

# Shining the Light

## ON AUSTRALIAN MID-CENTURY MODERN

“AUSTRALIAN MODERN IS MAKING A COMEBACK, WITH COLLECTORS LOOKING TO THE BEST OF 1950s DECORATION AS BLUE-CHIP INVESTMENTS.” SO RAN THE INTRODUCTION TO A PIECE IN THE *AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS REVIEW* IN JUNE 2007, WRITES **JULIE CARTER**.

**T**he feature continued: “For most of the last three decades second-hand furniture made in Australia after World War II has been virtually unsellable, so it’s hardly where investors would expect to get top quality investments. But with a selective approach there are some valuable finds to be made.”

And how true this prediction has proven to be. Mid-century Australian designers have finally stepped out from the shadows of their European and American counterparts and claimed a place for themselves in design history.

While most of us already recognise the more famous names of designers such as Grant Featherston, Robert Klippel, Douglas Snelling and Clement Meadmore, there were other Australian designers whose mid-century work was just as important. It’s just that we see some of it every day... Who can get excited about a stackable plastic chair, seen in every town hall and scout club in the country? They did in 1968, when the very first one was produced.

In the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s, when designers were using industrial materials to make furniture, it was cutting edge. Their designs and aspirations were misunderstood by the Australian furniture retailers who wanted to stick with the safer traditional furniture designs, and eventually the innovation was killed by the public, who wanted a cheaper version of everything and didn’t mind if the item was mass-produced and imported from overseas. Australian mid-century modern shone for a brief few decades and was then extinguished, but for a select few designers the spotlight is once again shining. The recent exhibition at the

National Gallery of Victoria – which has played a major role in the acceptance of mid-century modern – has brought into focus some of the less famous names who deserve their turn in the sun.

### Mary Featherston

Plenty has already been written about Grant Featherston, who is arguably Australia’s most famous modern designer. But what of his wife, Mary?

She was born in England in 1943, and arrived in Australia at the age of ten. She completed a Diploma of Interior Design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1963, and worked as an interior designer for Mockridge, Stahle and Mitchell architects in the mid-1960s. She and husband Grant formed a professional partnership after their marriage in 1965 and they co-designed a range of seating during the late 1960s and ‘70s. Their first joint project was the *Expo ’67 Talking Chair* for the

“WE SHARED THE BELIEF THAT THE ROLE OF DESIGN WAS TO ENRICH PEOPLE’S EVERYDAY LIVES,” SAYS MARY.

Bruce Hyett – lounge chair 1992.  
Manufactured by Wycombe  
Industries Pty Ltd, Geelong, Vic.  
Aluminium, cotton, other materials.  
National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne.



Montreal World Expo; they then undertook the fit-out of the National Gallery of Victoria from 1966 to 1968, designing a modular furniture system. Lacking in practical experience, Mary worked predominantly as an assistant to Grant on these projects. She and Grant shared the belief that design should be embedded in nature and in the late 1960s they commissioned architect Robin Boyd to design a shed-like house with an enclosed garden, from which they based their experiments with various plastic technologies. Together they produced a run of chairs that explored the possibilities of the use of plastics in the creation of innovative seating forms. 'The rotation-moulded, polyethylene Featherston Stem chair took 18 months to reach production stage and was one of the most technologically sophisticated chairs ever made in Australia,' notes an entry for The Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

"During the early 1970s, Grant and I began working on the *Numero* range of lounge seating," Mary reveals in *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design*. "The idea for *Numero* was as simple as it could be; a moulded form with a pull-on stretch cover that fitted like a glove." The idea was to use minimal materials, modularity and volume production techniques to create well-designed and affordable pieces. "We shared the belief that the role of design was to enrich people's everyday lives," says Mary. In the book she explains that the most challenging aspect of the *Numero* research and development was to find an upholstery

**Right:** Fred Lowen – aluminium shell chair 1954, manufactured by the Fler Company, Richmond, Vic. Aluminium, wool, steel, wood, rubber and other materials. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

**Below:** Kjell Grant – Montreal chair 1972. Manufactured by William Latchford & Sons Pty Ltd, Melbourne. Steel, vinyl, other materials. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



fabric that stretched two-way – something we take for granted in today's world of latex. "After much searching by us and experimentation by several manufacturers, a Tasmanian company succeeded in developing a two-way boucle, wool/acrylic mix that was ideal," says Mary. The first in the *Numero* series was launched in 1973, followed by further ranges in 1974. The series was popular and sold up to eighty units a day, but in the mid-1970s the beanbag was introduced, and at one-third of the price of the *Numero* lounge, the competition was fierce. Australia's furniture retailers were not supportive of innovation – they wanted more conservative, traditional design – and the *Numero* range became the last to be designed by the Featherstons.

