

Leo Fender (American, 1909–1991)

George Fullerton (American, 1923–2009)

Freddie Tavares (American, 1913–1990)

Fender Stratocaster Electric Guitar. Designed 1954, this example 1957
Wood, metal, and plastic, 38 x 12¾ x 1¾ in. (96.5 x 32.4 x 4.4 cm)
Committee on Architecture and Design Funds, 2014

One of the most influential instrument designs of the twentieth century, the iconic Stratocaster electric guitar was designed in 1954 by Leo Fender, with engineering assistance from George Fullerton. Fender, a musician and tinkerer, had already pioneered the development of the solid-body electric guitar with his commercially successful Telecaster from 1950. The Stratocaster diverged from the form of its predecessors in its bold profile, which heralded the electric guitar as a wholly new type of instrument. Its space-age form, designed by Fender draftsman Freddie Tavares and unchanged after sixty years of production, was ergonomically sculpted to meld with the player's body. The guitar also boasted a recessed jack to keep amplifier cables out of the way, volume and tone knobs positioned for easy adjustment while playing, and deeper double cutouts for better neck access. Its technical features included three pickups for a bright, glassy sound and a Fender-patented, built-in tremolo arm ("whammy bar"). While originally marketed to country musicians, the Stratocaster's distinct sound and player-friendly design quickly found favor with pop and rock musicians. The model set a new standard for electric-guitar design and performance, and eventually it came to dominate the market.

Before MoMA acquired the Stratocaster in 2014, instruments in the Museum's collection skewed toward the high tech: a digital MIDI-controlled flute; an electric violin; and the Tenori-on, a handheld electronic instrument with a visual interface. These objects suggested the myriad ways design and technology had pushed the musical envelope, but none is an archetype of design in its own right. It was in preparation for a 2015 music-related exhibition of the design collection that prompted the Museum's search for a Stratocaster. The curators sought a vintage model from the golden era of production, at the optimal and most influential state of its design. As the guitar was destined for museum display as an exemplar of its form, it needed to be in excellent cosmetic condition. Finding an instrument with all its original components also posed a challenge, as the modular electronics and bolt-on construction of the Stratocaster made it ripe for custom modification. The Museum located an all-original 1957 Stratocaster, miraculously in near-perfect condition after fifty-eight years. What's more, 1957 was a significant year for the Stratocaster, and for rock and roll: Buddy Holly appeared on television performing his hits "That'll Be the Day" and "Peggy Sue" with his '57 Strat, canonizing this rollicking new genre and introducing its flagship instrument to a national audience.

Once acquired, the Stratocaster was immediately put on display in the exhibition *Making Music Modern: Design for Ear and Eye*. Because the instrument's good design was also due to its supreme playability and unique sound, it was important that visitors be able to experience the object in action: during the course of the show, MoMA staff was invited to demonstrate the Stratocaster by playing the guitar live in the galleries, plugged into its companion 1959 Fender Bassman amplifier. —Luke Baker

