The New Ice Age

FAMILY FEATURES

Today's refrigerators not only cool, freeze, keep foods fresh and safe, make ice and filter water, but they also function as impromptu art galleries, message centers and the focal point of the kitchen. The refrigerator is the hardest working — and most widely used — appliance in the kitchen. More than 99.5 percent of American households have at least one, according to the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers. And with today's increasing focus on home style, it's no wonder homeowners want them to look good, too.

For thousands of years, keeping food cool meant keeping it on ice, so design was based on function and built around a frozen block. But in the last 50 years the refrigerator has evolved from a simple cooling box to a multi-functioning home appliance. With this evolution, the style of the refrigerator has transformed to an aesthetically appealing state-of-the-art appliance built for maximum storage.

The Cold, Hard Facts

In 1800, Maryland engineer Thomas Moore devised a simple ice box for transporting perishable farm butter, coining the term "refrigerator." This first edition was a cedar tub filled with ice and lined with rabbit fur for insulation. But while Moore's refrigerator delivered function, it lacked design appeal and had limited storage capacity.

Physics streamlined function at the turn of the century when chemical gases were compressed to remove heat from an enclosed space to keep food cold. Early refrigerators using this technology had noisy compressors mounted on a boxy cabinet with about 4 cubic feet of storage. Though these models were an improvement, function still dominated form.

The Coldspot refrigerator debuted in 1931 in the Sears catalog and stores. Shortly after, style began to take precedence when designer Raymond Loewy transformed the refrigerator from "an ill-proportioned vertical shoebox" to a salute to the spirit of progress. The sleek, redesigned Coldspot refrigerator had automotive styling with chrome latches and trim. As function met form, refrigeration began to evolve at a rapid rate. The loud noise of the compressor had softened to a comforting hum and cumbersome handles were replaced by feather-touch latches.

Fashion Meets Function

In 1935, Loewy's Coldspot refrigerator was advertised as "luxurious and convenient … new in design — modern — streamlined — arrestingly beautiful." For Loewy, the Coldspot refrigerator was "a step in the evolution toward perfection," a notion that is still reflected in refrigerator design today. In 1977, the Coldspot refrigerator became part of the Kenmore family and continued to evolve.

Today's refrigerators, which provide between 18 and 26 cubic feet of storage space, haven't forgotten their history — or their function. The Kenmore Elite CS refrigerator takes its name — and retro design — from the first Coldspot refrigerator. With its curved doors reminiscent of the original machines and high efficiency interior, the CS refrigerator is a modern unit that recognizes its past.

Chilling Out Through the Years

Ice Age: Natural refrigeration means everyone, and everything, is cold.

Iron Age: Snow, ice, cool streams and caves keep food cold.

B.C.: The Chinese cut and store ice by the year 1,000 B.C.

1700s: Refrigeration technology starts to heat up when Dr. William Cullen studies the evaporation of liquids in a vacuum.

1800s: Natural ice is harvested in winter and stored in icehouses.

Early 1900s: About half of all U.S. households rely on blocks of ice to keep foods cold. The first home refrigerators are made with compressors driven by belts attached to motors located in the basement. In 1918, Kelvinator introduces the first refrigerator with automatic control.

1920s and 30s: The first electric refrigerators with ice cube compartments debut.

1940s: Frozen foods stored in tiny freezer com-partments become popular.

1950s and 60s: Innovations include automatic defrost and ice makers.

1970s: Energy-efficient refrigerators make their mark — a typical 1973 model uses more than 1,800 kWh per year.

1980s: Frost-free refrigerators become popular with separate doors for freezer and refrigeration.

1990s: Federal efficiency standards take effect.

2000s: A typical new refrigerator with automatic defrost and a top-mounted freezer uses less than 500 kWh per year. Sears introduces a refrigerator that uses the same amount of energy as a 75-watt light bulb.