

House Beautiful



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THE WORK OF PAUL T. FRANKL as exemplified in this couch and chair shows originality in handling forms and materials, with a tendency perhaps toward dramatic expression

SOME MODERN FURNITURE DESIGNERS

Are there any who will take their Place in History with such Men as Adam, Chippendale, and Phyfe?

BY C. ADOLPH GLASSGOLD

ANONYMITY has been the fate of most men whose names have been carved in beauty on the objects closest to our daily lives. Down almost to the contemporary designer of furniture, the only record left has been the material embodiments of their talents. Some few names — Robert and James Adam, Thomas Chippendale, André Charles Boulle, George Hepplewhite, Thomas Sheraton, Duncan Phyfe — of the furniture designers up to the beginning of the nineteenth century are alone known to those casually interested in the history of the decorative arts. A scant handful more — Biennais, Jacob, Desmalter, Gouthiere, Caffieri, Martin, Darley — are probably familiar only to students. In the main those men whose work had a wide psychological effect, individual and social, upon their generations were just so many obscure springs feeding the stream of the decorative arts.

To-day we have reached a higher point on the incline of social awareness that received its elevating impetus in the invention of printing, so that now the last chair from Djo-Bourgeois or table from Ruhlman is reproduced in magazines throughout the world, and their names have become common coin in parlor conversation. Other names — Josef Hoffmann, Bruno Paul, Pierre Chareau, Louis Sognot — are known to those who even half attentively read their periodicals. The work of little-known and little-valued

men finds its printed record too. To separate the good from the bad, to judge the contributions of these men, to estimate their single and collective value, and to forecast (though prophecy is inexpensive) their final



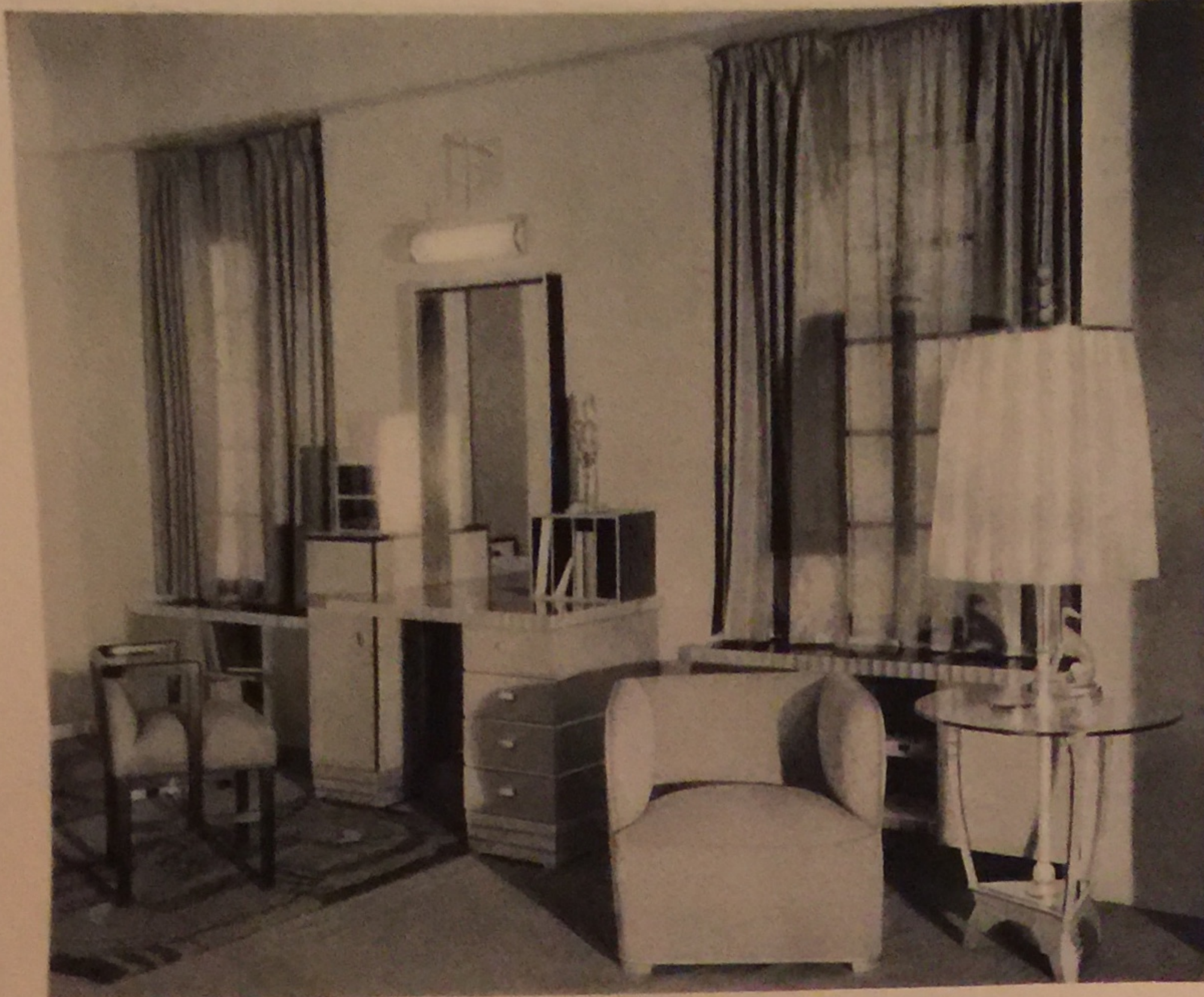
ONE OF FRANKL'S SKYSCRAPER BOOKCASES, in a style characteristic of much of his work

