

# Masterpieces of **German Design**



**Thomas Berg**



## Peter Behrens

### Wertheim dining room chair, 1902

In 1902, the Berlin department store of A Wertheim organized its first sales exhibition of 'Moderne Wohnungs-Kunst', or 'Modern Art of Home-living', arranged by architect Curt Stoeving. The Wertheim department store building had been built in 1896/97 on Leipziger Strasse by famous architect Alfred Messel.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, due to its ultramodern organization and design, it was regarded as a major architectural and cultural attraction. Architects and interior designers Patriz Huber, Mackay Hugh Baillie-Scott, Ludwig Paul Troost, Arno Körnig, August Endell, Sepp Kaiser, Richard Riemerschmid, Peter Behrens, Paul Schultze-Naumburg and Thorwald Jørgensen created a total of eleven model rooms for this show, arranged inside the department store to appear like two typical, fully decorated and furnished Berlin flats. Stoeving formulated the aim of the exhibition in the journal *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*: 'Viewers of every

level of education are to be given the opportunity of experiencing the simple unity of these modern rooms, of seeing the practical usefulness of the pieces of furniture and of buying such items in the best quality at reasonable prices.' For the first time in Germany, complete sets of interior decoration in the new 'modern' style were presented to the public in a department store, whilst interior furnishings had previously only been shown at art exhibitions and in specialized commercial art galleries, making them accessible only to a privileged few.

Of all the interiors shown, the dining room designed by Peter Behrens (1868–1940) caused the greatest stir among contemporary viewers and critics. Like the dining room in his own house (part of the Art Nouveau Mathildenhöhe ensemble in Darmstadt) Behrens had designed the year before, his Wertheim dining room was a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art. Everything in it – from the walls and ceilings, the furniture and lamps, the carpet, table cloth and

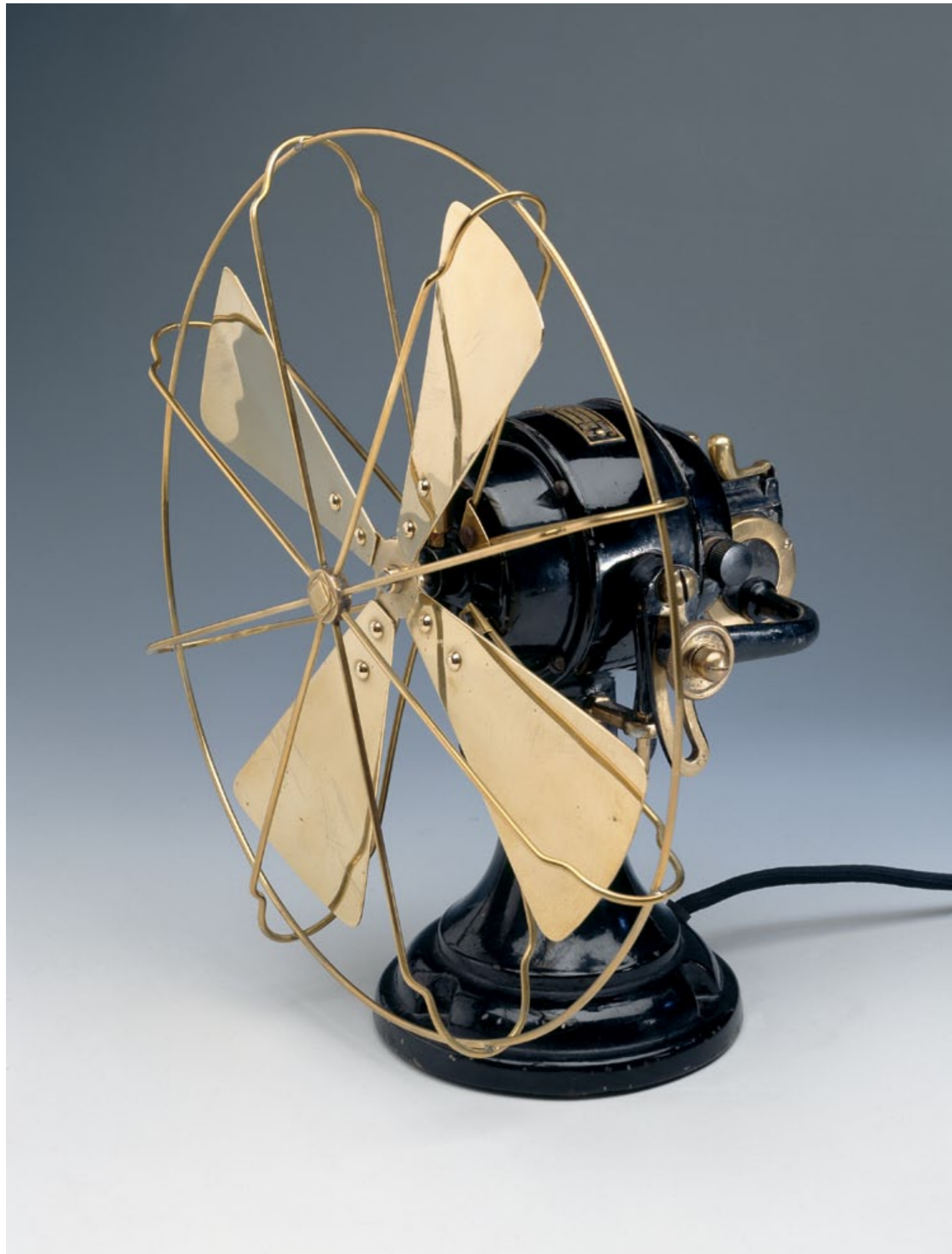
napkins to the tableware, glasses and cutlery – was designed to match, their forms and decorations based on a strictly geometric grid of rectangles and squares. However, this dining room appeared simpler, less luxurious than Behrens's own in Darmstadt – for one thing because the different items were meant to be reasonably priced (by the end of 1902 the complete dining room furniture had been sold out five times over) and were designed for mass production. Another reason for their simplicity was Behrens's own increasing departure from the eccentric, symbol-laden Art Nouveau style and the fact that he had developed a functional, tectonic formal vocabulary based on simple geometric forms. Six years later, in 1908, his Wertheim dining room was again shown, unchanged, as part of the department store's third sales exhibition of modern home furnishings. It had lost nothing of its modernity.

