

Classics of Polish Design. Furniture Icons from the Polish People's Republic (PRL)

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Abstract: *Classics of Polish Design. Furniture Icons from the Polish People's Republic (PRL)* presents a review of the best Polish furniture designs from the Polish People's Republic: the 1950s and 1960s. The paper continues the series devoted to the "Classical Polish Design", presenting the results of research on Polish post-war furniture and the icons of Polish design, carried out within the framework of dissertations in the Department of Wood Technology in the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW). Some of the innovative furniture designs have been analysed in the hereby article. We present a chronologically organised review of designs that aspired to become breakthrough and timeless (design icons), with the author's background and the furniture's style, structure and materials.

Keywords: Polish post-war furniture, 1950s and 1960s design, furniture for small apartments, "modernity", "the little stabilization", „Ład” Artists' Cooperative, BNEP, IWP

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of design includes many furniture designs that, thanks to the uniqueness of form, structure or materials became icons of global design. Most of them were framework furniture: chairs, armchairs, tables... Some of them are no longer available in the market, but due to their innovativeness and uniqueness they made history of design. An example of such design is the "Red Blue Chair" by Gerrit T. Rietveld, member of the Dutch avant-garde group, De Stijl (Fig. 1a). This piece of furniture was designed in 1917-1918, initially as grey, white and black, but in 1923, after seeing paintings by Piet Mondrian, the author added more intense colours: red for the backrest board, blue for the seat board, and yellow on the ends of cross-sections of the black, rectangular bars of the frame, which created the structure of the legs, rails and underarms. The chair was never comfortable, but it earned everlasting fame.

Some of the iconic furniture designs, due to their usability, are still being produced and bought by customers. This is the case of the armchair "Wassily" designed by Marcel Breuer in 1925-1926, as one of the first pieces of furniture in the world made of bent steel pipes, that became a symbol of the Bauhaus school's functionalist revolution (Fig. 1b). A similar example is the "Barcelona" chair by Mies van der Rohe – perhaps the most frequently bought armchair – that was first designed for the German pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition (today, to visit Villa Tugendhat in Brno, designed in parallel to the above-mentioned pavilion and built in 1930, it is necessary to book the visit several months in advance). Another icon is the "Longue chair" from 1956, by the American designer Charles Eames (Fig 1d) – designed as a set together with the ottoman, made of bent plywood with swivel construction and leather upholstery (the contemporary symbol of high social status and wealth). Some other timeless designs are the shell chairs by Scandinavian designers: "Egg Lounge Chair" with swivel construction, by Arne Jacobsen, from 1959 (Fig. 1e), or the "Womb Chair" by Eero Saarinen and Florence Knoll from 1947-1948 (Fig. 1f). These chairs made use of innovative materials, as they were produced using fiberglass and resin. Especially the "Womb" chair was created at

a time (1940s) when such components were still not universally available, even in the progressive American market.



Fig. 1. Icons of Global Design: Red Blue Chair, G.T.Rietveld ("De Stijl" group), 1917-1918 (a) (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czerwono-niebieskie_krzesło); "Wassily" chair, M. Breuer ("Bauhaus" school), 1925-1926 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wassily_Chair)(b); "Barcelona" chair, Mies van der Rohe, 1929 (c) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barcelona_chair); Lounge Chair & Ottoman, Ch.Eames, 1956 (d) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eames_Lounge_Chair); "Egg Lounge Chair", Arne Jacobsen, 1959 (e) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egg_\(chair\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egg_(chair))); "Womb Chair", Eero Saarinen and Florence Knoll, 1947-1948 (f) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eero_Saarinen)

Each of the pieces of furniture presented above is unique, innovative and breakthrough in its own way. However, what are the reasons why some designs are easily forgotten, and others remain popular forever? Their beauty, attractive and timeless shapes, durable construction and materials, perfect functionality, usability and universal style of the furniture are definitely appreciated. However, the rational features do not fully explain why some of the design icons are still manufactured today and have become part of the popular culture.

Currently, the phenomenon of furniture iconisation can also be noticed in Poland. It happens with, most of all, chairs and armchairs from the times of the Polish People's Republic, which can be mass produced, easily accessible, inherited from grandmothers or found in the junkyards, and restored in a more or less professional manner by enthusiasts or professional companies that value their work. There are many such offers on the Internet. Where does their popularity come from?

