Alcoa's Aluminum Furniture: New Applications for a Modern Material,
1924-1934

In 1924, the Aluminum Company of America, having no previous experience in furniture design or manufacture, completely outfitted the offices of Mellon Bank’s Pittsburgh headquarters. This marked the beginning of a decade of experimentation at Alcoa with aluminum furniture production.

During its 40-odd years as the country’s most powerful aluminum company, Alcoa had avoided the pitfalls of producing only consumer durables. Its furniture business would eventually become a moderate success, but Alcoa was less interested in a large market-share in furniture than in convincing other manufacturers to venture into the field. As it had done in the aluminum cookware business two decades earlier, Alcoa ventured into aluminum furniture to demonstrate the versatility of aluminum because it was the only manufacturer of raw aluminum in the United States; the ultimate goal was to broaden the range of objects made from the metal, and then supply the raw aluminum to firms making those consumer items. It was a formula that would make the corporation, from its headquarters in Pittsburgh, one of the

Gregory W. Smith is an assistant curator in the Museum Division of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
Aluminum is a light non-ferrous metal, roughly one-third the weight of steel or brass. While it is ductile, easier to work cold than other metals, and resistant to corrosion, it is also difficult to weld or solder and reacts electrolytically in contact with some metals. These unique properties demand different production techniques than with other metals, and special product designs.

Despite the abundance of aluminum in the Earth's crust, cheaply separating the element from its ore is a relatively recent achievement. In 1886, Charles Martin Hall, a young scientist in Oberlin, Ohio, perfected the electrochemical aluminum reduction process that made possible the modern aluminum industry — before Hall's advances, pure aluminum cost as much as $500 per pound.1

Before Hall's discovery, a few companies made limited use of aluminum for making novelty items, but the metal itself was a novelty. Small amounts of the metal were found also to improve the quality of finished steel, and in fact, the steel industry was the largest market for aluminum. Although Hall's reduction process made it possible to manufacture large quantities of aluminum, there was no ready market for it. Manufacturers, consumers, and even aluminum's proponents were largely unfamiliar with the metal's properties and unsure of its possible applications. Alcoa president Arthur Vining Davis noted that "while it was a great and wonderful thing to invent the process for making aluminum, it was a totally different and... infinitely more difficult problem to make aluminum commercially, and a still greater problem to utilize the aluminum when made."2

As the sole American producer of aluminum until the 1940s, Alcoa served as both the major provider and promoter of aluminum to industry. For much of the company's early history, manufacturers were unfamiliar with aluminum and reluctant to utilize it. Alcoa demonstrated and promoted aluminum as a substitute for more familiar materials, and developed its own consumer products with careful attention to quality and consumer education. Alcoa's methods of in-house research and development also allowed the company to become a leader in finding solutions to the technical problems involved in making and working with the metal.3

By the early part of the century, Alcoa had developed strategies for vertical integration: backward into extraction of bauxite (an ore rich in alumina), and forward into fabrications, vital to the creation of new markets. The company's earliest products ranged from shoelace eyelets to horseshoes to bicycle parts. While such items were not large markets in themselves, they, along with an expanding cookware market started in the 1890s, demonstrated the metal's versatility and attractive qualities to both manufacturers and consumers. Public acceptance of these products, along with a steady reduction in the cost of aluminum,
allowed aluminum to become a viable competitor with other metals. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Alcoa had an established presence in the transportation industry, supplying fabrications for trains, dirigibles, and automobiles where lightweight strength was essential.

The formula of opening new markets for the raw product by demonstrating aluminum's versatility in the manufacture of consumer goods can be examined by following developments in the aluminum cookware industry. By the mid-1890s, several American companies produced cookware using aluminum supplied by Alcoa's corporate predecessor. Consumers initially resisted aluminum utensils because they were unproven and more expensive than either cast iron or enameled steel. The lightness of aluminum was often equated with cheapness, a problem compounded by a market glutted with poorly made aluminum cookware manufactured by fabricators ignorant of aluminum's unique properties. Alcoa's corporate policy was to reverse public perception that products made of aluminum were inherently of poor quality.

