

The closest British design came to Bauhaus was arguably in the furniture produced by Isokon in the 1930s. We asked *Magnus Englund*, Isokon furniture collector and Managing Director of contemporary design retailer Skandium (skandium.com), to share his advice on buying vintage Isokon.

Buyer's Guide Isokon furniture



What characteristics define the Isokon aesthetic?

While most Isokon furniture was designed during the 1930s, it has a timeless look that points forward to US and Scandinavian 1950s ply furniture. The start of Isokon came about because of its founder Jack Pritchard's work for the British company Venesta, a sister company of the Estonian plywood manufacturer Luther. Plywood is therefore the material of choice for all Isokon furniture. Alvar Aalto's plywood furniture designs from the 1930s certainly had an influence, which is hardly surprising as Aalto furniture was widely sold in Britain through Finnmar at the time.

Which designers have worked for Isokon?

The most famous designer to have worked for Isokon is without doubt Marcel Breuer, who lived in London for some years in the 1930s. His Isokon Long Chair is arguably the most important piece in the collection. Walter Gropius also designed for Isokon, but none of his pieces made it into serial production. Jack Pritchard and Wells Coates made the first designs for Isokon before the arrival of Breuer and Gropius in London, and Egon Riss designed the first 'Donkey' just before the war. In 1963 Ernest Race designed an updated version of the 'Donkey' that fitted Penguin pocket books, and more recently BarberOsgerby, Shin & Tomoko Azumi and Michael Sodeau have contributed to the collection. The Venesta Stool, made and designed by Venesta in Estonia, was marketed by Isokon in Britain before the second World War, and is generally considered part of the Isokon collection, but the designer has never been identified.

Many of these designs are still manufactured today, by British company Isokon Plus.

Over what time period were classic pieces like the Donkey and the Long Chair manufactured?

The first Penguin Donkey was introduced in 1939 and was only made for a brief period of time, because war cut off the supply of plywood from Estonia. This makes 1930s-made 'Donkeys' very rare indeed. The Long Chair and Short Chair, and the Nesting Tables and Dining Table, were introduced earlier and were therefore in production for longer, but were never made in large quantities. In the 1960s John Allan took up production of the Long Chair and Nesting Tables again, this time in Britain. This ceased around 1979, and in 1982 production was taken on by Chris McCourt of Windmill Furniture (who went on to set up contemporary brand Isokon Plus), whose version of the Long Chair is more faithful to the 1930s version than the modified 1960s/70s design.

What were the reasons behind using bent ply for the early pieces?

The choice of timber as a material was both influenced by Jack Pritchard's love of plywood, and his view that tubular steel, the choice material of Breuer and the Bauhaus, would not work in Britain. He believed it was too cold and modern for the British, who preferred wood and even then, only particular woods. This explains why early Venesta, Isokon and Aalto furniture was stained dark; the light birch ply was just too modern and radical. Tubular steel therefore would be a tougher sell still.

Previous: Long chair, designed by Marcel Breuer (1902-81) for Isokon Furniture Company, 1936. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Right: Isokon classic chairs, photograph courtesy of Isokon Plus. Over page: The Penguin Donkey Bookcase or magazine rack, designed by Egon Riss and Jack Pritchard for Isokon Ltd, 1939. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

