

perceive its atomic structure? On the contrary, you perceive its surface and no more. But no surface exists. You perceive a surface where no surface exists because there are inherent limitations on the kind of information which any optical system such as our eye can transmit. The percipient eye and the innocent eye both present to our consciousness a picture of something illusory. What we perceive is *not* the world as it actually exists, at all. It is an analogue of that and a very incomplete one. If the case were otherwise atomic physics would be easy. Most of it would be self-evident.

15. Taste and style

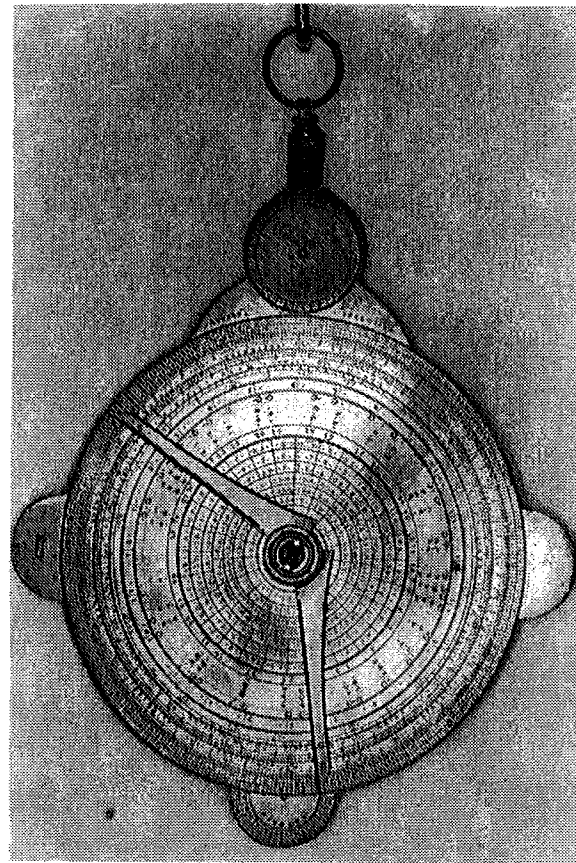
Just as chairs are recognisable as chairs, and as things distinct from tables, so Chippendale chairs are recognisable as distinct from Sheraton chairs, and Gothic buildings as distinct from classical ones. Styles or fashions of design are recognisable, and that is the important fact about them. They are known by the process of recognition described in the last chapter, recognised like everything else which we recognise, by means of a *few* characteristics only, which act as signs of an affinity between all the different objects which belong to the same style of design.

But the experience of beauty aroused by works of art is not, as we have seen, aroused merely by a few characteristics sufficient for the purposes of ordinary, cursory, recognition. On the contrary, it comes of looking at the thing and paying attention to all its features and all the visible relations between them. To recognise the style of a design and to appreciate the beauty of it are two quite different things and come of two quite different approaches to it. Thus it is possible, and perhaps not uncommon, for people to be discriminating about styles and fashions while being insensitive to beauty.

The word taste as used nowadays has two distinct meanings. It may mean the appreciation of beauty or it may mean merely the appreciation of style and fashion. In the first case, when we speak of a person's taste we are speaking of his personal preferences among works of art as determined by his individual sensitivity to their beauty. In the second we are speaking of his knowledgeable discrimination between different styles and fashions, that is to say between different kinds of work, and, more particularly, of his preference for one fashion rather than another, one kind rather than another. It is in the latter sense that the word will always be used in this book.

Now, no *kind* of shape, no *kind* of design or *kind* of picture or other work of art can be beautiful. When works of any or every known kind are looked at some will be found beautiful and some not. The fact that all are of the kind known as Romanesque, say, does nothing to guarantee that all of them have merit as works of art. Some do and some do not. Some have more than others.

To be knowledgeable and alert: to be knowing



Astrolabe: back. By Anthony Sneewins 1650
 Crown copyright Science Museum, London

'The style prevailing at a given time may be of no interest to certain good artists who are working then'

17. e.g. 'Even during the eighteenth century, when every kind of taste was at the lowest possible ebb . . .'
 J. H. Parker: *An Introduction to the study of Gothic Architecture* (15th ed. 1906).

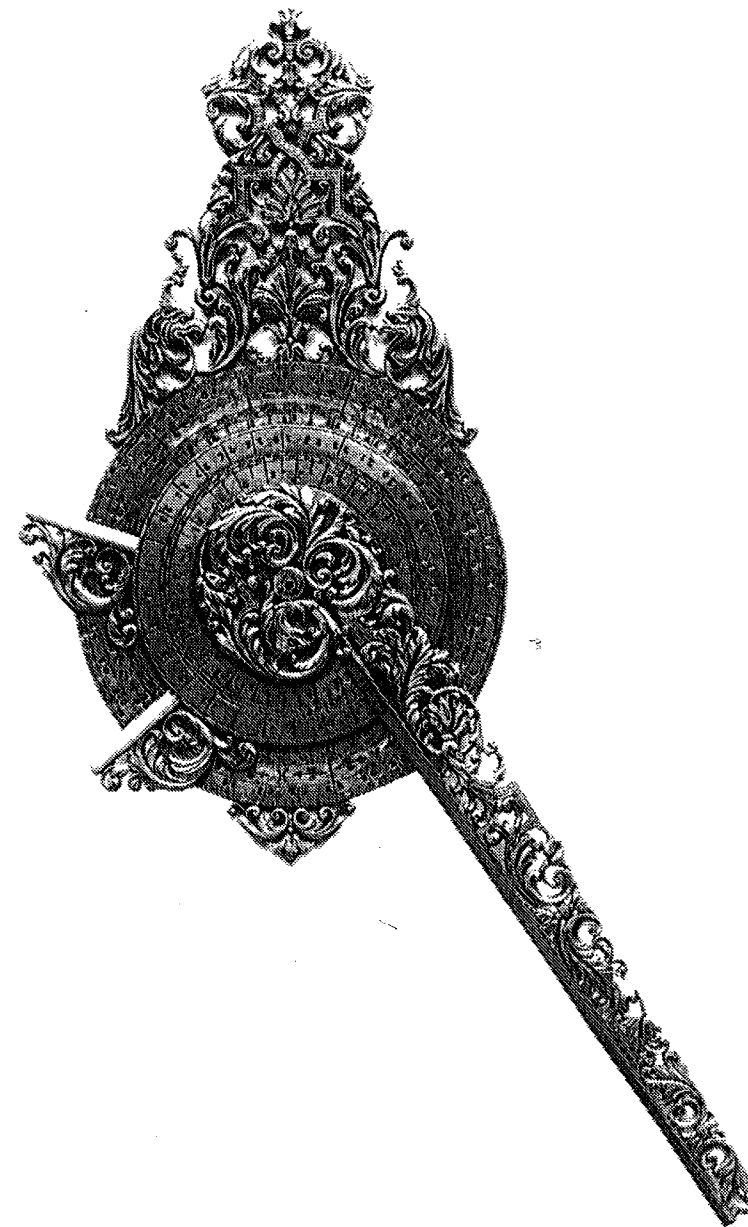
indeed: about fashion and style is an important branch of one-upmanship, which depends largely on being up-to-date and showing that one's taste is only for what is 'in', for what is newest and therefore smartest. To be sensitive to the beauty of things on the other hand avails little if at all in this way, for an appreciation of beauty cuts across all fashions and will often lead the person who has it to cherish things which are out of fashion while ignoring many of the things which are 'in', though worthless as art.

