

“ Let’s keep them functional
 shaped for purpose pleasant to feel looking quiet
 with guts cheerful
 picked out with roses?
 ough
 nor encrusted with cherubims
 dust and death
 this is life
 what about space light and colour.”

— Gerald Summers, 1933

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By LEONORA PETROU

IN THE PRECEDING WORDS the British designer Gerald Summers outlined his vision for his designs in the first brochure for his firm, Makers of Simple Furniture. With simple, sculptural forms Summers captured the zeitgeist of a decade. Internationally recognized, his work placed Britain at the forefront of modern design in the 1930s.

In the years that followed World War I, England changed dramatically. As the large British estates broke up, a burgeoning middle class began to fill the cities. Living spaces were smaller, and domestic help was no longer available. Sum-



Gerald Summers and Makers of Simple Furniture

mers responded to the mood of the time with simple, practical, and versatile furniture made in pale wood to reflect the sunlight. In less than ten years he devel-

oped more than one hundred designs and completed many private commissions. He also notably worked with architect Oliver

Designed in the 1930s, Gerald Summers’s Cocktail Bar Stool, like much of the furniture by Makers of Simple Furniture, is constructed of white-polished birch plywood—with a black-polished footrest and a black linoleum-covered seat.

Falvey Hill to furnish the Modernist Show House at the Frinton Park Estate in Frinton-on-Sea and with Jack Pritchard, founder of Isokon. His furniture was offered through select



The D-End desk was designed by Summers, 1930s. Constructed of selected birch plywood and finished in white polish, it was available with the five graduated locking drawers on either right or left and open shelves, a cupboard, or an open space in the curved end.

The D-End desk, Curved Back (CB) chair, and a Summers cigarette box in a photo of c. 1935.

The CB chair, 1930s, in birch plywood with later upholstery.

retailers in the United Kingdom and the United States. Then he fell, more or less, into obscurity. His body of work is only now being rediscovered and appreciated anew.

The son of a widowed Presbyterian missionary in North Africa, Summers was educated at the London Missionary Society's School for the Sons and Orphans of Missionaries, later known as Eltham College, a boarding school in England. On leaving school at age sixteen he began an apprenticeship at the engineering firm of Ruston and Proctor, which, interestingly, also produced molded plywood fuselages for airplanes. In 1916, although underage, he enlisted in World War I and was sent as a Sapper to the Somme where he dug trenches and laid mines.

Summers's childhood years and experiences in the war had a profound effect and led to fundamental changes in his way of thinking and his principles for living; he turned away from his rigorous Presbyterian upbringing and decided to trust in his own judgment, nurturing the desire to build a different world. A December 1986 interview with his widow, Marjorie, records that it was at this time that an interest in wood began.

In 1926 Summers joined Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company, a progressive company re-



sponsible for the world's first advertised radio broadcasts, and while working there suggested to his co-worker Marjorie Amy Butcher—later his wife—that he make some simple plywood furniture for her flat similar to designs he had constructed for himself. By 1929 the couple had moved to a basement flat in the artistic and literary hub of Fitzrovia near the British Museum; by day they worked at Marconi and then spent their evenings designing and making. The challenge Summers set himself was to create simple,

B/W PHOTO: COURTESY OF WILLIAM SUMMERS

minimal shapes, considering first the function, then the material, and finally the form, a formula he believed led to rightness of design, in which "sight too will be satisfied." Both he and his wife embraced humanism, a system of thought centering on human values and abilities rather than on religious beliefs, and their workshop soon became a meeting place for like-minded thinkers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and W. H. Auden.

One evening a passing gentleman mistook a display of finished pieces in the basement window for a showroom, knocked on the door, and asked if they could "make something like that for me." He returned the next day with £100 for them to begin work (at the time the average home cost £600). That led to many commissions for the wholesale fashion house Rose and Blairman, which had been founded in the 1920s. (The gentleman was Mr. Rose.) George Val Myer, architect of the nearby BBC Broadcasting House, was also an early customer.