In 1973 the couple received a grant to research preschool children's play and learning environments and Mary was a consultant to the Museum of Victoria's Children's Museum from 1984 to 1992. Mary Featherston has since specialised in the design of play and learning environments and has won several awards. She has curated the Reggo Emilia travelling exhibition in Australia

and South-East Asia since the mid-1990s and she was inducted into the Design Institute of Australia Hall of Fame in 1996, along with late husband Grant, who died in 1995. She continues to live and work in Melbourne. "My status as a designer has a lot to do with Grant's work," she said humbly in an interview for *The Age* in 2005. "I just bathed in his reflected glory."

#### Kjell Grant

Born in Scotland in 1929, Kjell Grant won a scholarship to the School of Design in Chicago in 1946, and another to the Royal College of Art in London (where he studied under the sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth) in 1951, the same year he received a Master of Arts from Stirling University in Scotland. He returned to Chicago to study architecture and industrial design and in 1956 visited Scandinavia, where he studied glass and ceramics. In 1957 Grant arrived in Australia to work on a project that involved designing televisions, but he decided to settle and worked as a freelance designer before making a permanent home in Melbourne in 1960. In 1964 he established the Formplan Design Group and worked in architectural, interior and product design until 1976, when he became a freelance consultant designer. He designed the furniture for the Australian Pavilion at the Montreal Exposition in Canada in 1967, and the Montreal chairs that resulted from this project are represented in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Grant's focus in the late 1970s was on major public seating projects for theatres



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and cinemas and his major commissions included the Adelaide Festival Theatre, His Majesty's Perth, Theatre Royal and Seymour Centre in Sydney, and the Arts Centre in Melbourne. From 1980 to 1983 he lectured in industrial design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and in 1999 he founded Melbourne Movement, a collective of young design graduates whose work is taken to the world forum via exhibitions. In 2011 Kjell Grant was inducted into the Design Institute of Australia Hall of Fame. He continues to live and work in Melbourne.

### Bruce Hyett

Bruce Hyett was born in Australia in 1923 and studied at Geelong College before serving in the army in the Second World War. In 1947 he enrolled at Swinburne Technical College, heading off to England in 1948 as part of a post-war retraining scheme and studying furniture design at the Central School of Art in London and at High Wycombe Institute. When he returned to Australia in 1950, Hyett set up Wycombe Industries Pty Ltd, in Geelong, and with Ron Moody and Ian McGowan he designed and manufactured furniture for more than three decades. In the 1960s Hyett was twice awarded the Gold Medal of the Guild of Furniture Makers of Australia.

In 1975 Hyett introduced a contemporary lounge suite that was noteworthy enough to be featured in *The Age*. Of particular interest was the suede



upholstered chipboard construction and laminated table top – which magically transformed into a footstool when a cushion was added. The suite was made in knockdown form, although it was usually retailed assembled.

The late 1970s saw Hyett designing furniture for the use of the elderly and the handicapped. His intention was to create practical furniture that was also comfortable for long periods. His prototype chair included a headrest, adjustable back, ashtray and magazine rack.

### Schulim Krimper

Born on the eastern border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1893, Schulim Krimper was orphaned at the age of nine and lived with his eldest sister for three years before being apprenticed to the town cabinetmaker at the age of twelve. He completed his apprenticeship and served with the Austro-Hungarian artillery in the First World War before working his way through Europe and settling in Berlin in the 1920s, but in 1939 he and his wife fled

Grant and Mary Featherstone – *Numero IV* lounge, 1971 designed, 1974 manufactured by Uniroyal Pty Ltd, Melbourne. Polyurethane foam, wool, other materials. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Nazi Germany and arrived in Melbourne that same year. His work was thrown into the spotlight in 1948 when the National Gallery of Victoria bought two cabinets, and the sale was followed by several exhibitions.

During the 1950s and '60s, when he employed up to six assistants, Krimper became known as the city's premier supplier of custom-made furniture, using both native and imported timbers for his designs; his skill in revealing the beauty of the timbers he worked with was legendary. He favoured blackbean for his smaller cabinetry, and blackwood and other native timbers for larger cabinets, tables and chairs. Exotic timbers from the South Pacific were finished with very light shellac varnishes or lightly oiled to enhance the muted streaky grains and specked figuring.



Schulim Krimper – shallow chest on stand c.1948. Red cedar, silver ash, myrtle, copper and brass. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. NOTE: Krimper's output was quite select, and could be considered small compared to his mass produced rivals.