One-upmanship is common enough now and has always been so, but not everyone is afflicted with it. Yet everyone's appreciation of beauty is to some extent influenced by the fashion of his time even though he may regard one-upmanship with all the contempt it deserves. Moreover fashion and taste are not without their value.

No one can be taught what beauty is: everyone finds that out for himself: but he can be taught what are promising places in which to look for it; and taste, as often as not, is what teaches him that. But if taste is sick or degenerate he will be looking in the wrong direction and the chances of his seeing something will be poor: whereas if taste is in health the chances will be good, a tradition will be kept in being, and art will constantly develop and evolve instead of having to make fresh starts first in one direction and then another, as tends to happen at present.

The style prevailing at a given date may be of no interest to certain good artists who are working then. Consequently although there is good art in all times and places, often enough the taste of its own time ignores or underrates it, and later generations are left to discover it, as happened for example to the early work of the painter, John Sell Cotman. The taste, of any group, is conformity, and there is a degree of caution and mediocrity inherent in it. Its effect is the establishment of a canon of works which are 'in' for the group and period in question, and also of works which are 'out': for taste is invariably also distaste. The taste of a given group and period is simply the set of opinions about art which are generally received at the time.¹⁷

Experimental Psychology as applied to art is, according to the terminology of this book, concerned almost entirely with taste and not with beauty. Such statements



Nocturnal. Gilt metal. French late 17th century
 Crown copyright Science Museum, London

as those given below, for example, are about the taste of a particular group, which might be an ethnic or a cultural or an age group: or a group by education or profession: and at a particular date. The date of any experiment in this field is one of the most important facts about it. Modern experimental evidence is not the only kind of evidence. Taste *does* change with the passage of time, in any group! Experiments really are not required to prove that.

Most of the following statements are of types found in reports on experiments on the psychology of 'aesthetics'. All of them, however are statements about the taste of some particular group at some particular period.

'This sort of colour was considered more beautiful than that'

'This sort of colour was preferred to that'

'Such and such a colour looks best against such and such a background'

'A lighter (or darker) colour looks best above (or below) something or other'

'Ellipses were preferred to circles' (or vice versa)

'This kind of line is ugly'

* No kind of colour – 'a colour': or 'red' – nor any kind of picture nor kind of anything else is beautiful. Beauty comes always from the singularity of things. Two things which happen to be closely similar in size, colour, insurance value, smell, weight or shape, may both seem equally beautiful. It is not therefore to be deduced that, say, a smell of turpentine is a necessary prerequisite of beauty; and nor is the fact that the two things' shapes are measurably within a millimetre of each other. They might still be as different as chalk and cheese: they might differ hugely in surface quality so that one lived and the other was dead. One judges a man by what he is, by his individuality, his idiosyncrasy; not by his measurable properties or measurable behaviour or by the shape of his nose or the description in his passport. So with a work of art.

The argument in this chapter is that the real value, the beauty of any particular work of art, depends always on its 'form', its individuality, singularity, and never on what little it visibly has in common with other works, namely the style it happens to share with them. Taste is concerned with judging works by their style, that is to say by superficial characteristics, and not by their intrinsic qualities by virtue of which alone true works of art continue to have value long after the style they happen to exhibit has ceased to be in vogue and has become a matter of history. Taste, in other words, depends on perception only. You can exercise taste without really looking at anything.

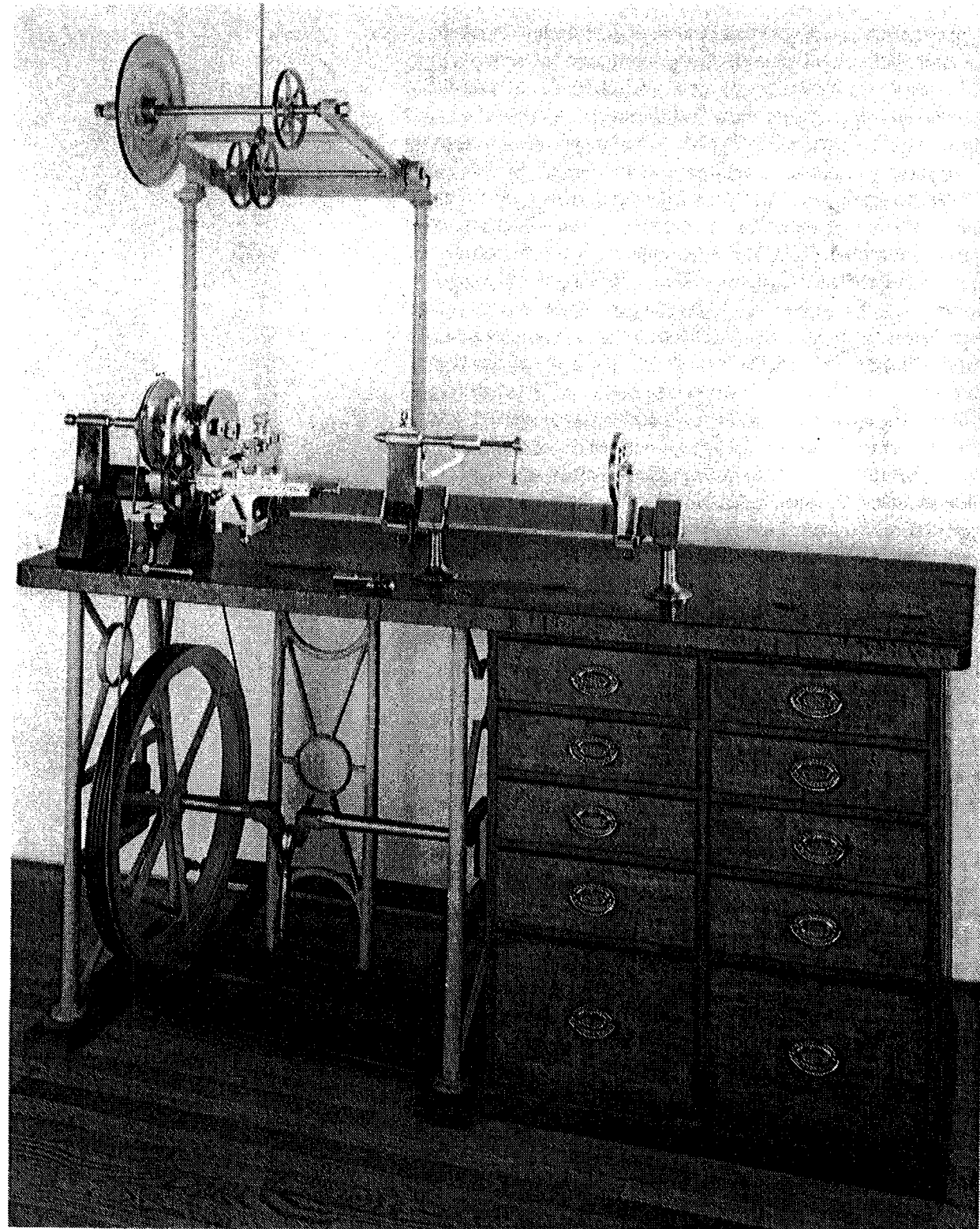
The meaning and importance – a limited importance, as it seems to me – of taste, style and fashion in art

