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Featuring a roundup
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ALMACENES SIMAN,
THE ARVIND STORE
& DIPTYQUE

International Style



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FOR MANY PEOPLE, the term “international style” evokes images of a sophisticated, glamorous world full of jet-setting travel, business, fashion and art. Oftentimes, the imagery has a nostalgic feel, with a retro-chic, Euro-continental flair (think classic James Bond, Pan Am or an early episode of “Mad Men”). Yet, like the now often-overused word “luxury,” it can be challenging to pin down what international style is exactly. Is there currently a shared global style or aesthetic apparent in retail design that could be considered “international”—or is today’s international style too evasive and *à la courant* to identify? Perhaps more of a “you know it when you see it” type of thing?

Technically, international style refers to two previous historic design eras. The first is a period in European art of the 14th and early 15th centuries, which blended both Italian and Northern Gothic elements and was marked by sinuous lines, rich color, heavy gilding and decorative patterned surface details. Originating in the Papal court, it was admired by its many foreign visitors, and subsequently crossed over various borders to become the preferred international mode of the ruling elite of Europe due to its elegant appeal.

More than 600 years later, just after World War I, international style came to reference a new approach in architecture and product design developed in the 1920s and '30s that sought to express structure directly through the use of modern materials and eliminate nonstructural ornamentation. First defined in 1932 by Americans Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, the most common characteristics of this revolutionary international style included strict



geometric forms, simple lines, open interior spaces, and large expanses of glass, steel and reinforced concrete construction.

A functional style of 20th-century architecture—and, like its 14th-century predecessor—it was so called because it crossed national and cultural barriers. Only this time, it extended well beyond just countries in Europe, crossing oceans to all continents, and became a significant influence on architecture and design globally. From commercial and residential projects to product design and academic curriculum, it truly was international.

Additionally, many proponents of the new international style and modernist movement sought to address socioeconomic challenges facing rapidly developing countries, including post-WWI population growth, changing demographics, urban planning, affordable housing, modern transportation and more. Taking into account such concerns, 20th-century international style helped to expand its design influence beyond projects servicing only wealthy patrons and academia and into

mainstream consciousness and public appeal.

Now, nearly 100 years after the founding of Bauhaus in 1919, we continue to see the major influence that international style still has on today’s architecture and retail environments, surviving subsequent architectural design styles, such as Brutalism, Postmodernism, Deconstructivism, New Classical and, who can forget, “Google.”

More popular than ever, the essence of international style and mid-century modernism is everywhere around the world—and is available to all levels of the socioeconomic ladder. It still inspires the design industry today, having

evolved from its academic elite origin into a more global beat appeal. Whether mass-produced or custom-made, at affordable or collector prices, the range of international style has influenced products available to both designers and consumers alike via vendors such as Design Within Reach, IKEA, CB2, Knoll, West Elm and others.

Moving forward, there are many new global design influences today that were not part of the equation even just half a century ago, including the Internet, social media, branding and marketing, sustainable design and climate change. These influencers continue to push the boundaries of current architecture and retail design thinking, reflecting a new chapter in international design and perhaps a shared new international style. dar

BASED IN NEW YORK, PETER-TOLIN BAKER IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED WITH RETAIL DESIGN AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING VIA P-T B DESIGN SERVICES (OWNER), THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (ADJUNCT PROFESSOR), RETAIL DESIGN INSTITUTE NY CHAPTER (BOARD PRESIDENT), AND AS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO DESIGN+RETAIL.