire



Cabaret Fledermaus in Vienna, ca. 1907
Photo from Eduard F. Sekler, *Josef Hoffmann: Das architektonische Werk. Monographie und Werkverzeichnis* (Wikimedia Commons)



P.1184 Wood screw
Diane Steverlynck and Maud Vande Veire



A.1070 Iconic Synchronization, modular chair modelled after the 'Fledermaus chair' by Josef Hoffmann
OS_Studio



Film still from 'Excerpts from Correspondance', 2026
Alexandre Humbert Studio