

the  
resurgence **of**  
modernism

by Laura Michaelides

this hot  
design trend  
is far from  
new



Japanese design inspired contemporary architect John Pawson in the design of his London home, below.



Top to bottom: Thonet bentwood rocking chair, c. 1880; Breuer chair, c. 1928; Jacobsen's "Ant" chairs, c. 1953; the Panton chair, c. 1960; and the Mies van der Rohe stool. All photos courtesy of *Modern: Masters of the 20th-Century Interior* by Jonathan Glancy

**H**ave you noticed as you shop for home furnishings and study design magazines that everything is looking sleeker, simpler, and more modern? Although many will continue to favor the familiar lines of traditional and country furnishings, there is no doubt that modernism has made a major comeback in home design.

As is so often the case, the current taste for modernism in design first appeared in the world of fashion. Renewed appreciation of clothing styles from the '50s, '60s and '70s began to emerge in the late '80s and early '90s. At about the same time, antique stores in New York's Soho and Los Angeles, including 50/50 and Wooster Gallery, were beginning to feature restored modern furniture classics from the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s. Many cutting-edge interior designers quickly embraced modernism, in part as a relief from the heavy emphasis in the '80s on excessively ornate traditional and English Country design.

The trend towards modernism has continued since that time, giving

the sensibility time to catch on with the public. Mass market furniture retailers, such as Pottery Barn, Ikea, Crate and Barrel and even Ethan Allen have responded to shifting tastes by offering streamlined furniture styles along with the more standard country-inspired selections.

#### ROOTS OF A REVOLUTION

Although the modernist aesthetic continues to challenge, and seems perennially new, the roots of modernism in design date back to the classic period of modernism in the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, architects such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, in France and Germany respectively, eschewed what they saw as a slavish adherence to traditional building types, and exalted the new. They admired the honest visual expression of a building's structure, simplicity and individual creative vision. The Bauhaus, first a school, later a catchword to denote a style, became a modernist think tank and major exporter of the modernist philosophy.

This was a heady and creative time, and the modernism that



*An apartment in Unité d'Habitation, designed by Le Corbusier*

emerged was a culmination of influences which had emerged since the 1870s in Europe, in a variety of proto-modernist movements such as the Art Nouveau in France, the Wiener Werkstätte in Austria, and De Stijl in Holland, among others. Concurrently, the Arts and Crafts movement in Great Britain, and later in the U.S., stressed simplicity, honesty of visual expression, and a stripping of ornament; all hallmarks of modernism. American architects

such as Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright furthered the modernist cause in this country, and became extremely important exponents of an American interpretation of modernism.

#### **REVITALIZATION**

Although the trends of traditionalism and modernism have coexisted since that time, the general public's admiration for modernism seems to come and go. A second

*Right: Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut.*

*Far right: A living room in Le Roche-Jeanneret House, designed by Le Corbusier*



period of intense public fascination with modernism emerged in the '50s, '60s and '70s, when "high tech" was "in", and the lessons of modernism from the '20s had gained acceptance among America's corporate elite. It was during this period that Charles and Ray Eames

championed the use of molded plywood in furniture design, and other designers, such as Arne Jacobsen and Verner Panton experimented with new materials, such as molded plastic. Swedish modern, with its heavy emphasis on sculpted, and soft forms in wood,

also emerged as an important design influence at this time. Pop art and culture also played a role in the 60s and 70s in determining aesthetics in architecture and design.

The current taste for modernism highlights the varied origins of this aesthetic. Whether it's the classicism of the early modernist period of the '20s, the softened and more widely accessible look of European Art Deco from the '30s, the design experiments of the '50s, or the pop emphasis of the '60s, all are showing signs of influence on the current design scene. Also important today is the influence of Japanese architecture with its heavy emphasis on simplicity, and warmth of materials that so impacted the Arts and Crafts tradition in America and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

While modernism is an important current force in the current design scene, it is important to note that this aesthetic has, and always will, coexist with the traditional. Traditional design continues to exert an important force in home design, and in the heartland of America, it is doubtful that modernism will have much impact. With regard to one's home it is important to remember that your home should always reflect

who you are, and there is no one definition of taste. However, the story of modernism is an interesting and dynamic one, which reflects and relates so much about the 20th century. As we move into the 21st century, it seems worthwhile to reflect on this important trend in philosophy and taste. ■

*Laura Michaelides designs interiors and is refreshed by the current enthusiasm for modern design. She is a recent transplant from the New York metropolitan area and is operating her design office, Laura Michaelides Associates, in Montrose. She admires modernism as well as all design that is resoundingly authentic. Email her with questions at [lmichassoc@aol.com](mailto:lmichassoc@aol.com). Next month she will share with us local resources for modern furniture and accessories.*