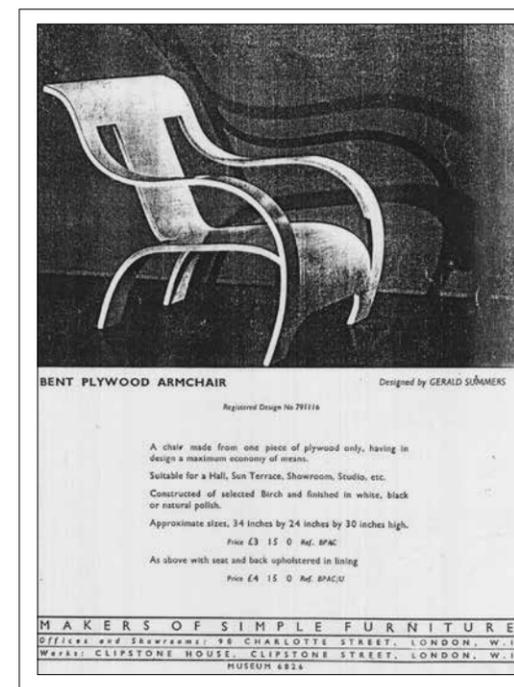
From these small beginnings the business quickly grew. By 1931 Summers had completed a small inventory of furniture, and the couple registered the name Makers of Simple Furniture at Companies House. As Marjorie explained to Martha Deese in their December 1986 interview, "it was simple furniture, you see, and we were makers of it." The first listing for Makers of Simple Furniture in the London telephone directory appeared in February 1932.

Summers became a member of the DIA (Design and Industry Association), a splinter group that had grown out of the arts and crafts movement, feeling that the latter's anti-industrialization stance was counterproductive to two of its core principles: simplicity and truth to materials. The DIA's founding purpose was to "improve all the things we live with and use" by applying "sound design" and "just the appropriate shaping

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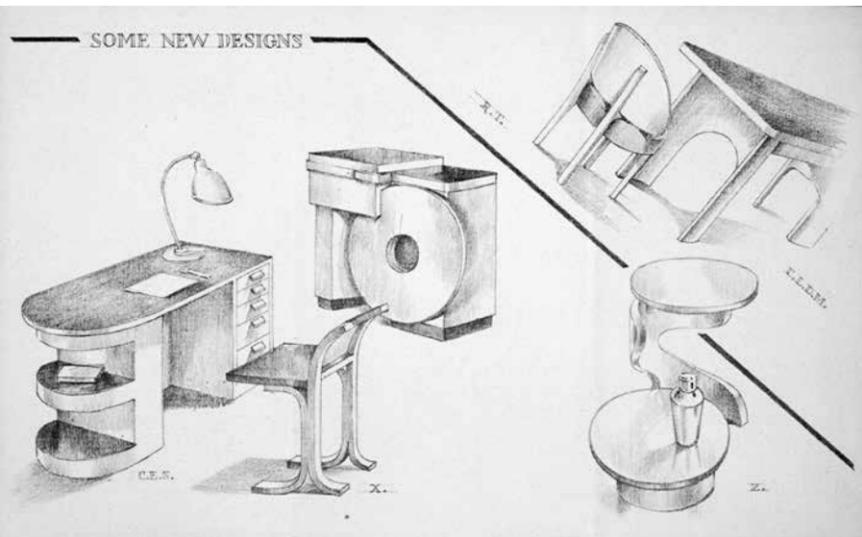
being rediscovered



Advertising sheet for the Bent Plywood Armchair (BPAC), c. 1934, sent to the press and clients.

Registered as design no. 791116, the BPAC, designed in 1933, was most often constructed of white-polished birch plywood. This example with a rare black finish was purchased about 1935 by Wilfred Randolph Brown for The Chase, his art deco house on the Wirral peninsula in northwestern England.





Marketing leaflet designed by Summers c. 1938, showing a variety of “new” designs.

