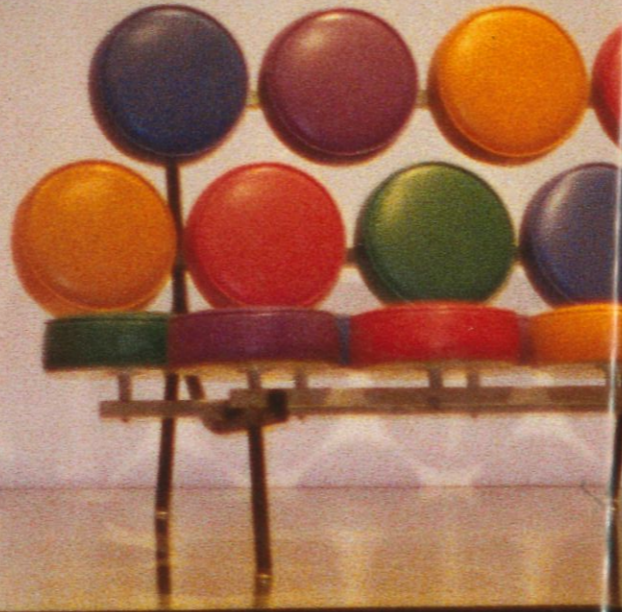


Sit Up!

100 MASTERPIECES OF CHAIR DESIGN FROM THE VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM, GERMANY

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
2 July – 6 September 1998
Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane
2 October – 15 November 1998
Object Galleries, Customs House, Sydney
5 December 1998 – 7 February 1999
(part of the 1999 Sydney Festival Arts Program)



Installation view of *Sit Up! 100 Masterpieces from the Vitra Design Museum*, Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane. Foreground: *Bolfinger Chair*. Designer Bätzner Architectural Office, 1964 – 65. Fibreglass-reinforced polyester resin. Background (right): *Marshmallow*. Designer: George Nelson, 1956. Steel tubing, aluminium, vinyl.

A number of years ago, before the Brisbane City Gallery was refurbished and modernised, two *Kone chairs* could regularly be seen at the edges of the exhibition space that housed a sort of semi-permanent display of Mayoral portraits and views of the early settlement. These chairs, which I think were designed some time in the late forties by Roger McLay, had clearly been around for some time, and as such were most probably seen as just 'part of the furniture'—which, of course, they were. While city galleries tend to end up holding all sorts of bits and pieces, as well as carefully selected fine art and craft, I understand that these examples of simple, but elegant, Australian furniture design are not really considered part of the collection, and are currently somewhere in storage.

No doubt this situation is repeated in galleries all over the country, with furniture only occasionally making the shift from the floor to the pedestal. Of course, when objects are purchased for daily use in the business of running a gallery, they have quite a different status from those objects acquired as part of an institution's collection. However, with the passing of time, it is possible for humble work-a-day things to make the transition from the furniture and fittings inventory to collection catalogue. For example, the Hamilton City Gallery, in regional Victoria, has examples of the gallery's original office furniture by Grant Featherstone on display as part of the permanent collection, and has given similar pieces to the National Gallery.

Interestingly, the only Australian designed chair included in the exhibition *Sit Up! 100 Masterpieces from the Vitra Design Museum Collection* is Marc Newson's *Lockheed Lounge*. Newson is also the youngest designer in the exhibition, which includes pieces by a long list of the best this century has to offer—Aalto, Breuer, Eames, Gehry, Jacobsen, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Sottsass, Starck—as well as one or two pieces from last century, like Thonet's classic bentwood, *Chair No.14*. Significantly, the vast majority of the pieces in the exhibition not only look like they have been well used, many of the designs are still in production. In other words, this is a museum exhibition of objects that can still be bought new, so there's quite a lot of familiar work on show—chairs you may even have sat on (something you can't do with these pieces).

