



Paul Tuttle seated in his 1952 wood armchair, Private Collection

Tuttle: The Designer's Edge

by Jeffrey Head

Architect, sculptor, furniture-maker and interior decorator all describe the career of California designer, Paul Tuttle (1918–2002). Although he was not formally trained in any of these disciplines, Tuttle succeeded in creating very thoughtful, finely crafted designs. His aesthetic approach was based on exploring traditional, recognized forms, those with a classic orientation toward proportion and feel. The results were an enduring, contemporary interpretation rooted in modernism.

Tuttle was innovative in taking practical and necessary furnishings, such as tables, chairs and other pieces, and experimenting with their structure and materials to produce new designs that were functional and sculptural. While the developments were artistic and original, to call the pieces art furniture may ignore the elegance and structural integrity Tuttle achieved over countless others in the field.

With his pragmatic view, Tuttle maintained the modernist trait to expose and respect his materials instead of disguising or turning the material into something it was not intended to do. Since he understood materials and process there was a synergy with the designs he developed and had executed. He experimented and worked with a range of materials during the course of his more than fifty-year career, with a variety of woods (including bentwood, laminated, and plywood), and rattan, rolled cane and metals (tubular, rolled aluminum, stainless steel). He also worked with glass and, in later years, plastic and powder coated steel. His choice of finishes, such as calfskin, canvas, cowhide, leather and ultrasuede, was equally diverse and thoughtfully integrated.

Tuttle's chrome plated "Z" chair from 1964 is considered his best known design (first named the "Zee" by Tuttle for its shape). For this design he wanted to "challenge metal to do something that was completely impossible in wood." Tuttle called the swoopy cantilevered design the *Rocket Launcher*, because it appeared ready to spring into action. The chair was included in the 1965 installment of the California Design Exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum, where it gained much attention for its graceful lines.



Zeta Lounge chairs, 1968, Chromed steel and leather. Photo courtesy of Wright



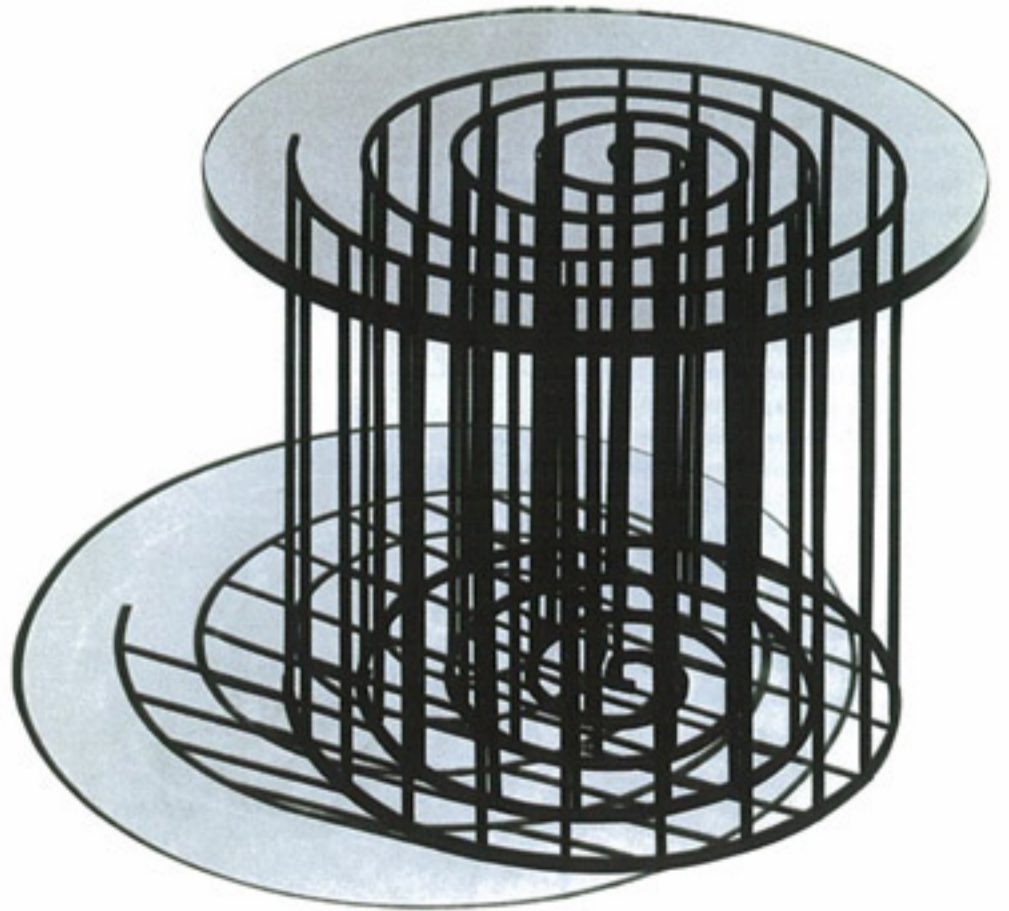
"Z" Chair, 1964, Chromed steel with black leather, Private Collection