place among designers of all time is no simple task in the face of this superabundance of material and the inevitably myopic vision of contemporaneity.

By the strange telescoping process of time we come to see the history of the decorative arts as a series of styles or periods. Periods have a distinctiveness about them that is apparent to any meandering museum visitor. About the objects of these periods and by means of them we have reconstructed their ages, of which they are so revealingly expressive. That the decorative arts of our age should be equally coherent, expressive, and characteristic is only a logical and justifiable expectation. That they must be unlike all other periods follows inevitably from the differences between our age and the past.

Very briefly, the present differs radically from the past (for our purposes) in its methods of transportation, its fabrication of synthetic materials, its domestic and business architecture, its inventions, and in its exploitation of the machine. To be truly reflective of our age the decorative arts must take cognizance of these differences, must intelligently employ these advantages, and wisely accommodate itself to the new needs and modes of life. The adjustment was naturally and unconsciously made in the case of the automobile and aeroplane, which had no traditional mould into which they might be cast, whereas in furniture the change

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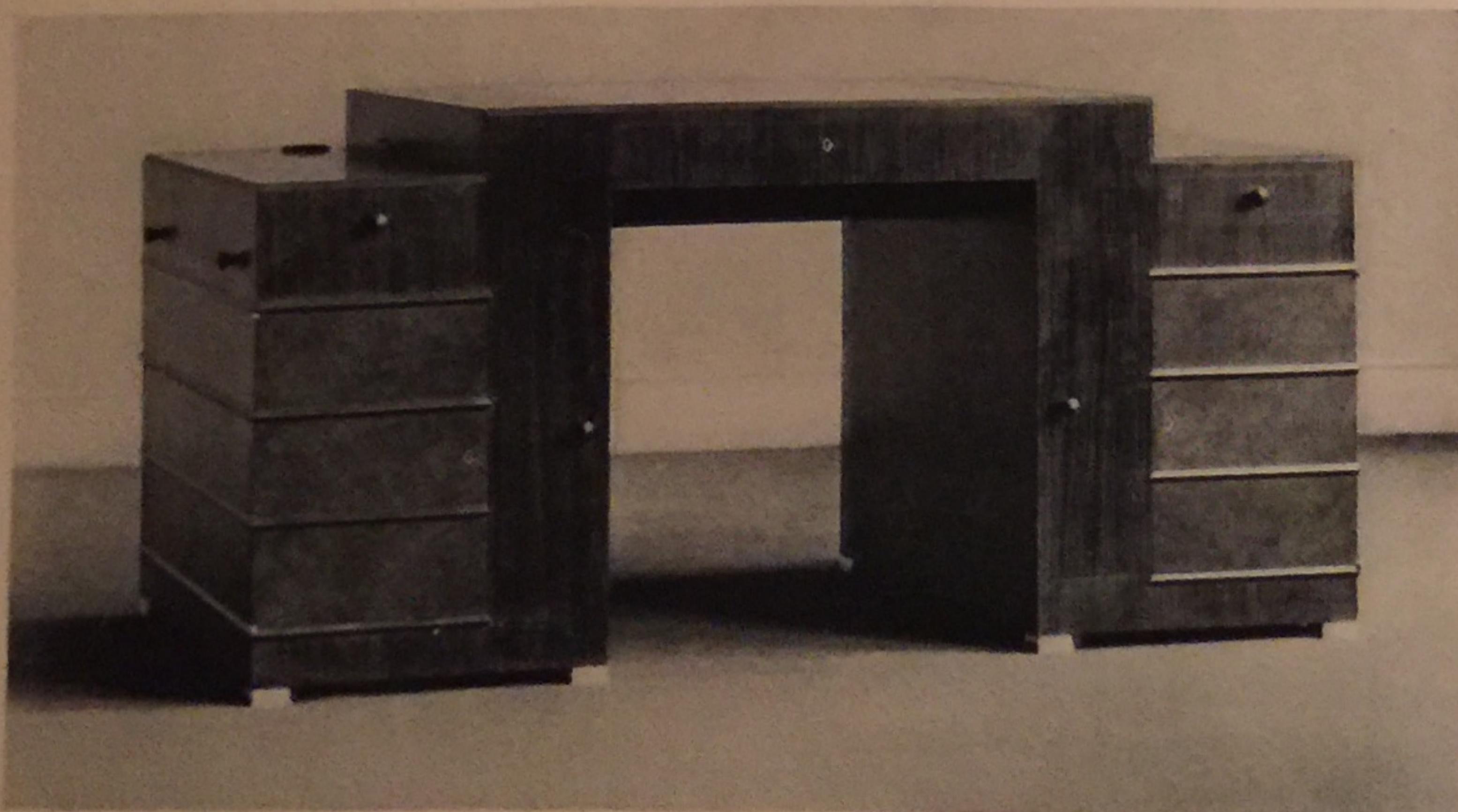


