the art of seating

Two Hundred Years of American Design

Harry Bertoia (1915–1978), Bird Lounge Chair, c. 1952, Knoll Associates, New York, chrome wire frame with original green wool cover

All images courtesy of the Clark Center for Japanese Art and Culture

Traveling Exhibitions
“After looking at this collection, it will be difficult to deny that chairs can be utilitarian art. The exhibition provides us with an opportunity to see readily recognizable pieces mixed with some gems rarely seen by the public.”

- Dr. Debra Murphy, professor, University of North Florida, EU Jacksonville

The Art of Seating: Two Hundred Years of American Design organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, Florida, presents a survey of exceptional American chair design from the early 19th century to the present day. The chair is experienced not only as a functional item, but as sculptural in view—the chair as art. Each of the more than 40 chairs in the exhibition was chosen for its beauty and historical context with important social, economic, political and cultural influences. Selections from the Jacobsen Collection of American Art are joined by contemporary designs offering a stylistic journey in furniture with showstoppers by John Henry Belter, George Hunzinger, Herter Brothers, Stickley Brothers, Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, Isamu Noguchi, and Frank Gehry, among others.
Most chairs encountered throughout the day define themselves fairly simply—a place at the family table, a comfortable spot with a great view of the river, a seat of corporate power. When looking at the chairs selected for *The Art of Seating*, however, there is much more to see than simple pieces of furniture. These works of art have compelling stories to tell about our national history, the evolution of American design, and incredible artistry and craftsmanship.

Perhaps the most illustrious piece of history in this collection is that of the House of Representatives Chamber Arm Chair from 1857. Designed by Thomas U. Walter, architect of the capitol from 1851 to 1865, the House of Representatives chairs were created to be used in the halls of congress and...
were showcased in portraits of political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. A later design by David Wolcott Kendall, deemed by his peers as “The Dean of American Furniture Design,” was presented to William McKinley during his term in the White House and has become known as the McKinley armchair.

The American Chair Collection, the center of this exhibition, is a remarkable and comprehensive private collection of iconic and historic chairs reaching back from the mid-1800s to pieces from today’s studio movement. Not only does the exhibition provide an opportunity for the viewer to see readily recognizable pieces alongside those rarely seen by the public, it also takes the viewer into the design studio through patent drawings, documented upholstery, artist renderings and multimedia presentations. In addition, pedestals for all chairs, wall-mounted graphics, and two DVDs are included with the exhibition in addition to audio files for a cell phone tour.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, a private, non-profit visual arts educational institution and cultural resource of the University of North Florida, serves the community and its visitors through exhibitions, collections, educational programs and publications designed to enhance an understanding and appreciation of modern and contemporary art with particular emphasis on works created from 1960 to the present.
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Eero Saarinen (1910–1961), Grasshopper Arm Chair, 1946, Knoll Associates, New York, NY, laminated birch and upholstery
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John Henry Belter (1804–1863), Slipper Chair, c. 1860, John Henry Belter, New York, NY, laminated carved rosewood, upholstery

Thomas Ustick Walter (1804–1887), House of Representatives Chamber Arm Chair, 1857, Bembe & Kimbel, New York (1851–1861), Hammitt Desk Manufacturing Co., Philadelphia, PA, oak, pine, horsehair show cover

Unknown, Rustic Twig Bench, c. 1855, Janes Beebe & Company, Bronx, NY, cast iron with green paint

Herbert von Thaden (1898–1969), Adjustable Lounge Chair, 1947, Thaden Jordan Furniture Company (1947), Roanoke, VA, laminated birch, birch, and brass
Erwine Laverne (1909–2003) and Estelle Laverne (1915–1997), Acrylic Chair (Lily Chair), 1957, molded acrylic resin, polyester upholstery.
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Two Hundred Years of American Design

Specifications

Number of Works
More than 40 chairs

Exhibition Components
Pedestals for all chairs, wall-mounted graphics and two DVDs

Organized with
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville in collaboration with The Jacobsen Collection of American Art

Curator
Ben Thompson, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, Florida

Requirements
Moderate security, 5,000 square feet

Fee
$23,000 plus outgoing shipping

Shipping
IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing costs within the contiguous U.S.

Education Material
Audio files for cell phone tour; digital files for exhibition brochure, children’s coloring book

Booking Time
8 weeks

Availability
Please inquire

Contact
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Installation at The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL, 2011
A Short History

Few objects tell the history of modern design as eloquently as the chair. Aesthetics trends, the emergence of new technologies, ergonomics, social and cultural developments are all reflected in the evolution of chair design.

The private collection at the core of the exhibition The Art of Seating: 200 Years of American Design includes 40 chairs that fit this description. Designed for function, each of these pieces of art has a story to tell about its own genesis and about our national history. This extensive, scholarly collection exemplifies the majority of the important movements in American design over the last 200 years. Through its objects, one can trace the vibrant and progressive history of this country’s ingenuity and creativity. While all art is influenced by the design of previous generations and concurrent works in other countries, the Jacobsen collection’s encyclopedic survey of 200 years stresses the formation of a national character and shows the unique history of American decorative design.

