

The Guardian - 6 February 2007.

Hans Wegner Brilliant Danish furniture designer on a lifelong quest to produce the perfect chair

By Penny Sparke

Hans Wegner, who has died aged 92, was the last remaining member - and one of the most innovative and prolific representatives - of a generation of Danish designers that also included Borge Mogensen, Finn Juhl, Arne Jacobsen, and Poul Kjaerholm, who worked through the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and beyond. Their work links Denmark's reputation for modern furniture of outstanding quality and craft skills with a domestic aesthetic that embraced modernity and human values simultaneously.

No one who lived in the decades immediately after the second world war will fail to remember the difference a piece of Danish wooden furniture - a coffee table or a tea trolley - made to dull, Utility-dominated British living-rooms, but few will have known that only a handful of craftsmen, working with a handful of modestly sized manufacturing companies, were responsible for turning the international tide in furniture design in those years.

What's more, it has lasted; Italian chrome and glass came and went, but Danish modern design has survived, passing down the generations while retaining the same values - truth to materials, fitness and purpose, and respect for human scale. The newly extended Museum of Modern Art in New York has been totally equipped with Danish design, and Wegner's classic "Round" chair takes pride of place, still modern-looking and comfortable over half a century after its design.

Wegner's education and background incorporated all the elements that informed his rigorous approach to furniture design. He was born in Tonder, in rural Denmark, the son of a cobbler. He trained with a master cabinet-maker before moving to the Technology Institute in Copenhagen. From there he transferred to the city's famous School of Arts and Crafts, where he received an architectural education, graduating in 1938. These were the days of hard minimalism and new materials - tubular steel and bent plywood among them - emanating from the German Bauhaus. Wegner clearly took in the underlying message of the need to move with the times.

He was reluctant, however, to sacrifice the craft skills and love of natural materials that he saw as his heritage. He took the elegance and the simplicity from what came to be known as functionalism, but he chose to retain an interest in solid, carved wood throughout his career. Two years after graduating as an architect, he went to work in the office of Arne Jacobsen and Erik Moller in Aarhus, and was given the opportunity to work on one of Denmark's finest modern buildings, the Aarhus city hall. His task was to create the furniture, and it set him on a path from which he never looked back. For Wegner, 1943 marked the establishment of his own office in Gentofte. The following year he began to work on a series of what came to be called his "Chinese" chairs - because they were inspired by portraits of Danish merchants sitting on Ming chairs. Most were designed for the Fritz Hansen furniture company, but his most famous creation, the Round chair, conceived in 1949, was made by the small furniture workshop, Carl Hansen and Son. That remained the case for many years as the chair stayed in steady production. Once again the chair's success was a result of the close collaboration between the designer and the craft-based production process.

One of the impetuses behind Wegner's prolific production of different chairs was the challenge to create a new one for each of the annual Cabinetmakers' Guild exhibitions, held in Copenhagen. He showed a new one each year between 1941 and 1966.

As early as 1940, Wegner began to work with a small craft-based furniture manufacturer named Johannes Hansen. Their collaboration crystallised his ambition to become a master chair designer, and their long relationship underpinned many of his heroic achievements through the 1940s and 1950s. Combining the skills of an architect and a craftsman, Wegner was able to sketch, model and then create a finished prototype while working with highly skilled artisans assisting him along the way. It was an approach that characterised Danish design then - and it still defines it today. Young designers, such as Kasper Salto and the Strand & Hvass team, talk in exactly the same way about their design aspirations and working methods.

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Wegner saw, and to a significant extent oversaw, the whole story of Danish design. In many ways, he was Danish design, embodying its principles in every design decision he ever made. Although he made so many chairs - around 500 in total - and each one can tell its own story, a few stand out. The 1949 Round chair was the ultimate Wegner chair design - a simple wooden form made up of four legs joining a continuous back and arms wrapping around the sitter. The seat of hand-woven cane provides just enough comfort, as does the carved form of the back-rest. An exercise in minimalism, it quickly became an iconic piece. It graced the cover of the American magazine Interiors in 1950 and was described as "the world's most beautiful chair". Somebody must have agreed as it was chosen to seat Richard Nixon and John F Kennedy during their 1960 US presidential debate.

The "Y" or "Wishbone" chair of the following year is another memorable Wegner design, a development of the same theme but with a new, Y-shaped piece of wood added to its back. The "Peacock" chair of a couple of years earlier showed Wegner playing with the traditional form of the Windsor chair, but extending the length of the back struts to give a contemporary feel. One of his most overtly useful chairs - the "Man's chair" - had a coat-hanger form extending from its back-rest to hold a man's jacket and stop it getting creased. Although he was earnest in his ambitions, Wegner allowed himself the space to play a little as well.

I met Wegner more than 20 years ago in the Carl Hansen workshop, and spent some time there utterly enthralled as I listened to the detail of how the Round chair was made. I was struck by his modesty but, above all, by the fact that he was clearly a man with a quest that dominated everything else - to design the perfect chair. That is what he did all his life, work on that ever vanishing ideal which all furniture designers still strive to fulfil. Along the way, he produced many, many chairs, each in its own way perfect, meeting the requirements of the brief he set himself. He kept working right up to the 1990s, when he passed his studio over to his daughter Marianne.

The Copenhagen Museum of Art and Industry acquired its first Wegner chair in 1942. Since then his pieces have been added to many collections, including those in New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Neue Sammlung in Munich. He received numerous awards, among them the Lunning prize in 1951 and the grand prix at the Milan Triennale in the same year. In 1959 he was made an honorary royal designer for industry by the Royal Society of Arts, and in 1997 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Royal College of Art. He is survived by his wife Inga and his daughters, Marianne and Eva.

· Hans Jorgen Wegner, furniture designer, born April 2 1914; died January 26 2007