Summers’s rectangular dining table, 1930s, is also constructed of selected birch plywood and finished with a white polish; on this example the top is covered in heat-resistant black Traffolyte, but it was also offered with white Traffolyte.

and finish for the thing required.” The philosophy and purpose of the DIA so clearly enunciated the mood of the times that in 1933 the BBC broadcast a series of programs (which it also printed weekly in *The Listener*) by well-known designers such as Wells Coates and Gordon Russell, a former president of the DIA.

Knowledge of MSF was initially spread by word of mouth. Both Gerald and Marjorie resigned from Marconi in 1933. By 1934 they were producing illustrated advertising sheets, which were sent to the press and clients, and by 1936 they were represented by the major

retailers of modern furniture in the U.K. and on the East Coast of the United States.

Three of Summers’s iconic designs were produced in the first years: the Bent Plywood Armchair (BPAC), the High Back Chair (HBC), and the L-shaped Book Units. The sculptural BPAC simply achieved what others across Europe and Scandinavia had been striving for with limited success; for example Alvar Aalto’s No. 31 armchair had to be modified with bracing, which Summers declared was alien to his beliefs. In a critique of plywood furniture published in the June 1935 issue of *Design for To-day*, he wrote: “In pure design we expect each part and member to pull its full weight in making the design suitable for its purpose. That is to say...if we use a brace only to strengthen two members the design is bad.” The BPAC was made from a single rectangle of plywood with four lengthwise and two lateral cuts, brushed with glue, and laid in a mold overnight. One client’s concern about the chair’s durability led to an “environmental” test in which it was soaked with water and left in a warm, damp place for a number of weeks. It passed, and Summers reg-



istered the design at the London Patent Office in the spring of 1934.

The High Back Chair also came into being in 1934. With significant presence yet almost weightless (of 1.5 mm airplane ply) the back spreads from a tight curve at the base, constrained by the shape of the seat, to a flexible, gentle sweep at the top. This variable curve is significant historically as it predates the multidirectional curves used by Charles and Ray Eames in the 1940s.

In the same year, Summers achieved a Mondrian-like perfection with his L-shaped bookshelves. The module has asymmetric internal dimensions, and a group can be arranged as a