2. RESEARCH AIM, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The paper aspires to present a review of eminent Polish furniture designs from the Polish People's Republic (1950s and 1960s). It continues the series of "Classical Polish Design", presenting the results of research on Polish post-war furniture-making and the icons of Polish

design, carried out within the framework of dissertations in the Department of Wood Technology in the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW).

The hereby paper analyses innovative furniture designs and proposes to consider them as icons of Polish design. We present a chronologically organised review of breakthrough designs, with the author's background and the furniture's style, structure and materials. The analysis of furniture includes the design ideas that contributed to their innovative and unique character.

The research has been inspired by Internet sources offering the sale of numerous renovated pieces of Polish furniture from the 1950s and 1960s (at prices comparable to contemporary replicas of the icons of global design). If renovation is not done properly, it can disfigure the original proportions and even contradict or blur the original concept of furniture design, which needs to be understood, in order to carry out successful and appropriate restoration.

Apart from Internet sources, the article makes use of reference literature devoted to the topic of post-war design, and catalogues of furniture exhibitions from the period under research. Most analysis and furniture descriptions have been based on own research within the scope of style, construction, materials and functionality of the furniture pieces.

3. REVIEW OF POLISH FURNITURE DESIGNS FROM THE 1950s AND 1960s – ICON PROPOSALS

3.1. Plywood furniture

Furniture made of plywood in the post-war years became a synonym of "modernity". This type of furniture started to appear in the second half of the 1950s, due to a gradual opening of Poland (after Stalin's death in 1953 and in the period of social realism) for global design, including new materials and technologies.

One of the most significant artists of post-war Poland, who initiated a dialogue with this material, was Jan Kurzątkowski (1899-1975), furniture designer that gained renown in the interwar period, interior decorator, and also creator of wooden and paper toys (Kozina 2015). Kurzątkowski was a founding member of the "Ład" Artists' Cooperative (1926-1996), he was also a teacher at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, where he educated many eminent artists.

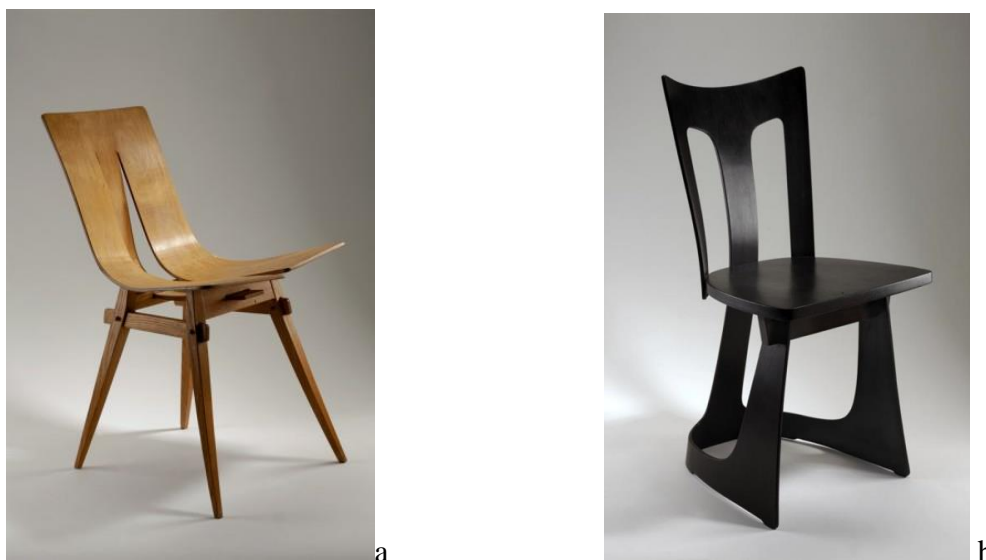


Fig. 4. Jan Kurzątkowski, plywood chairs: "Krzesełko z językiem" ("Chair with a tongue") 1952 (a), and chair with a load-bearing structure made of bent plywood 1956 (b) (www.designalive.pl)

In his practice, Kurzątkowski was very eager to experiment with structures and forms, and had exceptional plastic creativity. Furniture designed by this artist is an example of avant-

garde approach to forms and materials, and his works are considered an important influence in the development of furniture-making in post-war Poland. At the 1st Nationwide Exposition of Interiors and Decorative Arts (1952) and at the Nationwide Exposition of Interior Architecture (1957), Kurzątkowski displayed his designs of the so-called "Chair with a tongue" (partially cut, flexible piece of plywood attached to the apron base, with an interesting, slightly tapered shape of the legs), and a chair with load-bearing structure made of a bent piece of plywood, whose plane smoothly passes into the backrest (Fig. 4a and b).



