'A chair is a stool with a back-rest, and a stool is a board elevated from the ground by supports'—the words of Christopher Dresser, an English designer and design philosopher of utilitarian objects in 1873. Hinchliffe quotes this minimalist definition and goes on to show in her selection of pieces how much more complex a chair in fact is.

We imagine that we couldn't live without chairs, but in the not too distant past, chairs were in fact a rarity and a luxury. Judith Flanders in her thought-provoking look at the relatively modern concept of 'home' (in *The Making of Home*), details the history of chairs: 'For much of history, furniture we regard as essential was a luxury. As late as the 17th century, few households had enough chairs for everyone to sit. In Jan Steen's (painting) *A Peasant Family at Meal-time* (c.1665), only the man of the household has a seat, while the rest of the family eats standing up.

'A century later, in a scene that appears to us spartan, Joseph van Aken's (painting) *Saying Grace* (c.1720) is in reality a depiction of prosperity, with its display of textiles, earthenware, pewter and chairs' (picturing some of the family standing while a few are seated).

The chairs selected by Meredith Hinchliffe for exhibition in *Take a Seat—Australian Modernist Seating* extend over seating design and construction between 1940 and 1975. Modernism was the prevailing movement and philosophy of economic, social, political and cultural life of much of the 20th century and in this exhibition the evolving design of the chair is shown as a result of this philosophy, becoming an object of daily use and desire.

The design of these chairs is comfortingly familiar—this is the furniture which proudly filled the homes of our parents and grandparents, a 'modern' style reflecting changes at that time taking place all over the world.

Take a Seat was appropriately held at the Lewers gallery in Emu Plains, former home of Margot and Gerald Lewers gifted by their daughters Tanya and Darani to the people for the Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest. Hinchliffe's concept for the exhibition was inspired, with its venue and its focus on an exciting period for Australian art and craft.

Opposite page:
Grant Featherston (b. Australia 1922-1995) Model 53 Elastic easy chair, c. 1953, Timber frame, padded woollen upholstery, courtesy of Lindsay Collection + Grant Featherston Z300 Chaise Lounge, 1953, Timber frame and legs, wool fleck upholstery, brass caps, courtesy Lindsay Collection.

This page:
P.J. Sorensen, Sling back chair, 1950 Timer frame and webbing, courtesy Ken Neale Sydney

PLEASE TAKE A SEAT

What is a chair? The answer may seem obvious but in fact chairs became an integral part of our social history much more recently than you might expect. The question is answered by Meredith Hinchliffe, curator of *Take a Seat,* an exhibition of mid-20th century seating held recently at Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest.
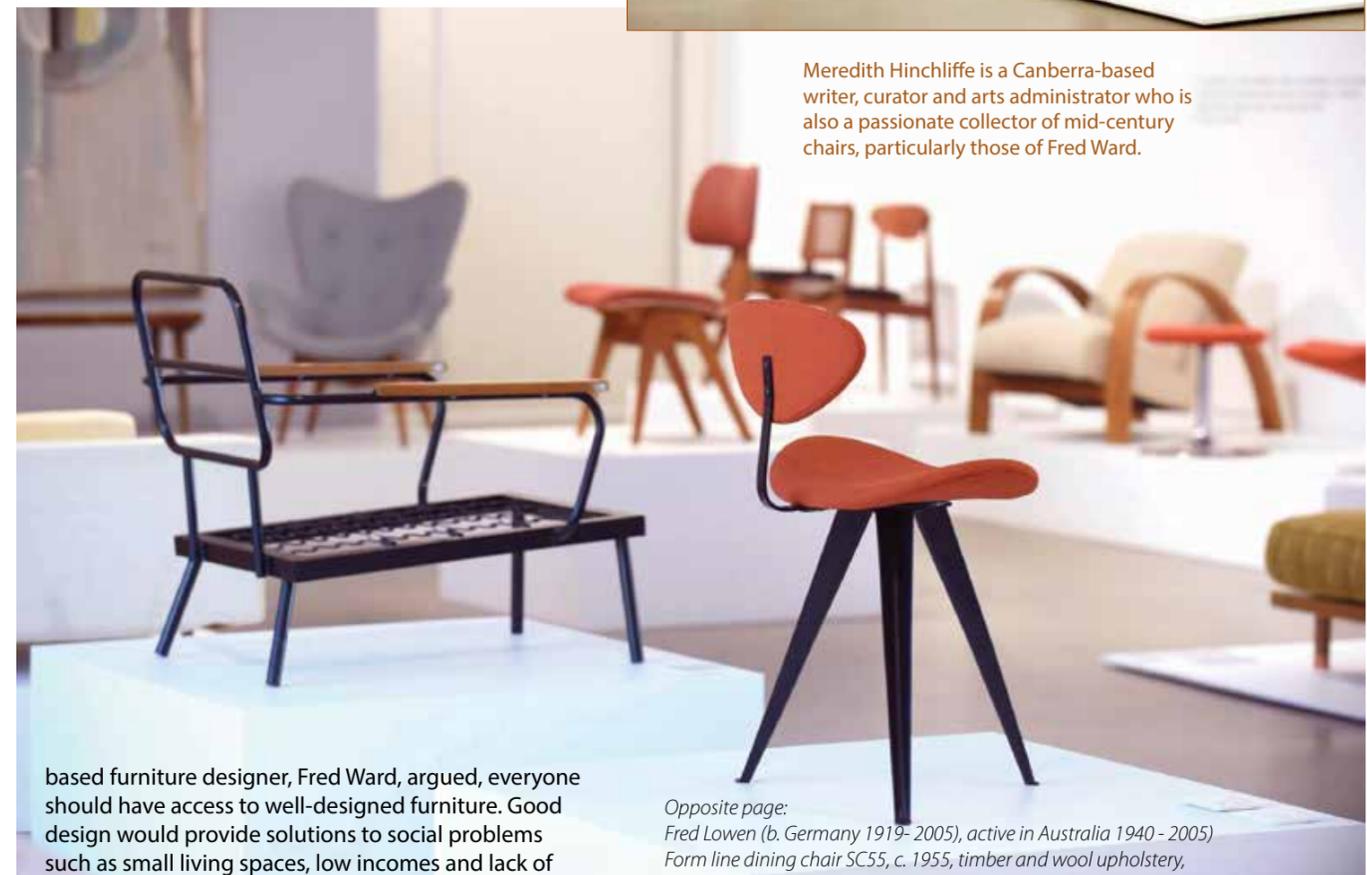
to make furniture, design homes and decorate them. Increasingly, the heavy 'brown' furniture of the past lost favour. Designers looked to express a post-war lightness of mood and optimism in their furniture'.