particularly need attention at present, for the misconception that they are of primary importance is quite widely held and the art of design seems seldom to be discussed in terms of anything else. Thus it comes about that originality is thought of only in terms of stylistic originality; a question discussed later on.

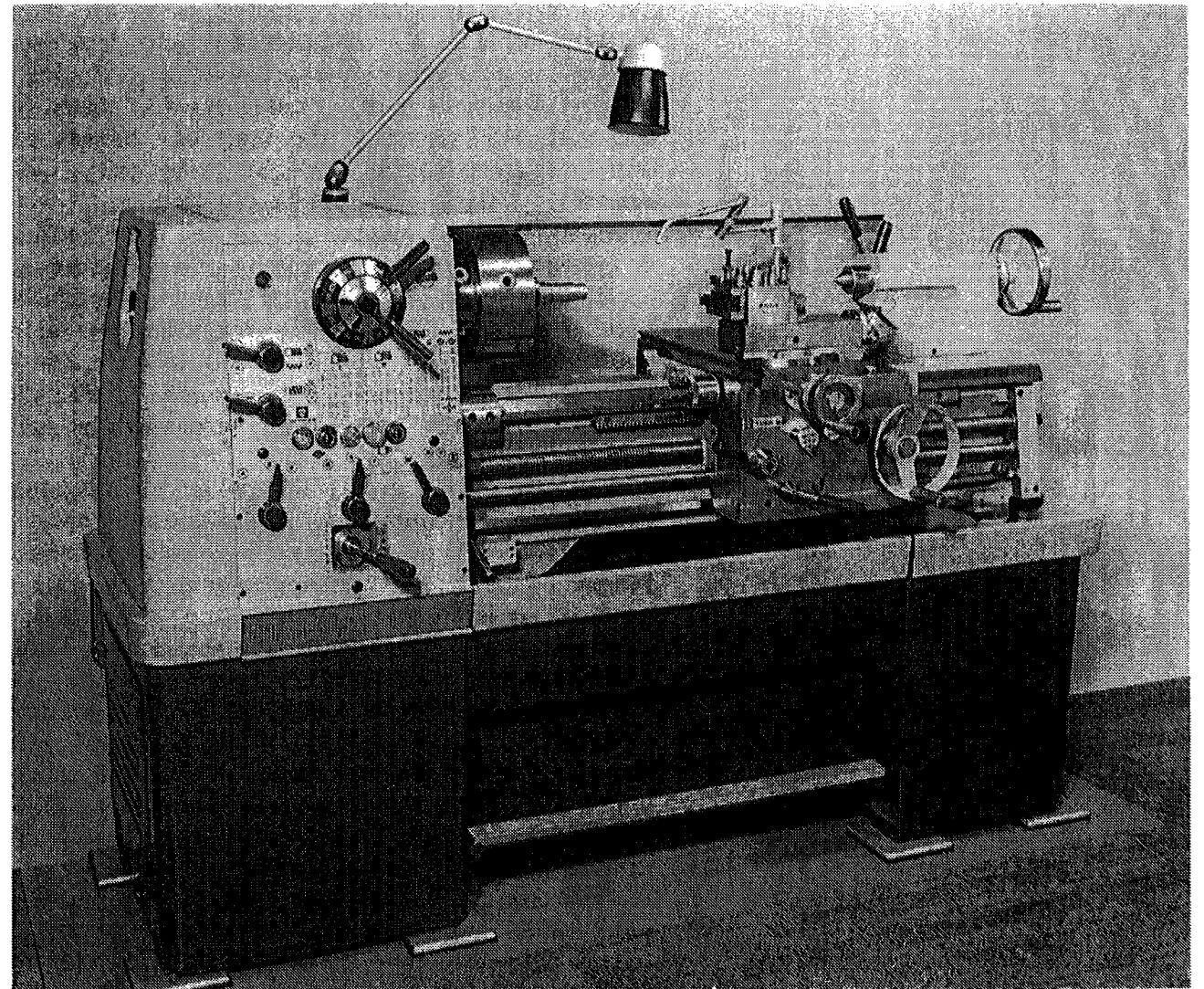
That an artist should work in the general style of his time is all but inevitable, except in the rare cases of men of exceptional powers who make a fresh departure. The work of the leading users of a still evolving style shows the others in what fields experiment is likely to be productive, and shows them what artifices have been found expressive and may still be capable of further development. This is as much as to say that these works influence the work of other contemporary artists: and indeed there is no work by however exceptional an artist which has not been influenced by the work of his predecessors in some respect or other, however complete the break which he may apparently have made from everything before him. This is eminently true of the arts of design.