Materials: Frame of solid oak, stained dark brown;  
wickerwork seat  
Measurements: 97.5cm high  
Manufacturer: Probably manufactured in the workshops of A Wertheim's department store, Berlin (1902–c. 1910)



Dining room installation  
at the Wertheim department  
store, 1902





## Peter Behrens Electric table fan, 1908

Materials: varnished cast iron foot and casing, with polished Tombak alloy propeller and polished brass wire-basket guard  
Measurements: 29 cm height  
Manufacturer: Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG), Berlin (1908-?)

The origins of the AEG go back to the year 1882, when Emil Rathenau obtained the licence for producing Thomas Alva Edison's incandescent lighting system from the Compagnie Continentale Edison and founded the 'Deutsche Edison-Gesellschaft für angewandte Elektrizität', the 'German Edison Society for Applied Electricity', in Berlin. In 1887 this society was reconstituted as the AEG, a rapidly expanding shareholder company, which soon extended its production to all areas of electrical applications. The firm started with six workers/employees in 1882. By 1907 it already employed over 30,000 workers and other staff, and by 1912 more than twice this number. In a matter of only thirty years, the AEG thus became a huge, internationally active industrial manufacturer of electrical machinery, systems and appliances.

At the beginning of the 20th century few houses had electricity. Most people still used gas lights and candles to light their homes, and the development of electric stoves and household appliances was still in its infancy. However, competition in this segment of the economy was strong and, in engaging Peter Behrens, the AEG hoped to distinguish itself and its products from its competitors and their products both formally and functionally, thus gaining a competitive edge.

From 1907 Behrens redesigned a large part of the company's range of products, unifying them in terms of form and style. He freed the electrical appliances from all historicist, purely decorative elements and – by applying artistic abstraction – concentrated instead on good proportions and forms with a view to modern, rationalized industrial production procedures.

In 1907 Behrens first successfully revised AEG's range of arc lamps and in 1908 turned to redesigning the company's range of fans. He had all the casings, feet, wall and ceiling fixtures of the fans he designed coated with dark green varnish, and merely accentuated their functional forms of largely geometric bodies with polished strips of Tombak or a few square or round ornamental inlays. Combining all this with shining propellers and wire-basket guards, both of polished brass, Behrens thus created a novel type of industrial aesthetic, which lent his range of AEG fans and other products their unique character and identified them as AEG products, distinguishing them from those of other companies. The visible functionality and modernity of the electrical appliances Behrens designed for AEG up until 1914, is only equalled by the lamps designed much later in the Bauhaus Dessau metal workshop for industrial production.



AEG poster stamp, c.1908

# Lucian Bernhard

## Posters for Bosch, 1914

Materials: Colour lithograph  
 Measurements: 45.5 x 64cm  
 Manufacturers: Hollerbaum & Schmidt  
 GmbH, Berlin (printing) / Werkstätte  
 für Feinmechanik und Elektrotechnik  
 Robert Bosch, Stuttgart (client)



Small Bosch poster, c.1913



The poster Lucian Bernhard (1883–1972) designed for Bosch in 1913/14 is regarded as one of the most important examples of early modern billboard advertising. On a bright orange background, it shows a Bosch sparking plug at the moment of ignition, with the brand name BOSCH in blue capital letters, and emphasized by a blue framing line around the product against the orange background. Similar to the way they are drawn in comic strips, the sparks of the sparking plug convey a sense of power and dynamics. The advertised product and the name of the manufacturer form a visual unity and thus enter the subconscious of the viewer as inseparably linked.