"Z" Chair, 1994, Mahogany and powder coated steel, Private Collection



Low arm chair, 1960. Laminated wood frame and horsehair upholstery, Private Collection



Black iron side table with 3/4 inch glass top, 1964, Private Collection

Covered in black leather and manufactured by Carson-Johnson, Inc., the chair was also notable for its then expensive price of \$500.00 (about \$3,500 in today's dollars). Another exclusive Tuttle design was the 1972 *Anaconda* chair for Straessle International (distributed by Thonet in the U.S.). Described as "commodius leather or vinyl upholstered fiberglass shell that sits in a boa-like half circle of chromed metal tubing. The base of the chair. . . is a ring of the same outsized tubing."

After serving in World War II as an Army Librarian in India, Tuttle moved to Los Angeles and attended the Art Center School (the Art Center College of Design). He lacked the necessary skills to complete the program but became very influenced by his instructor, Alvin Lustig, who taught graphic and industrial design. Tuttle worked part-time for Lustig and continued to appreciate the senior designer's ability to communicate the cultural and social aspects of design. He then interned in the busy architectural offices of Thornton Ladd and Welton Becket. He worked on interior spaces for both firms, including the Joseph Magnin store for Becket. Later, like Lustig, Tuttle was a fellow at Taliesin West under Frank Lloyd Wright (Lustig at Taliesin East).

During the late 1940s Tuttle produced his first furniture pieces, a handmade wood chair, table and bench. The table was ultimately selected by Charles Eames for the 1951 installation of the Good Design Exhibition held at the Chicago Merchandise Mart and organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Tuttle's design career was underway and was followed by awards and exhibitions. For several years during the 1960s he was included in the popular and critically important California Design exhibitions held at the Pasadena Museum of Art, in addition to individual exhibitions throughout his lifetime.

In 1956 Tuttle move to Santa Barbara and in 1962 designed a 550 sq. ft. studio—residence for himself in Carpinteria. It was a low-cost, low-maintenance structure in contrast to the five larger homes he had designed for clients. Tuttle collaborated with contemporary architects on the modernist homes that also included custom furniture and finishes. Tuttle's own modest home was a reflection of his minimalist ideas about art, architecture and living. The constraints of the space created a theme for him of problem-solving and devising solutions that he applied to his design practice, often through the combination of materials and process. This also offered Tuttle the opportunity to express his perfectionism with design refinements and on-going iterations, even after a piece went into production.

Although cost was generally not an issue with Tuttle's custom pieces, he looked for ways to make further improvements, particularly with furniture design. In some instances he used screws instead of welding and polishing that increased cost. He often designed chair seats and backs that could be removed for upholstering. His passion for details fueled his ability to resolve issues. Tuttle's experimentation was not a self-indulgent activity, but a part of his experience to continually fine-tune both production and custom pieces. "Updated" pieces were not caused by a shortage of ideas or a repeat of past work, but rather the realization of a new solution with structure and line.

While Tuttle designed for a number of manufacturers and worked with several custom shops, he did not pursue high-volume or mass production. Instead he created furniture that reflected his personal interest in producing tactile, utilitarian pieces that combined a multi-disciplined approach with art and design. He was not compelled to participate in trends or rely on the industry in order to make a lasting contribution. His originality remains modern and contemporary.

A partial list of manufacturers of Tuttle's production pieces:

Arconas
Atelier International
Baker Furniture, Inc.
Beylerian
Carson-Johnson, Inc.
Landes Manufacturing
Modern Color, Inc.
Straessle International
Thonet (distributor)
Tucker Shops



Chariot chaise lounge, 1972, Chromed tubular steel with leather. Photo courtesy of Wright