It will be argued later on that design without style is an impossibility, and that is a fortunate fact for designers for they would be hard put to it to manage without the restraining influence of a style. The style to which a work belongs is quite irrelevant to its merit, but any style, while it is alive, has a positive value to practitioners none the less, for it puts limits on designers' freedom of choice about the appearance of what they are designing. Adherence to a style as the designer experiences it is simply a predisposition to choose shapes of a certain character and to avoid, particularly to avoid, shapes associated with now demoded styles. If he worked with no such predisposition his freedom of choice would often be limitless and all design would in Lethaby's phrase be 'only one man deep'. But the style gives the designer a point of departure and self-imposed boundaries – ill defined, of course – to the ground he may explore as he makes the series of choices about appearance which, as we have seen, will be forced on him willy-nilly in the process of design. What will concern him, if he is a good artist, will not be merely to 'work in' certain recognisable features and clichés which constitute the style, but to handle such features and to modify them in such a way that while still recognisably

'After the style they exhibit has ceased to be in vogue' Maudslay's bench lathe and cabinet
Crown copyright Science Museum, London



TASTE AND STYLE



Colchester lathe, 1968
Crown copyright Science Museum, London

prompted by the style they take on a new individuality of their own, and become elements of a work of art instead of a pastiche of the work of the most successful designers of the time; such as anyone can achieve by thumbing through a few magazines.

The making of art is largely a joint contributive enterprise just as the furthering of science is. Each practitioner by his work contributes something to the common stock. In the case of art the common stock is, or ought to be, a tradition which will focus the choices of artists for that time on one comparatively restricted



* field. Where all designers are working according to one tradition or style a great expertise will develop in making the style variously expressive: in producing an infinity of music out of a limited scale of notes. But this will only happen if the tradition changes continuously and steadily, little by little, and if idiosyncrasies develop here and there within it.

Change is of the essence of tradition. Our declining civilisation has largely lost the conception of tradition as continuous change by small variations – as evolution, in other words – and can produce only fashions which, one after another, appear, live for a little while, and die without issue. At each death another deliberately different fashion is launched and promoted, as sterile as the one before.

The importance of styles is that so long as evolutionary changes in them continue, good design flourishes.

* The connection between taste, style and association is interesting. Whenever someone exclaims that a putative work of art is 'horrible' or 'revolting' or flings some such epithet at it, what he usually means even though he may not realise it, is that the work is in a style which for him has horrible or revolting associations, and is for him a private symbol. It is this fact which explains a phenomenon that recurs in each generation and by which each generation in its turn seems to be utterly astounded as though it had never happened before. The process is this: The young generation grows up chafing under restraints, or imagined restraints, imposed by the older generation which fathered it, and grows up, of course, in an environment largely made by the older generation. That environment, the whole recognisable style of the older generation, comes inevitably to be associated by the younger generation with the restraints and mental aches of growing up. So, because of that association, once the second generation comes to maturity it turns against the style of the first which symbolises the bondage of its youth. But, by now, the second generation has fathered a third, and when that comes to maturity it rejects the work of the second generation for the same reasons, and also looks back with lively interest to the work of the first generation which its own parents so much detested.

This description is of course over-simplified. Not every member of a rising generation feels repressed,

and the work of one generation is never so homogeneous in style; nor is it ever uniformly rejected by the generation after. The work of a real artist will never quite lose all the allegiance it has won, even while the critics are howling it down. The case of Kipling comes to mind. But every artist of our time must be prepared in middle age to face two facts: that the younger generation reject his work, and that the work he himself rejected as a young man is just what the younger generation like. There is justice in the world! But 'middle-age' is an over-statement here, for grandmothers of thirty-odd years of age are quite common already. There is comfort in that. We may live to see our work appreciated by our grandchildren.

If a thing bears evident signs of its general style, then once the prevailing taste of the time turns against that style it will become more difficult (though not impossible) for anyone to appreciate the thing's beauty. There was a time not long ago when most people apparently found it all but impossible to believe that anyone could genuinely appreciate Victorian design. At the time of writing the style which was known as "contemporary design" is still out of fashion, but many things of that style too will live; although, as always, most will become no more than "period pieces", the stock-in-trade of future junk shops. *

The value of a work of art can only be judged by a generation for whom its style no longer has strong associations. Once that time comes nothing is any longer passionately decried as 'hideous' or 'frightful'. Some things will be seen as funny and many as simply negative, having at best a period charm; while some reputations established earlier will increase and others decrease. But the whole process of reassessment nowadays is liable to be vitiated because new associations of smart fashionableness get slapped on to old styles – a thing we have recently seen in the case of Art Nouveau. Almost any work in that style seemed to get uncritical acceptance in the early 1970's.

Taste influences: slants, indeed: our attitude to everything we look at. As often as it induces us to see geese as swans it makes us see swans as geese. In painting and sculpture the lapse of time is a reliable corrective of these aberrations, though retrospective fashions can reintroduce them in a milder form. But with design,

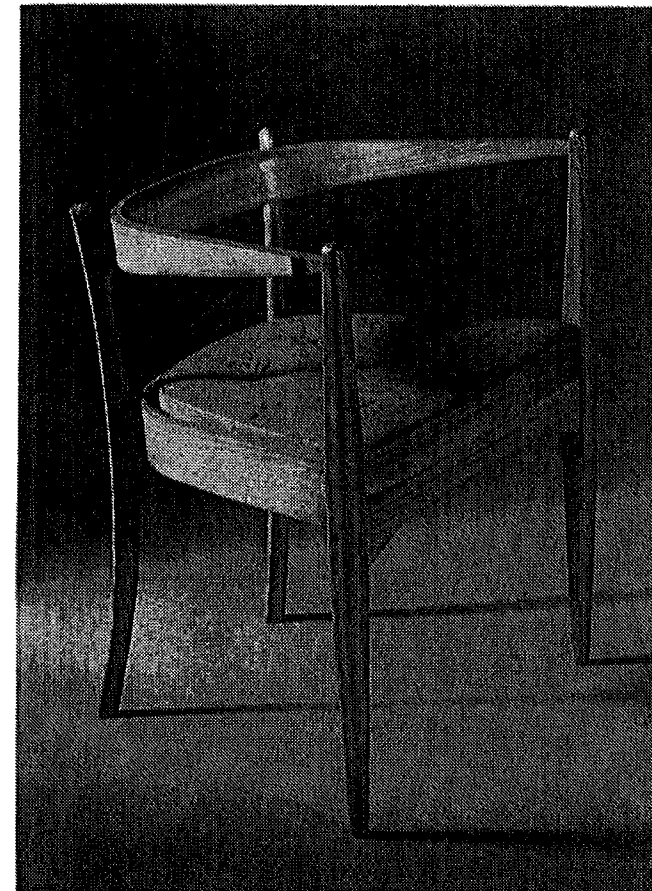
lately, the fact that a thing is old has been taken to be a recommendation in itself, and its merits apart from this verdict of taste are the less likely to be considered.