Some companies did produce heavyweight aluminum cookware known as "thickware." Alcoa purchased one such producer, the Massachusetts-based Hill, Whitney & Wood Co., and brought it together with another successful aluminum cookware firm, Ziegler, Wilson & Co. of Carlisle, Pa., which supplied marketing expertise. Through this venture, Alcoa pioneered its well-known "Wear-Ever" line. By 1912, Alcoa's cookware subsidiary, the Aluminum Goods Manufacturing Co., relied on the Wear-Ever line to control nearly 75 percent of the U.S. market. Initially created to salvage the reputation of aluminum, Wear-Ever remained Alcoa's most successful brand of consumer durables for decades.

The Move to Metal Furniture

Alcoa began aluminum furniture production in the 1920s, at a time when such furniture was deemed appropriate only for the office, factory, or hospital. Although the 1920s was a period of major transition in European interior design, marked by the rejection of historical reference in furniture and by experimentation with new materials, Americans were slow to accept modernism, and the relationship between modern designers and American industry remained weak. Although made from an untraditional material, Alcoa used traditional designs that appealed to conservative American tastes.

The modernist movement in Europe was actually a conglomeration of several schools of thought regarding design. The German Bauhaus, which opened in 1919 under the direction of Walter Gropius, promoted functionalist design and artists' collaboration with industry to produce high-quality, cheap consumer goods. Bauhaus designers utilized modern materials, such as tubular steel and aluminum, promoted honest use of materials, eschewed needless ornamentation, and celebrated the aesthetics of the machine. Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, and Gropius, all influential Bauhaus furniture designers, eagerly promoted the use of metal, claiming that "metal furniture is part of a modern room. It is 'styleless,' for it is expected not to express any particular styling beyond its purpose and the construction necessary theretofore... [M]etal furniture is intended to be nothing but a necessary apparatus for everyday life."

Modern French design was less austere than its German counterpart, often combining historical reference with Oriental motifs, executed in exotic materials with traditional craftsmanship. Many Americans first encountered this school of modern design through media coverage of "L'Exposition Internationale des Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes," held in Paris in 1925, and from which the term "Art Deco" was later derived. Over 400
objects from the exposition later traveled throughout the United States, but despite the interest generated, American fondness for historicism remained strong. In fact, American design in 1925 was so deeply rooted in historical style that the United States was not represented at the Paris exposition. Various European designers worked in the United States, though without much impact.

Americans associated modernism with cleanliness, simplicity and technological progress, and by the 1930s, the moderne designs of Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, Donald Deskey, and Walter Dorwin Teague transformed trains, cars, pencil sharpeners and other industrial items into expressions of speed and air dynamics, whether or not such styling was appropriate to the object's intended use. While the term "modern" (sometimes "moderne") became a popular catchphrase in American advertising for appliances, automobiles, and even food, middle-class Americans still sought traditional decoration, and most fine furniture manufacturers fervently resisted the trend towards modern furniture design, often characterizing it as "foreign." One critic argued that "the Art Moderne movement can never be anything but an imported product, a foreign and alien maneuver. It neither expresses our mood or our temperament, nor is it suited to our way of living or outlook on life." Other critics noted some manufacturers' halfhearted attempts to be modern: There are signs, here & there, of a panicky attempt to be modern... The American manufacturer, having lost the power of fresh design by his years of silly imitation, exercises neither restraint nor imagination in honestly facing his new problems... It makes people think that all modern design is a bad joke... our manufacturers apparently know no middle ground between monastic sterility and imperial orgy.

David Gebhard has noted the numerous traditional influences found in popular American furniture in the 1920s, ranging from Colonial Revival to Chippendale to Federal furniture styles. By the early 1930s, American manufacturers utilized both traditional and modern forms. Art Historian Richard Striner argues that Art Deco designs in the 1920s and 1930s "proved to a middle range between antagonistic ideologies." In a 1933 review of the "new furniture," Margaret McElroy described the offerings in both modern and period styles, noting that "after a bad beginning in this country, a long slump with only a few artists bearing the banner against indifference and active dislike, modernism has taken on a new lease on life." While McElroy appreciates some aspects of modern design, she simultaneously praises those objects which retain "essential forms of the past." Removed from its philosophical roots, modernism was relegated to just another style by many critics.

