

Lucy Ryder Richardson

A midcentury chair is not simply something to sit on.

A piece of design at once functional and aesthetically pleasing, it holds in its construction an elaborate story, rich in the drama, gossip and intrigue that accompanied the pioneering furniture designers of the Modern era.

This stylish guide showcases the 100 most iconic, most interesting, most controversial, or simply most beautiful chairs from the period. Discover the materials, craftsmanship and manufacturing processes that brought chair designs to the masses, as well as absorbing trivia, quotes and anecdotes that offer a unique insight into the time.

Featuring a range of international designers, including Robin Day, Charles and Ray Eames, Ernest Race and Arne Jacobsen, and covering the very best of European, Scandinavian, Japanese and American chair design, this is the perfect book for collectors, enthusiasts and design junkies alike.

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100 Midcentury Chairs

Lucy Ryder Richardson



Includes a directory of top international dealers

100 Midcentury Chairs

and their stories

19 Grass-seated Chair, George Nakashima, Nakashima Studio



Designer George Nakashima called himself “a bit of a druid”. Believing he was very much part of the process of giving a tree new life, he created beautifully handcrafted pieces with the utmost respect, as one of the main proponents of the American Crafts revival of the forties. Simple and comfortable, in spite of

its primitive feel and angular shape, the Grass-seated Chair is one of the most popular and commercially successful of Nakashima’s chairs, with its one steam-bent support that gently curves under the arms, predating Hans J. Wegner’s Round Chair (page 78). Keeping spindles to a minimal six, Nakashima ensures you can see through the chair, with four flared legs joined by simple stretchers. The heaviest looking part is the walnut seat frame which Nakashima’s wife Marion was given the task of weaving using baling twine they had lying around their homestead; seagrass was later used. And, while Mr Nakashima, as he was reverently addressed by both staff and customers, sought to explore the expression in each piece of wood, displaying knots and burls to maximum effect in larger pieces, the Grass-seated Chair sees husband and wife working on a simpler chair to give wood its second life.

Nakashima was born in America to Japanese parents. He studied architecture at MIT before spending a year living in France as a bohemian and travelling around North Africa and Japan. But nothing shaped Nakashima quite as much as a visit to India in 1936 where

he volunteered to supervise the construction of the Sri Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry. While working there, he had a revelation and was given the name Sundarananda, “One who delights in beauty”, which set Nakashima on the path to discover *The Soul of a Tree*, a book he later wrote and published in 1981.

On his return to wartime America in 1942 Nakashima was one of many Japanese-American artisans confined to internment camps. He, his wife and daughter were sent to one in the Idaho desert where, fortuitously, he met a carpenter skilled in using traditional Japanese hand tools. Ever meticulous in his attention to detail, Nakashima never forgot his teachings when he left with his family to set up his own studio in New Hope, Pennsylvania, sponsored by Antonin Raymond, an architect he had worked for in Tokyo. Nakashima would travel the country just to find the right piece of wood. The more he showed his devotion to the material, the more he seemed to attract outstanding craftsmen, who wanted to learn from this master producing outstanding furniture as a silent protest against mass production.

Nakashima is one of the most sought-after designers by collectors today, including many celebrities. Nelson Rockefeller commissioned 200 pieces for his house in Pocantico Hills, New York, in 1973. Steve Jobs had new Nakashima pieces created by George’s daughter Mira, who continues to stay faithful to her father’s pursuit for perfection and has run the studio since her father died in 1990. The Grass-seated Chair is still in production, although the woven seagrass has recently been replaced by Danish cord for its strength and durability. Look for the Nakashima signature underneath the seat to be sure it comes from his studio.

“Work for him was a spiritual calling, a linking of his strength to a transcendental force, a surrender to the divine, a form of prayer.”²⁴

Mira Nakashima



1944

DSW (Dining Side Wood), Charles and Ray Eames, Herman Miller, 1948

After their debut at the Low-Cost Furniture Design competition, both the fibreglass strengthened plastic armchair and side chair were offered with different bases. The single-shell chair soon became a feature in schools, restaurants, homes and offices in various incarnations including the DSW (Dining Side Wood), DSX (Dining Shell X-base) and DSR (Dining Side Rod) also known as the Eiffel Tower base, which was initially developed with Harry Bertoina, who was working with Eames at the time.

**“In architecture, or furniture, or jack straws,
it’s the connection that can do you in.
Where two materials come together,
brother, watch out.”⁴⁰**

Charles Eames

By 1954, the original rope edging had gone and seats could be stacked or attached to metal rods and put together in rows, to create the Tandem Shell Seating scheme for airport and stadium seating. “What works is better than what looks good,” said Ray Eames. “The ‘looks good’ can change, but what works, WORKS.”⁴¹ Changes happened over the years to improve the chair, with the curve of the back becoming more inclined and the edges of the seat redrafted to make a smoother line. There was an answer to every problem with the Eames, who loved working with constraints, Charles Eames particularly.

He even put rejected fibreglass shells back into production by having them upholstered after he found out that ones affected by discolouration were being consigned to the office skip.