I do not believe that anything there is, if looked at, and looked at dispassionately, is intrinsically ugly. It may be empty and devoid of beauty, but that is another matter. If we call a thing ugly we do so either because it is in a style against which we are prejudiced (and all of us are so prejudiced in one way or another) or because the thing has unpleasant associations. If we say that a garden slug is ugly we do so because we cannot look at one without thinking of the sensation of touching soft, clammy, slimy things. If we say that a pig or a bulldog is ugly we do so because its facial expression, if we saw it in a man, would disgust and frighten us: we could never find anything good or likeable in the character of a man with that expression; and in addition pigs have always, unjustly, been associated with dirt. If we say that an old boot is ugly we do so because we associate it with what is decrepit and sordid: but it is by now a commonplace that when we look at Van Gogh's picture of old boots those associations are transmuted by the beauty of the picture to a sentiment which words cannot express.

The experiences of beauty and ugliness do not necessarily exclude each other. It is possible, as too many people know who have seen explosions in wartime, to experience simultaneously and yet independently, a sense of extreme beauty and stupefying horror. For that matter there are plenty of religious pictures to demonstrate the same thing.

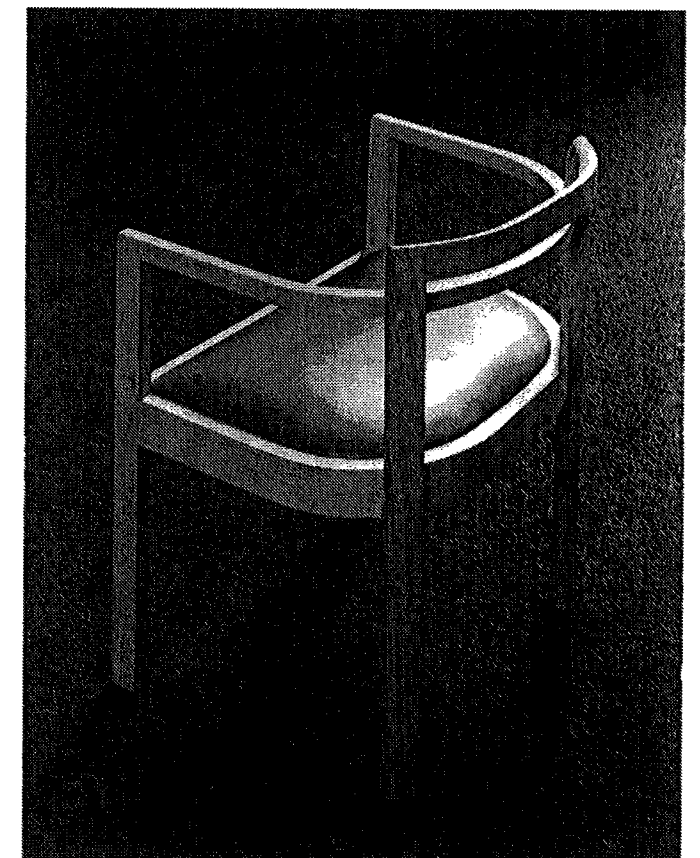
In retrospect the style or fashion in which a thing has been designed is always seen to be irrelevant to its beauty, for in every style we find some designs which are works of art and some which are art manqué. Moreover some things which in retrospect we judge to be well designed appear not to have been influenced at all by the style which was prevailing when they were designed. When they were new they must have seemed to be oddities, and unfashionable.

Because design is so often falsely represented to be a matter only of style and fashion, many designers of the present age have probably dreamt at one time or another of achieving 'Design without style': design where