THE WORK OF KEM WEBER shows logical restraint and sane structure. Several of his designs are featured in the illustration above



A CHAIR designed by Eugene Schoen which shows French influence

THE WORK OF EUGENE SCHOEN is notable for the skillful use of beautiful woods and rare veneers, a point well brought out in the desk illustrated below



has been more conscious and beset with the blight of conservative unwillingness to meet new conditions.

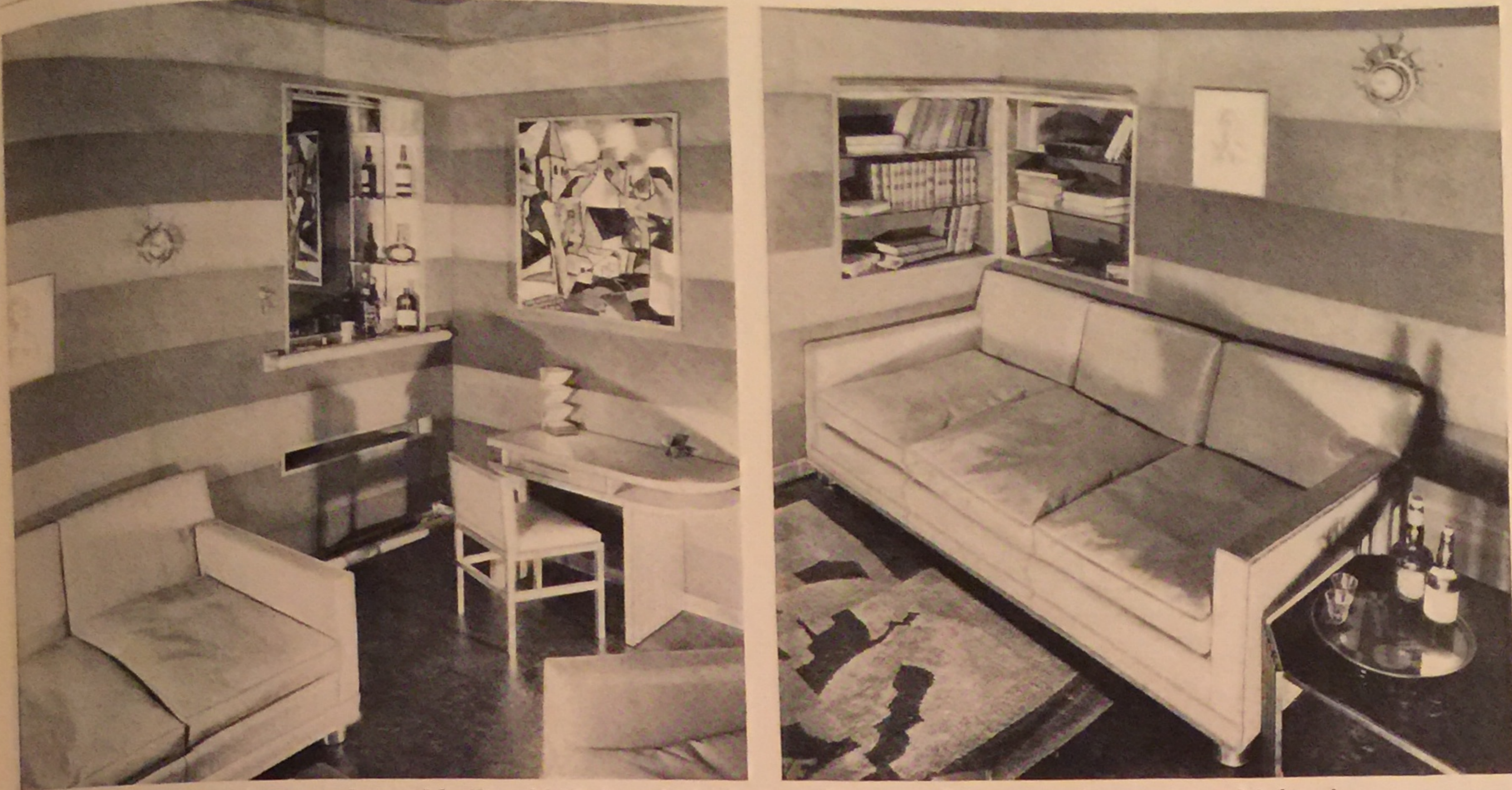
As a consequence of what will prove to be an inevitable adjustment to modern life, designers will be found increasingly to use synthetic materials, more and more to reflect the functional influences of our new architecture, and, by recognizing the limitations and scope of the machine, to acquire a simplicity of design that already seems to be a distinctive feature of modern furniture.

