

# WHEN HOMES WENT



Championing the mass-produced and the throwaway, the pop art movement transformed our homes. As a new exhibition opens, curator and *Roadshow* expert **Katherine Higgins** charts the explosion

‘Modern art forms and home comfort have a great deal in common this year,’ exclaimed Pathe news in 1968, reporting from the Earls Court Furniture Show. As if by magic, out of the back seat of a Mini, came a jigsaw of foam that, with a moment’s self-assembly, transformed into a three-piece suite. In the hands of another demonstrator, cylinders and cuboids made from expanded polystyrene were quickly arranged to form ‘take-it-easy loungers’. And for the Mod set who just wanted to sit ‘a-round’ there was Hille’s spherical polyurethane ‘Sea Urchin’, developed in conjunction with Dunlop.

Talk was of versatility, informality, mass-production, throw away, blow-up and a rash of new materials, mostly made possible by advances in plastics manufacture. It was clear that Britain’s homes had embraced a world that was ever so ‘pop’.

Just over a decade earlier, Richard Hamilton, a guiding light of the British pop art movement and best-known for his 1956 collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (see right), had ascribed what he felt were the characteristics of pop art. The result was a definition that is now enshrined in history: ‘Pop art is popular (designed for a mass



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Verner Panton’s chairs were suspended from the ceiling to avoid legs cluttering up the floor; Panton’s ground-breaking ‘S’ chair; modern materials appealed to Britain’s new breed of consumers: ‘teenagers’; portable furniture even made it on to London’s streets in 1969; Peter Murdoch’s ‘Chair Thing’ is now highly collectable; Richard Hamilton’s 1956 collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?*; Panasonic’s ‘Tootaloop Bangle’ radio; Carnaby Street and the Mini set the tone for Sixties style

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audience), transient (short-term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low-cost, mass-produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business.’

Swinging London in the 1960s had every one of those values at its heart. It was out with 1950s Festival of Britain style; those easy-to-sweep-beneath Sputnik legs, light veneers and asymmetric motifs. In their place came a truly relaxed environment (‘Chairs are to be lain in rather than sat on,’ advised *Design Journal*) where the seating hugged the floor and multi-function furniture clicked and slotted into place around the edge of the room. The same boutique shoppers who pounced on Mary Quant’s mini dresses and Quant Afoot PVC boots because they were sexy, youthful and witty, flicked through the pages of *Nova* – the style magazine of the era – and snapped up ‘low-hung lights for seductive dining’ for their bedsits from the newly opened Habitat.

The notion that pop art stood for something different and represented a challenge to the status quo struck a chord with Britain’s Youthquake generation, who went out of their way to be everything their parents were not. ‘There was a very strong sense that the boundaries were changing. We felt it was our time and we could do whatever we wanted to do,’ recalls Penny Brooke, a teenager in London in the 1960s. For Penny that meant taking the Pill, listening to the Beatles, shocking her parents with ‘Dolly Rockers’ dresses and lounging on an inflatable chair – while her parents looked on in shock from their pre-war three-piece suite.

## STYLE ON THE STREET

Buying pieces that were inspired by pop art became an increasingly easy proposition in the 1960s as they started to seep, trickle and, by the end of the decade, gush on to the High Street. A plethora of designers ventured into unknown territory, exploring the properties of colourful moulded plastics. Verner Panton was at the forefront with his ground-breaking one-piece stacking ‘S’ chair of 1967, made of glass fibre and polyester.

Fibreboard and bent plywood, previously the materials of the car and construction industries, were also offered as low-cost seating options. In 1968, Verner Panton designed bent ply stools for Declina-Mobel; Hull Traders launched their ‘Bonga’ range of natural fibreboard stools, bars and tables; and Peter Murdoch won a design award for his now very desirable (as most were thrown away) ‘Chair Thing’ – a flat-pack polyurethane-coated paper chair for children produced by Perspective Designs.

Consumer electronics were rapidly restyled too. ‘It’s an S, it’s an O, it’s a crazy radio!’ went the jingle for National Panasonic’s bracelet radio that twisted into an ‘S’ shape when you wanted to tune in. JVC encased electronics in moulded plastic in its now desirable ‘Videosphere’ television. Its smoked acrylic visor and

‘Pop art started to seep, trickle and, by the end of the decade, gush on to the High Street’



*‘The ‘Videosphere’ seemed better suited to an Apollo mission than a suburban living room’*

helmet outline made it seem almost better suited to an Apollo mission than a suburban living room.

