cover story | Angus Holland

Design down under

Our list of 20 great Australian icons – chosen by an expert panel – is full of surprises.

THE Hills hoist didn't make it. No Victa mower, either. Hang on a minute – wasn't this supposed to be the definitive list of Australian design icons?

The brief was deceptively simple: gather some experts and come up with the best Australian design from the 20th century using these criteria:

1. It had to be designed here.
2. It had to have some domestic application (since this is Domain).
3. There had to be something about it that defined it as an extraordinary design.

Some members of our panel (see, right) took a strictly aesthetic approach, nominating objects for their beauty and craftsmanship, such as Marc Newson's Lockheed chaise longue, an amazing piece that is impractical, expensive (if you can find one to buy) and meaningless to all bar the design elite. But still "important".

Other panel members took a more egalitarian approach, seeking designs that had affected the broader population, such as the Kambrook power board – not something you would call a thing of great beauty, but a household innovation.

There were the objects our panel liked, such as the Crown Lager bottle and Splayds. And there were the "icons" nobody could bring themselves to nominate – the Hills hoist and the Victa. The mower has its place in Australian cultural history, but the real icon is surely the lawn itself ...

Photos: Jennifer Soo

And the clothes hoist? A substantial piece of engineering, certainly more streamlined of late, but was it really necessary to make the sturdy and brutal original so ugly? So no cigar.

1. Kookaburra cricket ball: 1900

No Australian backyard would be complete without a Kookaburra cricket ball rotting away under the rhododendron. While the design is traditional, Kookaburra's interpretation is a pillar of Australian cricket, from Test level down to the backyard. The ball was first made by hand and the company has since made innovative use of machinery to keep production costs down. As a result the balls are still manufactured in Melbourne, while rival UK companies have largely moved their operations to the developing world. Kookaburra's Test match ball is a world-beater, used in most international competitions.

"This object can only be fully appreciated when handled, or if sighted when travelling at speed," says Eddie Butler-Bowden.
Best feature: You can own one just like Shane Warne's for about $70.

2. AWA Radiolette: 1932

AWA was an important Australian company and the radio was an enormously important household appliance, hence the inclusion of this Radiolette. No particular model stands out – there were dozens of variations. The Radiolettes had a lovely architectural feel to them with their art deco motifs and were technologically cutting edge with their cast bakelite cases. "It's distinctive and pretty impressive," says Debbie Rudder.
Best feature: Also makes an excellent doorstop.

3. Splayd cutlery: 1943

Like the BYO wine cooler (see item 15), Splayds were inspired by the casual Australian way of life. Using knife and fork at a barbecue can be tricky, particularly if you're also juggling a loaded stubby holder. That got Sydney inventor William McArthur thinking: why not combine knife, fork and spoon in the single utensil? The result is more fork than anything else, and while you couldn't cut a steak with the thing it works well enough in a bring-a-plate scenario. McArthur's wife Suzanne sold a basic version of his brainchild from her cafe from 1943 to 1967, when it was taken up by a big manufacturer and mass marketed. "An elegant solution to a problem," says Debbie Rudder.
Best feature: Inexplicably managed to convey prestige, hence its popularity as a wedding gift.

4. Shepherd castor wheels: 1946

This was a design nobody paid much attention to, mostly because it was hidden underneath the couch. But George Shepherd's design was brilliant in its simplicity. Previously castors had a tiny wheel flat against the ground and didn't really work. Shepherd used a large wheel on an angle, which made it much easier to both push and steer a chair around. It also looked elegant, with the wheel enclosed in a dust-proof case that gave it the appearance of a ball. An estimated 300 million have been sold. "It was a big improvement on previous castors because it actually worked," says Debbie Rudder.
Best feature: Their chunkiness.

5. "Web" chair by Douglas Snelling: 1947

Along with the Featherston and Andrews' Rondo (items 6 and 8), this is a "must have" for chair collectors. All three designers had a go at canvas webbing as they rebelled against the heavy upholstered furniture of the day, but Snelling's version was probably the most successful, with its Scandinavian feel. "The revealed construction of the web chair not only gives the chair its distinctive look, but makes it a most comfortable chair with the pliability of the webbing moulding to the shape of the body," says Sarah Wilson.
Best feature: Comfortable yet compact.

6. Grant Featherston "Contour" chair: 1951

If there's one piece of furniture that defines 1950s Australia, it's what every design nut calls the "Featherston chair". What they mean is Featherston's "Contour" chair, and in particular the lounge version with arms, because it came in many variations. With their swoopy contours and soft edges, they all followed Featherston's theme of a "negative of the human body", manufactured from moulded plywood with turned wooden legs. Earlier models were upholstered in vinyl and corduroy and all were popular with architects and design-hungry punters eager for furniture that suited the emerging Modernist houses.

