

'AT SOME POINT, EVERY DESIGNER OR ARCHITECT WILL ATTEMPT TO DO A CHAIR'

As BBC One's *Imagine* puts the humble chair on a pedestal, we meet star contributors, Peter and Charlotte Fiell

In 1953, chair designer

George Nelson said, 'Every truly original idea – every innovation in design, every new application of materials, every technical invention for furniture – seems to find its most important expression in a chair.' Peter and Charlotte Fiell, authors, chair experts and contributors to this month's *Imagine – Are You Sitting Comfortably?* agree. 'Nothing else comes close to the chair,' says Peter, as he settles himself on a sleek, ice-blue Jasper Morrison Air-Chair. 'At some point, almost every designer or architect will attempt to do a chair, because a chair can so perfectly represent a philosophy or an approach to design in a way no other object can.'

If this sounds grandiose, think about the chairs you have at home. Firstly, you probably have more chairs than any other piece of furniture; now think about the variety – the easy chair in your lounge, the practical, folding chairs in the kitchen, the deckchair for the garden, the formal, high-backed chairs in the dining room and the probably rather ugly but useful swivelly one in the office. Yet a chair is the most challenging piece of furniture to design. It needs to be ergonomic and comfortable; to bear our weight, so construction

techniques are crucial; and to look good, too – from every angle.

'The story of the chair is less one of social history and more one of technical, material and formal innovation,' says Peter. 'Design unity is the holy grail. The more you strip away decoration and emphasise intrinsic form, the more rationally, easily and simply a design can be mass-produced – essential if it's to get out there and really make a difference.'

Peter demonstrates his point with a small bentwood chair crouching in the hallway of the couple's London home. To the untrained eye, it doesn't look much, but there's an argument for saying modern furniture design began with this chair. 'It's clearly evolved from the Biedermeier style,' says Charlotte, 'but it's important because it has been made specifically for mass-production. Michael Thonet, the designer, has stripped it down to its essential parts. While the form may not be very modern, its simplification is.'

At the top of the house, outside Charlotte's study, Verner Panton's eponymous sinuous scarlet chair illustrates the 'holy grail' of Peter's argument – to a degree. 'This was the first single material, single form injection-moulded chair to be produced. It meant that with



'An Air-Chair takes only three minutes to make'

The Fiells' home is full of sitting beauties: (clockwise from left) a Pierre Paulin, a Panton, a delicate Viennese mahogany model and a rare rosewood by Andrew J Milne

one shot of energy you could drive material into a mould, and a few seconds later a chair would pop out – just like making road cones.' Despite Peter's evident enthusiasm for the chair, he has reservations. 'It's very difficult to say that this was the most important chair of all time because it never sold well. Okay, the curves are very sexy and it's a cool-looking thing, but is something a success because design critics say it's important – or is success linked to sales? I think it's the latter. If something doesn't sell, how can it amount to anything? How can it make a difference?'

These are the extremes, but in

every room beautiful, sculptural chairs beckon, spanning the last 150 years of chair design. 'We love Pierre Paulin's furniture,' says Charlotte, stroking a chubby, doughnut-shaped chair covered in bright green stretch jersey in their lounge. 'Without doubt, he has produced some of the most comfortable furniture ever, and it's so sculptural.' Peter agrees: 'Because the forms are so pure, they mix well in interiors of every type. My dream is to have a 17th-century Spanish interior mixed throughout with Paulin furniture – that would be so cool!'

To discover Charlotte and Peter's choice of iconic chairs, turn the page.

TAKE A SEAT... SIX OF THE BEST

NEW SERIES 8 8

**SIDE CHAIR, MODEL NO 14, 1859**

'This chair came about as a result of the burgeoning middle-classes in Vienna in the mid-19th century,' says Charlotte. 'As the café society developed, people needed chairs to sit on, and as growing numbers of cafés required more chairs, there was call for a model that could be made

quickly, simply and cheaply. Michael

Thonet's bentwood chair – which cost roughly the same as a bottle of wine – was the answer. By 1930, more than 50 million had been sold worldwide, making this one of the most successful industrially designed products ever.'

1

SERIES 7 CHAIR, MODEL 3107, 1955

'This is the chair that does it for me,' says Charlotte of Arne Jacobsen's stackable plywood and tubular steel model, most famously photographed with Christine Keeler astride it. 'It transcends time. It's 50 years old now and it still seems fresh. The shape is wonderful – almost like an Arp sculpture – and the plywood has a much nicer feel than plastic; it's more human somehow. Although the chair scores in terms of rationality by using a single-form seat and back, technically, this chair is not as advanced as the DAR. However, many of the best chairs involve a slight compromise. The influential American designer Raymond Loewy had an approach to design which he called MAYA (Most Advanced Yet Acceptable), meaning he advocated pushing the boundaries as far as they'd go, while still keeping the product acceptable to Joe Average. This chair does that.'