Office furniture has always been less reliant on historical precedent, generally lacking ornamentation, and often employing "modern" attitudes towards function and honesty in material for the sake of utility. Promoters of maximum office efficiency, such as Frederick Taylor, recommended specially designed chairs with swivel bases, saddle seats, and slatted wooden backs. Such chairs had been used in offices since the 1850s, and their basic design...
remained largely unchanged through the early 20th Century. Frank Lloyd Wright is attributed as the creator of the first metal office furniture, in his 1904 commission of the Larkin Company’s administration building in Buffalo. (Wright’s free-standing steel chairs weighed 68 pounds.) Specialized typist chairs were developed in the early 1920s. Made of steel, with adjustable seats and backs, they were efficient, comfortable, and unmistakably industrial. Such widespread use of steel in office furniture made the office look more like a factory. This may have been due to the gradual recognition of the factory system as a practical and efficient model that could be applied to white-collar working environments.14

**Mellon Goes Metal**

Alcoa’s first experiment with aluminum furniture came with the commission of a line of furnishings for the headquarters of Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh — Richard Beatty Mellon was a past president of Alcoa, as well as a major investor. Alcoa manufactured 100 desks, 300 chairs and an assortment of wastebaskets, coat racks, tables and umbrella stands in 1924 at its New Kensington facility near Pittsburgh. All pieces were custom-made (many were cast), and were for the most part heavier and more expensive than wood furniture. Although most pieces resembled wooden furniture, from their conservative design to the wood-grain enameled finish, some designs were machine-like and utilitarian, with a clear finish and skeletal frame that resembled the inner structure and metal supports of a modern building or factory.15

The dichotomous designs of the Mellon office furniture reaffirmed the hierarchy of the workplace. The simplest utilitarian pieces were designed for clerks and stenographers, while the executive furniture was more expensive, traditionally styled, and perhaps more comfortable. The most traditional pieces were designed for the director’s office and the ladies’ rest room. The director’s chair came in four similar styles; all were leather upholstered, and only one revealed its aluminum structure. A small smoking stand featured gracefully “turned” legs of cast aluminum. The large oval conference room table was perhaps the most unusual application of aluminum: finished with a prominent wood-grain pattern and an incongruous metallic shine. The furnishings of the ladies’ rest room were also unusual, consisting of a sofa, a chair, and a stool featuring reeded legs and floral upholstery. All of these pieces were made to resemble wood.

Other examples of the Mellon furniture were very machine-like, the aluminum remaining exposed. Such pieces emulated the Bauhaus aesthetic which celebrated simplicity in design, honesty in the use of materials, and form that corresponded with function. Elegance was derived from its functionality, natural finish, simple lines, and light upholstery: a compromise between the machine aesthetic and propriety. The stenographer’s chair employed wheels, and a minimal backrest on a post. A lightweight folding stenographer’s chair had an extremely skeletal frame of bent aluminum rods. A series of utility chairs, some collapsible, featured a reflective natural finish and exposed fasteners. Although these designs were not modern for the sake of modernity, the nature of their material remained evident.

After the success of the Mellon Bank installation, Alcoa’s furniture subsidiary, the United States Aluminum Co., marketed its furniture to other corporations and institutions. Alcoa targeted large corporations and institutions to ensure high
visibility for its products. Limited production and the cost of materials kept prices relatively high, but this was countered in the company’s literature by the argument that aluminum furniture was durable, fireproof, and virtually maintenance-free. The company’s first furniture catalog (1926) appealed to the customer who preferred “performance in equipment to temporary make-shift; who regards indestructibility as the best insurance and who demands, and will pay for, ease in handling with graceful and dignified proportions.” Alcoa offered special custom designs for large orders.16

Expanding Lines, New Shapes

In 1925, Alcoa relocated the furniture shop from New Kensington to a Buffalo plant where aluminum automobile bodies had been produced for Pierce-Arrow. Office furniture designer George K. Sandler and John Burdick designed a series of utility chairs, office armchairs and swivel chairs, folding chairs, and a railroad dining car chair. The Pennsylvania Railroad and the Philadelphia Free Library were among the first purchasers of these designs, and the U.S. Navy ordered lightweight aluminum furniture for its warships. Subsequent clients included the state of New York, Cornell University, the newly built Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, Shell Petroleum Co., numerous railroad companies, Carnegie Hall in New York, and Pittsburgh’s Isaly’s dairy stores. Alcoa outfitted its own offices and research laboratories with aluminum furniture, and created a special line of airplane chairs for Ford Motor Co.17