All these considerations, important as they are in producing a change in furniture design, do not, however, completely explain it. With the conviction that simplicity, as illustrated in the best work of Greece, Egypt, and our own Colonial era, is aesthetically more satisfying than the complicated ornamentation of more luxurious periods, goes the belief that the form of a piece of furniture must be patently conditioned by its function and that each piece should be but an item in a harmonious ensemble — the part subordinated to the whole, and the whole subordinated to the occupant. These things were true of all great periods, but have been obscured until recently beneath the welter of stuffy Victorian rooms and period imitations. I am not one to deny the beauty resident in a Louis XVI cabinet or a Spanish *vargueño*, but I do feel them incongruous in modern surroundings. The designers whose furniture reflects an awareness of the truth of these basic facts are the ones who will most vitally contribute to the growth of a full-blown modern style — a style whose tendencies alone can now be defined.

These tendencies were incipient in the William Morris movement in England as early as 1860, and it is therefore uncritical and unjust to consider modern furniture as a mere unrelated phenomenon of the moment. The Morris movement was, paradoxically enough, a revolt against the machine and a reversion to mediæval craftsmanship. It was more basically a revolt against the abominable furnishings being produced at the time. The Morris revolt took hold of Germany and helped develop a type of work called *Jugendstil*. The significance of this movement was its search for a non-imitative style and the employment of the machine in the effort to produce large quantities of furniture at reasonable cost. Natural motifs were the basis of the *Jugendstil* as they were of *l'Art Nouveau*, whose great protagonist was Siegfried Bing in Paris, about 1900. But the natural motif soon became too insistent and brought the movement to a decadent state where grapevines and flowers twined all over the furniture.

Out of the more structural elements of the *Jugendstil* developed about 1908 the phase of German design that was distinctly modern. In the 1914 Deutsche Werkbund Exposition, the modern style was seen to have taken firm root and attained definition in Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries.

France meanwhile was finding that its



A MAN'S ROOM designed by Donald Deskey which illustrates his extraordinary sense of proportion and feeling for the right combination of materials, steel, pigskin, and glass being used for the furniture and cork for the walls

Art Nouveau had exhausted itself and looked about for a more vital and appropriate style. It found the new decoration all about it, and immediately after the war began so rapid an assimilation and refinement of it that in 1925 at the Paris Exposition it emerged completely transformed, and became, for America at least, the leader in the modern decorative movement.

Although we in America had received a traveling exhibition of German applied arts in 1912, little attention was given the modern style until the Paris show of 1925 brought it so vividly to our knowledge. Since then its growth and acceptance here have been nothing short of startling. Our most distinguished designers are those who work in the new spirit, for they alone, awake to the demands of a social existence so radically different from previous conditions, aid the integration of the applied arts with the other modern phases of life.

