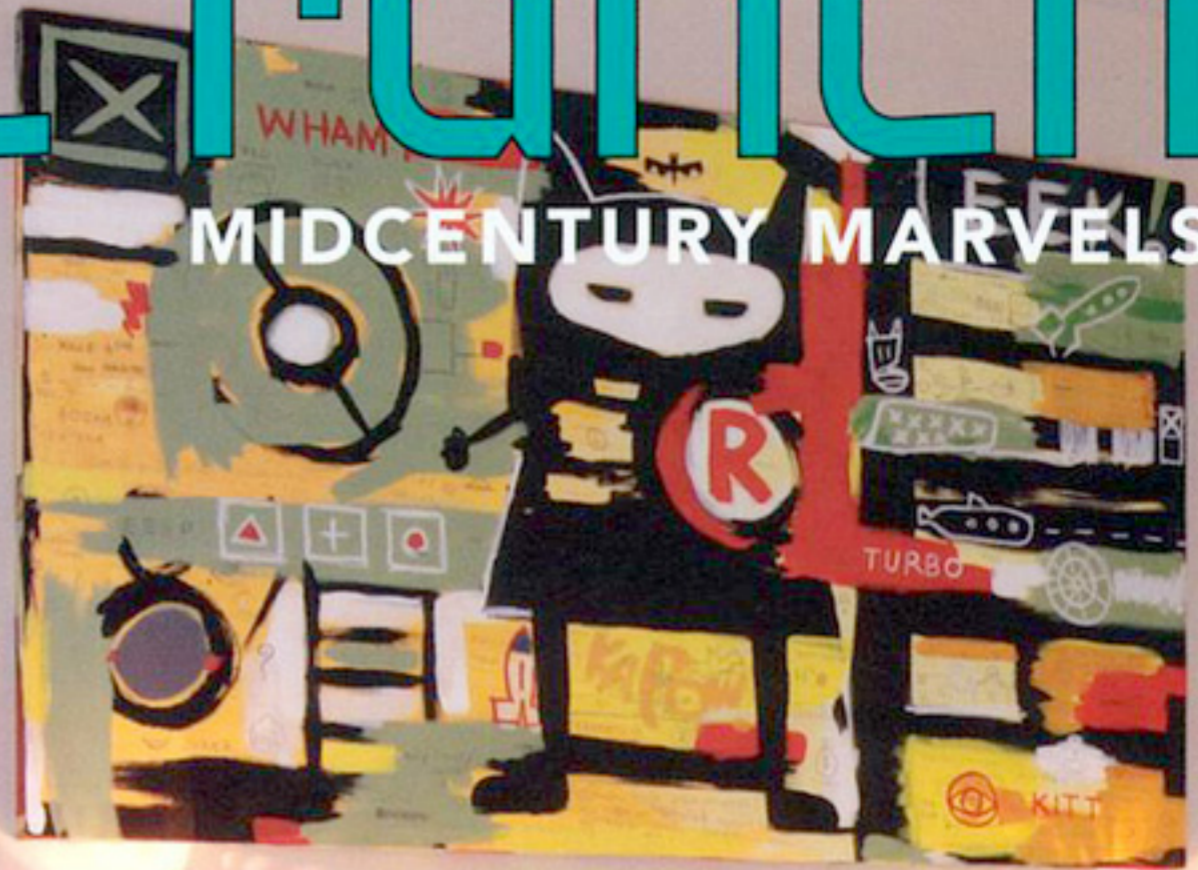


# atomic ranch

MIDCENTURY MARVELS



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# modern masters for your ranch:



**Paul McCobb**

text J M Cava  
photography courtesy Wright

Design appeal is based on integrity of form, simplicity of line and true organic function.

