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G Plan: Made in Malta

This landmark exhibition presents the untold story of a collaboration between two pioneering design companies – Gomme Industries, producer of G Plan in the UK, and Joinwell in Malta. The exhibition shines a bright light on our industrial design history and post-war furniture production.

In the 1960s, when it won the licence to produce G Plan products, Joinwell kick-started Malta's industrial design and furniture manufacturing industry. G Plan: Made in Malta features rare and iconic pieces which highlight its timelessness, functionality, and innovation, and tells this story through the themes of design, craftsmanship, process, social history, and culture.

In 1953, Donald Gomme, a designer at E. Gomme Limited, decided to create a modern furniture collection for the entire house which could be acquired piece by piece, as budget allowed. The G Plan brand was born.

G Plan, the Gomme Plan, a plan for living. The term 'G Plan' was coined by Doris Gundry of J. Walter Thompson advertising, and the brand's close relationship with advertising would completely change the way furniture was marketed in the UK. The distinctive brand was dominant in the advertising campaigns seen in British magazines, and G Plan pioneered furniture displays as complete rooms with matching accessories. The range came at a perfect time, when consumers were ready to abandon the dark, heavy, utilitarian furniture of previous decades. G Plan meant attractive, modern, adventurous.

In the aftermath World War II, Joinwell started winning contracts for the repair of war-damaged doors and apertures. Then, in the 1960s, the company struck a deal with E. Gomme Limited, becoming the only licensed manufacturer of G Plan furniture outside of the UK. Joinwell moved swiftly into furniture manufacturing, and flourished, as G Plan pieces gained popularity among locals with an eye for something modern and different. The British influx also bought the brand, which made them feel somewhat at home.

At this time, the local industry consisted mainly of small workshops and carpenters. Joinwell was one of a handful of larger companies and employed the biggest workforce, around 350 people. At its peak, the G Plan production line engaged almost a third of that workforce in the production process, from conversion and assembly to polishing. Raw materials were imported to supply the production line.

Production took up to twelve weeks, and most items were made in batches of ten to twenty pieces. Chairs were produced in the hundreds. At the height of demand, the waiting period was between three and six months, with four trucks delivering G Plan products daily to households across the island.

Machinery in the Joinwell factory differed to the UK, so production processes needed to be adapted to suit the local plant. Whereas G Plan UK used semi-automatic machinery, the Maltese plant was manual and required more handwork.

Timber chair frames were made according to blueprints and stocked in large quantities, foam and fabric cut against the templates provided, and the finished pieces delivered in the chosen finish.

G Plan became known for its innovative designs and approach to filling a home. While customers could choose an entire bedroom or living room, G Plan was very modular, making it appealing to purchase single pieces and combine them with existing ones. Priced at mid-range, G Plan appealed to the middle and upper classes.

Side by side, items produced in the UK and Malta were identical, the only distinction being a line on the tag the latter reading: Designed by E. Gomme Ltd. / Made by Joinwell Ltd.

Fine construction and detail are synonymous with G Plan. For example, dovetail joints in drawers on wooden runners. Drawer fronts were veneered vertically to ensure matching woodgrain when the drawers were split. This careful craftsmanship and quality have stood the test of time and made G Plan highly collectible.

G Plan furniture is still found in many Maltese homes today, some for nostalgia, some for those seeking a modernist or retro aesthetic second-hand. The precision remains impressive, and although the brand's popularity between the 1960s and 80s inspired many reproductions by skilled carpenters, the patented brass fittings and machine-pressed veneers of an original G Plan piece will always set it apart.