Fig. 5. Armchair "Byk" ("Bull") by Jan Kurzątkowski, with upholstered seat and backrest (late 1960s) (www.biznesmeblowy.pl)

Another piece of furniture designed by this artist and highly valued by the author himself, was the "Bull" armchair – with dynamic, bold shape and extremely minimalistic construction made of two lateral supports, one rail between them and straight backrest and seat. Each lateral support was made of two crossed elements, one (in the form of a very flat romboïd) served as the front leg and supported the backrest, and the second one (in the shape of a triangle with a sharp point at the bottom) served as the rear leg and passed into the armrest on its wider end. It is precisely the expressive line of the armrests that is frequently associated with bull horns (Fig. 5) (www.meble.com.pl). The two elements of both supports were joined with a screw (which additionally held the seat in place), and the supports were joined with each other by a transverse rail that supported the seat.

The designer Marian Sigmund (1902-1993) created a piece of furniture that played an important role in the development of bent and glued furniture from the times of the Polish People's Republic. Marian Sigmund was a co-founder and director (1933-36) of the "Ład" Artists' Cooperative, teacher of architecture interior at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts and dean of the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts, who – in 1947 – designed furniture for the Finnish houses together with other "Ład's" artists, at the request of BNEP (Production Aesthetics Supervision Bureau). His Sig 1 A587 chair (Fig. 6) was made of bent beech wood and profiled plywood. The backrest was created by two pieces of wood that responded flexibly to the reclining person, providing comfort (Kozina, 2015).



Fig. 6. Sig 1 A587 chairs designed by Marian Sigmund (www.designalive.pl)



Fig. 7. Designs by Maria Chomentowska made of plywood with forms making remote reference to Neo-Biedermeier: chair (a) and armchair (b) with backrest of bent veneer, 1954 (www.pinterest.com)

Maria Chomentowska (1924-2013) was an artist of the new generation who played an important role in the development of furniture-making in post-war Poland. She was a furniture designer and interior decorator, graduated from the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. Until 1977, she prepared ca. 200 models for mass production. At the beginning of her career, she cooperated with the "Ład" Cooperative, creating designs that usually made reference to the classical furniture of Neo-Biedermeier. Nonetheless, after some time, she started focusing on ergonomics, and was using bent veneer for modelling furniture. Her work with this technique resulted in two interesting designs: a chair and an armchair. Both had wooden legs, while the backrest made of bent veneer had an elliptical shape, adapted to the round shape of human back (Fig. 7). In a later period, the designer drew clear inspiration from the ideas of leading global designers, who worked with bent plywood. Until 1951, she cooperated with the Institute of Industrial Design (IWP) and prepared many furniture designs for schools. Over 50 of the designs prepared by her entered mass production (Kozina 2015).

Maria Chomentowska also created several chairs that became classics of the Polish People's Republic. The chair called "Pająk" ("Spider") (Fig. 8) was designed in 1956. The design was valued for its light form achieved with the use of bent plywood. In the same year, she created the chair called "Płuca" ("Little Lungs"), with a characteristic backrest made of two separate parts joined with a leather strip and providing flexibility. This small model standing on thin legs and dedicated for small living spaces was not mass produced and was

manufactured in a limited batch of only 55 pieces, out of which less than 15 have survived until today. These chairs are considered icons of Polish design, and they can be admired – among others – at the exhibition in the National Museum in Warsaw (wikipedia.org, 2021).



Fig. 8. Modern plywood designs by Maria Chomentowska from 1956: chairs "Pająk" ("Spider") (a) (www.desa.pl) and "Płucka" ("Little Lungs") (b) (www.iwp.com.pl)

Organic forms, present in many designs in the 1950s, were also used by Teresa Kruszevska (1927-2014). She was a furniture and interior designer, student of Jan Kurzątkowski, with links to the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, from which she graduated in 1952, and later worked there as a teacher. She created many designs of furniture, including furniture for kids. She also cooperated with the Bent Furniture Production Plant in the city of Radom.



Fig. 9. Chairs by Teresa Kruszevska: „Muszelka” (“Little Seashell”) from 1956 (a) (www.wyborcza.pl) and an armchair made of steel frame and woven seat (b) (www.wyborcza.pl)

In 1956, at an exhibition organised by the "Ład" Artists' Cooperative, she presented her famous plywood chair "Little Seashell" that later became an icon of post-war design. The chair had an apron structure with legs installed at an angle (spreading out towards the bottom), while the seat and the backrest were made of one single piece of bent plywood with elliptic shape and an opening at the user's lumbar area. The chair was presented in two colour variants: with black

legs and seat in the colour of wood, and the second variant with inverted colours (Fig. 9a) (Jasiołek 2020).