—Paul McCobb,  
*Interiors magazine*,  
July 1952

This Bryce Originals 1953 enameled steel, glass and birch vanity and upholstered chair sold for double the \$2,000–\$3,000 estimate in 2011. Opposite: Reform Gallery's L.A. Modernism booth included a peg-board door Planner Group unit with 'doughnut' pulls, wrought iron and bentwood Planner Group dining chairs and a Directional Pier mirror on the wall; a similar mirror sold for \$6,875 at Wright this past March.



**J**ust about any topic you can think of seems divisible into two opposite types, and the world of mid-century design is no exception. On one hand, we're all familiar with the dramatically stylish pieces that radiate from across the room, even though they're often functionally obsolete and intolerant of lesser-pedigreed objects. These we might call the Marilyn Monroes of design, while their opposites, say, the Audrey Hepburns, evoke a quieter classical beauty. The Hepburns remain eminently functional over time and fit gracefully into any decor. The lovely furniture of Paul McCobb falls solidly into this latter type and, even if you're unfamiliar with his name, odds are you've unknowingly encountered a number of McCobb objects already. That's because his modest and self-effacing pieces gracefully enhance any room without calling attention to themselves.

McCobb achieved this in part by integrating a modern sensibility with traditional American furniture and taste, resulting in a modernism that was fashionable, yet comfortable with grandma's Regency credenza or favorite rocking chair. Much of his interest—unlike that of the more rarefied midcentury designers—was in furniture that was democratic in design, price and use. Created for postwar middle class budgets, his Planner Group line remains the best mid-century design for the price. That's changing rapidly, however, as his work gains notoriety among collectors. A rare example in the more expensive Linear or Calvin lines can fetch up to five figures at auction.

A case in point was the 1953 vanity and chair that sold for \$6,875 at a Wright auction in Chicago. "Works by Paul McCobb have become more popular in recent years," says

Richard Wright. "Most of our auction results suggest affordable prices, yet select McCobb designs have exceeded our expectations. The vanity [that] sold in October 2011 for double its estimate is a great example. This renewed interest has caught our attention as well."

A Boston native, McCobb had little to no formal training in his ultimate calling, but arrived at furniture design through career paths in product design, industrial design and retail display. He launched his New York studio, Paul McCobb Design Associates, around 1945 and quickly found himself in the spotlight as America's best-selling furniture designer since Russel and Mary Wright a generation before.

McCobb promoted standardized production and distribution, which he promptly achieved not only in furniture, but in designs for just about everything in the home: textiles, wallpaper, lighting, dinnerware, radios and televisions. But furniture remained the heart of McCobb's work, beginning with his groundbreaking Planner Group for Winchendon, a collection of simple modular pieces produced from 1949 to 1964. The line was so popular during the 1960s that, much to his irritation, counterfeits appeared everywhere alongside his originals.

The Planner Group collection is brilliant in several ways. Others had tried bringing modular furniture to the market-



Jonathan Goldstein



Jonathan Goldstein



Clockwise from above: A mahogany Directional Tripod table dating from around 1955 realized \$813 in 2011. The high-end Directional coffee table combines brass, mahogany and travertine; it sold for \$1,785 in 2010. Part of the Irwin collection for Calvin Furniture, this tea cart employs similar materials: bent wood, brass rod and travertine.



Perimeter (Winchendon), Connoisseur and Living Wall (H. Sacks), and the Irwin, Linear, and Calvin Groups, mostly for Calvin Furniture.

In these designs, the modular concept takes a back seat, but the pieces share strong aesthetic and material sensibilities. As a rule, they depart from the relaxed informality of the Planner Group, exhibiting both richer material combinations—walnut, brass, leather and marble—and thinner, more graceful proportions, lending them a delicate aristocratic elegance. The Directional line is easiest to spot, thanks to a beautiful catalog from 1956 (reprinted in 2000) where these classic and urbane pieces look as timeless as a Brooks Brothers suit. Here, a humble bookshelf evolves into a delightful and lively syncopated modern composition called a 'living wall,' functioning not unlike the Eames stor-

age systems of around the same time, but without the industrial influence. McCobb's contributions to the genre (George Nelson also designed storage walls) were consistently lighter and more refined in character than those of his contemporaries.


