

Please Be Seated - Best Furniture Design

Written by Written by Melissa Larsen

As we celebrate design excellence in this issue, we thought we'd tribute one piece of furniture that we're all happy to see at the end of the day: the chair. From iconic midcentury modern pieces to our favorite recliners and lounges in pop culture, here's our ode to our favorite four-legged - in most cases - friend.



Rockin' Chairs

For more than 50 years, the name Eames has been synonymous with chair design. It all started in 1946 when the husband-and-wife team of Charles and Ray Eames began their relationship with Herman Miller (a long-time well-known American furniture manufacturer) and designed their famous molded plywood chair.

Earlier in the decade, Charles was working on MGM movie sets and made a groundbreaking discovery in wood-molding. The United States Navy even commissioned the pair to create plywood splints, stretchers and glider shells, molded under heat and pressure to be used during World War II. Later on, such techniques were utilized to fashion the molded plywood chair that has been heralded for its ability to fit the contours of the body and its relevance in both home and office settings—even today. "It takes years for a product to reach icon status, and over time, consumers have realized that this chair does what few accomplish—it embodies aesthetic integrity, enduring charm and comfort," says Gregg VanderKooi, classics manager for Herman Miller For the Home. Further establishing the Eames chair's iconic status, it was named Time Magazine's Best Design of the 20th Century in 1999.



Nearly 10 years after the Eames chair made its debut, Arne Jacobsen designed the Egg chair for the lobby and reception areas of the Royal Hotel in Denmark. Because of its cocoonlike shape, "it's designed to give a bit of privacy," says Kris Fuchs, principal and marketing public relations director of furniture showroom Suite New York. Since 1958, the Egg chair has been commended for its versatility and prevalence in pop culture (see On-Screen Seating on P. 101). "Today, it's still an icon around the world and vintage Eggs sell globally amongst the most prestigious auction houses for \$20,000 and up," Fuchs says.

Knoll, which is recognized as a design leader for workplace furnishings, is also at the forefront of iconic furniture, as it carries both the famed Barcelona and Tulip chairs. "Throughout our history, Knoll has collaborated with the world's foremost designers of furniture for offices and residences," says Liz Taylor, architect and design manager for Knoll. The beautiful Barcelona was created by Bauhaus designer Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the late 1920's. (Knoll received exclusive manufacturing and sales rights from van der Rohe in 1953.) The designer originally came up with the chair for the German Pavilion, the country's section of the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929. The World's Fair was hosted in Barcelona, hence the chair's name. The design of the Barcelona is said to be inspired by old campaign and folding chairs.



The Tulip chair is also available through Knoll because Eero Saarinen designed the industrial-inspired chair specifically for the company in the late 1950's. Saarinen was actually good friends with the founder of Knoll, Florence Knoll, as well as aforementioned designers Charles and Ray Eames whom he studied with at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. Due to its ahead-of-its-time appearance, the Tulip chair was even used in the original "Star Trek" television series. "These landmark designs are carefully proportioned and detailed; they epitomize material innovation, quality and utility," Taylor says. "They combine a modernist aesthetic with residential appeal."

Design of the Times

You'll notice that the aforementioned chairs have more than just eye-popping design in common: They were all results of midcentury

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modernism. Midcentury modern refers to the generation of design that occurred in Europe and America after World War II in the mid-20th century. "After the war, there were a lot of technical breakthroughs in the industry, and an audience for new design," Fuchs says. "Most of the cities in Europe were destroyed after [the war] and there was a massive rebuilding effort including new factories with new methods, and a generation of young designers with new ideas who had the job of creating the new world." After so many years of turmoil, people were ready for something fresh—even when it came to their furniture.



And thanks to the availability of flexible materials like plywood, chrome-plated steel, acrylic and fiberglass, these new designs could be produced much faster than more ornate furniture of the past, VanderKooi says. Such materials also contributed to the natural, organic shape of many midcentury modern pieces, unlike the bulky or elaborate furnishings that were popular during the Victorian era, for example. "Midcentury modern designers focused on innovation, simplicity, originality and what would adapt well to the changing needs of society," VanderKooi says.

Knock it Off

To some, imitation is a form of flattery. However, those who manufacture the real deal versions of these iconic chairs aren't taking it as a compliment. "Those who sell knock-offs basically are making money off of someone else's work," VanderKooi says.

In 2003, Herman Miller went as far as to launch the Get Real program, which provides education and awareness against knock-offs. All in all, Fuchs might have put it best: "To be frank, it's never O.K. to purchase a reproduction of an iconic piece. Who wants a fake?"