The first Alcoa furniture catalog, featuring full color paintings of 14 functional and elegant office chairs, was designed to appeal to an upscale market. Most styles were upholstered in leather, and since Alcoa did not produce matching tables or other accessories at the time, its chairs were designed to blend in with contemporary office surroundings. Though more simplistic than the Mellon Bank executive furniture, and less machine-like than the Mellon utility furniture, the new designs still mimicked wood. The catalog’s text outlined the advantages of alloys which combined the “lightness of aluminum with the strength equal to that of mild steel.” Such alloys could be fabricated into “complicated shapes, permitting the preservation of form and line essential in purely utilitarian furniture... available in plain colors or natural wood grains.” The result was touted as something very new in furniture design, “combining beauty with lightness, noncombustibility and freedom from warping or loosening of joints.”18 In terms of styling, the catalog suggested that the company understood the limitations of aluminum and the new modern aesthetic: In entering so old and well-established a market with a radical departure from the ordinary, care has been taken to select only a few types of chairs having serviceable rather than ornamental value. Any attempt to duplicate in metal the work of such master craftsmen as Adam, Chippendale, Heppelwhite or Sheraton would be doomed to commercial failure. Primarily the endeavor has been to supply the present day need for a fire-proof and strong but light chair frame with easily removable upholstery at a price compatible with the best wood.19

Alcoa diversified its furniture line with a line of institutional furniture in 1929, and by 1931 the line included over 50 designs for chairs, tables and stools. In 1929, Alcoa manufactured over 35,000 chairs. The company continually added new designs until the Depression forced a cutback in 1931, after which the number of new offerings decreased annually. In annual reports from 1928 and 1929, the company referred to new chair models by the name of the customer for whom the chair was designed. Chair #312, for example, was referred to as “New York Central.” 20

In the early 1930s, Alcoa focused its advertising campaign to elite business magazines such as Fortune. The ads featured photographs of executives and secretaries putting Alcoa chairs through the stresses of a typical day at the office. The copy stressed the rugged single-piece construction, noting that despite a high initial cost, aluminum chairs would prove to be much more reliable than similar chairs made of wood. Dependability became a very strong selling point during the Depression.

Alcoa openly invited other companies to create their own aluminum furniture lines. In 1929 and 1930, Alcoa published several articles detailing the company’s chair-making process in metal and furniture industry trade journals, to promote use of aluminum. An article published in Furniture Manufacturers, a
ACTION — From the moment the executive seats himself, the day moves like a dynamo. The telephone rings, he swings over to answer it. An elusive letter falls to the floor. He tilts over to retrieve it. As he dictates he pounds the chair for emphasis, rocks back and forth, slides his chair to reach a file box. And so goes the day full of high-pressure activity and high-strung nervous energy.

The office chair catches every nerve-quiver, every shock and thump. Chairs have to be built like gymnasium equipment to stand the strain, yet they must be light to respond to every motion—comfortable to every nerve and muscle. That, of course, means Chairs of Alcoa Aluminum.

The frames of Alcoa Aluminum Chairs are welded into one continuous piece. There are no glued joints, no dowels to work loose. These Chairs of Alcoa Aluminum are so light they move at your slightest touch. But they are more than feather-light—they are strong, made of the same strong alloys of Alcoa Aluminum that are used for building railroad coaches, airplanes and dirigibles.

In design Alcoa Aluminum Chairs match the ultra-modern trends in office equipment. You can obtain Alcoa Aluminum Chairs in 3 natural aluminum or any other finishes; in any upholstery. There is a wide variety of styles for homes, offices, hotels, restaurants and hospitals. Ask for literature on the type of chairs which interest you. Please address ALUMINUM COMPANY OF AMERICA; 2402 Oliver Building, PITTSBURGH, PENNA.
Pennsylvania Railroad Chair, 1932 Alcoa catalog.

Counter stools, 1932 Alcoa catalog.

