

Mid-Century Modern Furniture From Scandinavia

Background notes

Dr Robin Jones – 11 November 2015



Interior of Artek Shop, Helsinki



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FINNISH AND SWEDISH FURNITURE

Finnish and Swedish architects and product designers made a huge contribution to mid-20th century furniture design in an international context. Before the war, designers such as Alvar Aalto in Finland and Bruno Mathsson in Sweden exploited new materials, in particular plywood, and new manufacturing techniques to make some highly distinctive furniture. The introduction of new materials and techniques of production as well as changing uses of domestic space encouraged post-war designers such as Eero Aarnio and Ilmari Tapiovaara to come up with new forms of seating furniture.

ERIC GUNNAR ASPLUND (1885-1940) - Sweden

An important figure in the development of International Modernism in Sweden. Studied architecture at the Stockholm Academy of Art 1909.

1913 travelled to Italy and Greece.

1917-1920 he was editor of the magazine *Arkitektur*.

1921 designed the furnishings for Stockholm City Hall. Architect of Stockholm City Library 1928.

He was chief architect of the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 (Paradiset Restaurant) and presided over the breakthrough of Modern Functionalist style into Sweden. However, he remained a classicist in his designs and opened the way for other designers such as Carl Malmsten and Bruno Mathsson who favoured natural materials and a more a humane modernism.

CARL MALMSTEN (1888-1972) - Sweden

Established his own studio in Stockholm 1916 as a freelance designer of furniture and interior design.

1916 won first prize to design furniture for newly built city hall in Stockholm.

His furniture designs were modern re-workings of older Swedish furniture forms from the 18th century (local vernacular) – characterised by functional simplicity and formal clarity. He was convinced of the need for a modern approach to design but also believed that it was important to remain true to the cultural roots of Swedish design which provided design solutions and possessed a humane quality lacking in Modernist designs of German functionalists.

He reacted against the functionalist designs of the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930.

His work synthesizes traditional European furniture forms especially English with Swedish vernacular to create simplified and functional forms which also stressed high quality of production and good materials.

BRUNO MATHSSON (1907-1988) - Sweden

Mathsson is the most significant Swedish furniture designer from this period. He was the son of a fourth generation furniture maker from Varnamo in Southern Sweden and had gained a good knowledge of wood technology. He became fascinated by the possibilities of developing the form and function of modern furniture using new wood technology, such as plywood and laminates. Between 1933 and 1936 he developed the concept of a chair with 2 basic elements - curved, laminated bentwood supports and a contoured seat with a solid wooden frame. The first of these designs was known as the 'working chair' (Arbetsstol) demonstrating the belief that one works better when sitting in a relaxed position. He discarded traditional ideas of the height of chairs and tables and developed furniture of slender form and seating adapted to lower horizontal surfaces. In 1937 he showed furniture at the Paris Exhibition and developed an armed version of the Eva chair in 1941 (the Pernilla). The innovative design of the Working Chair and its graceful natural curves made it very popular. In 1957 the chair was chosen as one of a hundred best examples of Swedish furniture by the Swedish Society of Industrial Design. The chair is still in production today.

ALVAR AALTO (1898 - 1976) - Finland

The architect Alvar Aalto is one of the most important 20th century architects and furniture designers.

As with many of his contemporaries, Aalto developed a range of furniture, which took advantage of developments in moulded plywood. In 1929 he won a competition to build Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium (built 1930-2) outside Turku. He designed the buildings and furnishings. Instead of producing designs for tubular steel furniture as his contemporaries were doing he transformed these designs into modern wooden furniture manufactured by compression-moulding laminated wood. He collaborated with a cabinetmaker, Otto Korhonen (1884-1935) at Turku to produce a chair with press moulded back and arms which provided support for the user's back and arms – this became known as the Paimio chair and has become an icon of modernist design.

Aalto was keen to embrace the developments that industry offered his furniture, but only when these developments could be used to improve the furniture, and only when this could be done in a manner that would not alienate the object from the user.

In 1933 Aalto became more financially secure; he moved his office to Helsinki and designed a house for his growing family and a work studio.

