

TIMES
SIR GORDON RUSSELL

Pioneer work in furniture and industrial design

Sir Gordon Russell, CBE, MC, RDI, FSIA, died yesterday at the age of 86. With his death Britain has lost her last surviving pioneer of modern design, a pioneer not only of modern furniture, the field in which he made a world-wide reputation, but of design in industry at large.

Although himself a craftsman and a profound believer in handwork ("the only way to keep a sense of proportion," he used to say "is to work for a few hours each week with one's hands"), he was the most articulate and convinced champion of designing for the machine in the age of the machine. As he once wrote: "there is a job for the hand and a job for the machine" but no one could be more scathingly or through ignorance confused the two and tried to reproduce by machine things originally designed to be made by hand. "Are we to admire things," he asked, "because they are beautiful or because they are old? The doctrine that nothing is beautiful unless it is old has created an army of swindlers, whose artful work may in time even bring discredit on the lovely craftsmanship which they attempt to imitate."

Fortunately he lived long enough to see his early battles largely won; to find himself, who had so long been the target for misunderstanding and even abuse in commercial circles, honoured and emulated far beyond his own industry; to see his place in the history of design fully secure and recorded; to watch the Council of Industrial Design, which he had so imaginatively directed for twelve of his late middle years, grow into a national institution with an international reputation.

No list of honours and appointments can do justice to a man who so modestly but so fundamentally changed the outlook of his contemporaries on what should be demanded of things in every day use; or who so singlemindedly fought to raise the quality of English life. His friends and colleagues and disciples will remember him above all for his generosity; his wisdom; his humour; his wide knowledge; his extraordinary humanity, which made the humblest feel needed; his constant concern for young people; his sure eye for quality; his love of the countryside; and his almost puritan addiction to work coupled with his enviable pleasure in leisure. He was as fond of good food as of good wine, his taste for the latter having contributed over the years many an empty bottle to the reinforcement of the retaining walls of his garden's terraces, most of which, together with various extensions to his house, he had built with his own hands.

Few men can have lived so many full lives simultaneously—or for that matter consecutively—and few can have enjoyed so secure and happy a base as Kingcombe, the remarkable Cotswold house and garden overlooking Chipping Campden which he and his wife together slowly created over half a century and which is now a rare monument to a fine judge of good work, a great innovator, a great countryman, but above all a great artist-craftsman whose hands were never idle.

This it was with special shock and sorrow, but also with humble admiration, that his friends had to watch the fatal progress of the muscular atrophy which gradually incap-

acitated and finally killed him, but which he and his devoted wife Toni bore with astonishing fortitude and cheerfulness. Two incidents during his last months will never be forgotten by those who witnessed them: his farewell paper to the Royal Society of Arts, given under the simple title "skill" to perhaps the largest audience ever assembled under that roof; and the staging of a mini-Convocation of the Royal College of Art, complete with robes, at Kingcombe, so that he might receive in person his well earned Honorary Doctorate of the R.C.A.

Sydney Gordon Russell, the eldest son of the late S. B. Russell of Snowhill in Gloucestershire, was born in London on May 20, 1892 but was brought up in the Cotswolds which were to become the most formative influence in his life. He lived as a boy in Broadway where his parents owned the famous Lygon Arms inn, but was educated over the hill at the Grammar School, in Campden, where he came under the spell of C. R. Ashbee and his Campden Guild of craftsmen; indeed the Cotswolds at that time were, in the wake of William Morris, still the centre for much creative activity by many distinguished artist craftsmen.

It was inevitable that the young Gordon Russell should have been stirred by their invention just as he was impressed by his father's love of old furniture and of traditional stone building. Already before the First World War he was working in his father's furniture repair shop behind the Lygon Arms and it was natural that he should return there full of ideas for creating something new with traditions that were old. But first he had to suffer and survive four years in the trenches with the Worcestershire Regiment from which he emerged commissioned, wounded and decorated (MC), the full misery of which he was to describe most movingly in his autobiography.

Soon after the war he started designing and making his own furniture in his father's workshop and thus founded the firm that bears his name. At the start his designs were much influenced by the English Arts and Crafts Movement being primarily meant for hand production, but gradually he became more interested in larger contracts and eventually in selling to a wider public first through his own showrooms in Broadway and London and then through selected retailers—the famous Good Furnishing Group of the late 1930s. By this time he had already gained much experience of quantity production through his association with Frank Murphy and E. J. Power, the pioneer manufacturers of well designed radio sets whose cabinets were made by Gordon Russell in a factory at Park Royal to the designs of his younger brother R. D. Russell.

After a difficult start, the 1920s and 1930s were years of continuous expansion for Gordon Russell's furniture, but his great contribution was that in an industry that was continuously lowering its standards in search of mass markets he maintained a reasonable price only that level of quality and design that could satisfy his own conscience. In these years too he learned some of the problems of retailing and as a director with his brother, Don Russell, of a thriving and enlarged Lygon Arms, something of the power to be exerted on suppliers by the bulk purchaser or contract buyer. At the same time through his interest in the Design and

Industries Association he began taking on more and more speaking and writing and proselytizing in the cause of good design, all of which was admirably preparing him for his future directorship of the as yet unthought-of Council of Industrial Design.

But first he had to survive another war and the closing of his London showrooms, the fire-bombing of his Broadway ones, the selling of his Park Royal factory and the turning over of his Broadway one to the manufacture of ammunition boxes and parts of RAF Mosquitoes: But, as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner has written, it meant a widening of Gordon Russell's range of activity in perfect continuation of the direction which led him to the Murphy and the Good Furnishing enterprises. He joined the committee at the Board of Trade under the chairmanship of Sir Charles Tennyson that led to the production of the excellent but ill-named wartime Utility Furniture.

From 1943-47 Russell was chairman of the BoI Design Panel and thus a powerful if controversial educational force in the British Furniture industry. This too made him a natural choice for membership of the Council of Industrial Design formed in 1944 and for the Directorship three years later, from which he retired in 1959, having successfully launched The Design Centre for British Industries in Haymarket.

Conventional retirement was of course quite out of the question for someone of his vigour and distinction, since he was instantly co-opted onto diverse boards and bodies concerned with design and production such as the Design Panel of the British Railways Board, the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design, Morton Sundour Ltd, Edinburgh Weavers Ltd and Cockade Ltd, of the last two of which he was for a while chairman. Indeed he was a member at one time or another of the governing body of almost every organization concerned with the arts and design including the Royal Society of Arts, the Royal College of Art, the Design and Industries Association, the Arts Council, the British Council's Fine Arts Committee, the Royal School of Needlework.

He was given an honorary degree by Birmingham University, an honorary Fellowship by the Royal College of Art, Honorary Associateship and Honorary Fellowship by the Royal Institute of British Architects and Honorary Associateship by the Institute of Landscape Architects. He was a Member and past Master of the Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry, a past Master of the Art Workers' Guild, the first Fellow of the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers, a Vice-President of the Consumers' Association, Chairman of the original Postage Stamps Advisory Committee and a member of the Bank of England's Bank Note Design Committee. He was also first chairman of the Crafts Council of Great Britain.

In 1947 he was appointed CBE, in 1955 created a Knight Bachelor. He was also honoured by the Kings of Norway and Sweden and by the RSA which gave him its gold Albert Medal in 1962 "for services to industrial design". He wrote many popular books on design and furniture and his autobiography *Designer's Trade* was published in 1968.

In 1921 he married Constance Elizabeth Jane Vere ("Tom"), daughter of Dr F. A. V. Denning of Sligo, by whom he had three sons and one daughter.