

Collecting South African MID-CENTURY MODERN FURNITURE with Larushka Maré

This retro decor shop owner believes that clean Scandinavian-inspired designs from the 1950s and 1960s are well-suited to contemporary lifestyles



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
● Arno Jacobson-style egg chair by Durban Wire. ● Danish-inspired roll-top lowboy writing desk, c. 1965.

Vivacious owner of Jo’burg retro decor shop Re-Trend, Larushka Maré was introduced to the world of antiques and vintage furniture by chance a couple of years ago. “For 20 years, I had a rather boring career in banking. When friends who were moving to Dubai phoned to tell me they were putting their antiques business up for sale, I jumped at the opportunity. I bought the shop immediately and the rest is history,” she laughs.

“I think my appreciation of good design started in childhood. I grew up in a home filled with South African furniture made by companies like E. E. Meyer and D. S. Vorster & Co. My father, also in the corporate world, was passionate about repairing and restoring furniture in his free time. That’s where the bug bit me,” she adds.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF MID-CENTURY MODERN FURNITURE IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the 1950s, small South African furniture manufacturers, notably Frystark, D. S. Vorster & Co. and Bakker & Steyger were established to meet the increasing demand for modern furniture.

Companies like Lubis and Duros often produced knock-offs of overseas designs by companies such as Ercol and G-Plan. Their quality was as good and sometimes better than the European originals.

Retailers, including Properitus, Binnehuis, Helen de Leeuw and Anglo Dutch, promoted local designs and often commissioned pieces that were exclusive to them.

An abundance of indigenous woods like kiaat, imbuia, blackwood and stinkwood inspired makers such as Artecasa and E. E. Meyer to create items that showcased these woods.

Today, Brutalist pieces by avant-garde designer John Tabraham, who worked for high-end manufacturer Kallenbach, fetch hefty prices at local and international auction houses.

By the 1970s, many local manufacturers had closed doors or been bought out by conglomerates. Changing decor trends and a dwindling demand for mid-century modern furniture made it financially unfeasible to operate on a small scale.

TEXT: DERICK KIRK PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED



CARING FOR MID-CENTURY MODERN FURNITURE

- Unless you know what you’re doing, it’s best to leave restoration projects to the professionals.
- For a quick restore, remove wax build-up on wood with powerful detergent, warm water and a bit of elbow grease. Afterwards apply an acrylic polymer polish to add a lustrous sheen. Wood oils tend to attract dust and darken with time.



“I adore the clean Scandinavian-inspired lines of mid-century furniture. Modernist designs from the 1950s and 1960s are well-suited to contemporary lifestyles. The pieces are smaller than traditional antiques and are often modular, so you can configure them to best suit your interior. The designs also incorporated space-saving ideas like drop leaf tables, stacking chairs and ottomans,” Larushka explains.

“Many South African-made items are of top-notch quality and compare very well with European designs of the same period. What’s great is that you can get a locally made piece at a fraction of the cost of an imported one. Because I own this shop, I can chop and change my furniture at home. My favourite look at home is an eclectic mix of traditional antiques with mid-century pieces.”

TIPS FOR ASPIRING COLLECTORS

- “The condition of the wood is vital when buying vintage. Many manufacturers used wood veneers in their furniture. Damaged veneers are difficult to repair and pieces sometimes need to be re-veneered, which can be very costly,” says Larushka.
- “Buy whatever suits your style, after all, you’ll be living with it. Furniture made from solid wood in timeless designs are investment pieces that will last you a lifetime,” says Wim Castleman of Decades in Melville.
- “Do your research and look for makers’ marks, often hidden in drawers, and underneath or behind furniture. Because so little has been recorded about South African mid-century modern, I put together an Internet database, kerrodantiques.co.za/south-african-furniture-information with the information I’ve collected over the years,” says Justin Kerrod of Kerrod Antiques in Simon’s Town.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ● Atomic-style easy chair by Duros. ● Cocktail trolley in enamelled steel with brass details. ● Spindle-sided coffee table by Duros. ● D. S. Vorster & Co. desk. ● Retreated garden furniture with macramé detail by local designer Palasha. ● Large sideboard from the Status range by Frystark.

SOURCES Decades 083 477 2430 Kerrod Antiques 082 829 1186 kerrodantiques.co.za Re-Trend 082 889 9219