

Sitting pretty ... 'The Art of Seating' features 200 years of Americans' unique chairs



"Synergistic Synthesis XVII sub b1 Chair," 2003, designed and manufactured by Kenneth Smythe. From the exhibit "The Art of Seating: 200 Years of American Design," which runs through May 5 at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown (Michael Koryta and Andrew VanSty)

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In an oft-told story, Sigmund Freud is said to have remarked that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

Along the same lines, one might also reflect on whether a chair can sometimes be more than just a chair. The non-Freudian answer might be yes, when it is also a work of art, experienced not only as a utilitarian object, but also as a piece of sculpture.

That's the idea behind "The Art of Seating: 200 Years of American Design," which runs through May 5 at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown. On view are more than 40 chairs drawn from the extraordinary private collection of Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen, showcasing the best in American creativity and innovation. Included are designs by Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles and Ray Eames, the Stickley Brothers, Eero Saarinen, Frank Gehry and others.

The exhibit, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville, Florida, features designs from as early as an elegant carved wood side chair from 1820, to a curvaceous example in blue-painted steel from 2004. The show also includes two pieces by Bucks County's internationally known woodworker George Nakashima, one of the most significant American furniture designers of the 20th century.

To most of us, the humble chair is the epitome of a utilitarian object. Granted, in the form of a throne it might aspire to the heroic, but most of the time, a chair is just viewed as a way to take a load off.

Yet few objects tell the history of design as eloquently as a chair.

"We interact with chairs all the time, but seldom recognize the value they provide in demonstrating the history of American ingenuity in design, aesthetics, and technology," says curator Ben Thompson, deputy director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. "This exhibit utilizes the chair as an educational tool."

A major challenge of the installation was how to present a large collection of chairs in such a wide variety of style and color, and not have the room look like an Unclaimed Freight warehouse. This was admirably done by placing the chairs on white plinths of varying heights, thereby presenting them as the artworks they are, and not as marked-down specials.

As a clever way to place each chair in its proper historical context, each descriptive plaque not only gives the chair's designer, manufacturer and date, but also a timeline of what was taking place, culturally and politically, during that period.

We learn, for instance, that the Egyptian Revival side chair from about 1875 was created just a few years after the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal, which sparked an American rage for Egyptian style.

The exhibit is chronological and is divided into four sections. The 1820s through the 1880s was a period of invention, technological development, and patent-seeking. A prime example is the stunningly baroque "Centripetal Spring Arm Chair" from about 1850. With its invitingly cushy, red velvet domed seat, it somehow evokes Little Miss Muffet's tuffet, notwithstanding its padded back and headrest, ornate cast iron frame and spring suspension system.

"A foremost consideration in the collector's mind was that each piece in the collection had to function as a chair," says Thompson.

Of course, this does not imply they all have to be comfortable. Comfort was clearly one of the design goals of that centripetal arm chair, but it hardly seems a priority in some of the examples from the 1880s through the 1930s.

That was the period of the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement, with studios of individual craftsmen who reacted against the mass-production frenzy of the late 1800's.

Yet despite their simple lines and careful joinery, a dour-looking plank-back chair and oxbow armchair — the later attributed to the Stickly brothers — look patently uncomfortable as they stand against a back wall and look disapprovingly at the colorful folly surrounding them.

Between the 1930s and 1960s, advancement in materials science and World War II production methodology strongly influenced American industrial design. Chairs made out of fiberglass, acrylic and steam-bent plywood become common, such as the fascinating lounge chair from 1947 designed by Herbert von Thaden with its flexible back of laminated wood, and the ubiquitous Charles Eames wood lounge chair designed in 1945 and still popular today.

From the 1960s on, we begin to see a greater use of alternative materials. Frank Gehry's minimalistic high stool from 1971 is made from corrugated cardboard, Masonite, and wood. His equally minimalistic "Superlight" chair, with brushed aluminum surfaces attached to a simple aluminum frame, might not be as visually exciting as that Victorian centripetal spring chair, but is designed to carry 750 pounds. Try that, Little Miss Muffett.

Also during this period, chair design becomes more sculptural, with design following art, rather than the reverse. There's a significant local presence here, with such renowned craftsmen as Harry Bertoia, whose studio was in Barto, Pennsylvania and George Nakashima, who worked in New Hope. A number of the designs came from Philadelphia manufacturers, including the earliest chair in the show, a fancy side chair from 1820.

On display are two of Bertoia's creations, including a large diamond lounge chair from 1952. Of the two Nakashima pieces, a reclining lounge chair with cotton webbing represents an unusual departure from his mostly all-wood creations. More typical is an example of his celebrated Conoid chairs — an elegant, seemingly weightless design made out of walnut and hickory.

Looking like it was designed by NASA for astronauts, Kenneth Smythe's spacey "Synergistic Synthesis XVII sub b1" chair from 2003 is made from birch laminate with a Formica core held together with threaded rods. Inspiration for the design, the text card tells us, comes from the mathematician/philosopher Bertrand Russell, the music of Delius and the Fibonacci sequence.

Equally modernistic is Vivian Beer's "Current" chair from 2004. Made to look like it was fabricated from a single sheet of steel, this baby blue wavy creation evokes flowing water. It's as soothing to contemplate as a waterfall, and just begs to be sat on.

But there'll be none of that at the Michener — this show is strictly standing-room only.

The Art of Seating: 200 Years of American Design

A survey of American chair design in an exhibit featuring more than 40 chairs from the early 19th century to the present day

When: Through May 5

Where: The James A. Michener Art Museum, 138 South Pine Street, Doylestown

Museum hours: Tuesday through Friday 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday noon to 5 p.m.

Admission: \$18 adults, \$15 seniors, \$10 college students with ID, \$8 children 6 - 18, free for members and children under 6.

Info: 215-340-9800, www.michenerartmuseum.org

What else: Lecture by the collector, Diane DeMell Jacobsen, 1 p.m. Tuesday, April 2. \$20, includes museum admission.

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