

# Robin and Lucienne day essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Robin and Lucienne Day are respectively product and textile designers who brought a breath of fresh air to British design back in the 50s thanks to Robin's cheap mass produced furniture and Lucienne's vibrant and colourful textiles. The first thought that came to mind when looking into Robin and Lucienne Day's work was how their designs, created 60 years ago were still so very appealing to today's modern society. Robin Day's use of simple minimalist shapes when designing furniture and Lucienne Day's use of abstract colourful shapes when creating fabrics are still today used to furnish and complement our homes.

One would expect designer items to be expensive and probably parked in some collector's home, instead Robin Day's work is found in schools, libraries, concert halls, stadiums and in the underground. Robin Day was born in High Wycombe in 1915 whereas Lucienne Desire' Conradi was born Coulsden in Surrey in 1917. Neither of their parents were designers in fact Robin's father was a policeman whilst his mother was a dressmaker. Lucienne's father was a Belgian reinsurance broker and her mother a housewife. Lucienne did though develop a love for plants, later represented in her textiles, thanks to her mother's love for gardening.

Robin instead grew up in a furniture making town and most definitely was inspired by the surrounding workshops which later led him to create items of furniture such as storage cabinets and seating. (Jackson 2001 p. 9-10). They both studied at the Royal College of Art where Robin specialised in furniture and interior design whilst Lucienne specialised in printed textiles. When they met at the school dance in 1940 their mutual interest for design formed an

immediate bond between them which led to their marriage in 1942. (Jackson 2001 p. 12).

At the beginning of Lucienne's career, designers were expected to work anonymously and therefore were not recognised for their work. Soon after leaving the RCA, Lucienne found it difficult, due to this clause, to work for her first employer Sekers and soon left. (Jackson 2001 p. 12). Their work did not emerge until the beginning of the 1950's. Until then the post war government restrictions and the textile industries, which were still busy creating blackout material had cast a dark shadow on the design industry. (Design Museum, (no date) Robin and Lucienne Day [Online]. Accessed October 2007]. Available at: ).

They both started teaching at the Beckenham School of Art and later Robin turned to exhibition and poster design, creating recruiting posters for the RAF and exhibition stands for ICI. Lucienne instead went into fabric design for the clothes industry working for companies like Stevenson & Son and Marks and Spencer. (Jackson 2001 p. 17-29). In 1948 Robin began his collaboration with Clive Latimer winning the storage section of the International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design.

This marked the beginning of his relationship with the company Hille who commissioned him to design furniture for mass-production. (Jackson 2001 p. 26-27). In 1951 Robin was asked to design the interior seating of the Royal Festival Hall. It was quite a challenge for him as up till then the auditorium seating had been made out of timber frames held by cast-iron stanchions. For this project he took ideas from the car industry using new materials such

as fibreglass at the bottom of the seats to soundproof them or pressed steel for the seat frames.

For the Royal Festival Hall he also designed the foyer, restaurant, terrace, and orchestra chairs. Quite interesting was how he had the orchestra chairs made with an opening at the back to accommodate the tail of the player's jackets. (Jackson 2001 p. 36). Their careers really took off thanks to the festival of Britain in 1951 where Robin was asked to create 3 room settings in the Home Entertainment section of the Homes and Gardens Pavilion. The organizers had asked him to focus on storage, or better the lack of it and present for the Entertainment section a multi-purpose living room. (Jackson 2001 p. 40-41).

Particularly interesting was his modern vision for the living room where he also included in his design, even though it had not been requested, a dining table considering it: "...an important aspect of home entertainment" (Jackson 2001 p. 41). During this occasion Robin asked Lucienne to design some furniture fabric and wallpaper to display at the pavilion. Here at the entrance of the Entertainment section, she displayed "calyx" manufactured by Heals, a representation of abstract flowers which immediately attracted everyone's attention.

Interesting how Heals were not so keen on producing her fabrics as they were sure she wouldn't have sold any of it. Following the success at the pavilion the collaboration with Heals lasted for 20 years. (Jackson 2001 p. 44-48). To explain this new and positive change Lucienne quoted: "...probably everyone's boredom with wartime dreariness and lack of variety helped the

establishment of this new and gayer trend", (Design Museum, (no date)

Robin and Lucienne Day [Online]. [Accessed October 2007]. Available at: ).