Among those Americans whose furniture shows in greater or lesser degree a consciousness of the basic principles of the modern design and an awareness of its tendencies are Donald Deskey, Paul T. Frankl, Wolfgang Hoffmann, Ilonka Karasz, Lescaze, Walter Nessen, Winold Reiss, Eugene Schoen, and Kem Weber. Such perception alone does not, however, entirely explain their selection for special mention from out the long list before me. Many

THE WORK OF WINOLD WEISS comes closest to developing an individual touch in wood furthest removed from Continental practice. A room recently displayed at the American Designers' Gallery in New York

others show an intimacy with the theory of the modern style and some few more practise it with commendable delicacy or vigor. But the nine whom I have designated by name warrant first comment in any discussion of the subject by the extensiveness of their work and its beauty. Had they been designers in one style or another they would rarely have drawn a bad piece, for they are primarily artists in the field of design, and only secondarily adherents to a cause. Their final

positions among the furniture designers and cabinetmakers of the past (whose glory would be zealously preserved by admirers through slavish imitation) will depend not only upon the modernity of their work, but upon its beauty as well. It is by these two standards that they will be judged by futurity—beauty and appropriateness to modern needs. It is by these two scales as well that we, their contemporaries, are privileged to weigh them. I am only too

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well aware that æsthetic judgments are made on shifting ground, but I nevertheless beg to be permitted the dubious pleasure of passing tentatively upon these designers.

Among the earliest of our modern furniture designers whose names have acquired a certain prestige are Paul T. Frankl and Eugene Schoen. They had both begun to invest their furniture with the modern quality long before its popularization through the department-store expositions of the past few years. Frankl's furniture shows considerable originality in handling forms and materials with a tendency toward dramatic expression. His skyscraper furniture, for instance, threatened for a time to become his symbol; an occurrence which would have been unfortunate for his reputation as well as for

A KEEN STRUCTURAL SENSE gives the furniture of Lescaze (see above) an effective simplicity, heightened by the judicious employment of metals. Wherever possible, he tries to incorporate furniture into the architectural layout of a room, as in the office seen at the right

WALTER NESSEN limits himself to metal arts and is one of our best designers in this material, as demonstrated in the table and chairs below



Woringer

Courtesy of the Newark Museum



modern French school. He is little addicted to the use of lacquers, metals, or synthetic materials, but he is to my mind without a peer in our country in matching beautiful grains and rare veneers. Schoen, it might be said, is working in the tradition, giving its basic principles polished expression.

Allied with Schoen in a broad general way are Hoffmann, Karasz, Reiss, and Weber. They have in common with Schoen their allegiance to wood as material for the construction of furniture. They differ from him greatly, however, in spirit, for while Schoen shows French influence, the others, excepting Miss Karasz, evidence an artistic heritage culled from German or Austrian sources.

Miss Karasz is the most individual and original of the four, and by far the boldest in conception. Yet occasionally one deplors an over-vigorous statement in her pieces and a heaviness due to (Continued on page 214)