## AUSTRALIAN DESIGN AND INFLUENCES THROUGH THE DECADES

**1940s design in Australia:** In 1946 the Fler Company is formed in Richmond, Melbourne by Fred Lowen and Ernst Rodeck. The following year sees the launch of Functional Products Pty Ltd, and the *Snelling Line*, which was designed the previous year, is released. In 1947 Grant Featherston launches the *Relaxation* chair and Fred Ward launches Patterncraft. The Society of Designers for Industry (SDI) is formed in 1948, and the *Kone* chair by Roger McLay is produced. That same year, the National Gallery of Victoria buys a sideboard and chest by Schulim Krimper. In 1949 Grant Featherston designs the furniture for Robin Boyd's *House of Tomorrow* at the *Modern Home Exhibition* in Melbourne and wins almost universal approval.

**1940s around the globe:** In 1945 designer Ernest Race comes up with the BA chair using re-melted aluminium scrap, and Knoll releases its Ralph Rapson-designed line of wooden chairs. The following year sees the introduction of the moulded plywood *LCW* chair by Charles and Ray Eames, and the development of the *Lounge* chair and ottoman by Hendrik Van Keppel and Taylor Green using cotton cord and tubular steel. In 1947 the *Butterfly* chair goes into production, nine years after its initial design by Jorge Ferrari-Hardoy, Juan Kurchan and Antonio Bonet. In 1948 the first FX Holden is produced in Melbourne; the LP is invented and the *Grasshopper* and *Womb* chairs, designed by Eero Saarinen, are released. The first non-stop flight around the world takes place in 1949.

**1950s design in Australia:** Grant Featherston launches the *Countour* range in 1951, and the same year Schulim Krimper holds his first furniture exhibition at Georges Gallery in Melbourne. In 1952 Clement Meadmore establishes Meadmore Originals for interior and industrial design, and Fred Ward launches his range of *Blueprint* furniture designs. The *Double* sleeper by Gerard Doube is launched in 1953. In 1955 Michael Hirst establishes his design and manufacturing business and Fler launches the *SC55* chair. The following year Grant Featherston opens Featherston Contract Furniture; Gordon Andrews launches the *Rondo* chair and an exhibition of Schulim Krimper's furniture is mounted at the Rockefeller Centre in New York. In 1957 Grant Featherston is appointed consultant designer to Aristoc Industries and in 1958 the Industrial Design Institute of Australia is formed.

**1950s around the globe:** In 1950 Charles and Ray Eames design the *Eames* storage unit. The following year they release variations on the wire chair, and Britain holds *The Festival of Britain*. That same year, the first colour television programmes are aired on American television. In 1952 – the year the polio vaccine was created – the *Side* chair is designed by Allan Gould using steel rod strung with plastic cord, and Arne Jacobsen's *Ant* chair is manufactured. In 1953 Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay summit Mt Everest – the first humans to do so – and the steel-framed *Diamond* chair by Harry Bertoia is introduced. George Nelson designs the *Coconut* chair in 1955, and the *Tulip* chair by Eero Saarinen enters the market in 1956 – the same year the Eames partnership designs one of the most successful items of modern furniture: the Eames lounge chair and ottoman. The American Supreme Court declares racial segregation illegal and television is launched in Australia. In 1958 the *Swan* and *Egg* chairs by Arne Jacobsen are launched and the 'peace' symbol is introduced.

**1960s design in Australia:** In 1963 Clement Meadmore moves to New York and Grant Featherston designs the *Delma* chair, which became one of his most commercially successful pieces (more than 250,000 were produced). *You and Your Home* is published by Steven Kalmar in 1964 and Grant and Mary Featherston form a design partnership in 1965. In 1967, they design furniture for the Australian Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal; Kjell Grant and Fler do likewise. In 1968 the Featherstons design the interior fit-out of the new National Gallery of Victoria, and in 1969 one of the first plastic chairs is produced in Australia – the *Stern*, designed by the Featherstons.

**1960s around the globe:** In 1960 the oral contraceptive pill is made available in the USA. In 1961 the Berlin Wall is erected; Soviet Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man to travel into space and the first single-form seat chair is manufactured in 1963. Designed by Robin Day, the *Polyprop* chair is made of injection-moulded polypropylene on a tubular steel base. Martin Luther King delivers his 'I have a dream' speech in 1963 and JFK is assassinated. In 1964 the *Z* chair, which combines a steel frame with leather support, is released by Paul Tuttle. Jean Shrimpton causes uproar when she wears a miniskirt to the 1965 Derby Day in Melbourne. Eero Saarinen's *Globe* chair goes into production in 1966 and the Universale polypropylene stacking chair by Joe Colombo is launched. That same year Australia adopts decimal currency and the first Australian conscripts are sent to the Vietnam War. The first one-piece stackable cast polyurethane chair designed by Verner Panton goes into production in 1968, the year that Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy are assassinated. In 1969 Neil Armstrong sets foot on the moon and the *Sacco* (beanbag) chair is introduced.