3.2. Woven furniture

Another design by Kruszewska that deserves attention is an armchair made of steel pipes, whose seat and backrest were made of plastic string (Fig. 9b) (Kozina 2015). In the post-war period, furniture of this type was also a symbol of "modernity" and was designed by many eminent artists.

For example, beautiful, decorative seats made of string or wicker woven into sophisticated patterns on openwork steel frames were designed by Władysław Wołkowski (1902-1986), a Polish visual artist who graduated from the Warsaw School of Fine Arts (later Academy of Fine Arts) in the 1930s. He created designs for the "Ład" Artists' Cooperative. In 1945, he began a long-term cooperation with the Production Aesthetics Supervision Bureau (BNEP), Cepelia and the Enterprise of Expositions and International Fairs; at the same time he was also appointed the head of the Art Education Department in the Ministry of Art and Culture. In 1957, he designed a set of furniture commissioned by the Belgian royal court. Since 1968, he focused on creating tapestries made of string, wood and metal, which he called "Strojeńce" (Różańska 1996). One of his most famous modern furniture designs is the armchair "Chuligan" ("Hooligan") (Fig. 10).

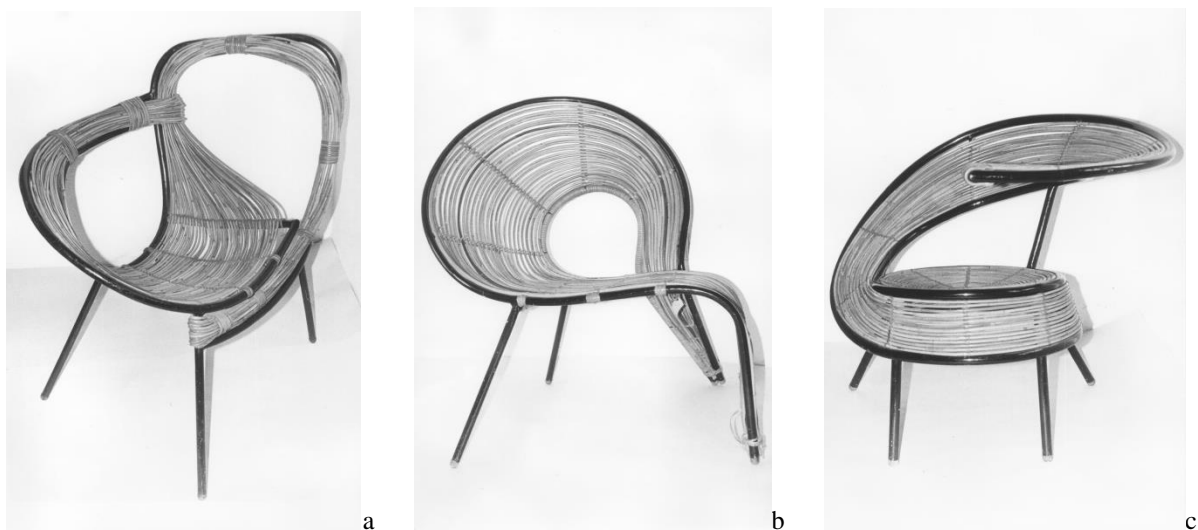


Fig. 10. Armchairs designed by W. Wołkowski: "Chuligan" ("Hooligan") before 1957 (a), chair from the set "Bachmaty" ("Tatar Horses") before 1967 (b) and armchair "Whirl" (c), production: "Ład" Artists' Cooperative (photo by A. Rozanska, collection of the Museum in Olkusz)

Similar seats – made of weave on frames of metal pipes or rebars – were produced on a large scale in the 1950s and 1960s in small production cooperatives. Furniture woven with colourful plastic string ("igelit" – Polish material made of polyvinyl chloride and acrylic acid), wicker and rope was also designed by Teresa Kruszewska (Fig 8b), Maria Chomentowska, Izabella Szerska-Sternińska (who worked as the artistic supervisor for Cepelia), and later by Zygmund Majchrzak. This kind of furniture, together with light tables with colourful tabletops, was used mostly in clubs and cafeterias.