1800–1875

The creation of the chair collection began with the purchase of Egyptian Revival Side Chair, c. 1875. Following Napoleon’s military ventures into Egypt and later archaeological finds in the mid–19th century, the ancient icons dedicated to and revering the afterlife were used commonly throughout European and American designs, including architecture, monuments, cemeteries, and even prisons. In the late 19th century, the New York cabinetry and decorating firm Pottier & Stymus applied ancient Egyptian iconography to the prevailing furniture forms of 1865–70 as a romanticizing motif. This ebonized cherry chair transcends other Egyptian revival designs for the thorough and consistent way in which ancient motifs were synthesized into an object quite bold and new for its day.

While the Egyptian Revival Side Chair may have been the first purchase, the collection chronologically begins in 1810 with a charming doll’s chair and the Rocking Arm Chair, c. 1840. Both are examples of the stylistic simplicity that marked designs in the early 19th century. Examples from this time period reflect the new American consciousness promoted by leaders like Thomas Jefferson who stressed the importance of building a new nation with American craftsmanship, materials and technology.

Though unproven, the rocking chair has been commonly held to be an American invention, a chair type initially most at home in the frontier cabin or middleclass porch front. This chair design was purely functional, not trendy. The Rocking Arm Chair is a highly refined example crafted by Shakers, who made an art out of deliberately undecorated, functional and beautifully constructed domestic objects. While the Shakers did some commercial manufacturing of chairs, more lovingly crafted pieces, such as this chair, were created for the Shaker community. Production of Shaker chairs and goods started dwindling after the late 19th century, when the Shaker population began to decline and industrial production of household items increased. However, Shaker-style furniture lived on and inspired furniture makers here and in Scandinavia in the mid–20th century.
The 19th century was marked by a succession of movements that drew their inspiration from sources outside of the young nation. These movements included the European-based Gothic, Rococo, Renaissance Revivals, and the Asian Exoticism of the late 19th century. The Centripetal Spring Arm Chair, c. 1850, possesses many of these influences in one design, the ornamentation of the revivals as well as the functional ingenuity of 19th-century American designers.

The rise of trade fairs in America in the 19th century provided a platform on which to promote one's “bright idea,” as well as to foster a spirit of healthy competition. It then follows that the 19th century saw a substantial rise in the phenomenon of “Patent Furniture,” ideas from a new nation using new materials and construction techniques as well as addressing functional needs of foldability, mobility, convertibility, and comfort. The Centripetal Chair was made by the American Chair Company (1829-58) of Troy, New York, and designed and patented by Thomas E. Warren in 1849. Warren went on to patent and utilize the same centripetal spring concept on railway car passenger chairs.

The concept of comfort was a key goal in chair design of the Victorian era. The Centripetal Chair was designed with a stationary seat and back assembly that “floats” above the quadrupod leg base on eight iron springs arranged radially from a center support post, allowing movement while seated. Unlike the rocking chair, it can move laterally and rotate in any combination of directions as well as vertically under the weight of the sitter.

1875–1900

At the end of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century the Arts and Crafts movement thrived in the U.S. where it was also known as the Craftsman Movement. The movement emerged as a reaction to the poor quality of mass-produced designs that were products of recent industrial advances. Proponents of the Craftsman movement utilized pre-industrial methods of manufacture utilizing hand tools and simple joints such as the mortise and tenon. The “McKinley” Arm Chair, c. 1894–96, by David Walcott Kendall (1851–1910) is a wonderful example of this style. Kendall is credited with popularizing oak, which was plentiful...
but considered coarse. He also created a chemical laboratory in Phoenix, Arizona, to develop various finishes and colors to make the grain of oak more pleasing to the eye of the American consumer. The “Malachite” finish on this chair, originally a much brighter shade of green, is a rare surviving example of his innovation in the service of popular taste and material availability. It is also possible that this chair is the first ergonomically designed chair in America. Local oral tradition stated that prior to the design process, persons of various sizes were invited to sit in a deep snow bank; their various sitting profiles and measurements were then transferred to the drawing board.

1900–1960

The beginning of the 20th century was marked by the upheaval of two World Wars. However, even amidst this tumult it continued to be an innovative time for designers who experimented with new materials and processes utilized in the war effort. During the years of regeneration after the Great War (1914–1918) the full flowering of modern move-
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Eventually, after Wright himself tipped over in one of the three-legged chairs, the four-legged version was fitted with casters and is still used today. The feet were designed to be interchangeable. The backs of the chairs were designed to swivel and upholstered on both sides, doubling the longevity of the seat backs due to normal wear and tear. The tubular steel frame is painted in Wright’s “Cherokee red” to match the color of the brick of the building. The upholstery fabric was originally specified to be an “old gold” but was later changed to brick red instead.

Following the Second World War, American designers began to collaborate closely with industry. The Baby Boom of the late 1940s and early 1950s contributed to an increasing need for more furniture, including designs that were light, compact and inexpensive. Designers such as Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, and Harry Bertoia worked to meet the demands of a citizenry that was furnishing their homes and businesses in large numbers.