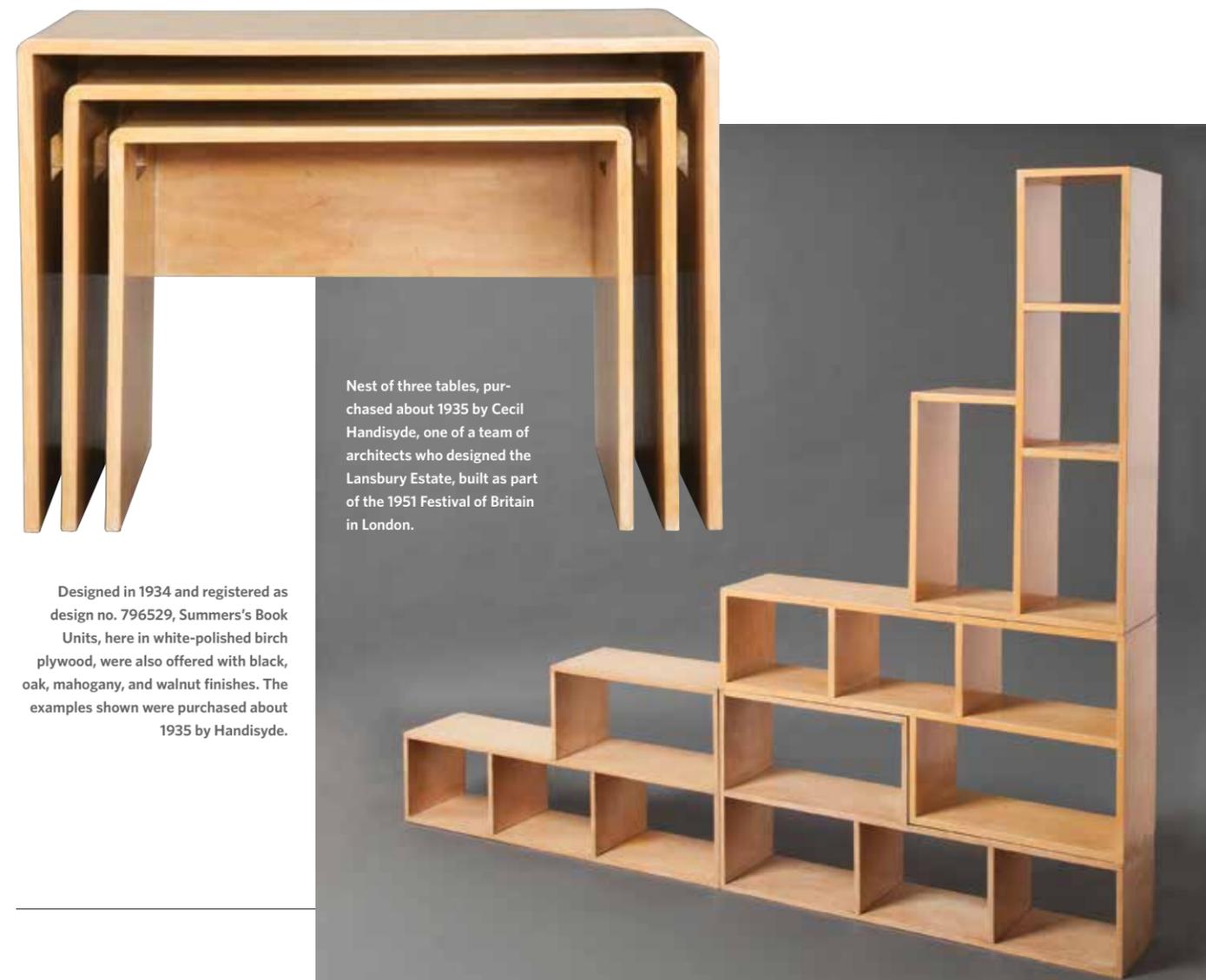
By 1936 Makers of Simple

Furniture was represented by major retailers

of modern furniture

block or provide an exciting silhouette—while offering different shaped spaces for books and objects. This modular design is quite unlike any other before or since, and beautifully illustrates Summers’s interdependence of form and function.

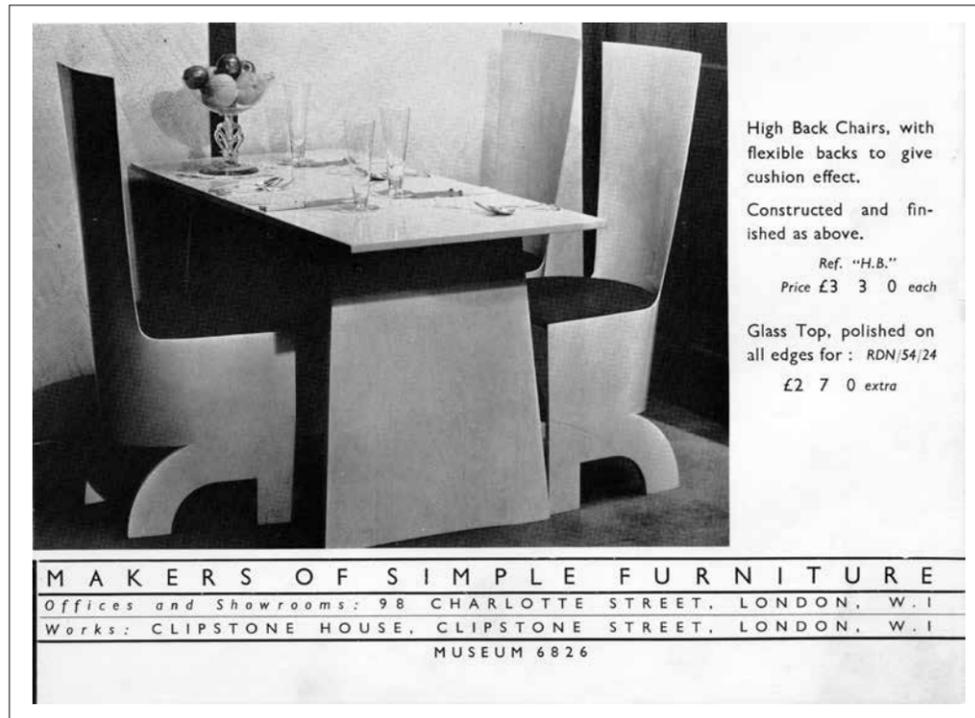
In 1936 Summers exhibited at the *Everyday Things* exhibition organized by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), where five



Nest of three tables, purchased about 1935 by Cecil Handisyde, one of a team of architects who designed the Lansbury Estate, built as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain in London.

