

# Masterpieces of Furniture Design



Exhibition Concept

**Vitra  
Design  
Museum**

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An Exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum and Qatar Museums

# Introduction

Furniture is closer to us than most other objects in our lives. It is an everyday companion, and it is everywhere: at home, at work, in public spaces. Furniture reflects social change and innovation, and sometimes it references symbolisms that are as old as human civilization. From solving technical and constructive challenges to creating beauty and inspiration in our everyday environments, furniture illustrates what design is all about.

The Vitra Design Museum owns one of the most complete collections of furniture design, comprising more than seven thousand pieces, from the past two hundred years. The exhibition Masterpieces of Furniture Design spotlights key objects from this collection. It features iconic design classics as well as lesser known pieces, and sets a special focus on expanding the canon of design by calling attention to female designers and non-Western makers.

All objects shown here are early original versions – some of them prototypes or one-offs – that epitomize the initial design idea behind each piece. As the majority of furniture icons belong to the typology of seating, this is also reflected in the exhibition.

The exhibits are grouped along seven criteria that can define excellence in design – from design's close ties with art to its potential for socially or ecologically sustainable solutions. The archival section in the centre of the room features prototypes, material samples, and original documents from the Vitra Design Museum's archives providing background information. The large-scale images on the walls show the exhibits in the historical setting for which they were created or in which they were presented for the first time.

COVER:  
nendo, Manga Cahir, 2015

PREVIOUS PAGE:  
View of the collection in the lower ground level  
at the Vitra Schaudepot

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Interior view Vitra Schaudepot



# Innovating Crafts and Technology

The history of modern furniture is full of innovations in technology and materials. For centuries, furniture was produced using traditional craft techniques, especially woodworking. With the emergence of modern design over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these crafts were enriched with new technologies, materials, and construction principles that gave rise to a new aesthetic. This is demonstrated equally by Thonet's bentwood furniture, which combined a traditional appeal with mass manufacturing, and by the virtuoso plywood creations of designers like Grete Jalk or Charlotte Perriand. Traditional crafts, practiced in a contemporary spirit, continue to inspire furniture makers to this day.

For metal furniture, the main technological leap was the introduction of tubular steel into domestic interiors brought about in 1925 by Marcel Breuer's B3 club chair. As is so often the case with innovations, the know-how came from other industries, namely, aviation and its great expertise in metal bending. From the late 1940s onwards, new developments in synthetic plastics gave further impetus to modern furniture design, as is evidenced by the seating shells created in the early 1950s by American designers Charles and Ray Eames. The new material's potential for furniture making was extensively explored and used in the following decades, which produced a wave of colourful, organically shaped objects inspired by Pop Art and societal change. That furniture design is itself a catalyst of innovation can be seen in projects like Konstantin Grcic's Chair One, made by aluminium die-casting, or Dirk van der Kooij's Endless Flow Rocking Chair, a product of 3D printing.



ABOVE:  
Konstantin Grcic, Chair\_One, 1999–2004

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:  
Grete Jalk's living room with lounge chair No. 9-1,  
nesting tables No. 5-2, and the prototype of a side table, c. 1965

Charlotte Perriand, Untitled/ Bookshelf for  
the Maison du Mexique, 1952

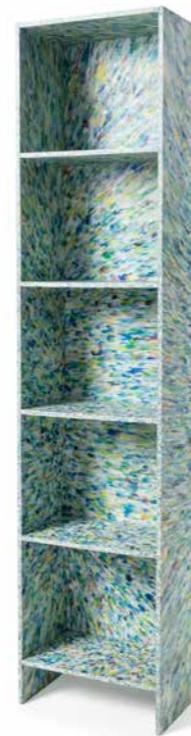


# Designing Sustainability



Designers today are very much aware of their role in contributing towards a more sustainable lifestyle and protecting our planet's resources. A look at the evolution of modern furniture shows, however, that sustainability is not a new idea in design. While many 1920s designers enthusiastically explored the potential of metal in furniture making, Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto expanded the scope of wood as a traditional, renewable material that is eminently suitable for avant-garde design as well. Fifty years later, Frank Gehry found inspiration in another sustainable material and transformed corrugated cardboard into a series of playful furniture sculptures he named Easy Edges.

