

12-14-2016

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Recommended Citation

Muszynski, Emily, "Delyte Morris' furniture- a collection of mid-century modern ideas" (2016). *Honors Theses*. 420.
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DELYTE MORRIS' FURNITURE- A COLLECTION OF MID-CENTURY MODERN IDEAS

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Honor's Thesis, Southern Illinois University

December 10, 2016

Delyte Morris' office lounge chair and ottoman, obviously worn, are part of the Delyte Morris Furniture Collection at the University Museum Archives. Along with his personal furniture, the collection includes tables, lamps, and chairs that were an integral part of his vision to bring innovation and modernity to Southern Illinois University (SIU) during his presidential years. The collection, featuring chairs of different styles, materials, and colors is a small fraction of the hundreds of furnishings ordered for the more than fourteen buildings constructed during Morris' 22 year career as president. C. D. May, the associate university architect at this time, used color and design to create a campus that was trendy and accessible, mirroring the post-war, mid-century modern designs of furniture that started in the 1950s. This furniture designed by Charles and Ray Eames, George Nelson, and Jens Risom, manufactured across Illinois and the U.S., reflects Morris' commitment to the expansion and transformation of SIU as a world-class academic institution. Delyte Morris himself became a raging force on campus; his goals and aspirations were practically untouchable during his presidency.

Morris, SIU's president from 1948-1970 is credited with not only increasing Southern Illinois Carbondale's student population by more than 20,000, but also building, from scratch the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville campus. He, along with his board of advisors, put SIU in a position that it had never been before; by 1948, the 79 year-old university was 3,006 students strong, with eight buildings. The architecture and design of the university reflected the surrounding area: it was turn-of-the-century style and included not only the permanent buildings, but nearby houses as well.¹ With a large commuter population, not much thought was put into establishing student housing or longstanding interior design. Delyte Morris, however, was not

¹ Robert A. Harper, *The University that Shouldn't have Happened, But Did: Southern Illinois University During the Morris Years 1948-1970*. (Carbondale: Devil's Kitchen Press, 1998), 11-13.

deterred. The disarray only fueled his goals. Coming onto campus on September 10, 1948, he had only one thing to say: his new function as the president was to, “provide the kind of environment the institution needs to grow in and to provide the faculty and personnel in addition to those already here to carry out the needs of this institution”.² His personality and charisma, along with his supportive family, ensured that his function was fully realized and a major force in the lives of students, faculty, and the state of Illinois. Morris was described as a competitive visionary who was dedicated to the state of Illinois as well as the university. His compassion and dislike of hurting people’s feelings, coupled with his opportunistic, flexible nature almost guaranteed that his goals would be reached.³ While this translated into a ten-year plan (from 1952-1962), which he carried in a list in his pocket, that included creating new housing, farms, medical programs, and environmental areas, it also influenced the designs of architecture and interior spaces across the university.⁴ The literal architectural extension, along with the expansion of service in other countries meant that the university itself needed to become a more modern, innovative space.

C.D. May, the associate university architect, became Morris’ right-hand man for design choices. Though Morris would, “...pick out drapes, the color of the walls, the type of desk,” when planning a new building, he trusted May when he was spread too thin.⁵ One of his major projects was designing the interiors of the new University Park with a budget of \$238 per student, including dining halls and lounges.⁶ With this budget, he turned to buying bulk stackable chairs and last-season lounge chairs that featured a variety of colors. The final product were 900

² Betty Mitchell, *Delyte Morris of SIU*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 2.

³ Harper, *The University that Shouldn’t have Been*, 42, 48.

⁴ Mitchell, *Delyte Morris of SIU*, The Ten-Year Plan illustration, 121.

⁵ Harper, *The University that Shouldn’t have Been*, 46.

⁶ James M. Corson., “Designer to Furnish 900 Dorm Rooms,” *Daily Egyptian* 46, no. 143 (12 May 1965): 8, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=de_May1965.

dorm rooms in Neely Hall that featured one colored accent walls and colored drapes to create a long, "...horizontal color effect".⁷ The lounge chairs were made out of coarse, "homespun" fabric of red, blue, gold, yellow, and green.⁸ These playful colors reflect a new-age focus of design on color, which was often based off of psychological studies.

The choices made on the furnishings of the new Social Studies library in the Morris Library were based on this idea. C. D. May chose specific colors based on the mood students may want to feel while studying; blue for contemplation and melancholy, green for refreshing and peace, and purple for pompous and dignified.⁹ This focus on mood and psychology emulates both modern ideas behind design features and Morris' dedication to his students' well-being. By wanting to create an innovative, yet calming mood, May was fusing the modern and the classic. Their furnishing decisions reflect two major pillars of the university: forward movement and a connection to Illinois. In 1962 alone, furnishings selected for the dormitories came from such Illinois cities as, Chicago, Quincy, Carbondale, Peoria, and Spring Valley.¹⁰ Even after Morris' presidency, May continued to introduce mid-century modern furnishings the ever-growing amount of buildings on campus. Herman Miller and his guest designers was one of the major sources of furniture for the university.