Designed in 1934 and registered as design no. 796529, Summers’s Book Units, here in white-polished birch plywood, were also offered with black, oak, mahogany, and walnut finishes. The examples shown were purchased about 1935 by Handisyde.

Promoted in a Makers of Simple Furniture advertising sheet, the High Back Chair (HBC), was designed in 1934.



of the seven illustrated works in the exhibition catalogue were his designs. As a firm, MSF also exhibited at the Piano Exhibition sponsored by Duncan Miller, a leading London furniture firm, where they displayed a music sitting room presenting ten of Summers's furniture designs. These exhibitions led to greater public awareness of the company and further private interior schemes were commissioned.

Summers, who had moved to larger premises in nearby Charlotte Street in the first half of 1933, preferred to make furniture to order in his workshop. There he employed a dozen craftsmen, who could modify the dimensions or finish of a design to suit the needs of the client. He remained passionate in his modernist principles, while also recognizing the creative force that must ultimately contribute to perfect design, as he wrote in *Design for*

To-day in February 1935: "the unconscious is allowed to come in and contribute to the work of the conscious. Surely it is by such a process, that rare and lovely thing, a pure design is born. No mistaking its freshness and power. When first we see it, our selves leave us and go out to it."

Gerald Summers's designs encompassed more than furniture, including a huge variety of household necessities from waste paper cylinders to cigarette and stationery boxes to lighting and mirrors. But in all his designs can be seen the same thoughtful response to the proposal. Each is created with extreme simplicity and truth to materials, but we can always see the "creative force" of the unconscious that lifts Summers's designs into a higher sphere. The 1930's term "beautility" could have been coined to describe any one of these.

As a consequence of World War II, materials became scarce and after a decade of spectacular creativity, MSF was forced to close. Summers, practical, painstaking, and with a love of problem solving, refitted the workshop to his own