Contemporary designers are no less creative in their use of innovative plant-based materials. Christien Meindertsma made her minimalistic Flax Chair from the fibre more commonly manufactured into linen. The Campana brothers, meanwhile, built their Favela Chair from recycled materials, and Cheick Diallo's Sansa Chair also emphasizes reuse as well as local sourcing. The main challenge for sustainable design, however, is posed by plastic. Virgin plastics made from fossil resources have a big carbon footprint but will be impossible to banish from furniture making in the near future. Many designers and manufacturers are therefore working on ways of avoiding virgin plastic wherever this is possible. Inspired by the idea of a circular economy, they use recycled plastics and/or create objects that are easy to dismantle into recyclable components, like Philippe Starck's Broom Chair.



PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Interior view Vitra Schaudepot

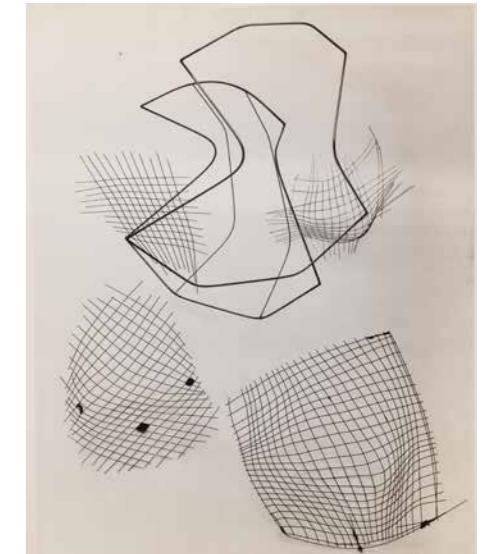
ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Cheick Diallo, Sansa, 2010  
Christien Meindertsma, Flax Chair, 2015  
Jane Atfield, Storage Tower, 1994

# Learning from Nature

Where do designers find inspiration? One of the most fascinating sources for new ideas in design is nature. The use of nature-based ornaments and images to decorate objects and interiors reaches back to ancient times, but nature's influence goes far beyond the merely decorative. This becomes especially evident in furniture design, where inspiration from nature extends from its endless vocabulary of forms and images to materials and constructive principles.

In the nineteenth century, progress in the natural sciences and the invention of photography inspired designs that were conceived according to nature's structural principles. The Art Nouveau movement was particularly enthusiastic about ornaments derived from the forms of flowers, leaves, and even bones. In the 1940s, new possibilities of moulding plastic gave rise to a defining international style known as organic design. A surge of interest in playful shapes expressing a less formal lifestyle fuelled this trend, which produced timeless icons like Eero Saarinen's Tulip Chair and the Panton Chair named after its Danish creator, Verner Panton. Both combine ergonomic forms with remarkable sculptural qualities.

In recent years, computer-aided design (CAD) has given nature-inspired styles a significant boost because it simplifies the development of complex organic shapes. Contemporary pieces quoting motifs from nature range from the Vegetal chair by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec to Zaha Hadid's Mesa table, which was inspired by the large, floating leaves of water lilies.



ABOVE:  
Harry Bertoia, different wire study models for the Diamond Chair, c. 1951

BELOW:  
Zaha Hadid/Patrik Schumacher,  
Mesa Nightblue Chrome, 2007





## Comfort Zones

A key task in furniture design is to create a comfortable environment. Comfort can depend on many factors: soft materials, pleasing colours, good acoustics, shapes that welcome and support the body – or simply the visual appeal of a furniture item. At the same time, comfort is defined by its historical and cultural contexts: what is deemed comfortable in a Japanese home may strike Europeans as uncomfortable; what seemed cosy and warm to the middle classes of the nineteenth century may well appear dark and clunky to young designers today.