In 1935 he met an industrialist couple, Maire and Harry Gullichsen. His friendship with them led to the formation of the Artek furniture design company which began to market Aalto's furniture abroad. An important opportunity for the international public to become aware of Aalto's architecture came in 1937 when he designed the Finnish pavilion at the International Exhibition of Arts and Technology in Modern Life at Paris. Success of the Finnish pavilion led MOMA in New York to commission Aalto to provide material for a one man show in 1938. In 1939 Aalto was given responsibility for organizing and designing the Finnish Pavilion at the World's Fair New York.

JOSEF FRANK (1885-1967) - Sweden

This Austrian born architect, interior, furniture and textile designer spent his early working life in Vienna, opening an interior design shop called Haus und Garten. He emigrated to Sweden in 1934 and was appointed as chief designer of an up-market interior design company called Svensk Tenn. Frank also designed many items of furniture. All of these follow a different route to the Germanic Bauhaus modernism. They are often based on pre-existing historic models, although not slavishly copying them in a historicist manner. He admired English Arts and Crafts furniture, Oriental furniture and the furniture of Biedermeier Vienna – all these influences were skilfully reworked into new forms of furniture, which offered another version of modernism. Svensk Tenn, the company for which Frank designed the majority of his textiles and furniture is still in business today and most of their best selling lines were created by Frank during the 1940s and 1950s.

ILMARI TAPIOVAARA (1914-1999) - Finland

Between 1935-6 he worked in the London office of Artek (company producing Aalto's chairs) and studied design at the Central School of Art and Design Helsinki. He then worked in the Paris office of the modernist architect Le Corbusier. In 1937 he was appointed as the design director for the Finnish furniture manufacturer AskO Oy.

In 1946 he designed the Domus stacking chair for the Domus Academica student hostel in Helsinki. It was a breakthrough chair made of plywood of knock-down construction and was produced by the Keravan Puuteollisuus. In 1950, he set up a design practice in Helsinki with his wife, Annikki, a talented textile designer. He went on to win 6 Gold Medals at various Milan Triennales (51, 54, 57 and 60). He later designed textiles, lighting, glassware and stainless steel flatware. For a while he worked in the design practice of Mies van der Rohe in the USA.

ANTTI NURMESNIEMI (1927-2003) – Finland

Finnish interior and industrial designer. During WWII he worked in a metal workshop and aircraft factory in Finland which gave him a good understanding of the properties of wood and metal. He was influenced by the exhibition 'America Builds' which Alvar Aalto brought MOMA, New York to Finland – this influenced his views on use of modern materials and new forms of furniture for the home.

1949-50 he worked in Stockmann Department Store design office as furniture designer. From 1951-56 he worked as furniture and interior designer in Viljo Revell's office and designed furniture for banks and hotels. In 1951 he designed a sauna stool in horseshoe shape with laminates of wood for the sauna of the Palace Hotel, Helsinki. The sauna stool won the grand prize at the 1957 Milan Triennale. His experience of working with metal also informed the design of seating furniture produced by Merivaara 1963-66. He married the textile and dress designer Vuokko Eskolin and lived in Milan. In 1956 he returned to Helsinki and started his own design practice.

TAPIO WIRKKALA (1915-1985) - Finland

The Finnish designer best known for his glassware, Tapio Wirkkala also designed a series of low tables/coffee tables for the furniture manufacturer AskO Oy during the mid-1950s.

These pieces of furniture derived from the experiments Wirkkala conducted with the wood workers Soinne and Kni in the production of laminated trays in the early 1950s, one of which was described as the most beautiful object of that year by House Beautiful magazine in USA.

YRJO KUKKAPURO (b. 1933) - Finland

Studied at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki and graduated in 1958. He is a functionalist who was heavily influenced by the work of Ilmari Tapiovaara (Tapiovaara taught him at the University of Art and Design). In the early 1960s, along with a number of other furniture designers throughout Europe, he experimented with proto-plastics – he used a technique known as sintering (1961) – a heated steel frame is dipped into powdered plastic so as to form a layer of melted material that can be removed from the steel mould once it was cool – he could find no manufacturers for this process. In 1964 he made another attempt to design a plastic chair – the prototype was formed of a wire mesh in the form of Kukkapuro's seated body. The result was a fibre glass and leather covered armchair with a cradle like structure. The chair was manufactured by Haimi 1964-5 and Avarte after this.

