Although the fervour of the 1950s for modern design in furniture subsided, the following years saw a continued interest in design, as reflected in the ABC television series *Design in Australia* (1961), which was hosted by Robin Boyd, and exhibitions such as *Melbourne Design 62*, held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1962. John Reed's Museum of Modern Art of Australia was renamed the Museum of Modern Art and Design of Australia in 1963, reflecting a dual interest in contemporary visual art and design in all forms.

In 1959, Max Hutchinson opened Gallery A in the showrooms of his shop-fitting and furniture-manufacturing business in Flinders Lane. His friend Clement Meadmore, who saw himself as 'an artist with a strong interest in design' and Max as 'a designer and craftsman with a strong interest in art',[59] encouraged the venture as a collaboration in cross-disciplinary creativity. In addition to mounting a range of innovative and groundbreaking visual art exhibitions – including an exhibition of the art of Bauhaus artist Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack – the program at Gallery A promoted design. A range of commercial furniture designed by both Meadmore and Hutchinson was also produced under the Gallery A label. Part of a small series that was exhibited at Gallery A in 1964, Janet Dawson's unique coffee table was characteristic of the interdisciplinary activities that Hutchinson's venture prompted and an inspiring example of art meeting design. Commissioned by local company Laminex to create a range of coffee tables using its famous product, Dawson designed the tables – which acknowledge the hard-edge style of painting popular at the time, making specific reference to Jasper Johns's late 1950s target paintings – that were attached to simple steel legs manufactured by Hutchinson.

In 1938 an *Australian Home Beautiful* writer noted that modern furniture was still in the experimental stage and asked,

> Where will it lead us? Where will we find a great artist-designer, who will gather together our ragged ideas of modernism and functionalism, sort them out, ally them with art and grace of line, and from our wonderful assortment of materials produce a style of furniture worthy to be remembered …?'[60]

The answer came in the form of the avalanche of modern furniture – innovative in its use of materials, functional and often imbued with a good dose of style – that was designed and manufactured in Australia in the decades following the Second World War. The local furniture industry was transformed during this period; the postwar desire to live differently and better, borne of a combination of practical necessity and the prevailing optimism of the period, coincided with the development of new materials and manufacturing processes and saw the emergence of a flourishing industry and market for contemporary furniture. The simultaneous recognition of industrial design as a profession encouraged a new breed of young designers schooled in the principles of good design and eager to make their mark by harnessing the possibilities of new technologies. Indicative of this transformation is the contrast between the order for 500 relatively simple wooden chairs that Fler received in 1948, just two years after its establishment, that represented a huge undertaking, and the ability of Lowen's later company Tessa to export in vast quantities to Europe and Asia in the early 1970s. That the years between 1945 and the mid 1970s produced so many classic designs is shown by the fact that, while a handful are still in production today, there remains an active collectors' market for the type of furniture that is characterised by the work of Featherston, Fler, Meadmore and Snelling – each of them models of function, material and style, and still modern today.

(above)
Gallery A label

(right)
Contemporary interior, Melbourne 2014
on wall, left to right:
Dana Harris, *Wallform* 2002
Clement Meadmore, *Split ring* 1972
Peter Atkins, *1000 tablets* 2012
foreground, left to right:
Mimih spirits by Jennifer Wurrkidj,
Hamish Karrkarrhba and Paul Namulumo

INFLUENCES AND PARALLELS

THE EARLY INDUSTRIAL DESIGN OF CLEMENT MEADMORE

PETER ATKINS

The reputation of Clement Meadmore as a major figure in international sculpture is well documented. However, Meadmore also maintained a successful parallel practice throughout the 1950s as an innovative industrial designer. A 1953 catalogue titled 'A Collection of Furniture by Meadmore Originals' documents thirteen Meadmore designs described as a 'steadily increasing range of contemporary furniture … representing the best in Australian design and satisfying the need for furniture up to present overseas standards and at a reasonable price'.[1] The range was sold through the Meadmore Originals store at 86 Collins Street, Melbourne, and among other items included his iconic corded dining chair, stools in various heights, a corded lounge recliner with detachable headrest, a dining table, various coffee tables and a modular bookshelf, as well as a series of small lamps with hand-pleated paper shades.