Conference table, Mellon Bank, 1924.
Marcel Breuer took first-place honors in 1933 at an international competition for the best aluminum chair sponsored by the Aluminum Alliance of France. Judges praised Breuer's metal-band chairs while dismissing other entries as derivative of existing steel and wood designs. Alcoa furniture designers used aluminum bands, to a somewhat lesser degree than Breuer, at about the same time.
magazine which rarely addressed issues of modern styling or non-wood fabrication, announced that “the Aluminum company always stands ready to instruct those who are interested in the application of strong aluminum alloys to their products, and to render assistance to users who are confronted with problems in welding, die-forming and other types of aluminum fabrication.”21 The article described Alcoa’s construction methods, and compared the strength and durability of aluminum furniture to wooden furniture. Other articles stressed the versatility of aluminum in modern design, noting that:

modern interior decoration would not dictate the use of the lighter colored metals, unless they combined these qualities with utility. While it is true that contemporary design is built largely around simple lines and curves, nevertheless, the workability of the metal and the number of different forms in which it may be obtained must be taken into consideration.22

Another such article asserted that the modern way of life required lighter furniture, arguing that “with the exception of aluminum, the metals are too heavy to make their general use feasible. This is a dynamic age; the permanently placed chair belongs to another generation. The modern chair, therefore, must be light and easily moved from one corner of the room to another.”23

Alcoa’s 1932 institutional furniture catalog, featuring a selection of 52 chairs, as well as tables, stools and wastebaskets, reflected the increasing acceptance of modern styling, which by then coexisted in America with traditional furniture design. Alcoa produced chairs that combined aspects of modern design with familiar styles that would not clash with traditional surroundings. The catalog noted that: “The effectiveness of the design lies in its simplicity; the beauty of the finished structure in the metal itself.”24

By printing the catalog with metallic ink, Alcoa implicitly promoted the natural appearance of aluminum, describing its natural-finish chairs as “modern in feeling and expression,” while offering a variety of other finishes “in color or realistic wood grain effects, all of chip-proof, baked-on enamels... Here are the ideal chairs — modern in appearance, yours for life.” The result was an eclectic, and sometimes incongruous, combination of old and new. Many chairs were variations on Alcoa’s earliest catalog pieces, and most still relied unnecessarily on wooden precedents; for example, many chairs employed stretchers, structurally nonessential in metal chairs. Also noteworthy is Alcoa’s selection of upholstery fabrics, flamboyant floral patterns that contrasted with the bare metal finishes of the more modest chairs.25

As with the Mellon Bank furniture of 1924, the 1932 catalog’s most modern-looking chair was also the most utilitarian: a machine-like aircraft seat (#902), originally designed for the Ford Motor Co. Structurally strong, yet skeletal and lightweight, it was also pictured in the catalog wearing a decidedly un-modern floral fabric on its removable cushions. A few other designs borrowed machine age motifs (especially counter stool #1277, which
featured a fan-like chrysler back support). One chair in particular (#712) could be described as the antithesis of modernism: a strange hybrid of Louis XVI styling, complete with reeded legs and oval back, presented with a metallic aluminum finish. (This model was originally commissioned by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1930, to be used in dining cars between New York and Washington.) While the 1926 catalog declared that “care has been taken to select only a few types of chairs having serviceable rather than ornamental value,” it was clear that by 1932, Alcoa would produce anything that would sell. 26

A Metal Made for the Machine Age

By the early 1930s, artists, designers, and manufacturers around the world utilized aluminum in furniture and decorative design. In November 1933, the French Aluminum Alliance sponsored the International Competition of the Best Aluminum Chair. Entrants from 14 countries submitted 209 designs, 54 of which were produced in prototype models. Most entrants designed variations of existing wood and chrome models, and Marcel Breuer took highest honors because his designs best reflected the unique physical properties of the metal. The popularity of Breuer’s mass-produced aluminum furniture in Europe proved that there was a market for furniture that was not rooted in historical styles. By 1934, Breuer had signed with eight manufacturers in as many European countries.

Modern interior design grew more acceptable to a wider segment of Americans in the early 1930s. Noted American architects, such as Raymond Hood, and industrial designers Donald Deskey, Paul Frankl, Russel Wright, Walter Dorwin Teague, Warren McArthur and Louis Rorimer created fixtures, furnishings and accessories of aluminum. Rorimer designed chairs and tables for both Alcoa and the General Fireproofing Co. of Youngstown, Ohio.

