

Ikea, the low-cost Swedish retailer that has furnished millions of homes around the globe, moved into the world of fine art with a Stockholm museum's retrospective of its 50 years of liveable design.



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From the first flat-pack table in the 1950s to the latest trendy home styles, the exhibition now showing at the capital's contemporary art museum Liljevalchs Konsthall traces a half-century of history as seen through Ikea's eyes.

"This is not a conventional design exhibition. It's more an exhibition about how we live our lives," curator Steffan Bengtsson told AFP.

"This furniture is very close to people's experiences and lives, so in a way it's a nostalgic exhibition," he added.

A green armchair from 1959, a red sofa typical of the 1970s, and a lamp anno 1995 are just a few of the regular household items on display in the show that runs until August 13.

"People will recognise their own old furniture, from their teenage years, their homes, their family. And then I guess people will start to talk about their own lives, 'we had that table', 'Annie had that chair', 'by the way, what happened to Annie and Henry?'," he said.

Normally stocked in mammoth warehouses outside urban centres, the cheap'n'chic pieces of furniture are displayed here as legitimate artworks.

Ikea as art: 50 years of Swedish design

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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Showing off Ikea's original shapes from the 1960s, bombastic colours from the 1970s and 1980s, and what the company dubbed "democratic design" from the 1990s, the display tells a story that not even Ikea or its founder, billionaire Ingvar Kamprad, could tell.

"Ikea is not that interested in history. For Ingvar Kamprad, tomorrow is the only keyword. I thought that Ikea had this wonderful archive, where you could just walk in and pick what you want, but it doesn't," Bengtsson said

"So we called neighbours, friends, fans, put some ads in the papers all over Sweden to collect what was possible. That was difficult," he explained.

Kamprad, known for his frugal penny-pinching habits, did however lend his favourite armchair to the exhibit -- Ikea's first armchair, an unnamed pale green model from 1951 -- shipped from his home in Switzerland.

The walls of the museum are adorned with covers of Ikea's famous catalogues, dating back to the very first one in 1951.

Posters tell the story of Ikea's beginnings, with amusing pictures of the first customers trying to load the company's emblematic flat-pack packages into the back of their small 1950s Volvos.

One room is dedicated to a second-hand market, where aficionados can buy old Ikea trappings or give away unwanted items in exchange for a coffee and a pastry.

Founded in 1943 by Kamprad when he was a teen, Ikea began developing its own furniture in the mid-1950s, popularising renowned Scandinavian design -- sleek and functional -- on an

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industrial scale and conquering first Europe and then North America before taking on the rest of the world.

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Bengtsson says Ikea was quick to pick up on design trends and imitate them at affordable prices, and was instrumental in changing the look of Swedes' homes.

"Ikea lit up homes. In the 1950s and early 1960s, almost all furniture was very dark, made from exotic trees. When Ikea started producing furniture made from light wood, something happened in all the rooms. Our homes became more open, more inviting," he explained.

One room in the museum allows visitors to linger and reflect on some of Ikea's more provocative slogans, such as "Chuck Out Your Chintz" in Britain and "Hello Cheapskates" (Salut les radins) in France.

The museum also displays some lesser known Ikea products, including a limited series of handmade reproductions of 18th-century Swedish antiques, made in the 1990s -- a series now in hot demand at auctions and which sometimes goes for as much as the real thing.

It also explains why Ikea suddenly began upholstering a large part of its furniture in denim for a few years in the 1970s: Kamprad had bought 700,000 metres (765,530 yards) of denim for a pittance from a Chinese factory that was going out of business.

"For Ikea, it's all about the price," Bengtsson concluded.

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