Clement Lyon Meadmore was born in Melbourne on 9 February 1929. He attended Scotch College where he stayed only one year, according to his sister, 'because he was not a sporty type and was constantly bullied … he preferred drawing'.[2] He moved to Geelong College where he became a boarder, returning home on weekends. One of Meadmore's main interests throughout this time was constructing model aeroplanes, and after completing high school he enrolled in aeronautical engineering at Preston Technical College in 1946. His brother Roger recalled, 'I think it was the shapes of the aircraft that appealed to him … but when the reality of the amount of maths and physics sunk in he dropped out of the course'.[3] He then studied industrial design at Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT University), from 1948–9. The course included a weekly class in sculpture and Meadmore

> made his first pieces – carved wooden V shapes tautly strung with wire – while completing his Industrial Design studies. After graduation, he embarked on the beginner's familiar path, making sculpture in his spare time while engaged in more lucrative pursuits – in his case those of an industrial designer – during the day.[4]

There is a paucity of information relating to the first designs that Meadmore produced. However, according to an early magazine article from 1952, 'His first attempts to develop furniture were hand-made in June 1951. The local blacksmith doing the welding in his workshop. Meadmore says that his design style was inspired by American and Italian examples'.[5]

Meadmore's *Corded chair*, 1952, with a simple frame made of bent steel rod, welded together and painted black, over which was woven a thin

(previous)
Antonia Blaxland
Dining alcove of Peter Blaxland's flat, Elizabeth Bay 1953
Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney

(right)
Clement Meadmore
Dining suite 1952 (detail)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

cotton sash cord to form the seat and backrest, has since become a modern Australian classic. With its sophisticated use of line and space, and overall elegant appearance, the chair went on to win the Good Design Award presented by the Society of Interior Designers, Sydney, in 1953. It is described in the Meadmore Originals catalogue as 'the best known piece in the range – combining a lightness of appearance with great strength and comfort, due to the individual supporting action of each cord'.[6]

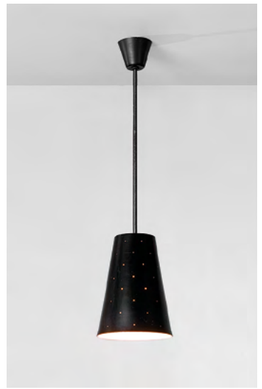
What sets Meadmore and many of his fellow Australian designers apart from their international counterparts is that, in order to achieve similar aesthetic outcomes, they were driven by different constraints and objectives. Both design and construction were governed by engineering limitations, such as a lack of comparative cabinet-making skills, as well as constraints imposed by the lack of raw materials and new technologies after the war. Much of Meadmore's early design work seems to be defined by a sense of 'making do', a tendency influenced in part by postwar conditions. The thirteen pieces advertised in the Meadmore Originals catalogue were made using simple, readily available materials, including steel rod, sash cord, canvas, leather, glass and plywood. It is a testament to Meadmore's superior design and problem-solving skills that he was able to overcome these material limitations during this period and produce such an astonishingly complex and resolved body of work.

This ethos was continued in Meadmore's 1975 book *How to Make Furniture without Tools*. In it he developed 'The System', which cleverly used standard 8 foot by 4 foot sheets of plywood, cut down into simple rectangular elements, to construct various chairs, stools, sofas, tables and desks. Influenced by the Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld's revolutionary furniture from the 1920s, these pieces could be easily constructed from a 'virtual kit of parts … without the use of tools … and no skills beyond the ability to use a tape measure with reasonable accuracy'.[7] It is interesting to note that more than twenty years prior to this, the top of his Meadmore Originals dining table was perfectly measured at 4 feet by 2 feet 6 inches, so as to get three tabletops out of one sheet of standard 8 foot by 4 foot plywood, optimising the potential of the available material to the last millimetre. Nothing went to waste in frugal, postwar Australia.

While Meadmore began his career as an industrial designer, it is clear that he had an equally strong inclination towards art. Meadmore said that the first sculptures he made were inspired by Mondrian, 'trying to do what he did but in three dimensions'.[8] His source was a copy of Mondrian's writings, bought in the late 1940s. Given Meadmore's 'interest in the linear possibilities of steel rod and suspended planes in space',[9] it is tempting to see his early design in the same light as his sculpture, especially if you consider the formal qualities of the black linear steel rod he favoured as the primary structural device for his furniture. These rods often intersect and at structural points often come to abrupt T junctures. The corded seats and backrests in red, yellow and white provide flat planes of colour that seem to hover over these black Mondrian-like linear structures.