3.3. Tables with glass tabletops

Glass started to be used in furniture for decoration more or less in the period of Rococo. As a construction material, glass began to be used in the inter-war, avant-garde variant of Art Deco. It was also valued after the war as a material used in the production of "modern" furniture.



Fig. 11. Coffee table designed by Hanna Lachert in 1956 -production: "Ład" Artists' Cooperative (a) (<http://miejsce.sklep.pl/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/imgp5028.gif>) and Rajmund Hałas – production: Zielonogórskie Fabryki Mebli (b) (Meble do Małych Mieszkań 1966)

Figure 11a presents one of the most popular coffee tables used in Polish cafeterias, and also in other public buildings and private apartments, designed by the inter-war avant-garde designer, Hanna Lachert, in 1956. The tabletop with a panel of black glass and round corners is placed on legs tapering towards the bottom. The table was made of ash wood and – similar to other furniture of the "Ład" cooperative – it was simple and elegant, had balanced proportions, and was manufactured with great care for the quality of materials and finish.



Fig. 12. Fragment of standard room furnishing from the 1960s (photo A.Szymczyk from the "Tenement House" exhibition presenting middle class interiors, Museum of Opole Silesia)

Due to the small dimensions of apartments in the 1950s and 1960s, narrow, low coffee tables started to replace traditional dining tables in residential interiors. They were light and easy to move around. The tabletop, sometimes covered with a glass pane, according to the style prevalent in those years was placed on thin round legs, usually tapering towards the bottom (Fig. 11b). These long, narrow tables (colloquially called "sausage dogs") were designed and produced in many Polish furniture cooperatives. They were used for eating meals, both on a

daily basis and during special occasions (Fig. 12). They were also part of the basic equipment of clubs, activities rooms, waiting rooms and offices.

3.4. Plastic furniture



Fig. 13. A plastic armchair designed by Roman Modzelewski in 1957
(<http://polki.pl/work/privateimages/formats/E/102713.jpg>)

The 1950s in Poland are also a time when designers started to experiment with plastics in furniture dedicated for mass production. In order to carry out their designs of plastic chairs and armchairs, Roman Modzelewski and Czesław Knothe had to develop methods to obtain those plastics in the first place (Frejlich and Lisik 2013).

Roman Modzelewski (1912-1997), who graduated as a painter from the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, started to design objects of daily use, including furniture, in the 1950s. In late 1950s, he had already achieved success in this field. In 1956, the artist designed, among others, armchairs made of plywood and metal (RM 56), and in 1957 – a similar chair. The designs of plywood chair and armchair by Modzelewski stood out from other designs, because the plywood bent into a hemisphere had an unusual place of connection in the seat.

At the 2nd Nationwide Exhibition of Interior Architecture in Zachęta, Warsaw, his furniture designs were awarded and won the 2nd prize of the Minister of Art and Culture in the category "Experiment – chairs with the use of substitute materials". He presented prototypes of two upholstered armchairs on metal legs (RM 57) and the above-mentioned chair made of plywood on a metal structure.

Later, Modzelewski started to work with synesthetic resin, and in 1958 – with the method of trial and error – he managed to create a fully organic sculpture made of epoxy laminate, which served as the seat of the RM 58 armchair (Fig. 13). It was a pioneering example of the use of plastics in Poland, and also a unique specimen of seat at a global scale. Nonetheless, it was not used in mass production by the Polish industry (Łuczak-Surówka 2012). The colourful plastic armchairs by Modzelewski impressed Le Corbusier himself, and the architect tried to convince Modzelewski to sell a licence for their production to France. Unfortunately, due to political reasons, the transaction couldn't take place, and the production of this armchair had to be postponed for a long time. It has started to be produced only recently and is enjoying huge popularity.