While the exhibition's originator, The Vitra Design Museum, is attached to one of Europe's most well known furniture manufacturers, the exhibition does not come across as either a PR exercise, or a trade show. All the works are drawn from the Museum's extensive collection of more than 1800 pieces, and the catalogue provides excellent additional information around each object. It is here that the Museum's original organisation of the exhibition works becomes apparent, with the chairs originally clustered conceptually under headings such as 'technology', 'construction', 'decoration' and 'manifesto'. While this approach to organisation through formal, technical or conceptual relationships might have worked well when the exhibition was first put together in Vitra's custom built museum space (designed by Frank Gehry), trying to repeat the pattern in the Brisbane City Gallery would have been difficult—and may not have read all that well. In the light of this, the installation here has been organised chronologically, working from the new to the old.

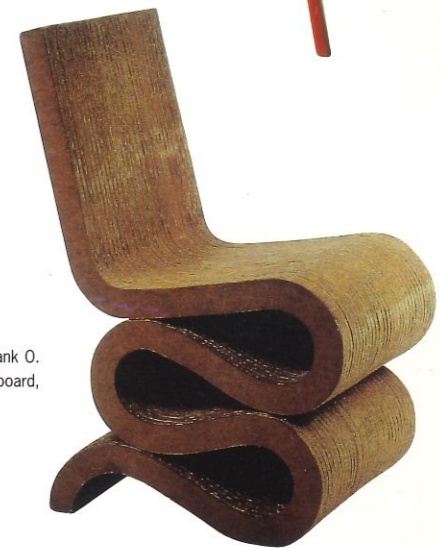
This organisation means starting with work by designers like Ettore Sottsass, Philippe Starck and Robert Venturi. Here work looks very new, but as the exhibition slips into the seventies, there's a sense that some pieces are a little dated. In other words, more of the work from the seventies and eighties has an 'of the moment' quality—anything Memphis, for example, looks very much like its time has passed. Also, more of the recent work looks like it is making a self-conscious effort to be clever, which sometimes leads work into the 'all style and no comfort' category—and I think I'd want to include Newson's *Lockheed Lounge* in this category. It's so theatrical, it could almost be described as a stage prop, rather than a piece of furniture.

This is what I think is so very different about much of the work that dates from the middle of the century (from the 30s to the 60s)—particularly the simple pieces that aim to find a balance between comfort, price and new technologies or materials. In this context, it is probably Charles and Ray Eames who have the most influence on

3-benet Skilstot. Designer: Hans J. Wegner, 1963. Varnished and bent plywood and laminated Birch-wood.



Wiggle Side Chair. Designer: Frank O. Gehry, 1972. Corrugated cardboard, fibreboard, round timber.



the feel of the exhibition—with around ten examples of their work included. The key here seems to be a play between ply and plastic, in a search for elegant solutions that might open the way to mass manufacture. In this respect, I'm sorry not to see an example of Robin Day's *Polyprop chair*, designed for Hille in about 1963, and sold in their millions to just about everyone—particularly institutions looking for seating on a budget. Of course, this chair, or a version of it, is so ubiquitous that it hardly needs inclusion in such an exhibition, although if it was, it would probably end up looking like the most 'down market' piece in the exhibition.

The challenge of displaying the 100 or so items in the exhibition has been well met by the Brisbane City Gallery, with a simple set of raised platforms each topped with a sheet of aluminium, serving as a neutral, but elegant display structure. The additional elevation makes the process of examining each exhibit relatively easy, while the floating platforms (each propped on two pieces of zincalume ducting) actively discourage viewers from giving in to the real temptation to take a seat.

Overall, *Sit Up!* presents what has to be seen as a fairly Modernist view of the chair, and it may well be this that gives the whole exhibition a strong sense of coherence, and timeliness. As any regular reader of contemporary life-style magazines will recognise, many of the 'masterpieces' designed from the thirties to the sixties still have a currency—a freshness—that has not dated, and that does not seem 'retro'. Take a quick flick through the interiors in magazines, from the archly hip *Wallpaper* to *Belle*, and you'll find chairs designed fifty or sixty years ago presented as if they are as new, as the latest issue—I suppose that's one way of identifying a design classic.

Peter Anderson is a Brisbane based freelance writer and research consultant with a special interest in visual arts, craft and design.