Furniture design illustrates how many concepts of comfort there are – and how many different ways of obtaining it. Thomas E. Warren's patented armchair, for example, combined the nineteenth-century taste for ornamentation with innovative metal springs that let the sitter sway gently in all directions. Josef Hoffmann's famous design known as the Sitting Machine offered the comfort of an adaptable backrest, while Le Corbusier's chaise longue B 306 enabled users to find a comfortable position by means of a sliding mechanism. Arne Jacobsen enveloped the comfort-seeking sitter in the protective shell of his Egg chair, while Charles and Ray Eames used soft leather to lend their legendary Lounge Chair a cosy feel. Whatever it is that makes us feel comfortable, be it a clean look or abundant upholstery, wherever we may be, at home or in a working environment, the accelerating pace and growing demands of life mean that providing ease and comfort will remain a central task in furniture design in future as well.



OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Charles and Ray Eames in their living room, Los Angeles, 1958. Photograph by Julius Shulman

ABOVE:  
Faye Toogood, Roly-Poly, 2018

BETWEEN:  
Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Charlotte Perriand, B306 / Chaise longue à position variable, 1928/29



# The Social Question



Some furniture masterpieces illustrate that design is a powerful tool for addressing social challenges and improving the quality of our lives. Thonet's famous No. 14, for example, owed its success to a competitive price that made it the chair of choice for cafés and restaurants all over Europe. These sprang up in the nineteenth century following the rise of a wealthy, leisured middle class.

If building or assembling one's own furniture became a popular pastime in the second half of the twentieth century, it was not (or not only) because people had to save money. Do-it-yourself, or DIY, was also seen as a way of actively shaping one's environment. A well-known example for this hands-on attitude is IKEA's Billy. This simple shelf has come to symbolize a no-nonsense approach to interior design where it is not the shelf that counts but its contents. Enzo Mari's Autoprogettazione series went even further: it consisted of construction guides and nothing more. Everything else – choosing wood, buying nails, hammering it all together – was left to the user, whom Mari effectively turned into a maker. In line with his socialist views, he saw this as an act of empowerment enabling people to make their own design decisions as well as their own furniture.

Sadly, in the world of furniture, an affordable price all too often indicates low quality. It can even mean that the coveted piece is merely a copy of an original design, produced without a license and without respect for the creative effort that went into the design. In the examples presented here, in contrast, design is understood as a democratic tool for everyone in society, be they rich or poor.



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE:  
Adolf Loos, interior of Café Museum, Vienna, 1899  
Marti Guixé, Respect Cheap Furniture, 2009  
Gonçalo Mabunda, www.crise.com, 2012

# Less Is More

Avoiding superfluous ornament, focusing on essential form, using simple, timeless materials: all this emphasizes the design quality of an object. It is an approach that has characterized traditionally crafted furniture since ancient times. When the first modern designers in the nineteenth century began to think about an effective use of resources and the resulting aesthetic, the idea of reduction gained popularity. A succinct description of this design approach is expressed in the phrase »less is more« coined by German architect and designer Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and adopted by many designers who followed him. The principle »form follows function« attributed to American architect Louis O. Sullivan also expresses the idea of reducing form to the absolutely necessary and became the defining paradigm of a style named Functionalism.

The evolution of modern furniture illustrates how influential these paradigms are even today, and how they are constantly being reinterpreted in different contexts using different materials and techniques. Eileen Gray's legendary E 1027 side table and Mies van der Rohe's minimalist cantilever chair are examples from the 1920s avant-garde, while Arne Jacobsen's famous Ant chair is typical for the timeless simplicity of mid-century Scandinavian design. Jasper Morrison's Ply Chair shows that simplicity can be highly poetic. Morrison compared the process of transforming a normal object into what he called Supernormal to putting »spray paint on a ghost«.