As early as 1953, Meadmore was becoming dissatisfied with his design practice. This was due in part to a dispute over royalty payments for the production of his *Corded chair*. As his brother recounted:

> He had expected payment of 1 pound stg. royalty on each [Corded chair], never received it and

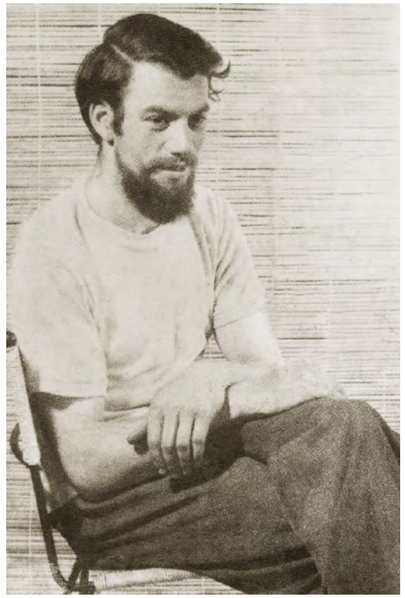


(left)
Clement Meadmore
Calyx pendant lamp c.1955
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne

(above)
Clement Meadmore
Light for the Legend Espresso and Milk Bar c.1956
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne

(right)
Clement Meadmore
Pair of Calyx standard lamps c.1953
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

(overleaf)
Clement Meadmore
Three-legged plywood chair c.1955
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne



sued unsuccessfully for breach of contract; he recalls a judgement that the chair was not original but had been copied from an American magazine … and that the defendant later bragged he'd made a fortune from the Meadmore chair.[10]

This event was probably the catalyst for Meadmore's decision to abandon his industrial design practice at this point. Two references written for the young Meadmore prior to his first trip abroad in May 1953 by R. Haughton James, an English-born industrial designer and president of the Society of Designers for Industry in Melbourne, provide a valuable insight into Meadmore's future direction. In the first reference to Gordon Russell, chairman of the Council of Industrial Design in London, James wrote that Meadmore was

> a chap who has had the temerity to originate and market a quite brilliant range of contemporary furniture here in Australia, an enterprise which he has found in his heart to abandon because he feels the need to get abroad to learn.[11]

In the second to Milner Gray, director of the Design Research Unit in London, he said Meadmore was

> one of those gifted people who apply themselves with equal brilliance to almost anything they take on and already has a marked success in design enterprises, which, in effect, he is abandoning so as to get what he feels he needs in the way of experience abroad … I think you will find him an unusual and rewarding chap.[12]

This visit to Europe, where he encountered first-hand the art and design he had only previously seen in books and magazines, was a watershed moment for Meadmore and most likely cemented his desire to become a sculptor. Eric Gibson writes:

> A turning point of sorts came in 1953 when, on a visit to Belgium, he saw an outdoor exhibition of modern sculpture at Middelheim Park, in Antwerp. The experience moved him to buy welding equipment on his return to Melbourne.[13]

Meadmore returned to Australia in 1954 a changed man. At twenty-five years of age he had renewed confidence and a clear ambition towards his future sculptural goals. Over the next decade, before his departure to the United States in 1963, Meadmore continued to forge ahead with his sculptural practice, while simultaneously making his living from design work and commissions. There is no need to distinguish between these two parallel aspects of his practice during the remainder of the 1950s, as neither was more dominant than the other. However, many of his early designs could be considered important transitional pieces when considered in context with his future mature sculptural work.

(left)
Unknown
Clement Meadmore c.1952
Collection of Rosalind Meadmore, Melbourne

(above)
Clement Meadmore
Corded armchair 1952
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

(right)
Meadmore Originals advertisement, *Architecture and Arts*, May 1954

(overleaf, left to right)
Clement Meadmore
Canvas sling chair c.1955
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne

Clement Meadmore
Glass top coffee table c.1952
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne

