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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.