Originals now sell for about $2000, though Gordon Mather Industries in Melbourne will do you a new one (it holds the licence) for about the same price. "For me it's top of the list," says Philip Graham. "These were the must-have chairs for the innovators, people stepping away from boring Edwardian antiques and into modern design."
Best feature: Works well in modern homes today.

7. Crown Lager bottle: 1953

Why Crown lager and not, say, the Vegemite jar? Granted, Vegemite is more of an "Aussie icon", but it's as much to do with what's in the jar than the label. Crown, on the other hand, was a deliberate effort by Carlton and United Breweries to design a special vehicle for Australia's first premium beer. The package, which took on its present form in the early 1960s, did everything it could to whisper exclusivity, from the unusually shaped bottle, to the handwriting flourishes on the metallic gold label, to the name itself. So what if the beer inside wasn't that different from Foster's? It was all about image. "It gave the beer drinker social confidence in any situation," says Eddie Butler-Bowden.
Best feature: Instantly confers status on the owner.

8. Rondo chair by Gordon Andrews: 1956

Designed for the Olivetti showroom, it caught the eye of the fashionable Sydney interior designer Marion Hall Best, who sold it in her shop. Somehow the six-legged swivelling Rondo managed to work in commercial and domestic settings and was successful for two decades, thanks to its combination of contemporary design and comfort. Gordon Andrews was a bit of an early Marc Newson, designing across many fields. Sydney shop FY2K has the licence to produce the chair. They cost upwards of $2695. "A beautifully simple design that works," says Anne Watson.
Best feature: It swivels, so you can play Dr Evil.

9. The Planet Studio K light: 1960

Not everybody could afford a Harry Seidler house or a Featherston chair in the '60s, but they could buy a Studio K light. A simple, elegant model with a high-tech look to its springs and balances, it introduced thousands of Australians to modern design and was handy in the study, in the living room – anywhere, really. It came in dozens of colours, too. No wonder it sold so well; designed by Bill Iggulden in 1960, it was manufactured for 40 years, selling between 100 and 200 a day.

The Planet company plans to release a limited edition Studio K for Christmas 2002 for about $100.

"So many people bought it and enjoyed it," says Simon Jackson. "I have two in my home."
Best feature: Funky design on the cheap.

The panel

Rina Bernabei is a senior lecturer in the Industrial Design Program at the University of NSW.
Eddie Butler-Bowden is a curator in the Australian Society and Technology program at the Museum of Victoria.
Philip Graham is a "hunter-gatherer" of retro furniture and objects. He owns a shop in Melbourne called White Elephant, which he opened after running out of room for his collection of 1950s and '60s artefacts.
Dr Simon Jackson is a lecturer in Industrial Design at the National School of Design at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne.
Christopher Menz is senior curator in decorative arts at the National Gallery of Victoria.
Debbie Rudder is curator of the *Success and Innovations* exhibition at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum.
Anne Watson is a curator of decorative arts and design at the Powerhouse Museum.
Sarah Wilson is the communications and development manager at the Object Australian Centre for Craft and Design in Sydney.
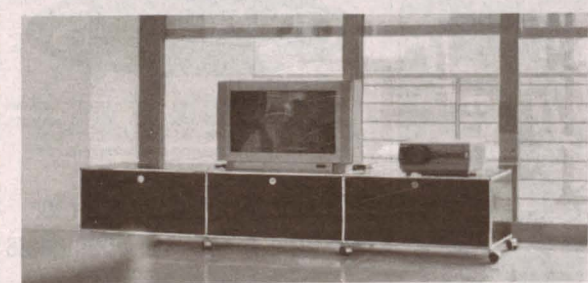

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10. Decimal coins: 1966

For $128,000, can you name the animal on the 20 cent piece? Phone a friend! Our decimal coinage, released in 1966, pays tribute to our flora and fauna without being too kitsch. The 5 cent (echidna), 10 cent (lyrebird), 20 cent (platypus), 50 cent (kangaroo and emu) and $1 (kangaroos) coins were designed by Stuart Devlin, who won the right to do so in a competition. "Devlin was a very versatile designer," says Debbie Rudder.
Best feature: Good value for money.

11. Wiltshire Staysharp knife: 1966

Melbourne engineer Dennis Jackson had a "eureka" moment in 1964 when he visualised a knife any fool could sharpen correctly, because it did it for you. The key was a plastic shield for the knife which also housed a spring-loaded sharpening block. Every time you slid the knife in

or out, it scraped against the sharpener. Wiltshire hired Stuart Devlin to make the plasticky yet modern holder and knife handle. "A huge proportion of the population did not know how to sharpen a knife, so an Australian inventor saw an opportunity," says Debbie Rudder.
Best feature: You could attach it to the bench.

