

modernism

the lure of the chair

simple in concept, the chair inspires designers from all ages

by laura michaelides



Chairs and the design challenges they pose have long fascinated architects and designers. Although the functional requirements for chairs have not changed over time, the possibilities for fulfilling these requirements seem endless. Think of the intricately inlaid throne chairs of the Egyptian pharaohs, the fine carving and swirls on the mahogany of a Chippendale chair, or

the linear rigidity of a chair by Frank Lloyd Wright. All of these examples provide a place to sit, yet each address different aesthetic and formal considerations.

Why has the chair as a form encouraged such an outpouring of creative energy over time?

Historically, furniture has been designed as an extension of the

architecture in which it was placed. The prevailing design concerns and cultural beliefs of any particular time period extended to its furniture. Within this context, the chair has been of particular interest, possibly because the user of the chair has such an individual and personal experience with the object. In addition, the chair offers a miniature sphere in which to experiment with technological and material advances





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that have been made over time. The challenge of making a truly comfortable chair has captivated designers.

And while all chairs do the same thing – provide people with places to sit – they do so in radically different contexts: Imagine the difference between an easy chair for relaxing and a chair pulled around a conference table in an office. The myriad of purposes for which chairs are used suggests just some of the reasons why designers gravitate so frequently to them as a design problem.

All of these considerations have applied to proto-modern as well as to modern chairs. With the current resurgence of interest in all modern things, it seems appropriate to take a look at some of the highlights of modern chair design.

THE EARLY MODERN INFLUENCE

If we assume the early impulses that lead to the modern movement were evident toward the end of the 19th century, then we might begin our brief survey with a grouping of chairs by the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, that he designed for the Argyle Tea Rooms in 1897. This selection exemplifies some of the

important design issues that concerned the most forward-looking designers at that time. It reflects the desire to strip away unnecessary ornament, which contrasts with the prevailing Victorian taste for ornate revivalism.

As such, it is tied in with the strong Arts and Crafts tradition that emerged in Britain in the second half of the 19th century. In addition, these chairs are strongly tied to the individualistic design vocabulary Mackintosh developed in his architecture. He merged the stark linear qualities of the Arts and Crafts sensibility with the careful placement of sensual organic forms.

Compare the Argyle Tearoom chairs with our next example (2) by Gerrit Reitveld. Reitveld was a Dutch architect associated with the revolutionary De Stijl movement in the Netherlands. This design reflects a preoccupation with the clarity of construction, the use of standard parts, and the expression of opposing planes through the use of color. In this design interest, human comfort is subordinated to concern with construction and ideology. In essence, it is more an intellectual exercise or a



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developing alongside the *linea* designs of the Art Deco movements which surfaced in Europe and the United States, were the pivotal and influential experiments in chair design undertaken by Alvar Aalto in Finland. For these

chairs, laminated plywood was bent to create sculptural forms, which predated the Scandinavian modern aesthetic of the 1950s as well as Charles and Ray Eames' work with this method. Others who experimented with this technique in the '30s were Bruno Marthison and Marcel Breuer. (10)

now-iconic series explores clean, fluid lines, appearances of weightlessness, and sculptural elegance, while addressing needs for physical comfort.

Examples 5, 6, and 7 are all famous chairs from this same period. The "grand confort" by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand, still produced today, is a classic that further explored the use of steel tubing with chrome plating. Numbers 6 and 7, by the same designers, indicate a desire to view the chair as a machine for living, much as they viewed the architecture they were then developing. Eileen Gray's chair of 1925-26, of lacquered wood, steel, and fur-upholstered seat, addresses similar issues (8), while Mies Van der Rohe's Barcelona chair (9), is the slickest, most developed version of this aesthetic.

During the 1930s,



sculpture than a functional chair.

In the 1920s, architects and designers experimented with steel, a purely functional material previously reserved for wartime and structural building applications. The material was highly suited to the aesthetic requirements of modern architects like Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and others associated with the Bauhaus in Germany, and later the so-called "International Style."

In 1926, architect Mart Stam designed a prototype chair (3) out of welded pipes and showed it to Mies Van Der Rohe, who was then inspired to create his own cantilevered steel chairs. (4) This





Eameses put their wartime experiments to use in bent plywood for their iconic chair designs. (11) The Eameses also had great success with their chair designs composed of molded fiberglass with steel bases. (12)

The moldable aspects of both plywood and fiberglass made expression of organic shapes possible, and both design and architecture in this era explored the potential of the new materials to achieve highly individualistic aesthetic expressions. The new materials were also well suited to address issues of comfort in chair design, as they could be molded to conform to the shape of the human body.

Also notable during this period were Arne Jacobsen's "Ant chair," and also his highly organic "Egg Chair," as well as Eero Saarinen's "Womb Chair," among many others. (13)

The late 1950s and 1960s gave birth to the pop art movement, a visual expression of the revolution in social and sexual mores then taking place. Conventional ideas about "good design" were turned upside down with experiments in kitsch such as the Eero Aarnio's "Bubble Chair," Gaetano Pesce's "Donna Chair" of 1969 (14), Wendell Castle's "Molar Chair" of 1969, and the "Blow Chair" of '67. (15, by Gionaton de Pas, Donato D'urbano, Paolo Lomazzi and Carla Scolari) The impulses displayed in

these chairs play with ideas about disposability, mass production, and surrealism, and culminated in the late '60s and early '70s with the "Joe Chair," after Joe DiMaggio. (16) This oversized baseball glove, by the designers of the "Blow Chair," is a nod to the work of the pop sculptor Claes Oldenbreg, who was famous for turning everyday objects into monumentally scaled sculpture.

Since the 1970s, there has been a continuous flow of creative energy directed toward the design of chairs. From the work of Mario Bellini, Vico Magistretti, and Pascal Mourgue, to the work of Frank Gehry, (17) Ettore Sottsass, (18) and Philippe Stark, there has been no end to the creative possibilities available for this form. Fortunately, for today's aficionado of modern design, many books are available on this subject, and many of original chair designs are still produced by such companies as Knoll International, Cassina, and Herman Miller, to name just a few.

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