MICHAEL HIRST
THE VARIATIONS

PETER ATKINS

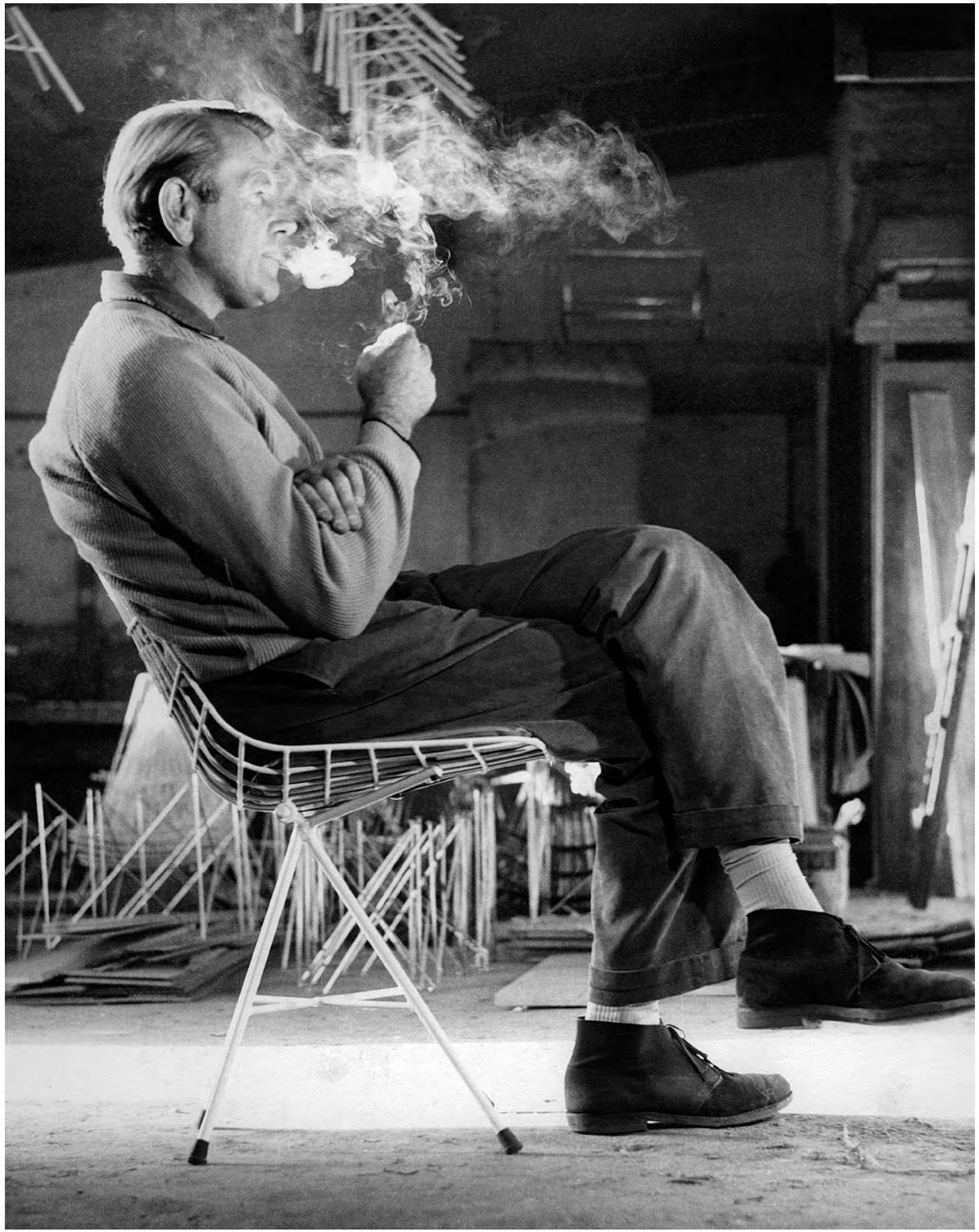
‘I was never in the biggest league like Meadmore or Featherston. I’ve never been a good promoter of myself … perhaps I should have but I didn’t.’
Michael Hirst[1]

Michael Hirst designed and manufactured a range of stylish furniture pieces, including tables, chairs and bookcases, throughout a notable but until now under-recognised career. He was also commissioned to design one-off pieces for clients of well-known contemporary furniture outlets, including Andersons and Georges in Melbourne, and for the interior designer Marion Hall Best in Sydney. His designs were sold across Australia through leading contemporary home-interior stores of the day and advertised in major design journals in the 1950s and 1960s.