3

DAR CHAIR, 1948-50

'The DAR (Dining, Armchair, Rod) chair, designed by Charles and Ray Eames, could be considered the most important chair of all time because it was not only the first plastic chair to be mass-produced, it was also the first sizeable, durable consumer item to be produced in plastic, ever,' says Peter. 'I think that's the most important event in the whole history of furniture because it meant that you could start seeing chairs being made almost by robots – the race was on. The other important thing about this chair is that it was part of a seating programme – a flexible system with interchangeable bases, with arms and without, and in high, low and stackable versions. This meant it appealed to people in the home, but also to offices, hospitals, airports – it answered all those briefs.'

'It was also seen as very stylish when it first came out,' adds Charlotte. 'No-one had ever seen a form like that, which conformed so beautifully to the human body and yet was so sculptural and at the same time reasonably inexpensive. In its day, the plastic shell would have seemed almost space-age compared to what else was available.'



2

Where to buy

* For originals, try Domus Gallery, 15 Needham Road, London W11 (020 7221 1666; domusgallery.co.uk).

* To get the look without the provenance, go to Aram, 110 Drury Lane, London WC2 (020 7557 7557; aram.co.uk). You can also buy new versions of classics at designshopuk.com and twentytwentyone.com.



POLYPROP SEATING PROGRAMME, 1962-63

'Everyone knows Robin Day's Polyprop,' laughs Peter. 'We've all spent hours sitting on them at school, Sunday school or wherever.

Nobody thinks much about them, but they were a real breakthrough in that they were the first

seat shells to be injection moulded – meaning the seats could be produced very efficiently, literally in "one shot". The single injection moulding tool used in their manufacture can produce 4,000 seat shells a week.'

'It's also scrubable and almost indestructible,' adds Charlotte, 'which is probably why this is among the most successful chairs ever – to date over 14 million have sold.'



4

PANTON CHAIR, 1959-60, produced 1968

'Verner Panton succeeded in producing the first whole chair – seat, back and legs – in a single form and a single material,' says Peter. 'This was the first chair which achieved total design unity, but it wasn't successful for several reasons. Firstly, the design had an inherent flaw in that the plastic had been pushed to its limits, so stress cracks often developed across the base of the seat. Secondly, it had no institutional applications, unlike other chairs we've seen. Finally, it was simply too radical for people's taste – as a result, it didn't sell well.'



5

AIR-CHAIR, 1999

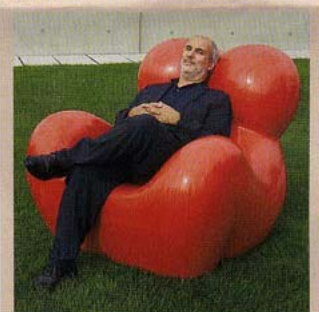
'This is one of the top three most important chairs of all time,' says Peter of Jasper Morrison's single-form gas-moulded chair. 'It's among the first pieces of furniture to be manufactured by gas moulding – a state-of-the-art process which allows hollow structures to be made of plastic – offering a better use from a structural point of view than traditional injection moulding. It is more environmentally friendly, using fewer materials and less energy – an Air-Chair takes only three minutes to make!'

'It's an incredibly "fat-free" design,' adds Charlotte. 'Jasper has stripped away anything extraneous and all that's left is this elegant, incredibly functional, pure form. Price-wise, this isn't far off Michael Thonet's approach – the chair costs about £50, which is very reasonable for something this good by such a cool designer. For all these reasons, it could be argued that this is indeed the holy grail of chair design – the completion of a cycle that began with Thonet in 1850.'



6

'It's hard to pick a favourite'



'Ever since I bought my first chair – a Thonet bentwood rocker – I've been a bit soft on them,' says Alan Yentob, presenter of *Imagine*, 'so this is a cherished project for me. We're focusing on the 20th century, mass-production and industrial design. The chair attracts so many great designers – I saw Terence Conran recently and he said his life's ambition was to design an iconic chair.'

Watch the BBC series

Imagine – Are You Sitting Comfortably? is on BBC One in February. Visit radiotimes.com for up-to-date listings.

Read the book Find out more in Charlotte and Peter's book, *1000 Chairs* (Taschen, £6.99).

FEATURE BY NASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS BY MYLES NEW, FIELL INTERNATIONAL