ABOVE:  
Rei Kawakubo, No. 24, 1989



# Dialogues between Art and Design

The evolution of modern furniture is closely intertwined with the styles and theories of modern art. Many protagonists of Art Nouveau, the Bauhaus, Surrealism, or Pop Art created furniture as well as visual art, or their works inspired important designs. In other cases, iconic design objects or even anonymous everyday objects gave decisive inspirations to visual artists. The so-called Readymade epitomizes the blurring boundaries between art and design: a seemingly banal daily object is elevated to an art object just by the artist's intent or a minor intervention, thus playing with the irritation that such cross-overs create in the observer's eye. French artist Marcel Duchamp was the first to launch this idea in 1916, and it continues to inspire designers and artists until today, from Surrealism to Pop Art.

Famous examples for cross-pollination between design and art include Gerrit Rietveld's Red and Blue Chair, which was linked to the De Stijl art movement, and Meret Oppenheim's Traccia table, which has become an icon of Surrealism. George Nelson's Marshmallow sofa, with its colorful seating pads, soon became a key work of Pop Art inspired design that propagated an informal, playful lifestyle. With the emergence of Postmodern design approaches since the end of the 20th century, the artistic references in design objects became more eclectic and multi-layered. Ettore Sottsass's Carlton shelf, for example, is referencing both African sculptures and comic images, while Nendo's Manga Chair combines the playful imagery of Japanese Anime culture with the sleek tech-aesthetic of the Digital Era.



PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Exhibition Design Concept

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Karl Lagerfeld's apartment with Memphis furniture  
in Monte Carlo, 1982

Meret Oppenheim, Traccia, 1939  
Gerrit Rietveld, Red Blue Chair, 1918/19

ABOVE:  
Virgil Abloh, Vitra Antony, 2019

# Facts

## Exhibition floor space

500 – 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> / 5,000 – 10,000 sq ft

## Exhibits

Furniture, film, photography,  
posters, drawings, material samples

## Curator

Dr. Mateo Kries

## Head of Exhibitions

Cora Harris  
T +49.7621.702.4036  
Cora.Harris@design-museum.de

## Exhibition Tour

Following the presentation at M7 the exhibition  
will be available to international venues from  
2024 onwards.

## Dates

M7, Doha  
7 September – 9 December 2023

An Exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum  
and Qatar Museums

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PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Interior view Vitra Schaudepot

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Interior view Vitra Schaudepot

