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Hans Wegner, 92, broke ground with Danish Modern chair designs

By DAVID COLMAN

Hans Wegner, whose Danish Modern furniture, most famously his chairs, helped change the course of design history in the 1950s and '60s by sanding modernism's sharp edges and giving aesthetes a comfortable seat, died on Jan. 26 in Copenhagen. He was 92.

His death was confirmed by his daughter Marianne Wegner, who worked alongside her father for more than 20 years.

Wegner was one of a small group of Danish furniture designers whose elegant but comfortable creations made Danish Modern all the rage in the 1950s and 1960s.

He also earned a footnote in political history, when, in 1960, Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy were seated on Wegner chairs during the first nationally televised presidential debate.

He was one of what I think of as the humble giants of 20th-century design - those men who would probably shun the term designer and prefer to call themselves cabinetmakers," said Paola Antonelli, the curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where many of Mr. Wegner's chairs are not only on display but in use, in the museum's restaurants.

Wegner rose to international prominence as one of a handful of Danes who seized the design world's attention with a fresh aesthetic of sculptural and organic modern furniture. Others were Arne Jacobsen, Finn Juhl, Borge Mogensen and Poul Kjæholm.

Their works, often constructed in warm blond wood, domesticated the cold chrome shine of the Bauhaus-influenced International style. In the process, they found a way to dovetail the words "Danish" and "modern" for the first time, joining cabinetmaker-guild traditions of high craftsmanship, quality and comfort with modernist principles of simplicity and graphic beauty.

This unity was epitomized by Mr. Wegner's two best-known chair designs, both introduced in late 1949. One was the Wishbone chair, with a Y-shaped back split and a curved back and armrest suggested by a child's Chinese chair he had seen. Sometimes called the Y-back, it is an understated work of simplicity and comfort, its graceful shape hinting at both East Asian design and modernist ideals. It is still made today by the Danish firm Carl Hansen & Son.

His other 1949 success became known simply as the Chair, or the Round Chair. (Mr. Wegner did not name his chairs, letting manufacturers or customers name them as they liked, leading to some confusion over the years.) The Chair is a strikingly modern design, with a caned seat and a back and armrests made of one continuous semicircle of wood. This was the chair used in the Kennedy-Nixon debate.

By the late 1960s, the rage for Danish Modern had cooled in the United States. But Wegner kept working, creating new company PP Mobler. He retired in the early 1990s, when Marianne, an architect, took over his studio.

Over the past decade he was able to witness a surge of renewed interest in his work. Mid-century Modern furniture is again in high demand, according to spokesman for PP Mobler and Carl Hansen. What was a chic look a half-century ago has today joined the pantheon of mainstream style, perhaps a fitting tribute to a man who believed that a chair should be made well enough to last at least 50 years.

New York Times - 6 February 2007.

Hans Wegner Dies at 92, Danish Furniture Designer

By DAVID COLMAN

Hans Wegner, whose Danish Modern furniture — most famously his chairs — helped change the course of design history in the 1950s and '60s by sanding modernism's sharp edges and giving aesthetes a comfortable seat, died on Jan. 26 in Copenhagen. He was 92.

Associated Press

Hans Wegner at his home in 1997.

His death was confirmed by his daughter Marianne Wegner, who worked alongside her father for more than 20 years. Mr. Wegner (pronounced VEG-ner in English and VAY-ner in Danish) was one of a small group of Danish furniture designers whose elegant but comfortable creations made Danish Modern all the rage among cosmopolitan Americans of the '50s and '60s.

He also earned a footnote in political history, when, in 1960, Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy were seated on Wegner chairs during the first nationally televised presidential debate.

"He was one of what I think of as the humble giants of 20th-century design, those men who would probably shun the term designer and prefer to call themselves cabinetmakers," said Paola Antonelli, the curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where many of Mr. Wegner's chairs are not only on display but in use, in the museum's several restaurants.

Describing the appeal of his furniture, she said, "First and foremost, it's comfortable, and saying that it's comfortable before saying it's beautiful is really high praise, because the truth is that it's incredibly elegant."

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Born in 1914, Hans Jorgen Wegner learned woodworking as a boy, the son of a cobbler, in Tondern, in southern Denmark. He was studying design in Copenhagen in 1938 when he was hired by Mr. Jacobsen and Erik Moller to design furniture for the town hall they were creating in Aarhus, Denmark. Before the project was over, he met Inga Helbo, a secretary in Mr. Jacobsen's office. They later married.