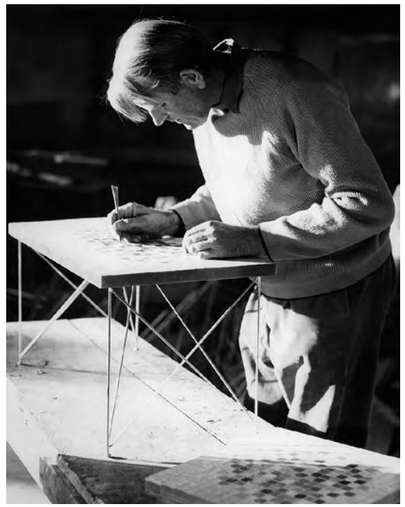
Two of the more fascinating pieces of Hirst’s early output are his collaborations with Clement Meadmore: a wire-framed all-purpose chair known as the *DC 601A chair*, 1957, and a wire-base table described by Hirst as the *Meadmore Principle coffee table*. It was manufactured with a variety of tops including linoleum, marble, leather, laminate and, later, mosaic glass tiles imported from Italy, which were painstakingly applied by Hirst himself.

The association between the two men occurred in or around 1956 and it was most likely made through friends, as they shared a common interest in jazz. Melbourne, in the lead-up to the 1956 Olympic Games, was a vibrant city bursting with energy, ideas and optimism. A forward-looking artistic community of musicians, painters, sculptors, architects and designers, eager to embrace new trends and rebel against tradition and the austerity of the war years, shared ideas and exchanged information relating to recent international artistic developments.

Both Hirst and Meadmore had travelled to Europe and the United Kingdom during the early 1950s where they found much inspiration, the influence of the far-reaching and ambitious Festival of Britain in 1951 evident in all aspects of contemporary design.[2] By 1955, Hirst had returned to Melbourne, was married with a new baby and had secured a job with a local furniture-making company, Bambra Cabinets. After nine months, Hirst decided to strike out on his own and opened his first factory in East Hawthorn, designing and manufacturing his own furniture products. According to Joy Hirst,



Unknown
Michael Hirst in his East Hawthorn factory c.1957
Michael Hirst Archive, Melbourne



Michael's widow, he was a workaholic, determined to make a success of his business. He imposed high standards on himself. The nature of his work was labour-intensive and included hand-polishing the marble tops of his tables to ensure absolute perfection.[3]

Clement Meadmore was also back in Melbourne by 1955 with a renewed enthusiasm for his practice. The twenty-six-year-old, twelve years younger than Hirst, had arrived home ready to continue his interest in industrial design, as well as simultaneously develop his fledgling sculptural practice.

By 1956 Meadmore and Hirst were working together on the *Meadmore Principle coffee table*. Constructed with 3/16-inch (5 millimetre) steel wire rod that was nickel- and then brass-plated, the base was much lighter and more delicate in appearance than the heavier ½-inch (12 millimetre) black-painted steel rod favoured by Meadmore prior to his trip to Europe. This table, unlike anything Meadmore had designed up to that point, was in Hirst's words 'a collaboration' between the pair. Asked about his career many years later, Hirst said:

> Other than collaborating with Clement Meadmore on the [*Meadmore Principle*] table … and the aforementioned [*DC 601A*] wire chair, all furniture was designed and manufactured by me. The table was designed c.1955–56 … the mosaic tops were designed by me … [and] Meadmore's basic design for the table I expanded into a number of variations such as square tables and bookcases.[4]

The statement by Hirst that 'all furniture was designed and manufactured by me' is critical to any understanding of the complex association between the two men but, perhaps more importantly, it also sets the foundation for the attribution of other designs that followed the *Meadmore Principle coffee table* and the *DC 601A chair* to Michael Hirst. Hirst's variations were many and varied. Known examples include a large square marble-topped coffee table, tall bedside tables, a series of nesting tables in both teak and marble, a plastic-coated outdoor table with a perforated metal top and, most strikingly, a wire-framed, stackable bookcase known as the *Michael Hirst unit shelves*.