3.5. Upholstered furniture

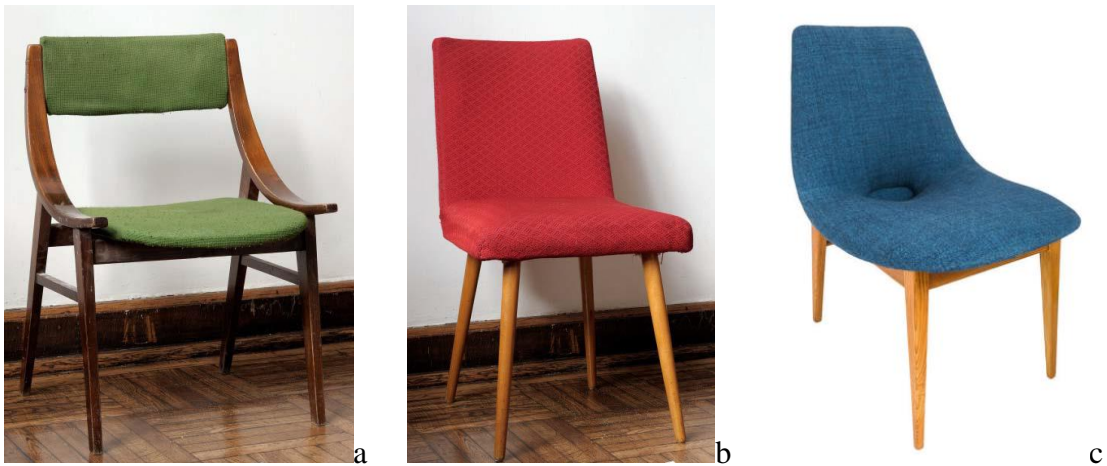


Fig. 14. Upholstered chairs mass produced in the 1960s (a and b) (http://www.mnw.art.pl/ex/katalogmebli_aukcja_mnw.pdf) and the "Muszla" ("Seashell") chair from 1956 by H. Lachert (www.designalive.pl, hemma.store)

The natural pursuit of increased comfort led to the creation of many upholstered seats (Fig. 14). The chair with upholstered seat and backrest, and bent, hemispherical arm supports was mass produced by Zamojskie Fabryki Mebli in the 1960s (Fig. 14a). Its dynamic shape and modern construction (reportedly, inspired by ski jumping) fulfilled the needs of furniture for small apartments. Other kinds of mass-produced furniture had simple forms and brightly coloured upholstered seats integrated with the backrest, supported by round legs, placed at an angle widening outwards and tapering towards the bottom (Fig. 14b).

The "Seashell" chair was designed by Hanna Lachert in cooperation with the "Ład" cooperative in 1956. The ash wood chair was small but comfortable, and fit perfectly in the small spaces of post-war apartments. The style of this piece of furniture is characteristic for the post-war era: organic shapes, upholstery and light construction. Its most frequent colour variants were navy and mustard (digital resources of the National Museum in Warsaw, 2021).



Fig. 15. Armchair 366 by Józef Chierowski from 1962, National Museum in Warsaw (www.wikipedia.org; http://www.mnw.art.pl/ex/katalogmebli_aukcja_mnw.pdf)

Nonetheless, the iconic piece of furniture from the post-war period is definitely the armchair 366 (Fig. 15) designed by Józef Chierowski (1927-2007), designer of interiors, furniture, and pianos, professor at the Interior Architecture Department of the PWSSP in

Wrocław. The production of this armchair began in 1962 in a production plant in Świebodzice. It earned the appreciation of users thanks to its light construction frame with lateral supports and its comfortable seat and backrest. The structure of this armchair was made of two lateral supports: each of them consisted of two legs placed at an angle, which provided the base for the armrests that had a rounded shape and served as a rail connecting the two legs. The seat-backrest part also had a rounded shape and was designed as one single shell piece made of polyurethane foam covered with soft fabric, and placed on a wooden structure. The armchair occupied very little space, which allowed for a better use of space in small interiors, and was very light, visually dynamic and modern. Because the structure of this armchair looked attractive and was easy to produce, it became very popular and its production continued for a long time, not only in Świebodzice, but also in smaller companies, in many variants of upholstery and colours.

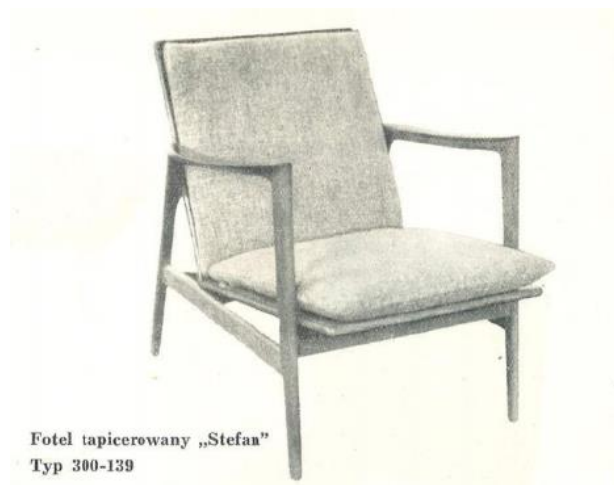


Fig. 16. "Stefan" Type 300-139 Armchair (Meble do małych mieszkań 1966)

