

DONALD W. BUCHANAN

DESIGN

by Nancy Townshend

What began as an admiration for Swedish industrial design products at the Brussels World Fair in 1935 turned into a career in industrial design at the National Gallery of Canada for Donald Buchanan from 1947 to 1955.

HERBERT READ AND DONALD BUCHANAN

Donald Buchanan wrote Herbert Read, the distinguished British author of *Art and Industry: The Principles of Industrial Design*,¹ on April 8, 1946 that “the real job is now to arouse enough support for the formation of some kind of Design in Industry Committee in Canada through which not only information on the subject but also designing talent could be pooled or otherwise made available to all groups interested.”² Read quoted Buchanan’s statement in his commissioned Report titled “The Future of Industrial Design in Canada”³ to Harry McCurry, Director of the National Gallery of Canada.

In his Report, Read outlined three aspects of the problem:

1. The Training of Industrial Designers.
2. Encouraging the Use of Designers by Manufacturers.
3. The Education of the Public in the Appreciation of Good Design.

Read explained how The Council of Industrial Design in London, U.K. met objectives #2 and #3 above and that this Council also established Design Centres for each industry throughout Britain. As well, the Design and Industries Association of Great Britain organized exhibitions, lectures and competitions, and published pamphlets on design issues.

Of critical importance for Read was “the quality of the designers employed by industry.” Reid believed that the whole education system needed to be changed from one based on “a humanistic study” to “education on constructivist principles and practice... such [as that]...initiated before the war by Walter Gropius in Germany (the Bauhaus)...[now] at Harvard

and...Moholy-Nagy [now at]...Institute of Design in Chicago....” “It is complete nonsense to restrict the training of designers for that system to a curriculum based on the study of natural forms and organic processes.” Read believed that “the establishment of such a school in Canada should be your [McCurry] first objective.” For a short-term solution, he recommended the organization of “existing design talent into one or more consultant groups” such as The Design Research Unit, a “co-operative group of designers, architects, engineers and scientific advisers” advocating good design. “Our experience in setting up and running this Unit [with Read as its chair] might be of value to you in Canada.” Finally, Read noted: “little can be achieved unless the professional status of the industrial designer is fully recognized by all concerned.”⁴

DESIGN FOR USE IN CANADIAN PRODUCTS EXHIBITION (1946)

Buchanan’s *Design For Use* exhibition honouring Canadian talent in industrial design opened on October 1, 1946 at the NGC with Hon. C. D. Howe, Minister of Reconstruction [after World War II] and Supply officiating. Altogether, 95 metal products, 60 wood, 40 plastics, 25 glass, 12 ceramics and 20 textiles – all recently Canadian-made objects for everyday living - were exhibited in this show. “Design For Use: Design For Millions”⁵ was its slogan; the show’s full title was *Design For Use in Canadian Products: A Survey of Designs in Canada of Manufactured Goods for the Home and Office, for Sports and Outdoors*. The exhibition circulated under the title of *Design in Industry* from June 1946 to June 1947 to Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vernon, Vancouver, Kingston, Winnipeg and through the Maritimes to 1950. (*Canadian Art* published Buchanan’s article titled “Design For Use” during the summer 1946.)

The NGC published a booklet titled *Design For Use in Canadian Products* in co-operation with the Department of Reconstruction and Supply and the NFB. Buchanan wrote its Preface: “Emphasis throughout was on organic design. By organic design was meant that combination of functional efficiency and due proportion in form and structure which is the hall mark of any well designed, industrially produced, object.”⁶ In his article titled “Design For Use”, Buchanan wrote that “good design in manufactured objects...means a combination of simplicity, fine proportion and functional utility...[where] grace of line and clarity of form are allied to fitness for purpose.”⁷ Canadian designers excelled in kitchen equipment. The

exhibition showcased various prototypes of new or experimental designs of industrial products such as the stacking chair made by the same process for molding plywood airplane wings and structural parts during World War II by the National Research Council of Canada.

This show led to the formation of an Industrial Design Division at the NGC, and of the National Industrial Design Council in 1948.

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN DIVISION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA (June 1947 – 1954)

As director of the Industrial Design Division of the NGC from June 1947 to 1954, Buchanan oversaw the NGC's Industrial Design Information Services, the Design Index of original Canadian products of merit, The Design Centre, and organized exhibitions on industrial design. He also served as Secretary of the National Industrial Design Committee.