**1970s design in Australia:** The *Integra* chair by Charles Furey is introduced in 1973 and in 1974 the exhibition *100 Modern Chairs* is mounted at the National Gallery of Victoria, the same year that Clement Meadmore publishes *The Modern Chair*. He follows up with *How to Make Furniture Without Tools* in 1975. That year the National Gallery of Victoria mounts a memorial exhibition of Schulim Krimper furniture and an exhibition of the designs of Grant and Mary Featherston is held in Melbourne.

**1970s around the globe:** In 1970 Gaetano Pesce launches a series of vacuum-packed polyurethane foam chairs that pop into shape when unwrapped and Germaine Greer publishes *The Female Eunuch*. Giancarlo Piretti's *Folding* chair is also introduced, and in 1972 the laminated cardboard *Wiggle* side chair (*right*) is launched by Frank Gehry. The Vietnam War ends in 1975; full colour television broadcasting is introduced in Australia and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam is dismissed by Sir John Kerr.

Reference: *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design* by Kirsty Grant. Published by the National Gallery of Victoria, 2014, in conjunction with the exhibition *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design*.



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At that time the use of an oil finish was considered very modern in Australia, where the majority of the furniture was made using cheap maple panels on a pine frame with walnut veneers covered in dark gloss varnishes.

Krimper's work was expensive when new, and he serviced an affluent social circle with a reputation that said he only made furniture for a client after he got to know and like them... ensuring plenty of dinner party invitations. Although Krimper had a workshop in St Kilda he was rarely in it, and when visitors arrived he would keep them waiting before eventually emerging from his office wearing a smock or dust-coat, a French beret and occasionally a monocle for added effect. He liked to be known simply by his surname and it's been reported that his demeanor could be intimidating.

Exhibitions of Krimper's work were held at the Georges Gallery in Melbourne in 1956 and at the Rockefeller Centre in New York in 1956. The National Gallery of

Victoria mounted a retrospective in 1959, and in 1975 a memorial exhibition was held, four years after his death. Krimper's major commissions included furniture for St Mary's Cathedral in Hobart in 1961 and the chapel of St Mary's College at the University of Melbourne in 1964, and he is represented in the National Gallery of Australia, the art galleries of South Australia and Queensland and in Sydney's Powerhouse Museum. He continued to work on new pieces right up until his death.

### Fred Lowen

Fred Lowen was born Fritz Loewenstein in Germany in 1919. He studied art in Berlin before fleeing Germany in 1938 and escaping to Belgium; he entered England via the Dunkirk evacuation and was transported to Australia on the HMTS *Dunera*, being interned for two years after his arrival. After being reclassified as a 'friendly' enemy alien, Fritz changed his name to Fred Lowen and in 1946 founded the Fler Company in Melbourne along with Ernest Rodeck, whom he had met in the internment camp. In the late 1940s Lowen studied industrial design at Melbourne Technical College and by the 1960s the Fler Company had expanded with factories operating in every Australian state. Lowen returned to

Germany in 1964 to study art and furniture design, and in 1967 was selected by architect Robin Boyd as one of three designers contributing special designs for the Australian Pavilion in Canada. In 1968 Lowen left the Fler Company and established Twen – later known as Tessa – with Howard Lindsey. The new firm became a successful furniture exporter and Lowen was the recipient of several awards, including the Dunhill Design Award in 1970, the Sebel Design Award two years later and a Special Commendation at the 1973 Prince Phillip Design Awards.

In 1985 Lowen was awarded five Gold Classic Design Awards from the Industrial Design Council of Australia and the following year he retired from full-time work to become a consultant. In 1987 he was awarded the Order of Australia for services to Furniture Design and Manufacturing and in 1999 was inducted into the Design Institute of Australia Hall of Fame. Fred Lowen died in 2005.

Reference: *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design* by Kirsty Grant. Published by the National Gallery of Victoria, 2014, in conjunction with the exhibition *Mid-Century Modern: Australian Furniture Design*. 190pp, full colour throughout and highly recommended reading. [www.ngv.vic.gov.au](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au)



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*Clockwise from top left: A late 19th century French walnut two door vitrine, marble top with extensive ormolu decoration and four handpainted landscape and courting scene panels. A mid-19th century rosewood and cedar marble top credenza by Hill & Sons, 48 King St, Sydney (labels still intact). A pair of late 19th century Dutch mahogany elaborately carved armchairs cently recovered in Warwick leopard print fabric. A fine quality French style walnut and marquetry lady's writing desk and associated chair. A pair of late 19th century French mahogany armchairs with foliate carving to back and arms, recently recovered in Warwick cowhide fabric.*