In 1886 Robert Bosch established his Robert Bosch limited company in Stuttgart as a small 'workshop for precision mechanics and electrical engineering'.

The year after, in 1887, he modified a non-patented magneto, produced by the Deutz machine-building factory and turned it into his first commercial success. The revised low-voltage magneto he developed produced electric sparks, which ignited the gas mixture inside a stationary combustion engine. In 1897 Bosch finally succeeded in fitting the petrol engine of a tricycle with one such magneto and thus solved one of the biggest problems of the emerging automobile industry. Once Bosch engineer Gottlob Honold had developed a high-voltage magneto (in 1901/02), it became possible to construct high-speed petrol engines. In 1913, Bosch put the first complete electric system for automobiles on the market. It consisted of a magneto with sparking plugs, headlights, a dynamo and a regulator switch.

Lucian Bernhard (born in Cannstatt near Stuttgart in 1883 as Emil Kahn) had moved to Berlin in 1901 – just eighteen years old. Here he got to know the cartoonist and poster designer Edmund Edel who accepted him as an apprentice. In 1903 Bernhard started designing advertisements and advertising posters on his own. At about that time, he met 'publicity counsellor' Ernst Growald, who put him in touch with the reputable Berlin printers Hollerbaum & Schmidt. This firm succeeded in contracting a number of leading Berlin-based commercial artists, introducing them to potential customers – thus acting as an advertising agency avant la lettre. From 1905 the city of Berlin became a major centre of a new style of poster art, which departed from the rather narrative, decorative and painterly style that

had prevailed until then and put the product itself in the centre. Clearly represented products and a focus on branding characterized, and became the identifying feature of, the modern advertising poster. Bernhard was not only the most prominent and most progressive representative of this new style of commercial art, but also a successful typographer, architect and designer. In 1922, he was appointed to a professorship for commercial art at the school of the Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum (museum of arts and crafts). The following year he emigrated to the United States and established a studio for commercial art and interior design in New York.

# Dorothee Maurer-Becker

## UtenSilo wall storage unit, 1969

Materials: acrylonitrile-butadiene-styrene (ABS), metal  
Measurements: 68 cm high, 51 cm wide  
(larger version: 87 cm high, 66 cm wide)  
Plank Collezioni srl, Ora/Italien (ab 2008)  
Manufacturer: Design M, Munich, Germany  
(reissued in 2000: Vitra, Weil am Rhein, Germany)

Dorothee Maurer-Becker studied languages and then lived for a time in London and Paris, before moving to California in 1960. She eventually returned to Germany in 1963 with her husband, the well-known lighting designer Ingo Maurer (b.1932), and three years later they established Design M, a design and manufacturing company based in Munich. Although Ingo Maurer was responsible for the majority of the designs produced by this enterprise, Maurer-Becker also created a number of innovative products, including her iconic Uten.Silo I wall-mounted organiser from 1969. The following year, she designed a smaller version of this stylish 'wall tidy' known as the Uten.Silo II, which was similarly produced from two interlocking panels of injection-moulded ABS. These striking plastic storage units were based on earlier experimental wooden designs that

Maurer-Becker had executed in the 1960s. With their differently shaped and sized containers, and their numerous metal hooks and clips, the Uten. Silo I and Uten.Silo II were intended to be used as organizers in kitchens, bathrooms, offices or children's bedrooms. These highly useful products were also marketed under the name Wall-All, while another related design for a smaller organizer, known as the Wall-All III, was manufactured by Format Sales in the United States. Design M produced other household products in colourful ABS, including some stylish yellow coat hangers designed by Ingo Maurer in 1968. The company's innovative and modish designs in shiny, durable thermoplastic not only captured the optimistic spirit of the times, but perfectly suited the increasingly casual lifestyle of the 1960s.