12. Wine cask: 1966

Sadly the best feature of the wine cask has also cost it enormous credibility – its ability to keep wine fresh as you drink it over a few weeks has confined it to the end of the market where wine is sold by volume not quality. Perhaps we would think more of it if they sold Grange in casks. It was invented by Angove's winery in 1966 as a cardboard box containing a bag filled with wine: you simply snipped off the corner of the bag and poured away before resealing it with a special peg. A year later Penfolds added the metallic bladder

and the plastic tap, which meant you could pour straight from the box. It also kept the wine airtight. "A world standard," says Simon Jackson.
Best feature: When you've drunk the wine you can blow the bladder up like a balloon.

13. Eveready Dolphin torch: 1972

Not many products are deliberately designed to be ugly. Accidentally, yes, but rarely with as much thought as went into the Dolphin torch. It's robust, powerful-looking and appears ready to survive a lifetime rolling around in the back of a ute, even if it actually lived under the stairs in a Woollahra terrace. "The round original one has a certain naivety to it," says Debbie Rudder.
Best feature: Genuinely sturdy.

14. Kambrook electric power board: 1972

Back in 1971, if you bought a sound system with a reel-to-reel, a turntable and an amp and rigged it

"When you've drunk the wine you can blow the bladder up like a balloon."

up for a party you'd discover you had a problem. So many plugs, nothing to plug them into. What you needed was the Kambrook power board, capable of taking several plugs at once. Design icon? Granted, this is not something you'd spend hours admiring. But that's to the design's credit. Ironically, Kambrook did not patent the design and now competes with dozens of copycat brands. "Wherever people have electrical appliances they owe a debt of gratitude to this Caulfield design company," says Simon Jackson.
Best feature: The long cord.

15. Decor wine cooler: 1979

Few things say "Australian" like the Decor wine cooler. What other country would put so much effort into a device whose sole purpose was to transport and cool two bottles of chardonnay? It cleverly incorporates a central moulded ice pack that you fill with water and pop into the freezer:

the bottles sit snugly against it and stay chilled. The design has been recognised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which has one in its collection. "It won Australian design awards and was exported abroad, and to have found a market for Australian products abroad was no mean feat," says Simon Jackson.
Best feature: Did for wine what the stubby holder did for beer.

16. Dinosaur Designs salad set: 1985

Crude yet beautiful, handmade yet mass-produced. Dinosaur Designs makes a range of jewellery and homewares that whatever it is, it's different. And people like it. Most of their products are made from coloured resin, fashioned in moulds and hand-finished with the claim that every piece is unique. It is a testament to their marketing and originality that the chunky Flintstones-esque salad set has eclipsed the Alessi kettle as the wedding gift of choice. "It's captured a real Australian-ness, there's a real casualness to their work," says Rina Bernabei.
Best feature: It glows when you put a light behind it, which is why it looks so good in the Dinosaur Designs stores.

17. Marc Newson's Lockheed chaise longue: 1986

This piece helped launch Newson as one of the world's best-known industrial designers. After he won a grant from the Australia Crafts Council he staged an exhibition at Sydney's Roslyn Oxley gallery that featured the Lockheed, a retro-futuristic take on the classic chaise longue, executed in riveted aluminium and fibreglass. Its fluid shape and craftsmanship echoes the techniques of aircraft design, hence its name. A local sensation, Newson's chaise longue received worldwide exposure when it appeared in the 1987 Madonna music video Rain. Only 10 were produced and one is part of the permanent collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "It's sensuous and fluid. In fact, people slip off it.

"What other country would put so much effort into a device whose sole purpose was to transport and cool two bottles of chardonnay?"

A great sculptural object," says Christopher Menz.
Best feature: Perfect ice breaker.

18. Marc Newson's "Embryo" chair: 1988

Newson broke onto the design scene with the Lockheed chaise longue, but the Embryo was one of his first designs to be picked up for mass production. Newson was 25 when he was commissioned to design the chair for an exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum. His bright pink neoprene-clad Embryo lay back on its legs like a radioactive praying mantis. It was taken up by the Japanese manufacturer Idee and is available today – in a range of fabrics and colours – for about $3000. "Mark wasn't that well known up to then, but after the Embryo, his career took off," says Anne Watson.
Best feature: It's comfy.

19. Fruit bowl by Susan Cohn: 1990

Susan Cohn's bowl was the first Australian design to go into production at the Italian manufacturer Alessi, alongside pieces by Frank Gehry and Philippe Starck. Its perforated aluminium interior is beautiful yet practical, echoing the traditional Aussie meat safe. The bowl started life as a limited production run in 1990, and was taken up by Alessi as the "Cohncave" in 1992. "To come up with something new based on the oldest design of all, the circle, shows great ingenuity," says Christopher Menz.
Best feature: You really would put fruit in it.

20. The F!NK jug: 1993

This aluminium jug was the first product from Robert Foster's company, F!NK, and proves high-end designers can succeed in the Australian domestic market. Foster has a background as a silversmith, but in 1993 started F!NK to mass-produce his designs, which now includes sushi sets and shot glasses. The jug can be yours for $295-$325. "It's a really successful piece of design. I use one every day," says Christopher Menz.
Best feature: It doesn't drip.