By the mid-1950s, McCobb was one of the country's most commercially successful designers. Dubbed 'America's Decorator,' he racked up numerous museum exhibitions, awards, magazine features and consulting contracts with major corporations, and maintained showrooms in New York, Miami, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Like many great artists pioneering new forms and ideas, McCobb derived much of his inspiration from traditional design. Careful study of his output reveals influences from Shaker, Danish Modern, American Colonial and Neo-

Clockwise from right: A birch Winchendon Planner Group credenza and display cabinet sold for just under \$1,000 back in 2002. This 1530 model armchair was in constant production during the lifespan of the Planner Group. Another Wright auction Planner piece with two- and three-drawer stacking units sold for \$920 in 2002, just a touch over its low estimate.



Machine Age

Classic sources. This evident connection with the past certainly contributes to the historic significance and impact of his work. As a designer, he was not seeking to redefine our lifestyles but to merge timeless principles of aesthetics and function with contemporary materials and aesthetics. McCobb would have been pleased with this legacy, for he believed that well-designed furniture is neither dramatic nor boastful, but should instead "remain quiet and serve as a background for those who live with it." 

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*Need to have a McCobb piece in your life? If you're on a budget, there remain a surprising number of examples in thrift stores, yard sales, on eBay or craigslist, but patience is required. Otherwise, good inventories can be found in most major auction houses and galleries. My own favorites are: the Wright auction house in Chicago, operating worldwide with a knowledgeable staff, and an accessible website with many archives ([wright20.com](http://wright20.com)); Machine Age, a modern store in Boston ([machine-age.com](http://machine-age.com)); and Gerard O'Brien's Reform Gallery in Los Angeles, ([reform-modern.com](http://reform-modern.com)) containing an inventory of possibly the largest number of McCobb pieces in the world. Jonathan Goldstein ([paulmccobb.blogspot.com](http://paulmccobb.blogspot.com))—a collector and historian in New York—is a great source on McCobb scholarship; watch for his forthcoming book on this wonderful American designer.*



Clockwise from left: This 1952 North Craft Lighting table lamp sold for \$1,250 in 2009. A walnut and aluminum room divider from the 1956 Linear Group in a collector's home. McCobb's Straws pattern water jug, cruet and coffee pot from the 1959 Contempri dinnerware by Jackson Internationale. A pair of 1955 McCobb lounge chairs from Custom Craft with heavy wear to the legs, disintegrated foam and in need of new upholstery was listed for sale on the Wright site for \$2,800. In similar shape is the Model 314 Directional lounge chair seen on page 5.



place, but the Planner Group was the first commercial success to employ individual pieces that could easily adapt to changing lifestyle demands. Benches and coffee tables, mixed with bookshelves or dressers, transformed into credenzas, storage units and even room dividers with the look of larger custom pieces. To keep prices low, inexpensive, solid American maple and birch were left unstained with a minimal natural finish. The most intriguing and unconventional variations in the series were the smaller tables and dressers with thin black iron legs supporting wood tops, panels and drawers, sometimes combined with slatted wood shelves resembling bamboo. These less-common pieces have a more abstract and ethereal character than their all-wood relations and, as a result, command higher prices.

McCobb's interest in production methods guided the designs of his Predictor Group for O'Hearn Manufacturing, which specialized at the time in stodgy colonial reproductions. Exploiting the company's turning and shaping technology, he created a set of simple prefabricated parts from which multiple variations of a modern chair could be easily assembled. One of his more assertive modern designs, it was praised by George Nelson in his classic compilation, *Chairs*, as a "fresh and individual expression" of American design.

Not to be left out of the upscale market, McCobb produced a series of highly refined furniture collections from around 1949 to 1962, all appearing generally under his "Directional" label, but also carrying a dizzying array of alternate titles and imprints. The more recognizable of these today are Directional Modern (Custom Craft),