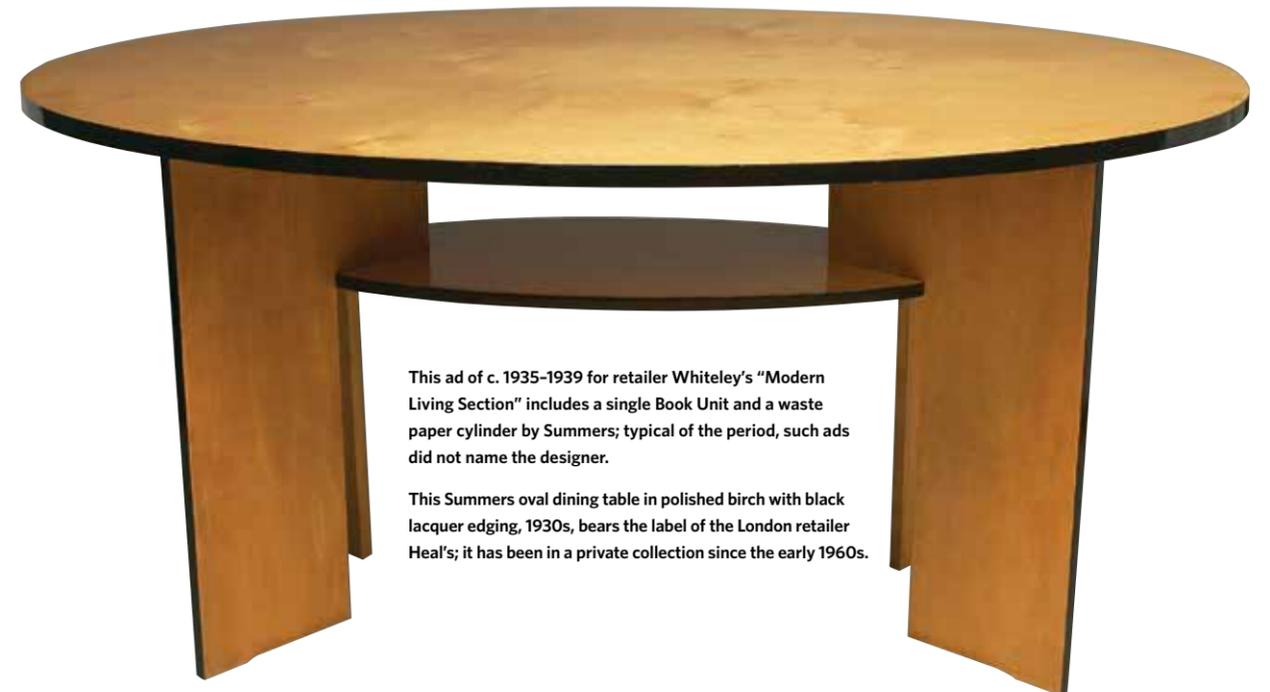
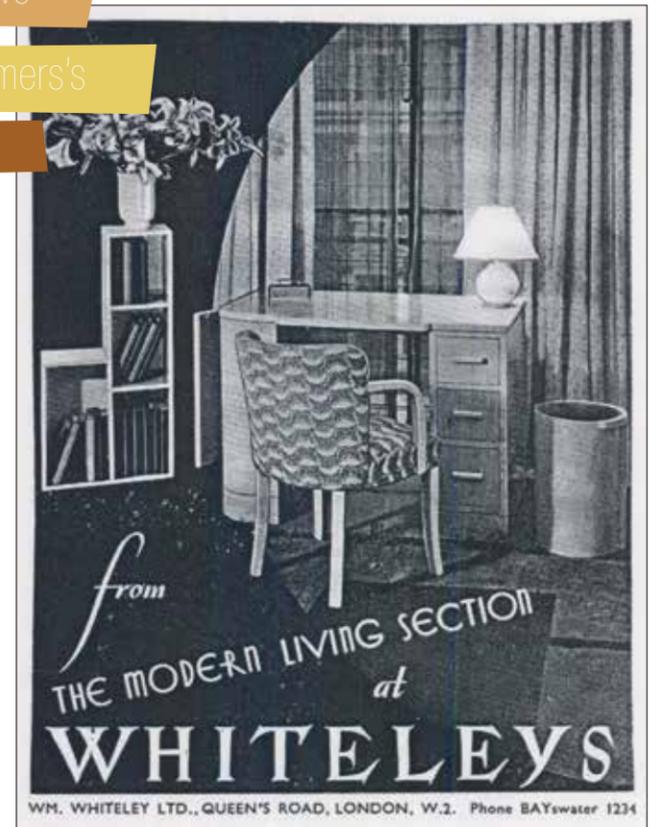


We can always see the "creative force" of the unconscious that lifts Summers's designs into a higher sphere

design for the sorting of ball bearings (the company exists to this day). Gerald died in 1967 and his wife some thirty years later.

The work of Gerald Summers is always greatly appreciated when exhibited, and the widely recognized designs such as the BPAC, Book Units, and the High Back Chair engender a great deal of interest at auction. He is represented at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. However, the full range of his design work is yet to be widely appreciated; he has yet to take his rightful place as one of the most brilliant designers of the modern era, and as a voice of his generation. M

Martha Deese's "Gerald Summers and Makers of Simple Furniture," *Journal of Design History* (1992), was invaluable to this study of Summers.



This ad of c. 1935-1939 for retailer Whiteley's "Modern Living Section" includes a single Book Unit and a waste paper cylinder by Summers; typical of the period, such ads did not name the designer.

This Summers oval dining table in polished birch with black lacquer edging, 1930s, bears the label of the London retailer Heal's; it has been in a private collection since the early 1960s.