Modern design appealed to architect Charles Eames. Some speculation indicates that his studies in architecture were discontinued at Washington University in St. Louis due to his support of Frank Lloyd Wright and modernism. Success followed, however, at the Cranbrook Academy of Art where he met Ray Kaiser, a student of Hans Hoffman, and Eero Saarinen. Charles and Ray married and together created some of the most influential designs in modern times. Their molded plywood chair, “LCW” (Lounge Chair Wood), c. 1954, was hailed as the “Chair of the Century” and is to this day manufactured by Herman Miller, Inc. The striking aesthetics of this chair, which can seem almost zoomorphic, derive from the separation of the softly biomorphic shaped back (head), seat (thorax), spine and legs, appearing to float by way of the mostly unseen rubber shock mounts. The chairs stance feels animated.

1960–Present

After the 1950s and 1960s, and what could be seen as the peak of 20th-century American Design, the applied as well as the fine art worlds experienced a conceptual fracturing. The formal ideals and certainties of the modernist movement were challenged during the latter part of the 20th century by a new mode of thought now called Postmodernism. The utopianism and conformity espoused by the modernists were rejected by the Postmodernists in favor of difference and certain uniqueness.

Frank Gehry is probably one of the more high profile architects of our time. However, oddly enough it was not a building that brought Gehry to national attention, but the design of a line of furniture, made of common corrugated cardboard, which he called Easy Edges. Inspired by the qualities inherent in the material he was using to make land contours for architectural models, Gehry, in 1968, started experimenting with this technique in a small workshop with the help...
of three assistants. The hands-on approach they took to developing this work is in keeping with Gehry’s architectural design process, that being the construction of models rather than drawing in two dimensions. The patent filing documents cite mass-production of pre-cut stock, assembled in an extruded shape with transverse stringers for stability, to effect a furniture object made of cross-laminated cardboard into a monolithic block for strength, finished with wax and spray-on fireproofing. In a sensational advertisement, three of these chairs, barstools, are shown supporting a Volkswagen. The Easy Edges line proved to be a most successful embodiment of the “Pop” movement in design, wonderfully irreverent but, unlike many other mass-produced pop objects it improved with age, attaining a soft velvety texture with use.

“Less is a bore,” said Philadelphia-based Robert Venturi (b. 1925) as a reaction to the traditional modernist approach. Venturi celebrates the eclectic over the pure, the pragmatic over the theoretical and a messy vitality over obvious unity. The architect and designer delights in elements that are purely decorative. The collection of chairs, tables and sofa created for Knoll in the 1980s by Venturi and his wife, architect Denise Scott-Brown, broke down barriers between traditional and modern design. In the early ‘80s, Venturi designed a series of chairs for Knoll International that reflects references to historical styles while maintaining the look and construction methods of modernity. The series, produced between 1984–1988, consisted of five models. The differing frontal silhouette of each suggests a side chair in the Queen Anne, Chippendale, Sheraton, Empire, and Art Deco styles. The laminated wood of the edges has a natural finish, while the planar frontal surfaces are finished in plastic laminate. The models were available in several bright solid colors of, more rarely as seen in the Sheraton Chair, 1984 with a bold polychrome graphic interpretation based on an actual antique chair. The inspiration Venturi drew upon for the Sheraton model is a Boston painted “fancy” chair in the collection of Winterthur Museum, circa 1805. This chair is superbly reflective of the Post-Modern design movement of the 1980–90’s, which sought to abandon the severity of the modern movement and engage the public with a design possessing a dialogue with design of the past.
Born in Bar Harbor, Maine, in 1977, Vivian Beer pushes the boundaries between art and craft, between utilitarian object and sculpture. She continues the tradition of other proponents of the American studio furniture movement such as Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle, and Jon Brooks: a purely American movement that peaked around 1960 and favored the aesthetics of craft and the handmade over the machine and mass production. The objects created by these artist/designers tend to be unique, one-of-a-kind designs, and do not lend themselves to high-volume production. When asked to comment on the chair titled *Current*, 2004, Beer states, “I wanted this chair to seem as if it had been cut and crushed out of a single sheet of metal. At the same time I wanted it to feel as fast and clean as water in its silhouette with the power of an implied brutal forming in the background. The balance and the trickery is important.”

At the beginning of the 21st century new technologies have transformed the way we lead our lives, navigate our world, and interact with others. The same technologies have undoubtedly had just as profound an effect on artist/designers. Laurie Beckerman received a bachelor’s degree in architecture from Pratt Institute, and, after graduation, designed low-income housing in Brooklyn and Harlem for the Pratt Architectural Collaborative. While trained as an architect to work on a monumental scale Beckerman finds furniture design “a natural detour on a more manageable scale.” In *Ionic Bench*, 2010, Beckerman looks to the past for aesthetic inspiration utilizing the capital shape of ancient Greek Ionic columns. At the same time she clearly recognizes the importance of the computer-assisted technologies available now. Beckerman slices one-inch thick Baltic Birch plywood utilizing CNC (Computer Numeric Control) cutters. The pieces are then laminated together to form the profile of this light and resilient bench.