#### THROWAWAY CULTURE

Ingrained in all these pieces was one key factor: disposability. Since ownership was meant only to be short-term as fashions changed, durability wasn’t an issue – a concept most perfectly enshrined in the rise of inflatable furniture. In 1968 Quasar Khanh linked PVC shapes with metal rings and filled the resulting forms with air to create a run of blow-up armchairs, lamps, a couch and stools that were manufactured in the UK by Ultralite. Affordable, mass-market and ‘almost unbreakable’ (although new owners were treated to a complimentary repair kit), they brought a sense of lightness and supreme flexibility to interiors – as well as the satisfaction of knowing you were riding the crest of a trend.

Fabric and furnishing designers propelled pop art style on to jackets, curtains and cushions, and it wasn’t only the imagery that reflected the style, but the production methods too. Recognising the new taste for more rapid change, Jane Wealleans and Sue Saunders formed OK Textiles expressly to print fabrics in shorter lengths, and shorter runs, than the standard 150 yards, so designs came and went more quickly. Under the natty slogan ‘If it runs we chase it’, they rode the wave of vintage film nostalgia that had been a key influence on Britain’s pop art fraternity. ‘Come Dancing’ was a print that conveyed the spirit of Hollywood icon Fred Astaire, also featured by Eduardo Paolozzi in his collages. It is avidly sought-after today, along with other OK designs such as ‘Fruit and Raspberry Lips’, ‘Stocking and Shoes’ and ‘Sea Cruise’. Their sense of pop also ran through to what could be said to be the first ‘lifestyle shop’, London’s Mr Freedom store, with which Jane was involved. A mecca for pop art devotees, it was described as being like ‘comic land’ and boasted seats and cushions in the shape of giant Liquorice Allsorts.

As the 1970s dawned, the possibilities of what ‘could be’ in terms of pop art’s influence were seemingly inexhaustible. On one hand it was the entertaining ‘Pratone’ (lawn) seat, a large rectangular ‘meadow’ of foam grass blades by Italian design firm Gruppo Sturm, on the other it was eye-wear designer Oliver Goldsmith’s vision of an egalitarian future filled with white acetate and mobile entertainment in his ‘TV Screens’ sunglasses (somehow these don’t sound so far-fetched now). But once the oil crisis struck, the notion of the pop art-inspired interior melted away like the plastic it was made of. Britain’s pop artists continued their work but, against a backdrop of economic crisis, three-day weeks and financial hardship, the furthest thing from anyone’s mind was furnishings that wouldn’t last. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE JVC's 'Videosphere' television; Jane Wealleans' iconic 'Stocking and Shoes' design for OK Textiles; living rooms in the 1960s became places to lounge and enjoy new pleasures like watching TV; Oliver Goldsmith's Union Jack glasses; made from ABC plastic, the Valentine Portable Typewriter was designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry King for Olivetti; Mr Freedom in fashionable Kensington became the place to buy pop furniture; Quasar Khanh inflatable armchair; Lloyd Johnson's jacket designs for his shop Cockle and Johnson; Gruppo Sturm's 'Pratone' (lawn) seat of 1971 was meant to resemble giant grass blades on which you could lie down and relax



BONHAMS; JANE WEALLEANS/V&A; TOPHAM PICTUREPOINT; EWA STOCK; MY-DECO-SHOP.COM; LLOYD JOHNSON; GUFRAM.COM; THE LIGHTBOX

#### BRITISH POP ART HOW IT STARTED

Against a backdrop of post-war reconstruction and social change, a group of like-minded young artists, writers and architects met to pool their ideas at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. Formed in 1951 and known as the International Group (IG), they introduced the world to a new kind of art that was stimulated by popular culture – films, comics, advertising, science-fiction and pop music were key inspirations. ‘We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals but accepted it as fact, discussed it in detail and consumed it enthusiastically,’ recalled art critic and IG member Lawrence Alloway.

The resulting ‘pop art’ (Alloway indicated that in the early days the label was ‘a friendly way of saying mass media’) challenged tradition by introducing mass culture into debates around high culture. With a visual language that drew from the ephemera of our everyday world came a new way of presentation – photography was layered with carefully selected magazine scraps, fill-in oil paint and cut-out headlines to form textured collages. ‘You can’t preconceive the result,’ noted the renowned Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi. Nor indeed the effect their pop art philosophy would have on our lives.

• ‘Snap, Crackle and Pop: British Pop Art’ runs from 2nd August–28th September at The Lightbox, Chobham Road, Woking, Surrey, GU21 4AA. 01483 737800; [thelightbox.org.uk](http://thelightbox.org.uk)