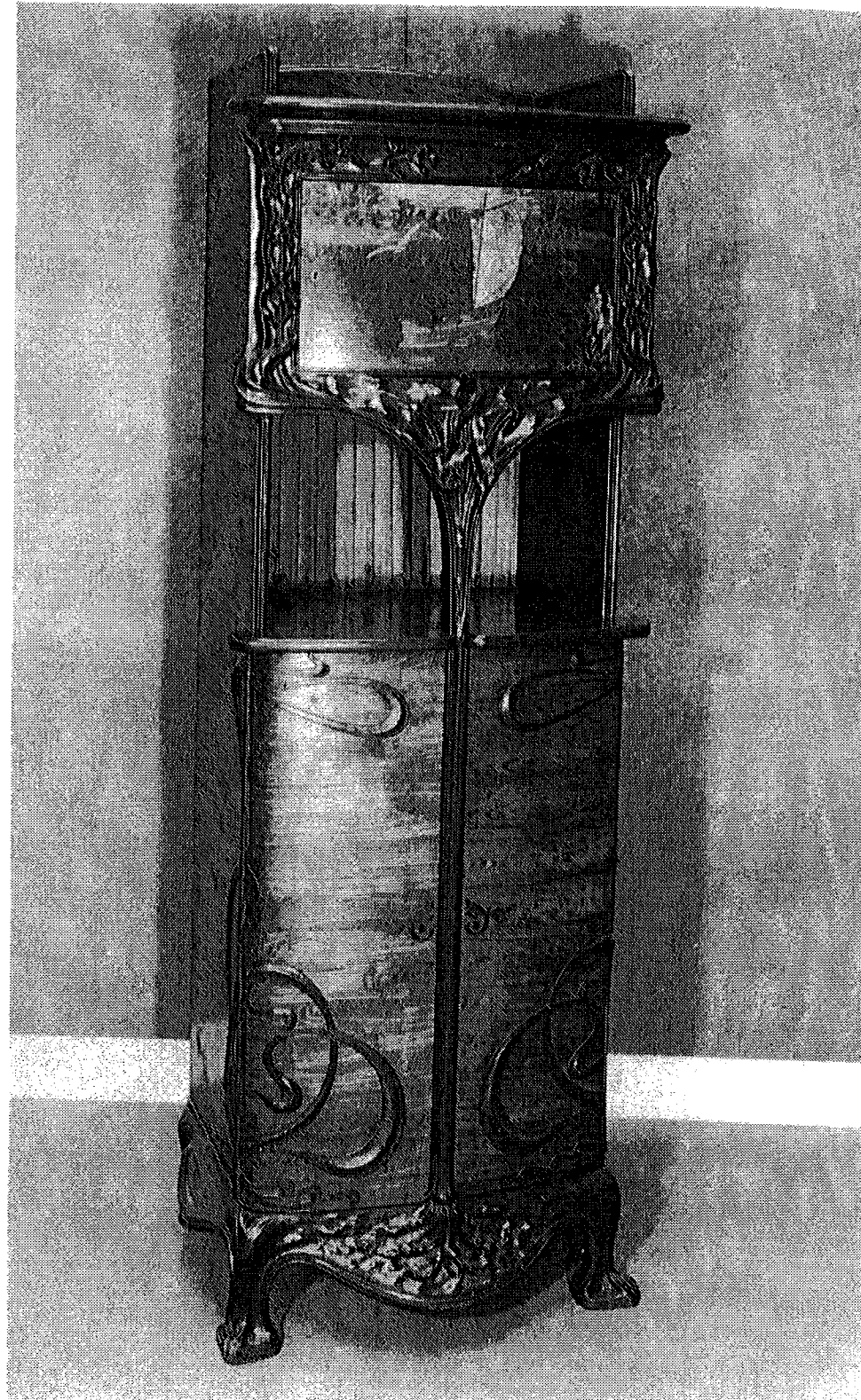


'Contemporary' chair. David Pye 1950
Wainwright Photo

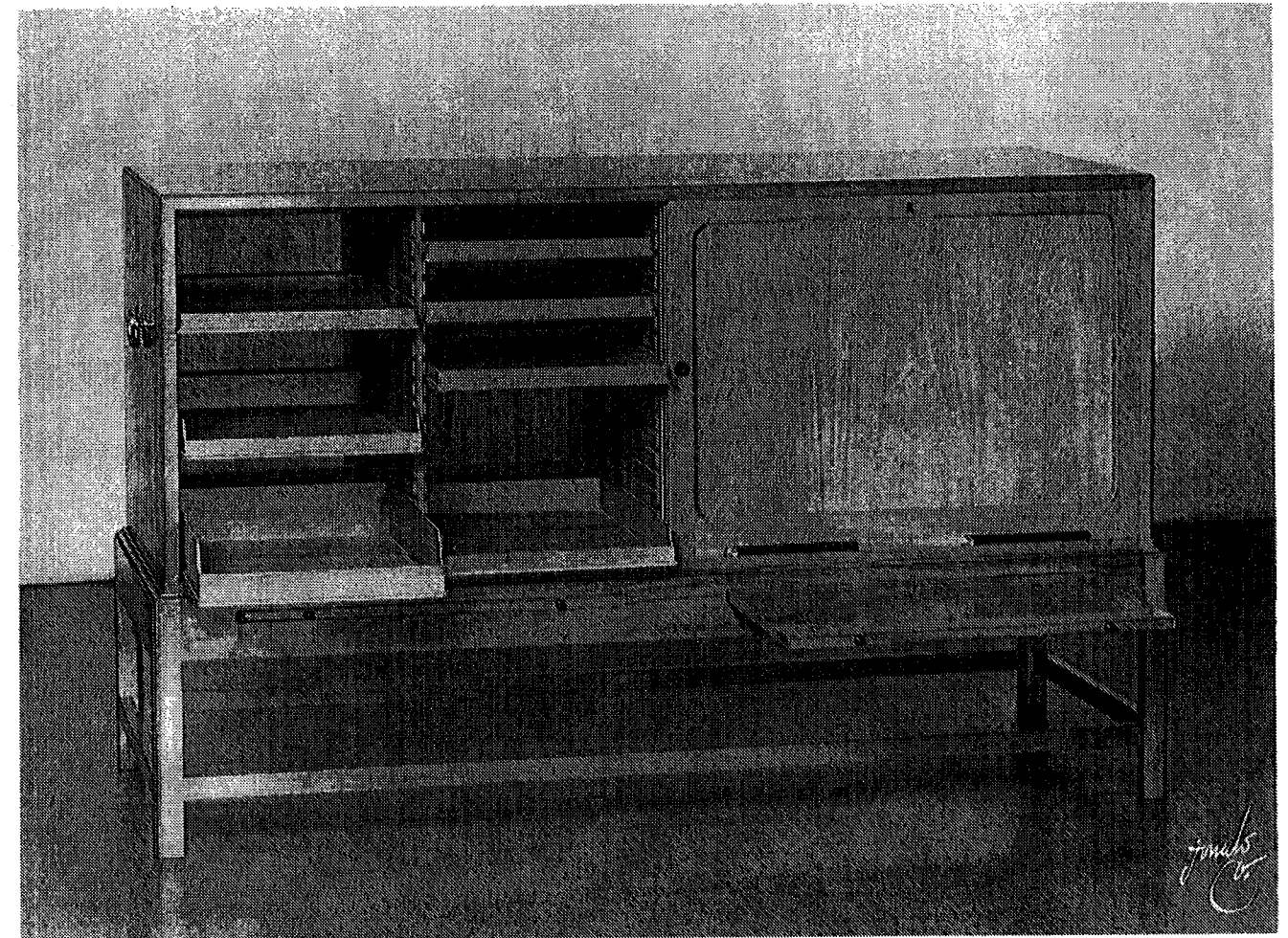
Chair designed by David Pye 1961
Kellow Pye Photo



'Art Nouveau' Cabinet, veneered, wrought iron hinges and ornaments
Victoria and Albert Museum. Crown Copyright



TASTE AND STYLE



'All the quality of appearance that decent workmanship produces'. Sideboard designed by Kaare Klint
By courtesy of Rud. Rasmussens Snedkerier, Copenhagen.

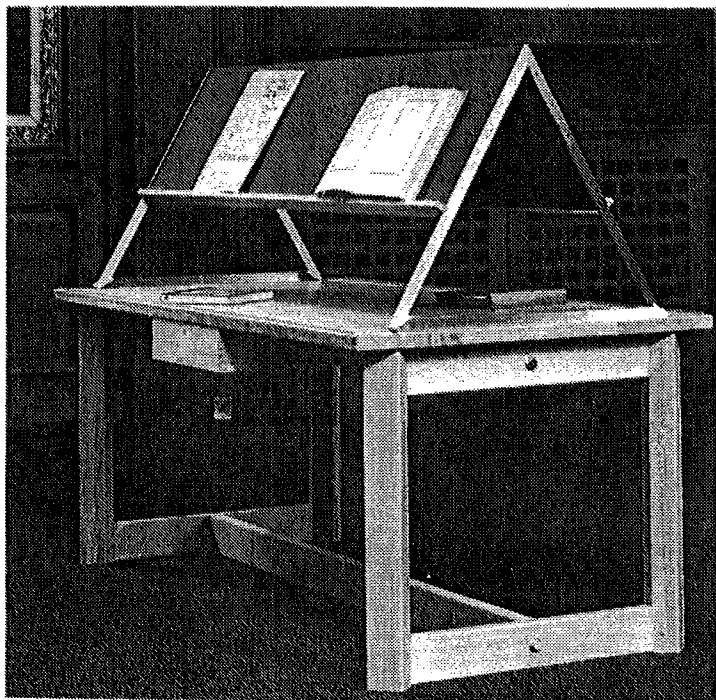
'Aesthetic styling has been completely abandoned': what has been called 'Timeless design': and sometimes (wrongly) 'Anonymous design'.