Once the Aarhus project was completed, Mr. Wegner started his own design business, and by the mid-1940s he had created chair designs for the Fritz Hansen and Johannes Hansen furniture companies, including the Peacock chair, a smart update of the Windsor chair.

New York Times - 6 February 2007.

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Working out of a studio at his house, Mr. Wegner produced hundreds of prototypes and had to be pressed to leave work for family vacations. Asked what his other interests were, his daughter Marianne, said with a laugh: "Apart from furniture? None." Mr. Wegner's wife and another daughter, Eva Wegner, also survive him.

By the late 1960s, the rage for Danish Modern had cooled in the United States. But Mr. Wegner kept working, creating new designs for another Danish company, P P Mobler. He retired in the early 1990s, when Marianne, an architect, took over his studio.

Over the last decade he was able to witness a surge of renewed interest in his work. Mid-century Modern furniture is again in high demand, according to spokesmen for P P Mobler and Carl Hansen. What was a chic look a half-century ago has today joined the pantheon of mainstream style, perhaps a fitting tribute to a man who believed that a chair should be made well enough to last at least 50 years.

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.

The Guardian - 6 February 2007.

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

Telegraph - 5 February 2007.

Hans Wegner

Hans Wegner, the Danish furniture designer who died on January 26 aged 92, was once described as the "Enzo Ferrari of the wooden chair", and was responsible for a huge range of familiar, functional yet beautifully crafted modern designs.

These included the Wishbone Chair of 1950, named after the forked uprights that supported the curved back; the Peacock Chair of 1944, a take on the traditional Windsor Chair, stripped of detail and with the back spindles fanned out like a peacock's plume, and the Round Chair of 1949, a huge hit in America, where it accommodated the backsides of John F Kennedy and Richard Nixon during the 1961 televised presidential debates. Interiors magazine described it as "the world's most beautiful chair" and it eventually became known simply as "the Chair".

The son of a master cobbler, Hans Wegner was born on April 2 1914 in Tønder in southern Jutland, where he grew up surrounded by forests, workshops and craftsmen. His instinct for materials grew out of the hours he spent in his father's workshop and at 13 he was apprenticed to a local cabinetmaker. But it was in Copenhagen, where he did his military service and remained to study at a technical college, then at the Copenhagen School of Arts and Crafts, that he encountered Bauhaus and became inspired by design.

He trained as a cabinetmaker, and worked as an assistant in Eric Møller and Arne Jacobsen's architectural practice, helping with the famous design for Denmark's Arhus Town Hall.

But it was only when he opened his own office, in Gentofte in 1943, that his interest in chairs began. His skill lay in taking old techniques — the steam bending of timber, the weaving of cord seats — and giving them a modern twist. In his early work, Wegner concentrated on stripping traditional chairs to their pure essentials and adapting them into a modernist idiom, working mainly in Danish hardwoods — oak, beech and ash.

With the Round Chair, however, he left tradition behind and won an international following. American manufacturers tried to persuade him to move to the United States, but Wegner insisted that his chairs were designed to be made in Denmark by Danish craftsmen.

Wegner said that he designed chairs he would like to use himself, which may, perhaps, account for some of his more idiosyncratic ideas. His Valet Chair, for example, designed in 1953, featured a back designed like a coathanger for a jacket and a shallow drawer under the seat for depositing the contents of jacket pockets; angled open, it functioned as a hanger for trousers.

His Ox Chair, designed in 1960, came with or without horns. "We must take care," he once said, "that everything doesn't get so dreadfully serious. We must play — but we must play seriously."

Wegner continued to design into his 80s from the workshop of the stone and wood house which he built near Copenhagen in the early 1960s. The Hoop Chair of 1985 was designed when Wegner was 71 years old, yet was startlingly original in concept. In more recent years he also worked with lighting, sometimes in collaboration with his daughter Marianne. Over the years he produced some 500 designs, of which 80 remain in production.

Among numerous honours, Wegner was made an Honorary Royal Designer for Industry by the British Royal Society of Arts in 1959. His furniture forms part of all major modern design collections.

Wegner is survived by his wife, Inga, and by their daughters.