During the 1960s and 1970s he worked on chairs of moulded plastic and also physio-metrical experiments on the shape of the human body and how it functioned best in furnished environment. The result was Fysio Office chair of 1978 – ergonomic design.

EERO AARNIO (b. 1932) - Finland

Aarnio was one of several designers to bring international recognition to Finnish design in the 1960s. He studied at the University of Art and Design 1954-7 and set up his own design practice in 1962 specializing in furniture design using new synthetic materials.

Aarnio started as traditionalist in terms of materials used – first furniture of wood and wicker but began experimenting in early 1960s with fibreglass. His best known designs from this period include the Ball or Globe Chair. In production from 1965 – with built-in stereo speakers and telephone. In 1968 he produced the Gyro or Pastilli chair – both chairs produced by Asko of Lahti for which he won the American Industrial Award in 1968. His furniture was produced by Adelta and Asko Oy.

Aarnio's Pastilli chair was exhibited at Cologne Furniture Fair 1968, exhibition of modern chairs at the Museum of Modern Art Paris in 1970 and 'Modern Chairs 1918-70' at the Whitechapel gallery, London, 1983.

YNGVE ECKSTROM (1913-1988) SWEDESE FURNITURE - Sweden

Swedese founded in 1945 by Yngve Eckstrom and Sven Bertil Sjoqvist in Vaggeryd, Smaland

IN CONCLUSION

The importance placed on tradition, the vernacular and natural materials, combined with a wish to produce new furniture for the modern home, and designs which could bring 'good design' within the reach of a large number of people, were seen as important factors in mid-century Scandinavian design of this period.

Many consider the designs we have looked at today to be amongst the most influential as well as the most beautiful of all twentieth-century furniture. The fact that many of these designs are still in production suggests that their creators found a style and approach to furniture which were completely suited to modern life in the 20th and 21st centuries.

DANISH LIGHTING AND FURNITURE – 1930-70

The influence of Denmark in the history of 20th century lighting, furniture and interior design can seem out of proportion to the size of the country.

This lecture will look at some examples of lighting and furniture by Danish designers and producers between 1930 and 1970.

Furniture by designers from Denmark such as Hans Wegner, Arne Jacobsen and Finn Juhl set standards in furniture design and production which influenced the rest of the world. The lighting fixtures of Poul Henningsen produced by Louis Poulsen revolutionized modern lighting in the home.

DANISH LIGHTING

Given its northern location and long winters, Lighting was taken very seriously in Scandinavia, particularly Denmark.

LOUIS POULSEN & Co

Although internationally celebrated today as a leading exponent of modern Scandinavian lighting, the firm of Louis Poulsen began as the Copenhagen Direct Wine Import Co. established in 1874 by Ludvig R. Poulsen.

After 1917, new owner of firm, Sophus Kaastrup-Olsen moved away from other products and concentrated solely on sales of electrical equipment and in 1924 retained the architect Poul Henningsen to develop a line of lighting fixtures.

POUL HENNINGSEN (1894-1967)

In 1924 he designed the PH table and ceiling lamp range first used in Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House, Brno.

Henningsen developed his range of PH lamps after 1927 – most of these are still in production today and are among the firm's best known products. His most outstanding designs – PH5 and 'Artichoke' pendant lights – were from the 1950s. The lamps are characterized by a core of incandescent bulbs surrounded by concentric tiers of reflective metal bands.

Henningsen practised as an architect at the time of the emergent Modern Movement and his design philosophy evolved through having to rethink the design of familiar everyday objects on the basis of functional need.

Through architecture he arrived at his conception of lighting as a fundamental and integral component within an interior rather than as a decorative accessory.

His enamelled aluminium PH5 pendant lamp of 1958 satisfied both these requirements – its staggered cupped shades served to diffuse the light source and to prevent glare. PH5 could be mass-produced from sheet metal.

To replace the traditional chandelier he devised the 'Artichoke' pendant light – first used at Langelinie Pavilion, Copenhagen in 1958. Leaves are made of copper.

In the post war period, Louis Poulsen & Co manufactured designs for lamps by Arne Jacobsen and Verner Panton.

DANISH FURNITURE 1945-1965

The interaction between architect and cabinetmaker or manufacturer was to be of decisive importance for the development of Danish furniture in the 20th century. In 1927 leading cabinetmakers entered the cheap mass furniture market.