Anyone who hopes to achieve design without style will, obviously, shun purely stylistic motifs and ornaments and will confine himself to what appears to him the most economically effective form of the device which he is designing. But in vain! Style will emerge.

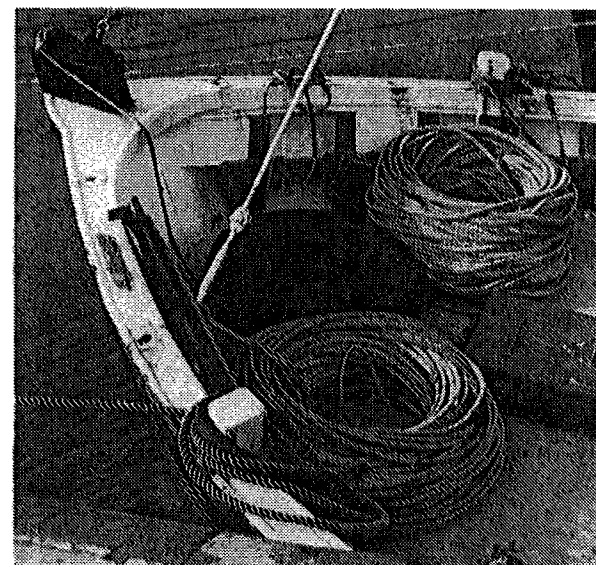
At any time in history the available technology and the range of inventions already made are capable of yielding far more than they are actually made to give.



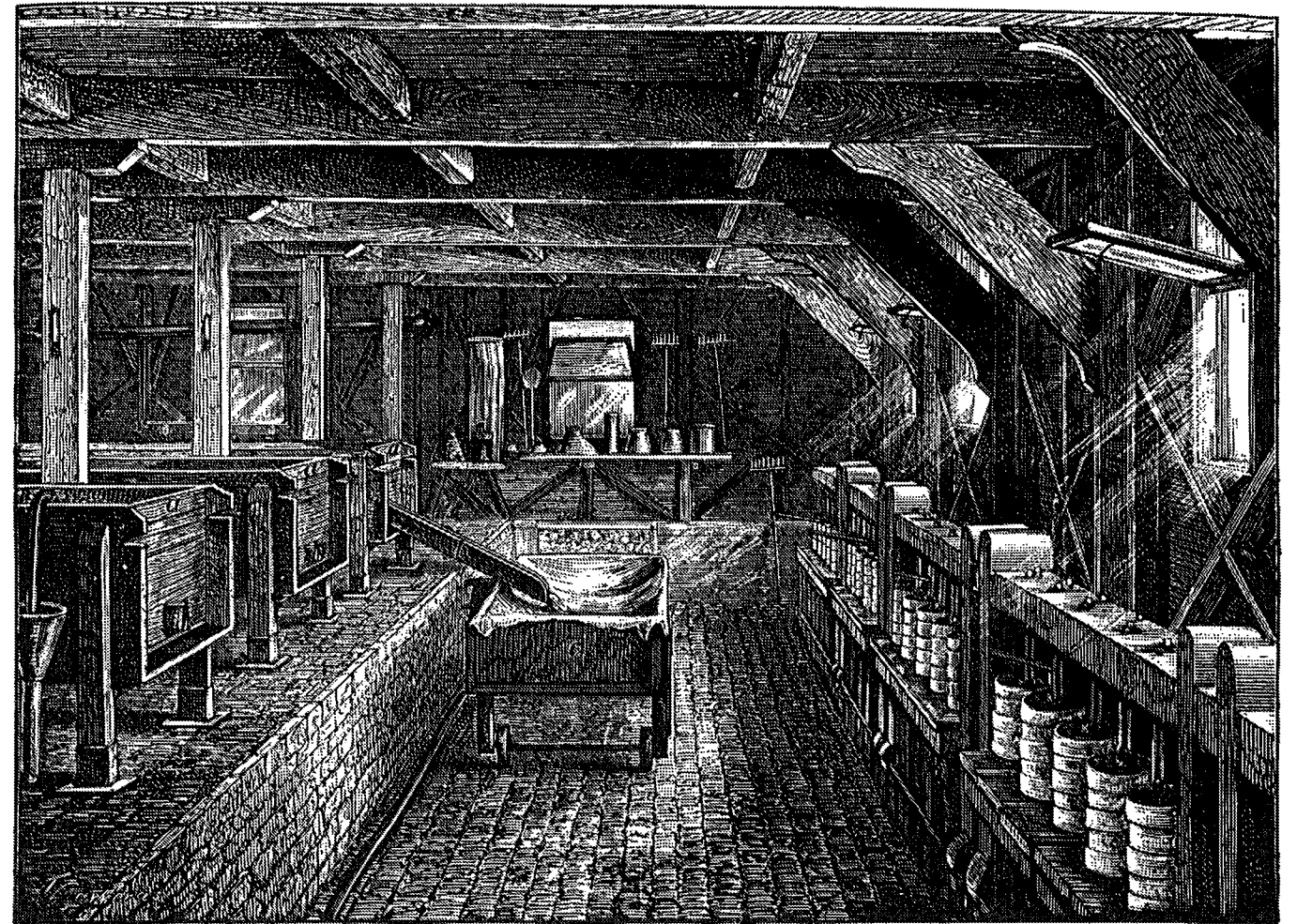
'Style emerging where none was intended'. Croft, Barra