59 Marshmallow Love Seat, 5670, George Nelson Associates, Herman Miller

A Jetsons-style future was promised for all during the Atomic age in design when the 'nuclear' dominated Western society. In the years between the forties and early sixties architecture, art, design and advertising saw atomic motifs appear in a multitude of ways. Considered by some as the earliest example of Pop furniture, the Marshmallow Love Seat, with its multicoloured vinyl cushions and varnished steel structure, used brightly coloured dots to portray atomic particles.

Although it is attributed to George Nelson, the Marshmallow Love Seat was actually designed by Irving Harper, design director at Nelson's own office, creator of the Herman Miller logo and the man behind most of George Nelson's clocks and advertising. The Marshmallow sprung out of a meeting with a salesman from a Long Island plastics company who showed Nelson and the team a product that he said could make 25 and 30-centimetre (10 and 12-inch) round cushions quickly and economically by putting a pre-sealed skin into a mould and injecting plastic into it. Nelson asked Harper to come up with a design, which he created in both a 10-inch and 12-inch disc version one weekend using a checkers set. He stuck the discs on a metal frame before drawing it up and set about creating a chair using eighteen "marshmallows" in an inventive pattern.

Unfortunately the plastics company could not actually fulfil their brief and the design turned out to be more expensive than Nelson

first hoped. Harper had to get all the cushions made with a plywood back and added foam and upholstery. What was meant to be a budget chair became a luxury piece.

Because the chair and advertising were all designed in-house by Harper, and the model used to advertise the chair on Harper's posters was the company secretary, it did not cause Nelson too much financial distress and helped them market the George Nelson brand. But Harper was rather irked for not getting credit for what quickly became a museum piece. In an interview with Paul Makovsky for *Metropolis* magazine in 2001, Harper explains "...there always had to be one name associated with the work. We couldn't just spread it around." He goes on to say, "I'm grateful to George for what he did for me. While he was alive I made no demands whatsoever. But now that he's gone, whenever the Marshmallow Sofa is referred to as a 'George Nelson design' it sort of gets to me. I don't go out of my way to set things right, but if anybody asks me who designed it, I'm perfectly happy to tell them."

The smaller of the two Marshmallow Love Seats was reissued in 1999 as part of the Herman Miller for the Home line, and continues to be produced in limited numbers. Vitra also manufactures the chair under licence. Only 186 Marshmallows were produced between 1956 and 1961. Now highly sought after, the midcentury productions go for tens of thousands whenever they appear at auction.



“Personally I think it [Round Chair] is my best achievement. Not because of its export success, but because I have been more thorough with it than anything else.”⁴⁷

Hans J. Wegner



Hans J. Wegner TOP 10

Hans J. Wegner is widely considered one of the leading figures in twentieth-century furniture design and the driving force in the Danish Modern movement that changed the way people looked at furniture in the fifties and sixties. He designed more than 500 chairs throughout his lifetime and had more than 100 produced. Widely copied, he has influenced so many famous designers.

Here are his top 10 chairs:

Rocking Chair 1944 (page 48)

Peacock Chair 1947 (page 62)

Round Chair 1949 (page 78)

Wishbone Chair 1949 (page 84)

Flag Halyard Chair 1950

Papa Bear Chair 1950-1 (page 88)

Valet Chair 1953 (page 116)

Swivel Chair 1955

The Ox Chair 1960

Three Legged Shell Chair 1963

100 Wiggle Side Chair, Frank Gehry, Easy Edges

In 1964 a British designer called Peter Murdoch created a chair from a single piece of die-cut, folded polyurethane card. Designed to be disposable, it was the perfect piece of Pop furniture. Architect Frank Gehry's longer-lasting Wiggle Side Chair materialized eight years later. Gehry wanted to create something softer than the plastic pieces he was seeing emerge around him, like the corduroys hippies had started wearing around his home town of Los Angeles. Lovingly carved from a redundant pile of corrugated cardboard he used for building architecture models, Gehry gave the collection of sculpted furniture the name Easy Edges after the edge board from which it was made.

Gehry's work is very much a product of his upbringing in Los Angeles – a magical, experimental, ever-changing place where he saw Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler make their mark at the beginning of the midcentury movement in architecture. But his Wiggle Side Chair also suggests a knowledge of the work of Alvar Aalto, the way he used the curve in his furniture to strengthen his pieces, and of Panton and his all-in-one plastic chair.

His father, an art-loving boxer and salesman, introduced him to paper as a child, when they fashioned hobby horses out of papier mâché. And Gehry returned to making sculptures in quieter moments at his architectural practice. For Wiggle he set about cutting and gluing sixty layers of corrugated edge board in alternating directions, secured with hidden screws and clamped each side with hardboard. Wiggle looked like a snake about to unfold and slither around the room. The folds made it sturdy, the fabric ensured it felt warm to sit on and the texture of the cardboard had an incredible noise-reducing effect in a room.