Hinchliffe quotes Gordon Andrews, one of the furniture designers represented: 'Good design is the conscious act of bringing order and grace to a product, so as to imbue it with aesthetic qualities beyond, but including, the functional.'

'In design and production, Modernist furniture had a democratic sense and purpose,' writes Hinchliffe. 'The industrialisation of furniture manufacturing enabled designs to reach a much wider market. As Canberra-

Meredith Hinchliffe is a Canberra-based writer, curator and arts administrator who is also a passionate collector of mid-century chairs, particularly those of Fred Ward.

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Margot Lewers' career began as an interior designer, textile designer and potter. Her shop, Notanda Gallery in Rowe Street, Sydney, opened in 1936. It epitomised the height of modern interior design and displayed the work of avant-garde designers. Margot's Modernist practice was also reflected in the home at Emu Plains, its architecture (Ancher House is a rare example of Modernist architecture, designed by architect Sydney Ancher), the beautifully designed gardens (Margot's creation), and Margot and Gerald's collection of contemporary art and textiles providing a stylish backdrop to their famous social gatherings. Patrick White, also part of this intellectual and artistic milieu, is often quoted: 'Ideas hurtled, argument flared, voices shouted, sparks flew… the house provides one of the focus points of our still tentative civilisation.' Margot and Gerald welcomed the exciting post-war influences in design aesthetics and designed, and built or commissioned their own furniture, some of which is on permanent display at the gallery.

Artworks were selected from the gallery's permanent collection to harmonise with the chairs in *Take a Seat* and to continue the theme in simultaneous exhibitions held in Lewers House and Ancher House. The works by

Margot and Gerald reflect Margot's enthusiastic use of colour and light and Gerald's appreciation of wood and stone, the preferred materials for his fluid and organic sculptural works. Other artists whose works were selected were Elwyn Lynn *(Herculaneum,* 1961), John Olsen *(Child's Fifth birthday,* 1957), Robert Klippel *(Optus 298,* 1970-74), Frank Hodgkinson *(Abstract No. 7,* 1958), Frank Hinder *(Construction* c.1943) and many more legendary Australian artists of the period.

The chairs themselves epitomised the use of modern post-war manufacturing methods and materials, many of them resulting from research and development carried out and specific to wartime, particularly in aircraft construction and fit-outs. Materials such as synthetics for webbing, foam fill and ply moulding would have a significant influence on furniture design and construction. The home-maker market was growing in these post-war years too, design was being influenced by European furniture makers, designers and artists fleeing Europe to settle in Australia and contemporary magazines showed off the latest trends in European and American design. The age of DIY was upon us, as Hinchliffe writes, with 'advice on how

based furniture designer, Fred Ward, argued, everyone should have access to well-designed furniture. Good design would provide solutions to social problems such as small living spaces, low incomes and lack of knowledge of well made furniture. Designer Gordon Andrews made a similar observation: 'If a product is more efficient, more comfortable, more visually attractive and handles better than its competitor, it will be appreciated, attain a high value and sell well.'

Designers featured in the exhibition: Gordon Andrews, T.H. Brown and Sons, Grant and Mary Featherston, FLER Furniture, Neville Gruzman, Marion Hall Best, Michael Hirst, Paul Kafka, Steven Kalmar, George Korody, Fred Lowen, Clement Meadmore, Roger McLay, Gyula Soos, Douglas Snelling, Fred Ward and Derek Wrigley.

Opposite page:
Fred Lowen (b. Germany 1919- 2005), active in Australia 1940 - 2005)
Form line dining chair SC55, c. 1955, timber and wool upholstery,
Courtesy Ken Neale, Sydney.
This page, top:
Douglas Snelling, (b. England 1916-1985) Rocking Chair, 1946 - 1955
Timber and Saran webbing, Courtesy Robert and Eugenie Bell +
Douglas Snelling Arm Chair and stool 1957, Australian hardwood,
cotton webbing, Courtesy the estate of Douglas B. Snelling, architect.
Above:
Gordon Andrews, (b. Australian 1914-2001), Gazelle Chair, Designed
in 1950, made in 1957 laminated plywood, cast aluminium, wool,
Courtesy Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Sydney, purchased 1989.
All photographs by Adam Hollingworth
Reference: http://www.penrithregionalgallery.org/wp-content/
uploads/2014/11/take-a-seat-catalogue.pdf