SOME MODERN FURNITURE DESIGNERS

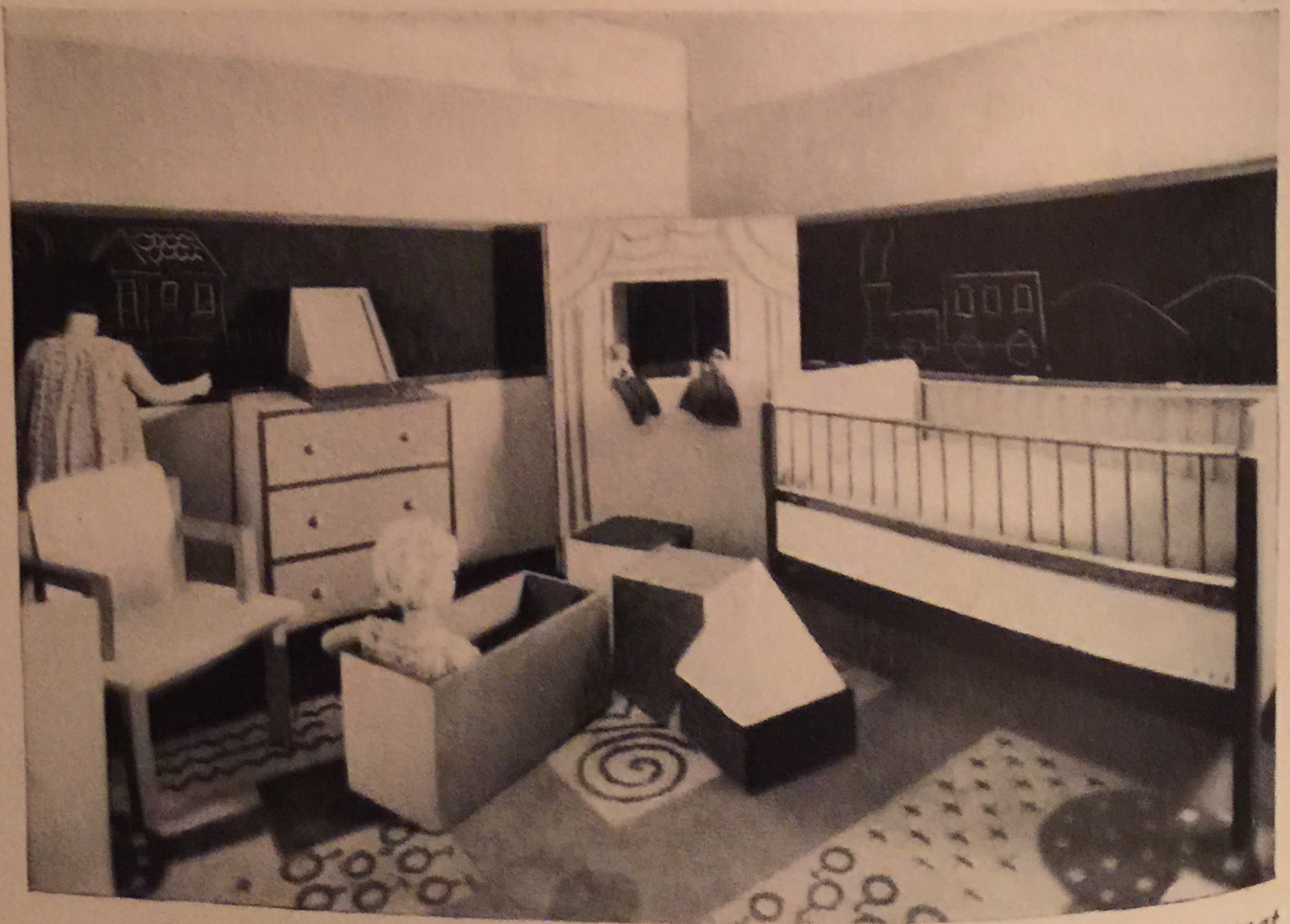
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too great solidity of the materials in which she works. Weber and Hoffmann perform a major service to contemporary design in furniture by the neat and logical restraint, the practicability and the sane structure, of their pieces. A great growth, both in feeling for material and in design, is shown in the work of Winold Reiss, who bids fair to supersede the others in wood furniture. He has not as yet Schoen's elegance, Frankl's taste, or Deskey's boldness, yet he comes, as does Miss Karasz, closest to developing an in-

dividual touch in wood farthest removed from Continental practice.