Gehry thought it would be a bit of fun and extra cash, but once the architectural chairs had made a splash in the design world, demand was overwhelming. The line made it into Bloomingdale's with a family of other pieces, surrounded by a system of cardboard walls and floors, but orders flooded in and the studio became chaotic. In March 1990 Gehry professed at a TED talk, "It threw me through a loop. I wasn't secure enough as an architect." Not wanting to turn his space into the next Eames Office, Gehry stopped production of Easy Edges. "I started to feel threatened. I closed myself off for weeks at a time in a room to rethink my life. I decided that I was an architect, not a furniture designer... I simply stopped doing it."¹¹⁰

Experimental Edges followed, a collection of items that have since become museum pieces, made to be intentionally bizarre and impractical so that Gehry would not have to mass produce them. As his architecture became more well known and people started to snap up every cardboard piece Gehry had ever produced, Vitra took on Easy Edges and started producing four models from the collection in 1986, including Wiggle Side Chair, Side Chair and Low Table Set. Today, the earliest pieces are highly sought after and the Easy Edges series is still in production.

And so we end our book with memories of early masters who stripped chairs back to the bare essentials, creating miraculous curves or startling geometry using anything at their disposal. But it is not enough to simply focus on designers who deconstruct and reinvent. If the midcentury movement has taught us anything it is this: knowing the story of the commitment and passion behind each piece makes us more considerate consumers when it comes to what we invest in.



87 Big Tulip Armchair, F545, Pierre Paulin, Artifort

Paulin thought in three dimensions. He originally trained as a sculptor, inspired in part by his uncle, the sculptor Frédy Stoll, until he injured a tendon in a fight that caused him paralysis in his right hand. “I could think up a shape and make it spin in my head like a sculptor or an architect would,” he said. “I made the most of that gift.”⁹⁸

Artifort needed more pieces to complement the range Paulin had already produced, and in 1965 the bold French designer came up with the Dutch company’s future bread and butter: the Little Tulip for dining and the Big Tulip Armchair for lounging, which immediately became bestsellers for Artifort. Sections of the Big Tulip were molded in Paulin’s sculptural style but the idea of a metal exoskeleton was new for Paulin. It allowed different segments on a crossbar to be lifted up off the floor and given space to float – as



Poul Volther’s Corona (page 164) with its lightly padded leather ellipses had done over in Denmark.

“I do not create. I invent, I arrange, I design . . . even the term designer, which used to have real meaning, has been so misused that it has become a really sad thing.”⁹⁹

Pierre Paulin

Paulin was a perfectionist in everything he produced, with every junction and seam hidden and polished off, and no screw or bonding line in sight. Like Danish master Finn Juhl, he leapfrogged convention and usual practice, confident that Artifort’s chief designer and engineer, Theo Ruth, would be able to make his designs work. Had he been too bogged down by the practicalities, his designs would have suffered.

Although the general public found his work too expensive, Paulin became a designer for the elite in his home country after Monsieur and Madame Pompidou discovered his work in the midsixties in an exhibition at MOMA. The French president and his wife asked him to decorate their private apartments at the Elysée Palace, previously dubbed a “house of sadness” by Madame Pompidou. The makeover included painted aluminum walls and colorful carpets by the Parisian-based Israeli artist Yaacov Agam. Other rich benefactors followed.

LEFT: Pierre Paulin (and model) sitting in his Tulip Armchair.

71 Cone Chair, Verner Panton, Plus-linje

Verner Panton, a jovial bearded Dane with a dog called Happy, looked at the world with a sense of childlike awe, enthusiastically embracing new materials and a bold colour palette. Conjuring up sculptural creations for the Pop age without compromising on quality, his work showed a man playing as passionately with design as a child would with his toys.

When the Cone Chair was first exhibited in the window of a furniture shop in New York, traffic police were called in to stop cars from swerving into each other as drivers became distracted by the chair’s unusual conical shape. This chair had no obvious back, no legs and was a grand departure from the wooden and cane furnishings seen in Danish homes at the time. Originally designed for Kom-igen (Come Again) – his parents’ quirky new restaurant on his birth island of Fünen – Panton hoped some of his designs would attract attention, and they did. He used five different shades of red throughout the building he decorated for his father, creating red lacquered metal hanging lamps with reflectors connected by threads and dressing staff in a lighter shade of the same colour.

For the Cone Chair, Panton lightly padded a thin sheet-steel frame with polyurethane foam, then added Kvadrat upholstery and seat cushions. The semi-circular padded shell extended upwards across the back and armrests and tapered down into a point on a cross-shaped metal base on plastic glides. The heartfelt commission from his father paid off when Danish textile entrepreneur, Percy von Halling-Koch spotted the Cone Chair at the restaurant’s opening and offered to put it into production. A Cone with a heart-shaped

back was produced the same year. At first Fritz Hansen wanted to manufacture the controversial chair and its matching stool as they were already producing Panton’s Bachelor and Tivoli chairs, but after they pulled out, von Halling-Koch was given free rein to create Plus-linje, a new company created to make a star out of the Panton Cone.

The Cone caused even more controversy when in 1961 the Danish design magazine *Mobilia* let Panton drape his chairs with naked shop mannequins and models for a shoot. Sales were good and Panton produced a more transparent Wire Cone Chair with bent steel upholstered minimally with round leather pads in 1963.



1958

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