In 1934, the same year that Alcoa launched its Kensington Ware line of household accessories, the corporation sold its aluminum furniture subsidiary to General Fireproofing. A manuscript in the Alcoa archives describes the company’s venture into the furniture business as “a good example of company policy whereby we developed a new use for our metal, proved the articles could be made and could be sold. When a logical manufacturer, such as General Fireproofing, was convinced and wanted to buy us out we sold.” Some of the chairs initially produced by Alcoa proved to be consistent sellers for General Fireproofing. 27

Despite Alcoa’s success with its line of office and institutional furniture, aluminum furniture was never fully adopted into the American home. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, magazines such as Popular Mechanics featured plans for tubular aluminum chairs and smoking stands, but it is impossible to determine how many thrifty craftsmen actually outfitted their houses with such pieces.

World War II interrupted the use of aluminum in consumer goods. After the war, Alcoa reentered the furniture business with the introduction of “Kensington” furniture, a line of domestic and institutional chairs, tables and desks by noted industrial designer Lurelle Guild, creator of the Kensington Ware line of fine aluminum giftware. Kensington tables combined wood components manufactured in Jamestown, N.Y., with aluminum parts manufactured by General Fireproofing. Company literature explained that “the styling of the chair will harmonize in quiet dignity with the worthy old, and subtly match the new. Kensington chairs will be sold in leading department and furniture stores.” 28 Alcoa sold over 400,000 of the new chairs, manufactured by General Fireproofing, as Kensington and Wear-Ever products before their discontinuation in 1952. 29 Shaw-Walker, of Muskegon, Mich., which contracted with Alcoa in 1929 to sell Alcoa furniture, introduced its own line of attractive wood and aluminum office furniture in 1938. Shaw-Walker promoted its “Correct Seating” line as a “good-looking, practical combination of wood and aluminum. Wood for parts that touch the body — aluminum for structural strength.” Company catalogs from the 1940s reveal that Alcoa designs greatly influenced the look of Correct Seating furniture. 30

New competition in the aluminum market, stemming from the break-up of Alcoa’s American monopoly in the early 1940s, brought down the price of aluminum, increasing the material’s appeal to manufacturers and consumers. In addition to its cost-effectiveness, the natural qualities of aluminum — most notably lightness and resistance to rust and corrosion — made it ideal for outdoor use. Affordable aluminum furniture and cheap anodized aluminum tumbler became fixtures in countless suburban backyards. Hand-wrought aluminum serving pieces and trinkets by Western Pennsylvanians Arthur Armor and Wendell August enjoyed popularity as well. The hand-wrought aluminum market soon became flooded with lesser-quality imports from Europe.

Alcoa created the market for aluminum furniture in an attempt to increase the demand for aluminum among other furniture manufacturers. The company remained in the business just long enough for aluminum furniture to grow from a novelty to a common feature in offices, restaurants, and nonresidential interiors. Today, numerous companies specialize in aluminum furniture production, and the continued success of designs popularized by Alcoa are a testament to the company’s innovativeness and determination to create new markets for aluminum.

Notes

1 In nature, aluminum atoms bond easily with oxygen, forming aluminum oxide, or alumina. Isolating the metal requires a chemical process, which was prohibitively expensive until the Hall Reduction Process, which utilizes an electrical charge through a solution of alumina dissolved in cryolite to produce aluminum with a high degree of purity. In 1888, Hall, with the financial backing of Alfred Hunt of Pittsburgh, formed the Pittsburgh Reduction Co., renamed the Aluminum Company of America in 1907 and commonly referred to as “Alcoa.”


4 Donald H. Wallace, Market Control in the Aluminum Industry (Cambridge, 1937), 11; Smith, 86; Graham and Pruitt, appendix A.

5 Earl Lishney, The Housewares Story (Chicago, 1973), 165; Smith, 85.

6 Smith, 86. Even into the 1930s, college students still peddled Wear-Ever door-to-door, bringing in over half of the sales in this manner of direct marketing.

7 Edward Lucie-Smith, Furniture: A Concise History (New York, 1979), 177. Breuer’s claim was not entirely accurate; his furniture did not lack “style”; nor was it inexpensive, or even suitable for mass-production.
Designer K. George Selander produced this whimsical Christmas card for Alcoa's corporate publication in 1930, commemorating the fifth anniversary of Alcoa's foray into the chair business.

