

Press release

**German Design 1949–1989
Two Countries, One History**

20 March to 5 September 2021, Vitra Design Museum

18 March 2021, 2 pm (CET): Digital press conference and curator-guided tour on the YouTube channel of the Vitra Design Museum, more information to follow.

An exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum, the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and the Wüstenrot Foundation

German design was put on the map in the 1920s by the Bauhaus school and the Werkbund association. After the division of Germany in 1949, design and everyday culture, too, went their separate ways on both sides of the border. In the West, design became a driving force in the »Wirtschaftswunder«, or economic miracle, while in the East it was absorbed into the socialist planned economy. More than thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Vitra Design Museum presents the first panoramic overview of post-war design in the two Germanies. From 20 March to 5 September 2021, the exhibition »German Design 1949–1989: Two Countries, One History« will offer a comparative selection of design from East and West Germany and explore ideological and aesthetic differences as well as parallels and interrelations between East and West. Exhibits range from iconic pieces of furniture and lamps to graphic, industrial, and interior design to fashions, textiles, and personal ornaments.

Cheap plastic and shrill colours in the East, cool functionalism in the West – the exhibition breaks with simplistic stereotypes and presents a differentiated view. Legendary automobiles like the »Trabant« (1958) and coveted everyday items like the radio-phono-combo ironically nicknamed »Snow White's Coffin« (1956) will be on display alongside new discoveries and rare objects such as Luigi Colani's sculptural loop chair »Poly-COR« (1968). The exhibition introduces important figures including Dieter Rams, Egon Eiermann, Rudolf Horn, and Margarete Jahny while also highlighting the role of design schools and the Bauhaus legacy. Its broad panorama of design from the two Germanies illustrates how closely intertwined design and history, everyday culture and world politics were in Germany during the Cold War period.

The exhibition begins with immersive installations allowing visitors to experience the role of design in East and West Germany. The two new states sought to establish their identities by designing new coats of arms, currencies, passports, and symbols – right down to the stylized figures in pedestrian crossing signals. At the same time, objects like Peter Ghyczy's »Garden Egg Chair« (1968) illustrate that the division between East and West Germany was not nearly as strict as it often appears: the futuristic chair was manufactured in almost exactly the same form on both sides of the border. The exhibition also looks at German design before the Second World War, since many German

designers were former Bauhaus students. By drawing on the modern ideas that had been taught at the Bauhaus and other design schools, post-war design practice and design education hoped to overcome the dark shadow of the Nazi era.

This introduction is followed by a chronological narrative of East and West German design history. It begins in 1949, when the Federal Republic of Germany was founded in the Allied occupation zones and the German Democratic Republic in the Soviet sector. The large-scale housing programmes by which both states sought to accelerate reconstruction led to a rapid rise in demand for consumer goods – from furniture and tableware to electrical appliances and automobiles. Everyday objects like the kitchen wall clock designed by Max Bill (1956) or Klaus Kuni's elegant watering can (ca. 1960) reflected a new domesticity as well as the growing popularity of modern design. In both East and West, several design schools were revived or established in order to train the young designers that industry needed so urgently, not least because design provided an excellent means of projecting a modern and open-minded image. Milestones in this context include the revival of the Leipzig Trade Fair in 1946, aimed at boosting East Germany's export economy, and the West German pavilion designed by Sep Ruf and Egon Eiermann for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair.

The construction of the Berlin Wall starting on 13 August 1961 finally enforced a hard border. Up until then, a number of companies and designers in East and West Germany had continued to work together; now the rivalry between the two political systems took hold in design, too. In West Germany, design came to be an important factor in a consumer society that coveted the latest furniture and automobiles as status symbols. The minimalist electrical appliances designed by Dieter Rams for the Braun company offer evidence of an increased understanding of quality and design culture. The concept of corporate identity also gained currency, as is illustrated by two iconic designs from 1972: Doris Casse-Schlüter's red lips logo for the city of Bonn, then the capital of West Germany, and Otl Aicher's pictograms for the Summer Olympics in Munich. In the automobile industry, these changes could be seen in the designs for Porsches – which only a fraction of the population could afford – whose reduced lines symbolized the perfect marriage of aesthetics and engineering. True design »Made in Germany«.

