

New Exhibit Gives American Chair Design Its Due Respect

The Driehaus Museum's curator discusses *The Art of Seating*, her favorite chair in the exhibit, and more.

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(left) Thomas E. Warren's Centripetal Spring Arm Chair from 1850 is believed to be the first swivel chair. (right) A Vivian Beer chair from 2004. PHOTOS: (LEFT) MICHAEL KORYTA AND ANDREW VANSTYNE; (RIGHT) DOUGLAS J. ENG

Up next in our series of interviews with notable, in-the-know locals: Catherine Shotick, curator of The Art of Seating, which opens at the Driehaus Museum this weekend.

What is *The Art of Seating* about?

It covers chair design in America in the past 200 years. There are 37 chairs drawn from a private collection. It explores how chairs reflect social, political, and economic trends. There are certain themes that we talk about a lot, the main one being the chair as art. A lot of people don't consider chairs art. And even though visitors can't sit in chairs in the exhibition, we'll have our visitors lounge with an Eames chair—the classic wooden chair—and a Bertioia that people can sit in.

What kind of technological changes have taken place in chair production in the past two centuries?

One big change came with the rise of industrialization. Some people saw it positively, others negatively. The Fancy Side Chair, for instance, was a machine-made chair that the middle class appreciated, because it was made to look expensive. It was painted to look like it had inlaid wood when it didn't. Other people were very much against the machine age, and wanted quality craftsmanship.

In modern times, [automation] is embraced more. We have a chair made in 2010 by Laurie Beckerman—an Ionic bench. It was designed using a computer, and it consists of 18 pieces of plywood put together. The name is referencing the top of an Ionic capital. He took the curlicues from that and made them the side legs of the bench.

A lot of the chairs in the exhibition have been designed by famous architects—Frank Lloyd Wright, Eero Saarinen. Is there a correlation between architecture and chair design?

In the 20th century, there was a desire for integrated and synthesized living environments. Architects weren't just architects—they were sculptors, designers in all sorts of media. Architects were working with the idea of an entirely designed environment. Frank Lloyd Wright also designed the entire interior of his buildings. One of the chairs in the exhibit is a chair Wright built for the Johnson Wax Company. He was hired by them as an architect, and to design all interiors of the finished building. He used the oval shape in the structure of the building, and all the furniture and interiors have that same oval shape. We have a large-scale photo of the interior in the museum. The ceiling is covered in big oval shapes—it feels cathedral-like. It's really cohesive.

What kind of material changes in chair design does the exhibition highlight?

We have what is believed to have been the first chair made of cast iron: the Centripetal Spring Armchair from 1850, which was the first swivel chair. It was made with these eight cast iron springs that the seat is on, and it's flexible in any direction you sit. It was inspired by railroad cars, which tended to be extremely bumpy, and so the designer, Thomas E. Warren, wanted to make smoother designs for railroad cars. Then he used that idea to create a beautiful chair made of cast iron.

There's also [Harry Bertoia's] Diamond Chair, which uses metal rods. It was the first time metal rods made up the structure of a chair. When you sit in it, it conforms to your body—it's extraordinarily comfortable to sit in. From 1800 until 1900 all the chairs are just straight back, because in the 19th century it was proper to sit up straight, with your back up. Starting around 1900, it became more acceptable to take the body into consideration, and to think about how it's comfortable in different ways.

What's your favorite chair in the exhibit?

My personal favorite is the Texas Longhorn Armchair. It's made from the horns of longhorn cattle, and it's strikingly beautiful, even though it's made out of this strange material. It also shows the innovative mindset of an everyday person. The designer was just a grocer working in San Antonio in the 1890s. He saw these piles of horns from a nearby slaughterhouses, and he decided to start making furniture. He made these fantastical, bizarre pieces, using up to 20 horns for one chair, which he would cover in animal fur or leather. They were very popular in Europe. People at the time would put them in studies or libraries and it would fit right into their dark, masculine spaces.