Herman Miller Inc, a furniture company based in Zeeland, Michigan, was at the forefront of post-WWII modern design. Started in 1905, the company has a long history of focus on the

⁷ Robert Ward, "New Dorm is Rich with Harmonious 'Bands of Color'," *Daily Egyptian* 47, no. 12 (6 October 1965): 7, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=de_October1965.

⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁹ Roger Turner, "Students can Play 'Colorful Chairs' Game with Psychological Shades Now in Library," *Daily Egyptian* 45, no. 103 (6 March 1964): 2, http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=de_March1964.

¹⁰ Southern Illinois University, *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees, 1962-1963*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1963) 7 & 27.

talents and individuality of workers and designers.¹¹ With this distinction, designers often brought in to the company using their specific techniques and styles. Many famous designers revolved through the doors of Herman Miller, but George Nelson and Charles and Ray Eames were not only the most famous, but were the designers who created many of the furnishings picked by May for the dormitories and miscellaneous lounges and offices on the Carbondale campus. George Nelson was the first of these designers to push the modern designs of post-war America. Nelson, who had a background in architecture, was hired by Herman Miller in 1945 and designed his first furniture line. His focus was primarily on standardization; he designed sets of parts that could be assembled in different styles to create new pieces. He produced mostly office furniture and chests, which were mid-century modern designs.¹² Nelson, in turn brought in Charles and Ray Eames (among many artists in 1948). Charles Eames, an architect, focused specifically on the function of furniture, while Ray-Bernice, his wife was a designer. Together, they designed some of the most popular mid-century modern office furnishings in the 1950s and 1960s.

Post-WWII mid-century modern design was characterized by an elite, progressive focus. Post-war America was focused on both the consumer and the consumed; the American people were shaken by the war and looking forward to a straight-forward culture focused on nuclear families. Mid-century modern design went along with this idea. As Charles Eames himself said, “One of the things we had committed ourselves to was trying to do a chair with a hard surface

¹¹ “Company Timeline,” *Herman Miller Inc.*, 2016, <http://www.hermanmiller.com/about-us/who-is-herman-miller/company-timeline/1900.html>.

¹² J. K. Ochsner, “George Nelson: Architect, Writer, Designer, Teacher,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 71, no. 4 (2012): 578, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=3cc3caf6-c14a-4262-8441-f051e231dd6d%40sessionmgr4006&hid=4205&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=000209113100026&db=edswah>.

that was as comfortable as it could be in relation to the human body and also would be self-explanatory as you looked at it-no mysteries".¹³ By using simple, clearly stated lines and materials, furniture in the 1950s-70s appealed to those looking for natural, no-hassle luxury. The growing amount of suburbs coupled with this consumerism led to a rise in the middle-class; a middle-class preoccupied with status and class.¹⁴The Eameses' and Nelson, then followed this trend by creating average-priced, durable furniture with sleek designs, "funky" patterns, and new materials. This furniture, coincidentally, was often bought by large companies and universities for their price and "intelligent-looking" design.¹⁵ Southern Illinois University was one of these places: many couches, lounge chairs, and bucket seats that are now part of the University Museum Archives were designed by the Eameses' and Nelson for Herman Miller.

A white couch with attached side tables [Image 1] within the collection was designed by George Nelson; it is an example of this idea of simple, sleek design because of the streamline between the couch and the tables. There are multiple examples of Charles and Ray Eames furniture within the collection, including shell chairs, office chairs, wooden chairs, and lounge chairs [a variety featured in image 2]. Through these designs, the couple brought natural and unnatural materials together to create modern, comfortable designs. At SIU, the plywood reclining chairs were featured in University Park's dormitories, and the shell chairs (plastic seat with metal legs) were used in many offices around campus. Both of these types of chairs were the first of their kind, as the manufacturers were looking for cheaper, yet sophisticated materials. Plywood and fiberglass (a type of plastic) were cheaper materials that allowed for breathability

¹³ Charles Eames, "Conversation with Charles Eames," *American Scholar* 46, (1977): 330, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=66f75b32-0c94-4199-9349-09061d3a78fb%40sessionmgr4006&vid=3&hid=4205>.