BACK COVER:  
Harry Bertoia, 422, 1950–1952



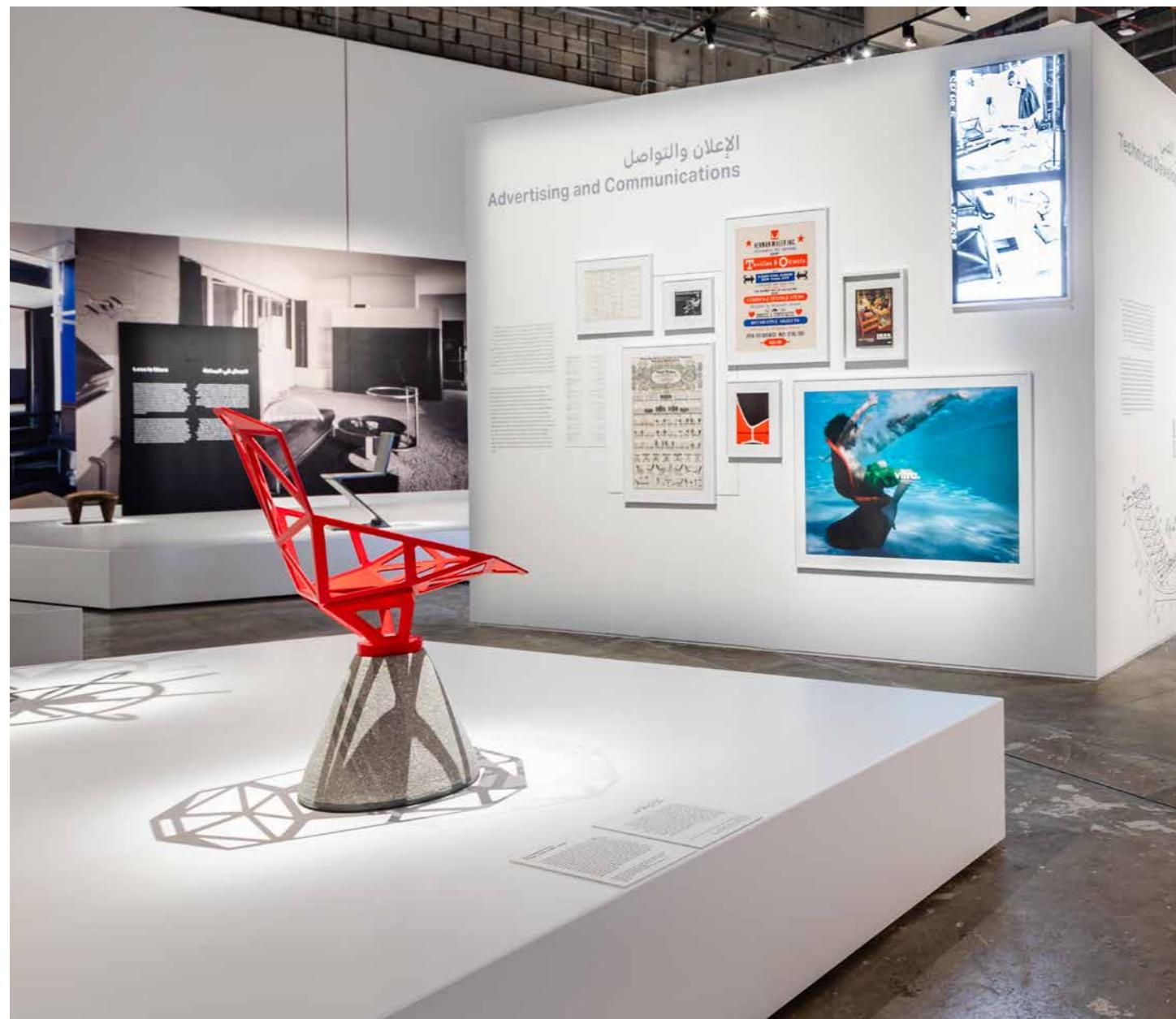
# Installation Shots





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# روائع فن تصميم الأثاث

## Masterpieces of Furniture Design

Furniture design is one of the oldest objects we have. It is an everyday experience, something we encounter in our homes, at work, and in public spaces. Furniture reflects social changes and movements, and it offers us products that are as art or as objects. It is a mirror of the world of power or a little bit of the opposite. Furniture reflecting technology and innovation, furniture reflecting culture and tradition. In today's environments, furniture reflects what design is all about.

The Vitra Design Museum owns one of the most complete collections of furniture design, comprising more than 7,000 pieces from the past 300 years. Masterpieces of Furniture Design highlights key objects from the collection. Furniture design is a discipline that is constantly changing. A central concept focus on exploring the core of design by calling attention to timeless designers and their movements. And they also show how an object originates, comes of age, and eventually ends its life. They also show how an object becomes a masterpiece. While each being the most precious pieces of furniture due to their complex histories and cultural history they represent the majority of design history.

The exhibits are grouped according to 7 principles that can define commonalities in design. These principles are based on the history, technology, society, or culturally movement. An overall look at the history of the most famous principles, material, ergonomics, designs, posters, and other documents related to the design. All of these are presented on the website. The huge screen images on the walls depict the works in the historical setting for which they were created or in which they were presented for the first time.



