

Press release – Preview 2021

German Design 1949 – 1989: Two Countries, One History

20 March to 5 September 2021, Vitra Design Museum

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

Driven by the Bauhaus and Werkbund movements, German Design gained wide recognition in the early twentieth century. After 1949, its development followed a unique path as designers in the divided nation continued working under opposed political systems in East and West Germany. More than thirty years after the German reunification, the Vitra Design Museum presents the exhibition »German Design 1949 – 1989: Two Countries, One History« from 20 March until 5 September 2021. It is the first overview that explores German design on both sides of the Iron Curtain. While giving insights into the different design philosophies in the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, it also reveals the many parallels and interrelations linking design in East and West during the nation's divide. The exhibition is supported by the Federal Foreign Office.

Cheap plastic and shrill colours in the East, cool functionalism in the West: the notions of German post-war design are ruled by clichés. The exhibition breaks with simplistic stereotypes and presents a differentiated view, looking at protagonists like Dieter Rams or Hans Gugelot in the West and Rudolf Horn or Margarete Jahny in the East, leading institutions such as Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design in Halle or the Ulm School of Design, and tendencies such as the continuation of Bauhaus ideas in the post-war era or, in the 1980s, design as a medium of protest and subversion. The exhibits range from iconic furniture and lighting to graphic design, industrial design, and interior design as well as fashion, textiles, and jewellery. Set against the backdrop of the German divide, many of the exhibits offer surprising perspectives and illustrate design's eminent role as a tool of politics and propaganda during the Cold War period.

By doing so, the exhibition not only reunifies the design evolution of a formerly divided country, but also allows a unique comparison of design under the different circumstances of capitalist and socialist societies. While in the Federal Republic, design »made in Germany« was one of the drivers of a booming export market, its role in the Democratic Republic was to boost the socialist planned economy and make everyday products affordable for everyone. However, the exhibition clearly shows that German design on both sides of the Iron Curtain was more multi-faceted, colourful, and controversial than political stereotypes might suggest. Design was not just a symbol of two separate economic systems – as a subversive mark of protest, it also made a subtle contribution of its own to the process resulting in German unification in 1989.

General information:

Exhibition:	German Design 1949–1989 Two Countries, One History
Duration:	20 March 2021 – 5 September 2021
Curators:	Erika Pinner, Vitra Design Museum Klara Němečková, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
Assistant curator:	Isabel Schorer, Vitra Design Museum
Curatorial assistant:	Fine Kugler, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
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