There are 2 main strands in post-War Danish furniture:

1. the designer-craftsman
2. designers who are interested in the possibilities of new technologies and materials.

BORGE MOGENSEN (1914- 1972)

Borge Mogensen falls into the first category. He was a cabinet maker who trained at the Royal College of Arts and Crafts and the Royal Academy in Copenhagen (1938-41).

From 1950 Mogensen set up as an independent furniture designer. Like many Danish furniture designers he was very interested in studies of how furniture worked in a home and how we use chairs and tables on a day to day basis. Traditional cabinetmaking formed the basis for Mogensen's work and he designed for the best Danish firms.

He was inspired by English Windsor chairs and American Shaker furniture, Spanish Renaissance furniture, military furniture. He preferred oak often combined with a wool or leather upholstery.

HANS WEGNER (1914- 2007) – craftsman designer

Wegner trained with a cabinetmaker and worked for himself 1932-36.

Subsequently he trained at the School of Technology, Copenhagen and worked for the architect Arne Jacobsen's office. He established his own studio in 1943 at Aarhus.

He developed a series of wooden chairs, which demonstrated his understanding of the furniture of past eras and regions and their careful fusion into something that was modern.

He became leader of the craftsmen-designers in Denmark during the post war era. His first notable design was the Peacock arm chair (model JH 550) of 1947 which was clearly derived from the English Windsor form. In 1949 he produced the Round Chair (JH 501). This chair was modified by Wegner for the next ten years in a number of forms. He designed for a number of manufacturers, including the cabinet making firm of Johannes Hansen and Fritz Hansen..

The elegance of Wegner's design, alongside the informed use of materials such as indigenous timbers, cane seats and woven fabric upholstery, make these designs an important part of the style of furniture that we associate with twentieth-century Danish furniture. A type of organic Modernism. The 'Y' chair designed in 1950, is a good example of Wegner's work - simple in outline with a minimum number of constructional members.

ARNE JACOBSEN (1902-1971)

Arne Jacobsen is perhaps the most internationally significant Danish designer for us to consider. He was a designer interested in the possibilities of new materials and techniques.

The project that Jacobsen is best known for in this country is St Catherine's College, Oxford, for which he designed the buildings and interiors, as well as a group of furniture. He also designed the Danish Embassy in London. Whilst Jacobsen designed a number of custom furnishings for his buildings in prewar years he only began designing for furniture in 1952, working with the Danish furniture making firm, Fritz Hansen. A three legged chair with separate seat and back panels showed the direct influence of Charles and Ray Eames.

The Ant chair or 3100 (teak faced plywood steel and plastic sheathing and rubber) was Jacobsen's first mature furniture design, produced by Fritz Hansen in 1952. This diminutive side chair was intended for the canteen of the Novo Pharmaceutical Co. in Copenhagen.

Jacobsen's most notable development of the Ant chair was model no 4130 which had a sculpted wooden base which blended better with the ply shell.



'Ant' chairs at V & A museum cafe

You may be familiar with the 3107 chair. In 1963 Lewis Morley photographed a naked Christine Keeler sitting astride a very similar chair – a copy of the Jacobsen one. This famous image has been reproduced by many celebrities, in more recent years the Spice Girls were photographed (clothed) on a range of brightly coloured 3107 chairs. In 1957 Jacobsen designed the furnishings for the Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) Royal Hotel in Copenhagen (now the Raddison Royal).

Amongst these furnishings he produced designs for two chairs which featured upholstered plastic shells on pedestals - the so-called Egg chair and the Swan chair. This chair is formed from a moulded plastic shell with foam rubber and leather cover on an aluminium base.

FINN JUHL (1912-1989) - chairs as sculpture

Finn Juhl trained as an architect. By 1937 he had begun his long association with the cabinetmaker Niels Vodder. In 1945 he opened his own office in Copenhagen and taught at the Fredericksberg School of Interior Design until 1955 where he exercised wide influence. He did not produce any startlingly novel forms or structures yet their elegance and simplicity came to represent Danish design in the 1950s. His furniture designs of the 1940s and 1950s however rank amongst best products of the post war period. He won thirty six prizes for his furniture in competitions in Copenhagen and won five gold medals at Milan Triennales of 1954 and 1957. During the 1940s and 1950s Juhl created a series of seating designs – handcrafted by Niels Vodder- with articulated wooden frames supporting sculptural upholstered units. The series became the paradigm of the Scandinavian organic look. Amongst Juhl's most famous designs is the Chieftain chair of 1949, which consists of a series of sculptural curves.