Sharing similar aesthetics, this group of variations was clearly influenced by the original *Meadmore Principle coffee table* collaboration, and used the same brass-plated 3/16-inch steel wire rod as the major structural element. However, through a series of clever changes and simple aesthetic adjustments to the structure of the base, they became new designs. There is no evidence to suggest that Meadmore was involved in the design of any of these products, most of them appearing around 1960, shortly before or soon after he had left Melbourne.[5]

Hirst and Meadmore worked on the *DC 601A chair* in 1957. According to Joy Hirst, Meadmore wanted the chair to have three legs – a design element he had used previously on at least two other chairs – but Hirst convinced him to opt instead for four legs to ensure stability and in order to achieve a more structurally sound base for the attachment of the wire-framed seat. As the manufacturer of both pieces, Hirst collaborated closely with Meadmore to resolve various material and design issues. We will probably never know the extent of the collaboration on the *Meadmore Principle coffee table* or the *DC 601A chair*; however, we do know that Hirst contributed to the design process of both pieces. This probably goes some way to explaining why Hirst felt so comfortable developing his own variations of new, highly resolved products after the initial two designs were marketed.

(left)
Unknown
Michael Hirst applying Italian glass tiles to a table top c.1959
Michael Hirst Archive, Melbourne

(above)
Michael Hirst advertisement, *Australian Home Beautiful*, August 1959

(right)
Clement Meadmore
Michael Hirst
Michael Hirst DC 601A chair 1957
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

(overleaf, left to right)
Michael Hirst
H-Flex chair c.1960
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne

Michael Hirst
H-Flex chair (Skid base) 1969
Michael Hirst Archive, Melbourne

The Hirst variations of the *DC 601A chair* begin with the *H-Flex chair*, 1960. The tapering backrest of the *DC 601A chair* was transformed into a shorter and wider curved back. The base was also redesigned, becoming squarer to help spread the load more efficiently to the external points of the seat base. Hirst also designed a tub or 'carver' version of this chair, in which the wire structure continued up the sides from the base of the seat and flattened out to form armrests, reminiscent of an Eames *Zenith shell chair*. This tub version also came with a star-shaped pedestal base. There was yet another design, constructed with wooden arms that were suspended on metal rods attached to the side of the seat base (although it is unclear whether these last two designs were ever put into production). In 1958, Hirst designed and manufactured the matching *Outdoor table* in plastic-coated metal – it had a circular perforated top with a striking, tapered tripod base – which a contemporary reviewer described as 'logic, combined with excellent selection of materials … a really well-designed piece of outdoor furniture'.[6]

The final variation of the wire chair was designed in 1969 as a commission for the Royal Botanic Gardens cafe in Sydney. Joy Hirst recalled that in order to prevent people from sinking into the ground when they used the chair outdoors, Hirst cleverly redesigned the four legs to form what he termed a 'skid base'. One of Hirst's most popular designs, this chair was manufactured and sold well into the 1980s. Articles in various interior-design magazines of the late 1950s credit Meadmore, who had by then garnered a substantial reputation in Melbourne as a leading young designer (and had won two Good Design Awards), with the design of both the *Meadmore Principle coffee table* and the *DC 601A chair*. Hirst took a back seat on this matter – largely self-taught, he always felt reluctant to call himself a designer and, at that point, was probably content to be known solely as the manufacturer in deference to Meadmore. In later years, however, he happily used the words 'collaboration' and 'co-designed' to describe his work with Meadmore, an acknowledgement of his part in the creation of these pieces. Hirst had enormous respect for Meadmore, and it is clear that the younger man was a major influence on his future design practice. He recalled that Meadmore was

> a purist … inflexible in his belief in what he was doing … this made him strong in character and achievement. I got along very well with him … but he was a strange fellow, very dogmatic … his opinions were the only ones, and by god he was bloody good and he still is … he was pretty contemptuous of most modern taste.[7]

Meadmore and Hirst remained lifelong friends, with Meadmore visiting Hirst on his rare trips back to Australia. Joy Hirst recalled Meadmore's visit to their home in 1999, more than forty years after the men first met:

> They sat together on the lounge for hours, recalling past adventures, both smiling, deep in conversation, clearly at ease in each other's company. It was obvious to me that the two men shared a deep affection and mutual respect for each other.

(above)
Gerard Vandenberg
Michael Hirst (left) and Clement Meadmore (right) with Meadmore Principle coffee table c. 1958
Michael Hirst Archive, Melbourne

(right)
Michael Hirst
Coffee table 1959
Harris/Atkins Collection, Melbourne