In East Germany, the design of this era was centrally regulated as part of the socialist planned economy. A separate government office – the Office of Industrial Design – ensured that it supplied the wider population with affordable products while boosting the competitiveness of East German industries. Large-panel system-building made it possible to provide housing on a large scale, which in turn required furniture and interior design concepts. The »MDW-Einbauwand« (1968) developed by Rudolf Horn for the Deutsche Werkstätten company proved extremely popular; its versatile modular storage units were soon to be found in private interiors all over East Germany. In public spaces, too, design had an important role to play. The exhibition shows the original plans for Berlin's Cafe Moskau and spotlights a relief by Josep Renau (»Die Beziehung des Menschen zu Natur und Kunst«, 1982–84). This newly restored wall mosaic in Erfurt illustrates how the penchant for decorating large buildings with artworks defined the look of cities. In terms of industrial progress, it was the »Trabant« car, launched in 1958, which had the greatest impact, since it accelerated the

mass motorization of the population at large. Today the »Trabi« with its body of recycled plastic is an icon of East-German design. Its production only ceased in 1991.

Thanks to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's initiative to normalize relations between the two German states, the 1970s saw a rapprochement between East and West that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Design on both sides of the border during this period reflected a growing critical awareness fuelled by events such as the 1973 oil crisis. The East German economy began to decline, but its designers proved inventive. Karl Clauss Dietel and Lutz Rudolph, for example, designed the »Mokick S50« motorcycle (1967–74) on a modular principle that made it easy and inexpensive to repair. Other designers turned to handicrafts or produced decorative art in small batches. In East Berlin, design and subculture met in a vibrant scene whose output in fashion, photography, ceramics, and decorative accessories expressed a new aesthetic of the everyday that was beyond the reach of industrialized planning. One of the last great projects launched by the East German government was a computer known as »PC 1715« and produced by the state-owned company Robotron (1985). It was reserved exclusively for state-owned companies, government authorities, and universities.

While West Germany did not emerge unscathed from the economic upheavals of the 1970s, its leadership role in international industrial design remained intact. The Volkswagen Golf, for example, launched in 1974, reflected a growing demand for small, efficient automobiles, and in the early 1980s, Steve Jobs asked Hartmut Esslinger and the German agency frogdesign to design one of the first Apple computers. During the same period, art-oriented and experimental tendencies gained importance in West Germany, paralleling developments in the East. Groups like Pentagon, Ginbande, and Kunstflug as well as design galleries and experimental shows influenced the development of a »New German Design« drawing on art, punk, and kitsch. Political détente gradually led to exchange and collaboration in design, too. Twin exhibitions featuring design from the other Germany took place in East Berlin in 1984/85 and in Stuttgart in 1988.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, large parts of East German industrial production were phased out, and many East German household names simply vanished. The exhibition »German Design 1949–1989: Two Countries, One History« compares East and West German design on equal terms and in so doing casts a spotlight on lesser known chapters of German design history. While emphasizing the political significance of design in the Cold War era, the exhibition also reveals the fascinating multiplicity of design styles and attitudes requiring a more differentiated approach than one fixated on ideological differences. The exhibition is the first to address the history of design in East and West Germany as a shared history – one marked by contrast and clashes, but also by sharing and connecting.

After its presentation at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein (20.03.2021–05.09.2021), the show will travel to the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (15.10.2021–20.02.2022). The exhibition and its international tour are supported by the Federal Foreign Office.

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive publication including essays by Paul Betts, Greg Castillo, Petra Eisele, Siegfried Gronert, Jana Scholze, Katharina Pfützner, Eli Rubin, Katrin Schreiter, Oliver Sukrow, Carsten Wolff, and many others, as well as interviews with Prem Krishnamurthy, Renate Müller, and Dieter Rams. Softcover with flaps, 21.5 x 28 cm, 320 pages; ca. 380 images, ISBN 978-3-945852-44-6 (EN), €59.90 (German Retail Price)

An exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum, the Kunstgewerbemuseum,
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Federal Foreign Office

General information:

Exhibition:	German Design 1949–1989 Two Countries, One History
Duration:	20 March to 5 September 2021
Curators:	Erika Pinner, Vitra Design Museum Klára Němečková, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
Assistant curators:	Mea Hoffmann, Isabelle Schorer, Vitra Design Museum
Curatorial assistant:	Fine Kugler, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
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Hashtag:	#VDMGermanDesign
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