8 The term was popularized by author Bevis Hillier in 1968, during a period of renewed interest in 1920s design. A vulgarization of Art Deco, often referred to as a "jazz" or "zig-zag" style, had wide appeal in American design, most notably in architectural details and print advertisements.


11 Wilson, 281.


13 Margaret McElroy, "Reviewing the New Furniture," House & Garden (Feb. 1933): 23. This issue also contains a special photo section featuring aluminum designs, by Russel Wright and Donald Deskey.


15 Mr. A.V. Davis' Booklet of Photographs of Aluminum Furniture Made by Aluminum Company of America for Mellon National Bank," May 27, 1925, Alcoa Archives. Metal furniture commonly imitated wood. In 1929, designer Norman Bel Geddes designed a metal bedroom suite in black lacquer and chrome for the Simmons Co. Although the design was praised by critics, public preference persuaded Geddes to subsequently supply a wood-grain design.

16 United States Aluminum Company, "Aluminum Furniture" (1926 catalog), Alcoa Archives. The least expensive non-upholstered swivel chair on the 1932 Alco price list cost $30, while a comparable oak chair in the Sears Rosbeck catalog (Spring: Fall 1932, 487) sold for $7.85; an oak chair with arms cost only $8.85. Alcoa's cheapest chair was $16.75, while some models cost over $100.

17 "History of Buffalo Works," 3-26. Alcoa Archives. United States Aluminum Co. 1926 catalog, The 170 railroad chairs purchased by the Pennsylvania Railroad proved susceptible to cracked frames, broken stretchers, chipped paint, brittle welded joints, and upholstery failures, encouraging Alco to employ more rigorous standards in design and testing of the line.

18 1926 catalog, Alcoa Archives.

19 Ibid.


21 "Chairs of Aluminum on a Quantity Production Basis in Buffalo Factory," Furniture Manufacturer 37 (May 1929): 61. In the 1930s, both the Alcoa News and Aluminum News-Letter (an Alcoa publication) featured articles about aluminum furniture manufactured by other companies.


28 Kensington, Inc. reply to prospective Kensington dealers. Collection of author.

29 An aluminum chair in the collection of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania features a Wear-Ever brand label pasted over a Kensington label. A material content tag indicates it was manufactured by the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Co. around 1940, at the same Youngstown address of General Fireproofing.

30 Shaw Walker office guides, 1941 and 1958. From the archives of the Knoll Group, Muskegon, Mich.
A banker, an architect, a bossman, a jazzman... and some "stuff that's gone"!

Thomas Mellon and His Times
Thomas Mellon
Hitherto unavailable autobiography of a great nineteenth-century entrepreneur who founded an American dynasty.

"An exceptional book by one of the most interesting men of his time, a voice too long unheard."—DAVID McCULLOUGH
545 pp. / cloth $35.00

Just Good Politics
The Life of Raymond Chafin, Appalachian Boss
Raymond Chafin and Topper Sherwood
The autobiography of Raymond Chafin, a political "boss" from Logan County, West Virginia, who manipulated political machinery for the elections of several state governors, U.S. senators, and, in 1960, for John F. Kennedy.
224 pp. / cloth $24.95

Crisis in Bethlehem
Big Steel’s Struggle to Survive
John Strohmeyer
“A fascinating close-up view of what ails a great American industry. Authoritative, but eminently readable, it has the makings of a saga of the American economy.”
—DANIEL SCHORR, National Public Radio
272 pp. / paper $14.95

Klook
The Story of Kenny Clarke
Mike Hennessey
Charts the life of one of jazz’s leading drummers from his early days in Pittsburgh through his legendary career.
408 pp. / paper $22.50

The Progressive Architecture of Frederick G. Scheibler, Jr.
Martin Aurand
Study of the unconventional architectural works of Frederick G. Scheibler, Jr. (1872–1958).
184 pp. / cloth $49.95

A new videocassette!
Stuff That’s Gone
distributed for WQED/Pittsburgh
A sequel to WQED’s phenomenally successful videocassette Things That Aren’t There Anymore.
60 min. / VHS $19.95

Order toll-free 800-666-2211
University of Pittsburgh Press • Since 1936