On the international level, Buchanan was invited to join a Committee⁸ to discuss the relationship between museums and industry at a forthcoming meeting of the International Council of Museums in Paris in 1948. For a proposed trip to Great Britain in July 1950, Buchanan suggested "intensive study of all activities of Council of Industrial Design in Great Britain, ... exhibition of British industrial design for showing in Canada in 1951, and the study of industrial design training course at Central School of Arts and Crafts and elsewhere in England with a view to possibility of Canadian design scholarships being tenable there in future."⁹

Canadian Design Index and NGC's Information Services:

The Canadian Design Index (1948) tabulated Canadian-designed industrial products of merit, their designers and manufacturers. An advisory committee of architects and industrial designers set up standards for their selection. Exhibitions of these products for everyday use occurred in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. The publication, *Canadian Designs for Everyday Use*, listed this Index. Museum professionals, journalists and public alike could find information on these products at the NGC's new Information Services.

Buchanan's Design Centre opened on the ground floor of the NGC in Ottawa on February 11, 1953 with the exhibition *Canadian Designs of Merit For the 'Trend House.'* (This show was later exhibited for six months in Toronto.) An exhibition of products that received Design Merit Awards to Industry followed. In 1954, Buchanan and the Design Centre assisted in the selection of Canadian designs for an international design fair, the Triennale, in Milan, Italy.

NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL DESIGN COMMITTEE/COUNCIL

Buchanan was instrumental in establishing the National Industrial Design Committee (NIDC) in June 1948 under Hon. C. D. Howe.

This Committee was formed to promote greater use of Canadian talent in the designing of consumer goods. It was composed of some thirty manufacturers, retailers, designers, researchers, consumers, and educational and government officials. It advised various Canadian government departments on industrial design. The Committee published booklets on good product design principles and practice such as *Good Design Will Sell Canadian Products* and *How The Industrial Designer Can Help You in Your Business*. It even gave out annually post-graduate scholarships in product industrial design (\$1500.) to students studying in the United States and Britain. The Committee co-sponsored competitions in product design in, for instance, wood and aluminum for home, garden or office. In 1953 it gave out Design Merit Awards to Industry. Manufacturers receiving these awards could use the Design Award labels on their products to attract consumers. Buchanan served as the Committee's Secretary from November 1948 until at least April 1952.

The NIDC also organized exhibitions such as "Design Centre" at the CNE in Toronto in 1948 which traveled to Montreal and Ottawa. It arranged for window displays in department stores from Victoria to Montreal. In 1954, the NIDC sponsored a conference on furniture design in Toronto where one hundred manufacturers, designers and retailers attended.

In July 1953 its title was changed from Committee to Council with twenty members. From 1956 to 1957, Buchanan served on the Council.

THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA 1953 – 1954

The *Annual Report* of the NGC for 1953-1954 concluded that “the Trustees are most anxious that the work of the National Gallery proceed without delay along the lines recommended in the Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1951)...Plans...include...the further development of the Industrial Design Division.”¹⁰

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Buchanan became the Chief of the NGC’s Industrial Design Division in 1954. He continued to encourage “Design For Use, Design For Millions” within Canada.

¹ London: Faber and Faber, 1932.

² Donald Buchanan as quoted by Herbert Read, “The Future of Industrial Design in Canada: A Preliminary Review of the Problem,” 7.4D, Design in Industry (file 1) (Outside Activities/Organizations), National Gallery of Canada *fonds*, National Gallery of Canada Archives. Buchanan wrote this letter on McCurry’s suggestion by wire dated April 6, 1946 to Buchanan, in response to Buchanan’s query “Would it be any help if I mailed Read list of Canadian Manufacturing Films [sic] [firms] who have told me they are interested in better functional designs...? Is there any other information I could forward him?” contained in a wire dated April 5, 1946 to McCurry. In a wire dated March 29, 1946, McCurry invited Read to Canada for advice and lectures on industrial designs.

³ This Report was contained in his letter dated June 12, 1946 to McCurry, 7.4D, Design in Industry (file 1) (Outside Activities/Organizations), NGC *fonds*, NGC Archives.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Donald Buchanan, *Design for Use: A Survey of Design in Canada of Manufactured Goods for the Home and Office, for Sports and Outdoors*. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, Department of Reconstruction, National Film Board, 1947, 6.

⁶ Preface, *Design For Use in Canadian Products*. Published by the National Gallery of Canada in co-operation with the Department of Reconstruction and Supply and the National Film Board of Canada, 1947.

⁷ "Design for Use," *Design For Use in Canadian Products*, 6.

⁸ See Rene d'Harnoncourt, Chairman, Committee on Museums and Industry, MOMA in a letter dated May 26, 1948 to Donald Buchanan, National Gallery of Canada Archives.

⁹ See "Proposed Official Duties During European Trip" attached in a memo dated July 12, 1950 by Donald Buchanan to Harry McCurry, Donald W. Buchanan file, RG 32, vol. 1113, National Library and Archives.

¹⁰ *Annual Report 1953-1954*, National Gallery of Canada.