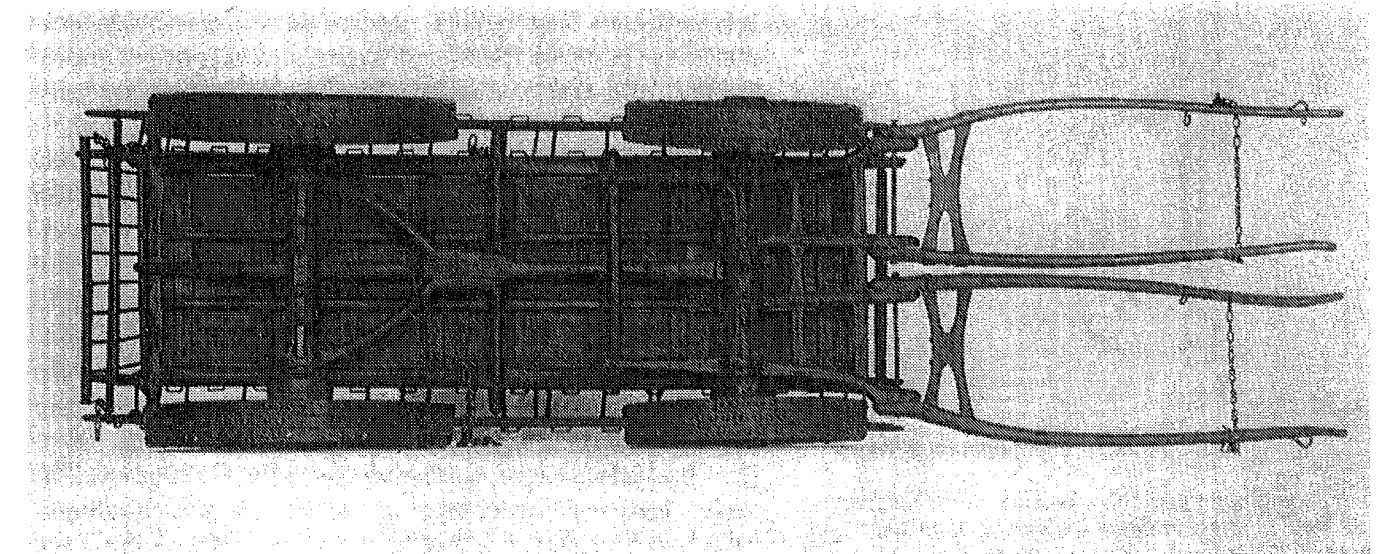
Book display table
Kellow Pye Photos.



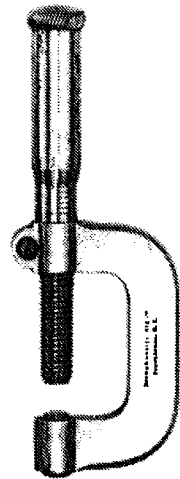
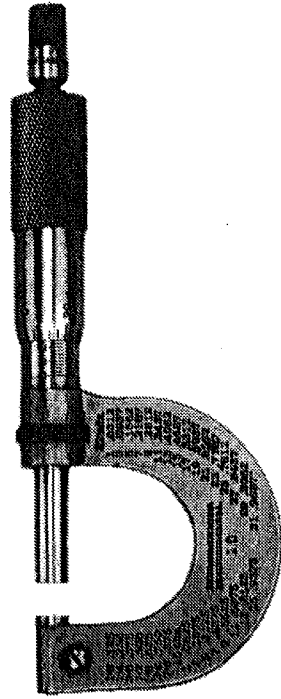
Bows of fishing boat



Longford cheese factory
Photo: Science Museum, London



Underside of a Surrey waggon
Crown copyright Science Museum, London



'A style gets seen into them as it were against their will' First 1 in Micrometer Calliper, Brown and Sharpe 1877 (below) and by the same firm 1928 (top). Crown copyright Science Museum, London

There are always innumerable things one could do or make, but which would cost too much. Economy in one or another of its forms governs or influences whatever is done; and in any given technique and time those features of things which are found to be the most economically effective become standardised, or nearly so, and thus come to be regarded as characteristic of things belonging to this particular phase of technology. Because they are seen to be characteristic and standard they act as convenient and obvious signs of affinity between all those things: and because there are signs of an affinity between them we say all those things are of the same style. The affinity we are talking about is a stylistic one. A style gets 'seen into' them, as it were against their will.

When hexagon nuts and hexagon heads superseded the old square ones on bolts, it must have been greater convenience in use which argued for the change: to turn a square nut in an awkward place one may need two different spanners. Convenience here boils down to economy of time and plant. From that time on for many years hexagon bolts were one of the normal features of 'modern engineering'. By means of them alone if by nothing else, any layman of the early nineteenth century could distinguish between one of the new engines and the old ones of Watt's time.

Nearly always when a new feature appears it has earned its place by defeating an older one. Thus wrought iron and cast iron beams superseded timber ones, and later steel beams superseded them; and recently welded compound beams have superseded rivetted ones and rows of rivets begin to be seen no more.

Such innovations of technology were at first seized upon by designers for their economical effectiveness alone, with no thought of style. But soon, very soon, any designer who wished to assert that he was in the forefront of the new movement found it essential to introduce such features in season and out of season, aggressively, and sometimes arrogantly. All too soon they became the symbols of the new movement, the new style. The new-found ability to make a wall all of glass had advantages, undoubtedly, in certain particular cases, but not in nearly so many as the Bauhaus-stylists pretended. It is not forgotten by those who have to work in buildings with these glass walls that their

propagators must have known quite well what a greenhouse was for and what it did. That knowledge counted for nothing beside the imperative necessity of showing how new the 'new architecture' was, by doing something obviously different from the fenestrated walls of the styles which had preceded it.

The earnest seeker after design without style wished for none of this. But he might have expected it. He did not reflect that anything newly invented will in our age at once be used as a symbol of newness: for newness is our obsession. No sooner are space vehicles and space suits invented and designed than a 'space style' based on their economically effective structure and its features appears in the children's comics. In the twenties and thirties one still thought of motor cars as having design without style, and of the 'styling' introduced from America as the imposition of a style where none had been before. But as we now see clearly, there *was* style before. Few things have a more powerful period flavour – in other words a more distinct style – than early motor cars and flying machines. The examples of these which Le Corbusier chose to illustrate as 'functional designs' in *Vers Une Architecture* now look delightfully cute.

There has never been any design without style. There has of course been design without obviously stylistic motifs: that is another matter: but never any that could not be unerringly placed by means of signs of style, and could not be imitated stylistically. It is only when a new departure in design is encountered for the first time and unexpectedly that we see design in which we are as yet unable to discern any signs which will enable us to place it. But as soon as we have seen a few more things in the same vein we shall recognise the signs of affinity between them: we shall discern a style.

And in design without stylistic motifs the style can sometimes be extremely unobtrusive. Much Shaker furniture reduced to a minimum the number of features in which a designer's free choice would be bound to declare itself. Yet the character of that furniture is very strong. It could be imitated without making a facsimile and that fact necessarily implies that there is a style to be imitated.