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Other Modernist Furniture Makers

Several other studio furniture makers in the 1950s deserve mention. **Joyce and Edgar Anderson** started making furniture as a team in Chicago, moving to rural Morristown, New Jersey, in 1948. Exploiting their craft skills, they built their own home, Joyce driving a bulldozer to clear the property. Their work in the '50s was low and angular, very much of the era. They sometimes incorporated decorative surfaces of ceramic tile or mosaic, made in collaboration with regional craftsmen they knew. In time, their designs moved toward more linear compositions with parabolic curves, and in the 1970s they ventured into stack lamination.

D. Lee DuSell, who taught design at Syracuse University, made some very interesting furniture in the mid 1950s. He had studied painting and printmaking at Cranbrook Academy of Art in the late '40s and was influenced by the idea that design could be a comprehensive gathering of art, craft and architecture. He did not identify himself as a woodworker, feeling closer to the tradition of progressive 1930s designers like Walter von Nessen and Donald Deskey, who used metal freely. Working in the basement of his family home in 1953, he made a gorgeous aluminum and birch table that took advantage of the inherent strength of cast aluminum for legs and understructure far thinner than possible with wood. The birch tabletop, hardly worked at all, seems to float above the structure, defying gravity.

DuSell's table received a General Award—one of only four—in the Brooklyn Museum's "Designer Craftsmen U.S.A. 1953" exhibition. Later, it was featured in an article in *Look* magazine as an example of design in stainless steel and platinum, which the writers called "the platinum look." DuSell went on to become an architectural consultant, generating metal

architectural elements such as doors, screens and liturgical fittings for more than 30 years. The table is now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

From the 1940s to the '80s, unconventional furniture makers sprang up all over California. Most of them had come from out of state or from overseas, attracted by the climate and a sense of limitless possibilities. Far from MoMA and East Coast schools like SAC, culturally disconnected from such traditions as the Colonial Revival, California was an ideal place for individualists who could rethink furniture. One of the first of these eccentrics was **Jan de Swart** (1908-1987). Born in Holland, de Swart learned woodcarving and construction at the age of 15. He eventually became fascinated by both abstract sculpture and new industrial materials. By the late 1920s, he was turning blocks of plastic on the lathe, as well as carving it. Moving to California in 1929, he worked for an Italian furniture maker and did odd jobs during the '30s. His experience with machinery served him well during World War II, and he became an expert in rivets, seals and fasteners for defense applications. He made prototypes in his home shop, astonishing engineers with his inventiveness. Despite offers to continue in industry, de Swart wanted to be a full-time sculptor, and after the war he avoided full-time jobs of any kind.

De Swart worked in wood, cast metal and plastics. He sometimes carved wooden timbers with his band saw, making large sinuous columns reminiscent of Brancusi's *Endless Column*. He also developed an unusual way of combining woodworking and cast metal. He made a wooden version of his sculpture, encased it in plaster, and burned it out directly without intermediary molds and waxes. The wood did not burn completely, but left deposits of ash and unburned material in the mold. When the molten metal hit these deposits, they would burn rapidly, filling the liquid metal with bubbles and other inclusions. The highly textural surface made for unpredictable surfaces.

De Swart also made sculpture-furniture hybrids for his home. A chair resembles Isamu Noguchi's sculpture from the early 1940s: the back consists of two tall slabs of wood joined edge-to-edge, pierced with holes, given oddly curving edges and punctuated with attachments. A seat indicates the object is a chair; all else is pure sculpture. Another de Swart hybrid is a cabinet with drawers, which looks like an oversize piece of Swiss cheese. He neither sought nor received recognition from the craft world and is not well-known today. Nonetheless, his radical furniture anticipated the expressive woodworking of the 1970s, and his work still has the capacity to amaze.