POUL KJAERHOLM (1929 - 1980) –

Poul Kjaerholm trained at Copenhagen Arts and Crafts School where he taught 1952-56. He designed furniture for the firm of E. Cold Christiansen of Copenhagen from 1956 and also Ejnar Pedersen of PP Furniture. Kjaerholm's designs reflect the Danish tradition of elegant detail and careful craftsmanship but use of contemporary materials and techniques. The materials selected may be similar to those used by Modernists like Marcel Breuer. However there are significant differences in approach to the use of the materials.

Kjaerholm demanded absolute perfection in the manufacture of his designs, the exposed nature of the construction is used to clearly show the nature of the materials and their inherent properties.

The PK 22 chair and other chairs were produced by E Cold Christiansen between 1956 and 1982 and were reissued by Fritz Hansen since 1982.

VERNER PANTON (1926-1998)

One of the most versatile contemporary industrial designers, the architect Panton created a broad range of products including furniture textiles and lighting.

After his design training, he became an associate of Arne Jacobsen in 1950-2. He established his own architectural and design practice in Denmark between 1955-62 and moved to Switzerland in 1963 (Binningen). His approach is closer to Italian designers such as Joe Colombo and Vico Magistretti.

Panton is best known for his futuristic furniture and interior design concepts which made use of new materials, bright colours and unusual shapes to create a highly original and striking visual effect.

The one piece moulded plastic stacking chair, or Panton chair as it is sometimes known which has been described as his most outstanding contribution to 20th furniture, was first designed in 1960.

As a design it takes full advantage of the capabilities of industrial manufacturing processes. The chair can be made in a single process and comes from the mould in its finished form.

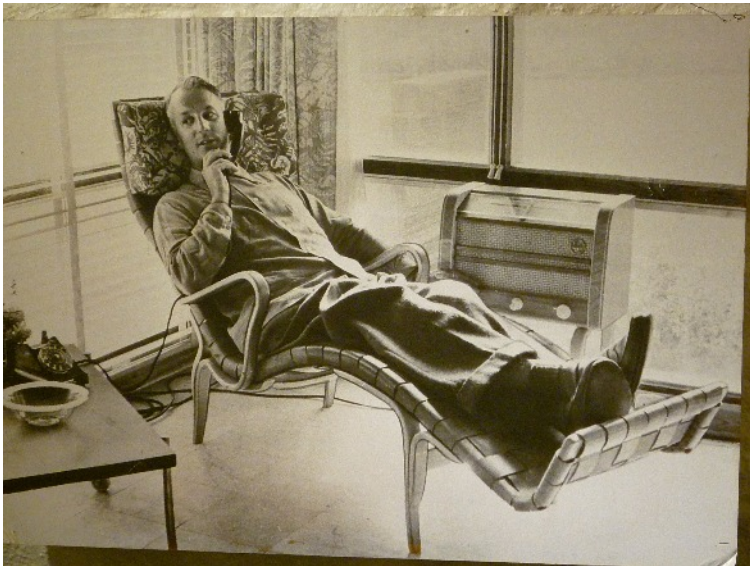
Having developed the idea of this chair, and come up with a workable prototype, Panton was faced with a long search for a manufacturer that had the capability and necessary faith to manufacture the chair.

He designed lighting for Louis Poulsen (Flower Pot 1968) and geometric textiles for Unika-Vaev. Panton designed some more interesting and unusual furniture, such as the Three-Dimensional Carpet of 1970 and the Fantasy Landscape of the same year.

IN CONCLUSION

Apart from the furniture of Arne Jacobsen and Verner Panton, the furniture designs we have seen today show a development away from the Modernism of Germany (metallic), a move towards a greater acknowledgment of furniture history and a desire to use natural materials rather than the alienating machine-produced materials which were favoured by some Modernists.

The importance placed on tradition and natural materials, combined with a wish to produce new furniture for the modern home, and designs which could bring 'good design' within the reach of a large number of people, were seen as important factors in mid-century Scandinavian design of this period.



Bruno Mattsson on his lounge

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