Another armchair that is still popular today, is the "Stefan" Type 300-139 (Fig. 16), produced in mid-1960s by Swarzędzkie Fabryki Mebli (Furniture Production Plants in Swarzędz). It was one of very few designs that were produced for export. Its style was very similar to the Scandinavian designs from the 1950s. The armchair was based on a supporting structure made of slightly oblique legs (stiles), connected with a horizontal apron below the seat and in the top part – slightly bent in two planes and with a wider rail in the armrest. The stiles were connected with apron bars in the front and in the back, and the seat, placed at an angle, was suspended between the supporting stiles, with an additional support of connecting rails. "Stefan" had a backrest made of a slat of wooden spindles placed in a frame, and the seat was placed on elastic bands attached to the wooden frame. It had a slip seat made of latex and bristle, which was much thinner than in other armchairs from those times; and the fabric covering it was epingle. The armchair's structure was made of oak wood with matt finish. It cost 1000 zł and was the most expensive out of all the armchairs available at that time.

Armchair with similar structure to Stefan, was the B-7522 designed by Zenon Bączyk (Fig. 17). It had quite large dimensions comparing to the average, because most furniture designers strived to reduce dimensions. The entire construction was made of two lateral supports, each of them composed of two vertical elements (legs) joined with horizontal elements (a lower rail and the rail of the arm support). The standing elements were connected by a front and middle rail at the point of connection with the seat, which was attached to them with the use of dowel pins. The backrest was attached to the stiles with screws. The seat subcomponent was attached with screws to the backrest subcomponent. The seat was composed of a frame and upholstery bands, while the backrest was made of spindles in a frame. The

upholstery was placed loosely on both frames and was exceptionally thick, additionally profiled with a thicker part below the thighs (seat cushion) and under the lumbar section of the spine (backrest cushion). An element that allows to easily distinguish the two armchairs is a different angle of inclination of the vertical parts of the lateral stands (legs), the armrest line that is curved only in the horizontal plane and provides a wider arm support, and the width of the two armchairs, related to the number of spindles in the seatback panel – "Stefan" has four of them, while Bączyk's B-7522 has seven.



Fig. 17. B-7522 Armchair (www.archiwum.allegro.pl)

3.6. Wall unit

In Poland, in the 1960s, some changes took place in the furniture production system. Iconic furniture from those times has modular structure – composed of segments that can be combined freely. Among the authors of such designs there were: Mieczysław Puchała, Longin Około-Kułąk, Halina Skibniewska, Olgierd Szlekys and the spouses Bogusława and Czesław Kowalscy (Huml 1978).

Precisely this SYSTEM MK by Bogusława and Czesław Kowalski became the most well-known set of furniture from the 1960s. These designers from Poznań won a competition organised in 1961 by Zjednoczenie Przemysłu Meblarskiego (Furniture Industry Association), whose aim was to design modern furniture for the apartments of textile workers in Łódź. They proposed the modular "System MK", whose name soon detached from the names of its authors and became a synonym of furniture for an average "Kowalski", who was the usual user of such segment-based furniture. "Meble Kowalskich" (Kowalski's Furniture) became iconic for the next two decades (Fig. 18).

In the Polish market, the furniture became well-known since 1963, after the success achieved at an exhibition organised in a pavilion at the Przeskok Street in Warsaw, by Centrala Handlu Meblami (Furniture Trade Centre). The press praised it as the furniture that everybody had been waiting for, which provided the necessary functions, with a rational use of the small living spaces. In the 1960s in Poland, wall units replaced the old-fashioned sideboards, and became a synonym of functional aesthetics and modernity, fulfilling the needs of a major part of the country's citizens – still working hard to improve their living conditions – and became the typical element of worker's apartments in Plattenbau blocks of flats.

The "System MK" was dedicated for small apartments with low ceiling. It was a modular set placed against the wall, with a foldable sofa and a foldable desk, some cabinets and bookcases. The modules were based on coffers, and the elements of the set could be combined freely, according to the individual needs of the residents. The system provided a possibility to

fit all the necessary functions in a very limited space: some privacy for sleeping, as well as furniture needed for eating, storage, working and learning.



