

THE FIRST DESIGNER HONOURED

You might say that Frederick Ward's relation to the humble Australian table and chair is as Kingsford Smith's to Australian aviation or John Flynn's to Australian medicine.

When the youngest profession, Industrial Design, recently decided to make an annual honour award to one of its most distinguished members, the choice of a first recipient could not have given much difficulty. Frederick Ward was practising industrial design in Melbourne 15 years before a course in the subject was inaugurated at any technical college. He was the first pioneer. More important, he was, and still is, good.

In the early 1930's furniture making was the very least Australian art or craft. The choice offered the public was between a treacly-stained and highly suspect period "reproduction" and an assortment of packing cases padded with felt and covered with the richest rainbow effects of which Genoa velvet can be capable - which is quite bright.

Ward added a third choice : good design. He introduced then practically all the essential principles of the best Australian furniture of today : functional form (but without dogmatic functionalism, thank you), the use of good Australian materials wherever possible (what wonderful, unknown Australian timbers he discovered, like Raspberry Jam wood from West Australia), respect for the nature of all materials, and suspicion of all ornament. To all this he added, more personally and positively, a natural sense of reposeful proportions.

He arrived at a state of mastery over the techniques he was using after a long disciplined climb through painting, drawing, patterning, cartooning, illustrating, designing, to the actual making of furniture. Later he headed Myer's design studio in Melbourne. Then for years he was University Designer at the A. N. U. Now he is back in private practice. Practically every sophisticated domestic interior in Australia today owes something to Ward's solitary gentle persuasion a generation ago in the 'thirties.

The award of his profession was given to him last night. It is called the **Essington Lewis Award** after the first chairman of the **Industrial Design Council of Australia**. It was presented by the Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr. J. McEwan. It is dedicated "to those responsible for raising industrial design standards in Australia". The symbol - inevitably called an Oscar - is a decorative stainless steel mantelpiece-size piece by Stuart Devlin.

Looking back now on Ward's designs of thirty and more years ago they appear anachronistic, almost unbelievably far ahead of the general run of furniture of their time.

Conversely, his design in 1964 looks conservative - almost reactionary compared with the boldest and newest experiments in fibre glass and steel. This is only because his ideas and work have maintained throughout his career the unwavering continuity of a craftsman or artist who long ago formulated a working philosophy and since has had no reason to doubt it.

As unassuming and uncomplicated as his designs, Frederick Ward still radiates the enjoyment of life and creative work and the hatred of only one thing in the world : timber stain.