Ingo Maurer, plastic clothes hanger for M Design, 1968



# Konstantin Grcic

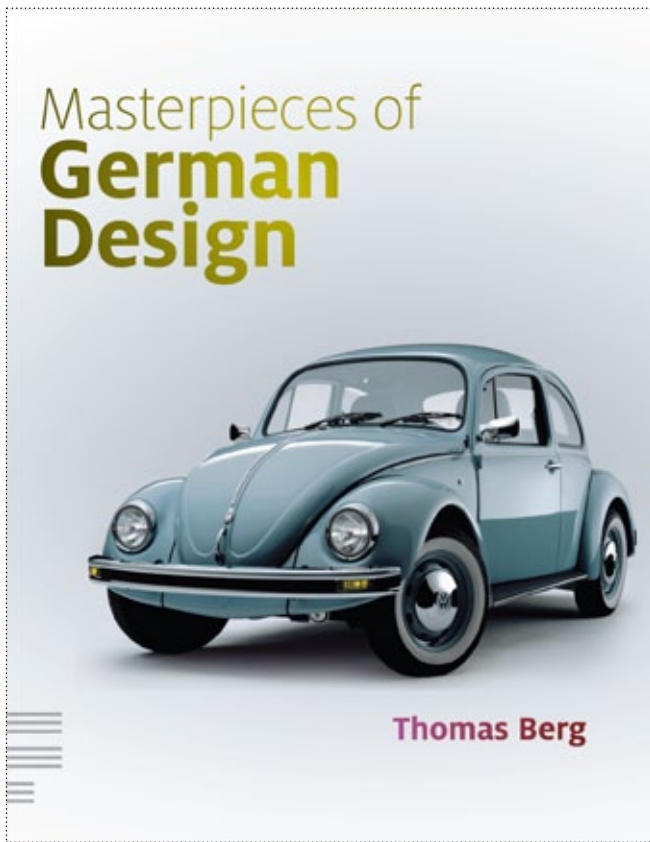
## MYTO Model 1207-20 cantilever chair, 2008

In late 2006, BASF commissioned the celebrated German industrial designer, Konstantin Grcic, to come up with a new application or product using this recently invented and highly durable polymer. Grcic had previously designed the award-winning Miura stackable stool (2005) in reinforced polypropylene for the Italian furniture manufacturer Plank. As a designer he therefore already had a good understanding of the formal and structural potential of advanced polymers and available moulding techniques. Working closely with the engineers and technicians at BASF and Plank, Grcic spent several months refining a design for a new stacking chair – research and development time that proved wholly justified with the resulting product constituting a significant benchmark in both plastics moulding technology and furniture design. When the fully recyclable MYTO cantilevered monobloc chair was eventually presented for the

first time in October 2007 at the plastics industry's largest trade exhibition, the K Fair in Düsseldorf, it caused a complete sensation. This reaction was an acknowledgement both of its materials innovation and its striking, faceted form that gives the design a strongly masculine and high-tech look, almost reminiscent of an F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter. The main concept behind the chair is a supporting frame that seamlessly dissolves into a mesh-like, perforated seat section. With its high flow rate and excellent strength, the Ultradur thermoplastic also permits an elegant transition from the thickest parts of the chair to its thinnest cross-sections. Virtually indestructible, the MYTO has excellent impact resistance, and can be mass-produced in high volumes thanks to its logical, process-driven design and the remarkable 'flowability' of its polymeric material.

Materials: Polybutylene terephthalate (PBT)  
Measurements: 82 cm high, 51 cm wide, 55 cm deep  
Manufacturer: Plank, Ora, Italy





**Target audience:**

Fans of German engineering & 'German Quality'  
Design students  
Design History students & institutions  
Industrial designers  
Engineers & engineering students  
Collectors & dealers of design artifacts

## Masterpieces of German Design

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Flexi-cover with flaps  
Format: 27 × 21 cm (10 5/8 × 8 1/4 in.)  
256 pages, 300 illustrations  
Recommended Retail Price:  
£24.95 | €29.95 | US \$45.00  
Single Language text  
English edition – ISBN 978-1-906863-02-9  
French edition – ISBN 978-906863-26-5  
German edition – ISBN 978-1-906863-13-5  
D.A.P. page 80

October 2010

**About the author**

Thomas Berg studied art history in Bonn. Later he became an independent art dealer and antiquarian in the field of 20th century design and decorative art. In addition, he pursued research in the area of design history and has contributed to numerous publications and catalogues on both the design and decorative art of the 20th century.

**From Bauhaus to our house**

*Masterpieces of German Design* is the first of a series of books dedicated to the national design outputs of specific countries. Celebrating the remarkable contribution of Germany to the world of manufactured products, this publication traces the twists and turns of German design from Jugendstil and the Bauhaus to Postwar and Late Modern, and beyond.

**Functional form**

Beautifully illustrated, this book features one hundred landmark German designs, each one being accompanied by authoritative descriptive information and an in-depth explanatory text. The highly varied selection of objects ranges from an early Pfaff sewing machine to the gull-wing Mercedes-Benz 300 SL to Konstantin Grcic's recent MYTO chair.

**From AEG to Zeppelin**

As well as an informative introductory essay, *Masterpieces of German Design* also features a useful timeline, which contextualizes the selected designs in relation to historical events. A very cool book providing a fresh new take on national characteristics in design.