عملية التصميم  
The Design Process

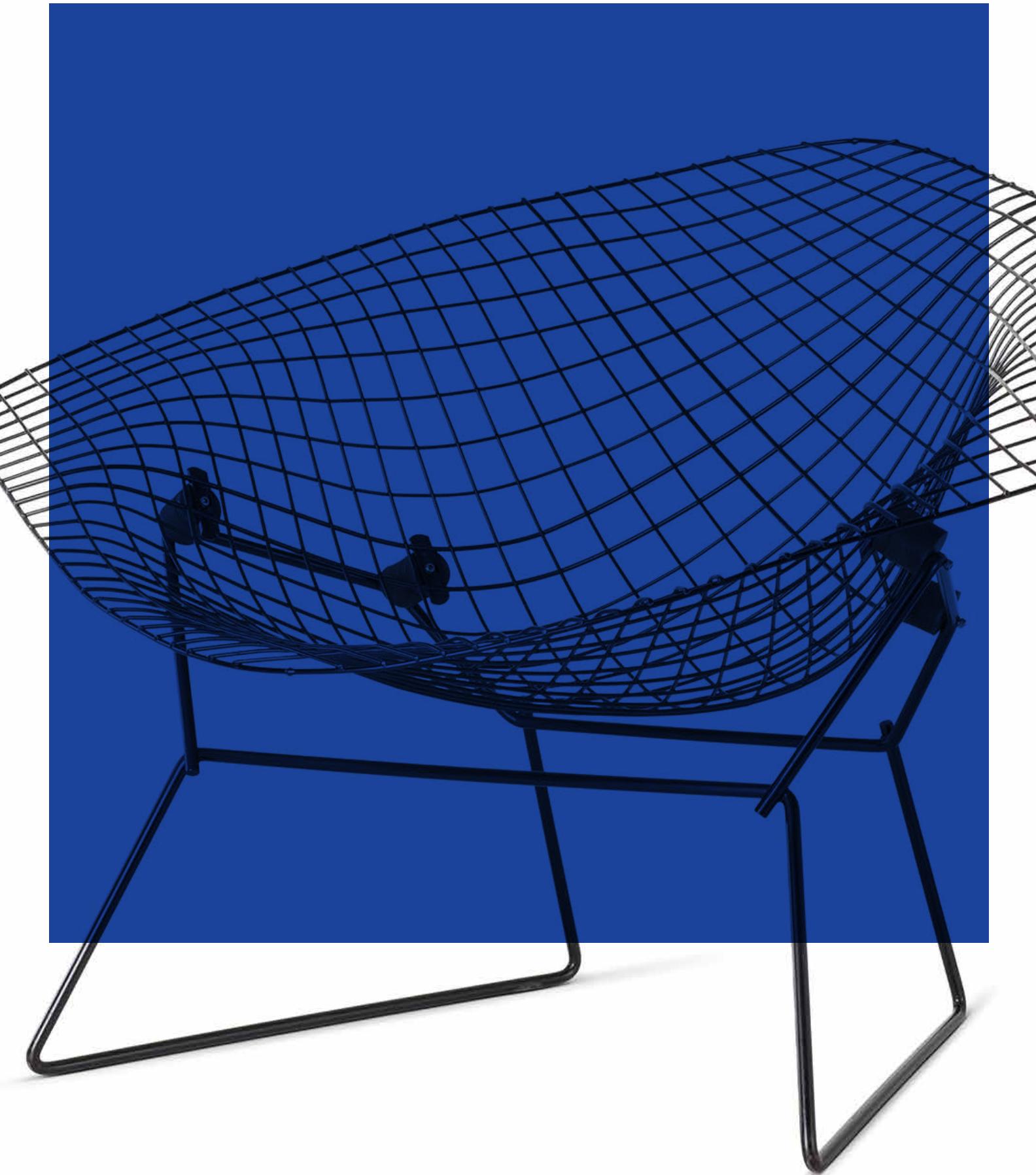




Masterclass  
Furniture

Adopting and  
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Charles-Eames-Str. 2  
79576 Weil am Rhein  
Germany  
T +49.7621.702.3200  
[www.design-museum.de](http://www.design-museum.de)

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