Following the Festival of Britain, Robin carried on designing furniture for Hills and seating for public places.

In 1958 he designed the chairs and benches for Gatwick airport. (Jackson 2001 p. 75). Between 1957 and 1965 he also collaborated with Pye designing contemporary televisions, radio and stereograms. (Jackson 2001 p. 74).

Lucienne in the meantime was also designing furnishing and fashion fabrics, carpets, ceramics and table linens for companies such as Rosenthal, Thomas Somerset and Cavendish. (Jackson 2001 p. 92-94). Her first tableware design for Rosenthal was in 1957 and was called Bond Street. It represented an interesting leaf pattern on the plates. (Jackson 2001 p. 95).

A particularly interesting design is the Odyssey tableware created for Rosenthal in 1958. The set was made up of a jug, cup and saucer. On the rims a quotation from Homer's poem was etched in gold in Greek script. A side plate was also produced with the translation. (Jackson 2001 p. 97). It was in 1963 that Robin Day designed his most famous piece, the Polypropylene side Chair for Hille. It was a light, strong yet flexible chair. The surface was heat resistant and scratch proof and thanks to its shape could easily be stacked together. It was definitely the perfect product for mass production.

It was so cheap and durable that everyone all around the world wanted it. It was in fact such a worldwide hit that over 20 million were produced. (Design Museum, (no date) Robin and Lucienne Day [Online]. [Accessed October

2007]. Available at: ). Very eye-catching was Hill's " riddle" advert placed in the Architectural review in September 1966 quoting: " What has 44 legs but is very light on its feet, a weatherproof shell yet wears many different covers, sometimes has arms - sometimes hasn't, works alone, or in large groups, can be seen all over the world but is only three years old? (Jackson 2001 p. 122).

This advert perfectly described the features and huge success the polypropylene chair was experiencing at the time. Robin Day's chair was being produced and sold all over the world and during his visit to Botswana in 1980 he touched closely the popularity of his design when he found them installed and used as seating in some wooden canoes (Jackson 2001 p. 122). By the 1960s Robin and Lucienne had independently reached fame in their respective fields and were asked to collaborate as consultants to many major companies.

The first company to request their design skills was BOAC (British overseas airways corporation) where they were asked to design the interiors of their new super VC10 aircraft that went into service in 1962. (Jackson 2001 p. 136). In 1962 Robin Day designed the furniture for the main dining area and Lucienne the curtains and other fabrics for the Churchill College in Cambridge. (Jackson 2001 p. 138-139). In 1962 the Days also began their long collaboration with the John Lewis Partnership, developing the new store interiors. (Jackson 2001 p. 40).

In 1971 Robin designed the E Series school chairs in different sizes to fulfil the needs of a growing society. The smallest version was designed for

infants, whilst the largest version for secondary school children. (Jackson 2001 p. 145). He continued to design public seating for classrooms, concert halls and even for the Underground. (Jackson 2001 p. 147-154). In 1990 he designed the “ Toro” seating entirely from metal. The “ Woodro” seating followed in 1991 and instead was made of slatted hardwood. (Jackson 2001 p. 156).

In 1990 Lucienne designed an incredibly bright and colourful mosaic called “ Aspects of the Sun” which was placed in the cafe’ in the new John Lewis department store in Kingston-upon-Thames. (Jackson 2001 p. 161). The Days are still working today and their designs still withstand the test of time. Companies like Habitat have once again placed their work into the spotlight with the reissuing in 1999 of the polypropylene chair in new colors. (Jackson 2001 p. 122). In 1999 the polypropylene chair was reissued by Habitat in a new range of translucent colours as part of the 20th century legends collection (Jackson 2001 p. 169)

In 1962 Robin Day quoted: “ A good design must fulfil its purpose well, be soundly constructed, and should express in its design this purpose and construction” (Design Museum, (no date) Robin and Lucienne Day [Online]. [Accessed October 2007]. Available at: ). Throughout the years his work has proven to be just this. Together with Lucienne they helped to end the dark gloomy post war era bringing a new meaning to design: high quality, low priced mass produced items for everyone anywhere in the world. This was their aim and now that they are in their 90’s they can truly look back and say “ this is what we’ve achieved! ”