¹⁴ Kristina Wilson, "Like a 'Girl in a Bikini Suit' and Other Stories: The Herman Miller Furniture Company, Gender and Race at Mid-Century," *Journal of Design History* 28, no. 2, (2015): 166, DOI: 10. 1093/jdh/epu028.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 168.

and “give” when the chair was used; this design was completely functional and comfortable, while the materials were cheaper and modern.¹⁶ Coupled with Nelson’s fascination with standardization, these new chairs became easily produced in a variety of styles and colors. This idea appealed directly to SIU and May because of the versatility; he found that he easily, and cheaply, design a large amount of spaces by ordering multiples of the same chair in different colors, or with a different style of seat and placing them around campus. With a rapidly growing student body, Morris was also onboard. In fact, Morris became a personal fan of the Eames lounge chair and ottoman, released in 1956 [image 3]. The combination of the wooden shell and leather padding increased comfort and reflected the mid-century modern idea of natural-meets-consumer, average priced sophisticated furniture. These modern designs had an impact on the environment of the university, as this trend towards mid-century modern furniture mirrored the new, updated buildings that were being constructed on campus. However, along with the goal towards progression and innovation, Delyte Morris’ SIU was still rooted in the homey connection to Illinois.

Jens Risom and Knoll Inc’s focus on textile work on top of metal frames gave them a homey-mid-century modern feel that also found its way onto the Carbondale campus. Knoll Inc, a furniture company that is still in commission, was started in 1938, after a long history of art study, specifically in Germany.¹⁷ This focus on art, instead of architecture like in the previous examples, influenced Knoll enormously, resulting in furniture that is not only functional and comfortable, but could be seen as stand-alone art pieces. Many of these chairs, like Eames chairs,

¹⁶ Kyle Normandin, “Charles and Ray Eames: Modern Living in a Postwar Era,” *Docomomo Journal* 46, (2012): 50-51, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=2a369ed7-c4e8-41ca-b641-7cd3542213cf%40sessionmgr120&hid=113&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=83435381&db=vth>.

¹⁷ “Knoll Timeline,” *Knoll Inc.*, n. d., <https://www.knoll.com/discover-knoll/timeline>.

combine the natural and man-made, but utilize more leather and tweed fabrics. The result is not one that is highly standardized, but rather each as an individual, with the potential to be a piece of art. Jens Risom, a Danish designer, worked with Knoll in the 1950s and 60s. Designing starting in the early 1940s, Risom made his furniture primarily out of wood and parachute straps, as they were one of the only materials accessible during World War II.¹⁸ As a post-war mid-century modern designer, Risom did not shy away from the war as some other designers did; he embraced what was accessible to him and sold his weaved parachute strap chairs long after the war. Many pieces in the collection mirror this idea of non-standardized, classic ideas in a new artistic subject because of their use of handmade fabrics and curved, metal or wood bases [image 4]. For the university, these pieces were acquired after Delyte Morris' presidency, signifying a bridge between the old and the new in many respects. For one, many of the pieces in the collection from Knoll Inc are either leather or fabric [image 5]. Given the humble past of the university and the connection to southern Illinois, a reference to handmade, yet artistic values was appropriate, and the modern and artistic, yet homey designs of Knoll Inc communicated this idea. With the end of the Morris presidency, the university reached a period of stagnation, in a sense.

In the 1970s, gone were the days of a rapidly increasing student population and major building projects and gone were the days of an only 3,006 student body. Instead, there was a world-class academic university with an environment rooted in innovation and advancement. The pieces from Delyte Morris' presidency show a dedication to a very specific vision he had: to create a university that is both supporting of the students and pushing towards advancement. He and C. D. May, the associate architect for the university, supported this idea by buying

¹⁸ "Jens Risom," *Design Within Reach*, 2016, http://www.dwr.com/designer-jens-risom?lang=en_US.

furnishings that were manufactured in Illinois and sticking to a strict budget. By choosing post-WWII, mid-century modern furniture, the interior design of the university appealed to many of the new students at the school; middle-class suburbanites who wanted sophisticated, clean designs without luxury materials. Herman Miller Inc and Knoll Inc provided a large amount of furniture to the university, much of which is now housed in the Delyte Morris Furniture Collection in the University Museum Archives. Even after the end of his presidency, Delyte Morris' legacy drew on, in part through the Knoll Inc furniture that was acquired because of its connection to handmade fabric and wooden bases. The pieces in this collection directly mirror the progression of Southern Illinois University, and its dedication to being a campus that is constantly expanding, yet with strong Illinois roots.

Images/Videos

1.



Retrieved from http://revolvemodern.com/revolvemodern_Seating.htm.

2. Video, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIEb4HcgZ4s>.

For colored pictures of many of the chairs featured in the collection, visit:
<https://www.moma.org/artists/1671>.

3.



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4.



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5.



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