Fig. 18. Wall unit designed by Bogusława and Czesław Kowalski (zasoby cyfrowe Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie: <https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl>)

Dividing furniture into modules was not a new idea. This concept was already applied in the modernistic designs of early 20th century (eg. Le Corbusier). However, it was innovative when it came to standardisation, which was needed to lower production costs. An original concept of the "System MK" consisted in using coffer-based modules, built on a rectangular plinth or frame that could be assembled at various heights, and served as a support for attaching different kinds of furniture walls and doors (Kowalski, 2014). On the outside, the coffers had battens that covered the joints and provided additional rigidity to the structure.

Kowalski's furniture was produced, mostly, by Łódzkie Fabryki Mebli and Bytomskie Fabryki Mebli (furniture production plants in Łódź and in Bytom).

The original design by the Kowalski spouses included many colour variants: white for the kitchen and vivid colours for children's rooms. In the initial version, the wall unit was made of particle boards and fibreboards coated with lacquer, and cheap, not very aesthetic furniture fittings. With time, lacquer was replaced by oak veneers, the particle boards in the back walls were substituted by plywood, and the fittings were also improved. Since 1965, high gloss finish became prevalent. Over time, producers started to prefer mahogany veneers, because they turned out to be the most popular. Later, less effective finish made of plastic cladding in many different colours started to be used, but it did not win over the customers.

For a long time, during the 1960s and – with some exceptions – the 1970s, "System MK" was the only available furniture set that could fit in the tiny apartments of the Polish blocks of flats. The popularity of this furniture set provided an impulse to create other wall unit versions that became a permanent element of Polish apartments for long decades, and they were

produced in millions of pieces. Nonetheless, some problems could not be avoided, as the industry was not able to provide all the needed materials for the segments, and the designed colours were not available.

The furniture by the Kowalski spouses is still appreciated in many apartments, especially those with small surface area, although currently we cannot say that wall units are popular among the young generation.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Polish post-war furniture design was characterised, most of all, by a lot of focus on functionality of the interior layouts, maximum usage of space, and extreme simplicity. Due to the need of providing designs for small living spaces, the number of furniture pieces was reduced to the minimum, and they were designed with light, modern, geometrical shapes. After the introduction of mass production and several types of foldable and modular furniture, more emphasis was placed on their multi-functionality and usability, adjusted for small apartments. There was a demand for the production of large wall units for small flats, and furniture that could combine the functions of a bedroom, dining room and office in one set.

The exhibition entitled „*Chcemy być nowoczesni. Polski design 1955-1968 (We want to be modern. Polish design 1955-1968)*” organised in 2011 at the National Museum in Warsaw, showing examples of design from the Museum's collection, became a blockbuster. It presented a wide range of achievements of Polish design from that era with its modern style. It also included furniture. The visitors who came to the exhibition could see that Polish social modernism created popular and practical products, which followed the global avant-garde trends. It is quite a pity that these designs could not be exported from the Polish People's Republic and due to the political situation did not get the appreciation they deserved.

Currently, certain pieces of furniture from the Polish People's Republic are treated as icons in Poland. And in spite of their different types, styles, shapes, structures and materials, they have several things in common:

- The icons of Polish post-war furniture-making are, first of all, very well designed.
- They have attractive, innovative forms and interesting structures, in many cases with high aesthetical value.
- They fulfil their functions perfectly.
- They are durable and resistant – which is confirmed by their contemporary owners. With appropriate care, they still look fresh and elegant and maintain their functional value after over five decades. The upholstered seats suffer wear and tear in the fabric (especially the elastic support layer of upholstery bands). In wall units and other pieces of furniture made of boards, the veneer is still well attached to the particle boards.
- Apart from beauty, they also have universal style and usability, which makes it easy for them to enter the contemporary pop culture.
- The pop cultural potential of furniture from the times of the Polish People's Republic is strengthened by the fact that they were popular – which means: mass-produced, easily accessible and cheap, thanks to which many of them have been preserved until today.

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Streszczenie: *Klasyka polskiego designu. Ikony meblarstwa PRL-u.* Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie najlepszych projektów mebli z czasów PRL-u, czyli lat 50. i 60. Artykuł kontynuuje cykl „Klasyka polskiego designu”, prezentujący wyniki badań nad powojennym polskim meblarstwem i ikonami polskiego designu, prowadzonych w ramach prac dyplomowych na WTD SGGW. W artykule przeanalizowano nowatorskie projekty mebli. W ujęciu chronologicznym wybrano i opisano projekty aspirujące do roli przełomowych i ponadczasowych (ikon wzornictwa), przedstawiając osobę autora i charakteryzując meble stylistycznie, konstrukcyjnie i materiałowo.

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