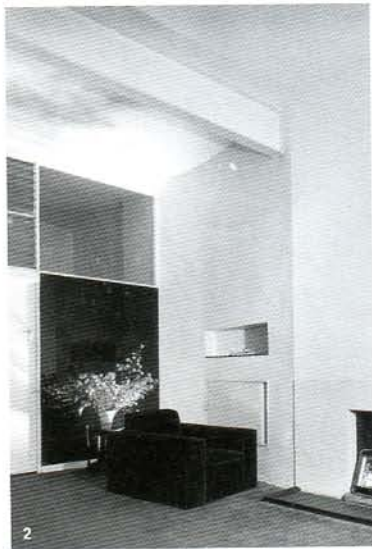




# WHEN MARCEL MET MOTLEY

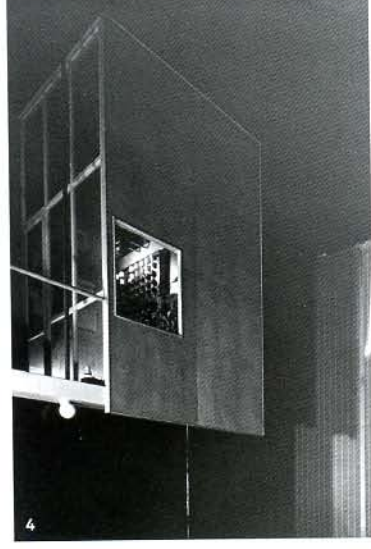
× *When Marcel met Motley*  
Chelsea Space  
Chelsea College of Art & Design  
16 John Islip Street  
London UK  
16 September – 21 October 2006  
[www.chelsea.arts.ac.uk](http://www.chelsea.arts.ac.uk)



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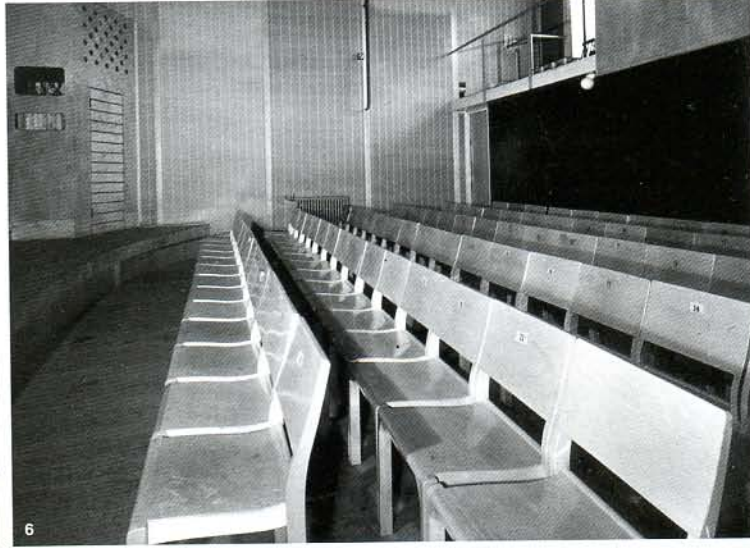
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1 / VIEW FROM THE STAIRCASE AT MOTLEY COUTURE, WITH CARMEN FLEMYNG, WIFE OF THE ACTOR ROBERT FLEMYNG, MODELLING AN OUTFIT.

2 / THE GROUND-FLOOR SHOWROOM AT MOTLEY COUTURE. AN ISOKON STOOL IS JUST VISIBLE BEHIND THE ARMCHAIR.

3 / THE REVOLVING SCREEN IN THE UPSTAIRS DRESSING ROOMS AT MOTLEY COUTURE ENABLED CUSTOMERS TO VIEW THEMSELVES IN FRONT OF A TOWN- OR COUNTRY-SCAPE.

4 / AT THE LONDON THEATRE STUDIO, THE LIGHTING BOX WAS POSITIONED AT THE BACK OF THE AUDITORIUM. THIS POSITION OFFERED A FULL VIEW OF THE STAGE, AND TECHNICIANS WERE ABLE TO REACT INSTANTLY TO THE ACTION UPON IT.

5 + 6 / AALTO'S STACKABLE 611 CHAIRS WERE USED IN THE AUDITORIUM, ALLOWING THE THEATRE TO DOUBLE AS A REHEARSAL SPACE.

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE MARCEL BREUER PAPERS, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

An unexpectedly beguiling contribution to the 4th London Design Festival was an exhibition of mid-1930s British design at the Chelsea College of Art & Design. *When Marcel met Motley* documented the brief collaboration between Bauhaus-trained Hungarian architect and designer Marcel Breuer and three female theatre designers who practised together under the name of Motley.

Elizabeth Montgomery met sisters Sophie and Margaret Harris at art school in the late 1920s, and the trio subsequently developed a novel, pared-down style of theatre design, in response to Modernist influences. "They tried to put on stage only what was necessary to the play," says exhibition co-curator Sophie Jump, "to design costumes which would aid the actors in their work, and to create scenery which would suggest location and period and could be transformed simply and easily."

Breuer had developed modern tubular-steel furniture at the Bauhaus in the mid 1920s. In 1935 he fled from Nazi Germany to Britain, where he immediately formed an architectural partnership and also began working for the newly established Isokon Furniture Company, redesigning his earlier furniture for manufacture in bent plywood. He was commissioned to adapt a chapel for use by the London Theatre Studio (LTS), which opened in 1936.

The LTS was the first British drama school to train theatre designers, in addition to actors, technicians and stage managers. There Breuer met the Motley trio, who ran the theatre design course. His flexible and stylish design accommodated two recent theatrical innovations: actors performing in front of the proscenium arch, instead of being confined within the "picture frame" behind it; and lighting directed at the stage from a box at the rear of the auditorium. He

furnished the theatre with Alvar Aalto's stackable 611 chairs, which allowed it to double up as the school's rehearsal space.

In 1936 Breuer also worked directly for Motley, when Sophie Harris, the trio's costume designer, commissioned him to design the interior for Motley Couture in London. The elegant, minimalist space that he designed for the shop included a staircase that could be transformed into a stage, where models paraded dresses. In the upstairs fitting room, he installed a revolving screen, which enabled customers to view themselves wearing Motley clothes against town or country backdrops.

The exhibition, 70 years later, illuminated an intersection in the paths of these designers from different backgrounds, showcasing their collaboration and their respective legacies in theatre design and interior architecture. COLIN MARTIN