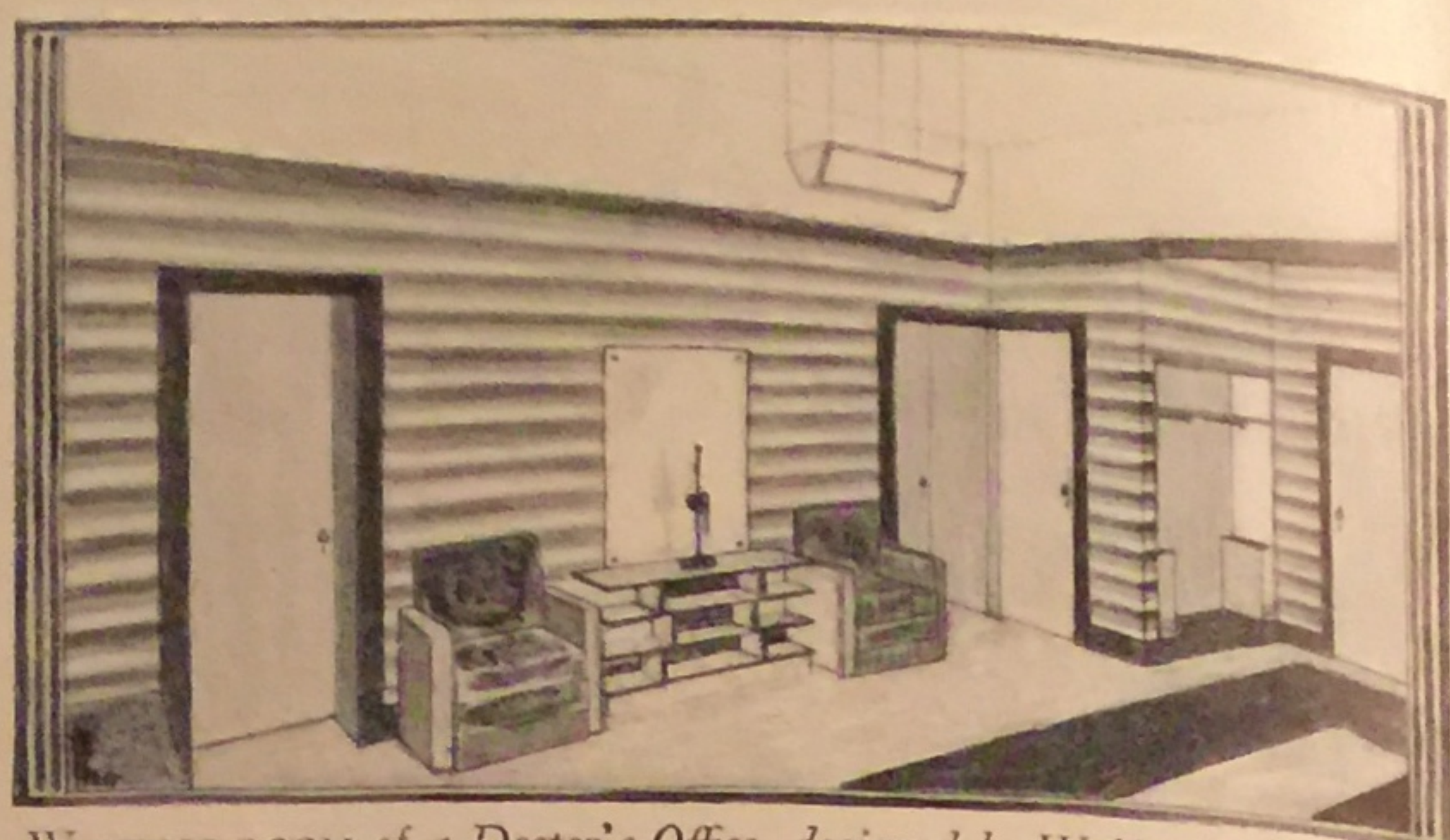
Most alert, ingenious, and stimulating are Deskey and Lescaze. They work with felicity in wood, metal, and synthetic materials. Lescaze is frankly of the Corbusier school of architectural purists, but unlike the Frenchmen he does not carry his designs to an extreme in order to prove a theory. He tries, wherever possible, to incorporate the furniture into the architectural layout of the room. By so doing, much space is saved — a consideration of some weight

Herbert Placas, Inc.



A NURSERY designed by Ilonka Karasz, whose work shows great individuality and boldness of conception

SOME MODERN FURNITURE DESIGNERS

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WAITING-ROOM of a Doctor's Office, designed by Wolfgang Hoffmann

in this age of small apartments. This structural sense gives Lescaze's built-in furniture an effective simplicity, heightened by a judicious employment of metals.

Deskey has made some of the most outstanding contributions to the modern style. Secure in an extraordinary sense of proportion and a feeling for the right combinations of materials, he has courageously and successfully experimented with a large variety of substances with telling effect. Many of his pieces are composed exclusively of standard industrial materials in which there can be discovered not the slightest trace of mechanicalness. Machine-made products are a handy and logical medium and Deskey uses them with artistry. When combined with wood these products produce

an effect unique in the history of furniture, and it is to Deskey's credit that the release from traditional methods afforded by them has not led him into eccentricity.

Nessen works exclusively in metal, in which he is a master craftsman without equal in America. Limiting himself as he does to metal arts, he cannot of course be expected to rank in importance with others whose equipment is more varied, but he has gained considerable reputation for his very fine furniture in that material.

The furniture of all these people possesses one or more of the features characteristic of modern pieces, and the best of them frequently achieve the ideal combination that distinguishes the true contemporary piece. To be truly modern it must be beautiful



Wassinger

EVIDENCE OF GERMAN OR AUSTRIAN influence is found in furniture designed by Wolfgang Hoffmann which shows a logical restraint and sane structure

SOME MODERN FURNITURE DESIGNERS

(Continued from page 216)

in its simplicity, chaste in its decoration, functional in structure, highly practical, composed of readily procurable materials, easily reproduced by machine technique, unobtrusive in an ensemble, and a means toward comfort as well as an end for beauty.

I ardently wish that space permitted me to speak in detail of Gilbert Rohde, Herman Rosse, Robert Locher, F. T. Whitman, Jr., Percival Goodman, Alexander Kachinsky, Herbert Lippman, and a few others who would all deserve analysis in a more comprehensive survey for either their experimental vitality, sincerity of purpose, or worthy talent.

If nationalism in the applied

arts is disappearing in the Occidental countries (and the growing internationalism of the art spirit appears undeniable to me), then we need not lament the presence of German, Austrian, or French strains in contemporary American furniture. For national traits threaten to disappear in time, and there will emerge a style common to all. We may, however, be grateful that we have the many men capable of working with such distinction along the paths marked out by Continental originators. These pioneers of Europe will rank in fame with the greatest furniture designers of history when time has allayed the bitterness of controversy.



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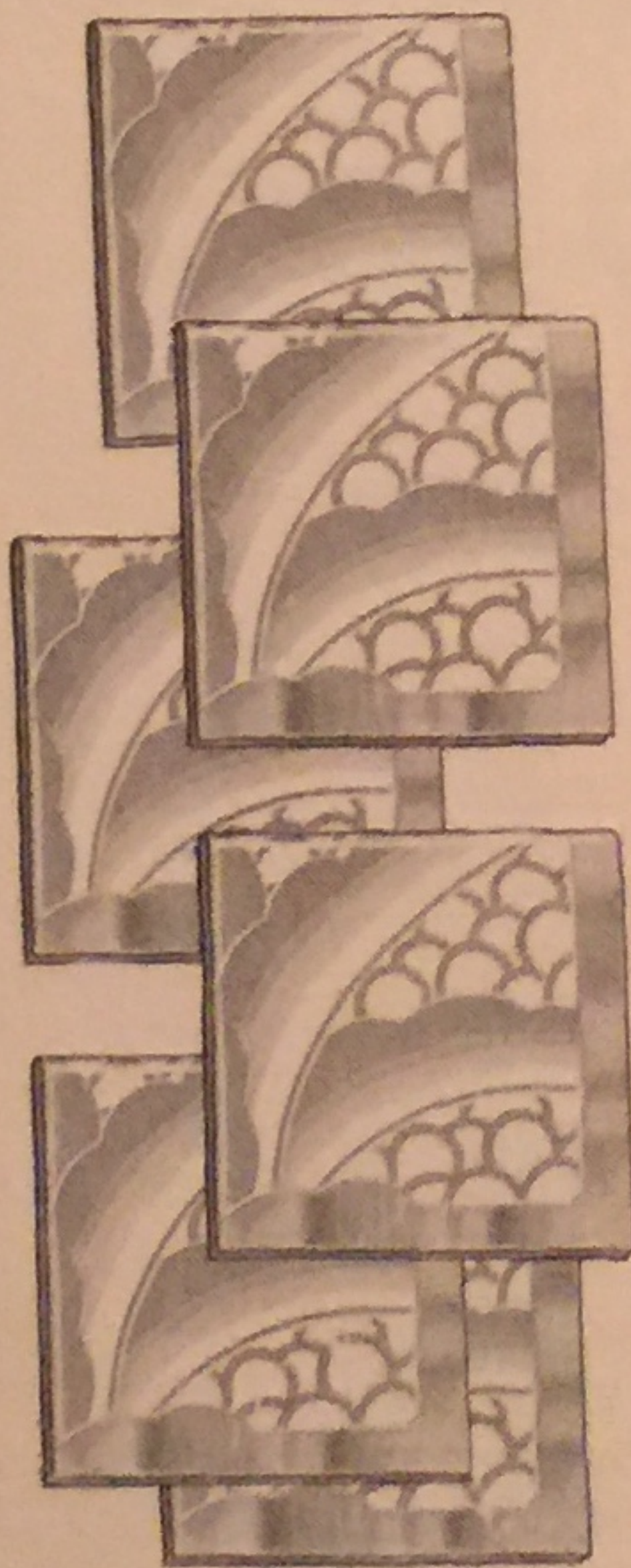
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MODERN
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