



SILHOUETTE :  
THE MODERN EVOLUTION

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*"The history of Modern design can be chronicled by the evolution of the chair. Modern designers have long relied on chairs to communicate their most radical design notions and to define the fundamental beliefs, concepts and possibilities of the Modern movement... Chairs have employed unconventional engineering techniques, utilized non-traditional materials and had their basic forms altered in order to influence static design concepts or as a vehicle for larger social commentary. The chair has become the most interpreted of any furniture form, acting as intermediary between the creative intent of the designer and the reality of consumer and marketplace...Understanding the development of the chair is critical to understanding the larger issues of Modernism and its history."*<sup>6</sup>

Landmarks of twentieth century design are recognized for their innovative forms, materials and manufacturing techniques as well as their role in the history of style, culture and technology. "The most consistent polarities of design in the century...have set manifestations of technical progress against traditional craft-oriented approaches."<sup>4</sup> The chaise lounge, specifically Le Corbusier's, has been an icon in furniture for decades as portrait of modernity, innovation and style. A reinterpretation of a classic piece of furniture with a contemporary design will ultimately result as a portrait of current design. There is a desire in furniture design to continue to evolve the use of materials, to redefine the use of objects, and to design new shapes.

*'Simplicity is an essential quality of good design. And it is one of the most complicated things in life, because you have to take away, take away... it is the start from a precise executive and functional concept, and the designer should be able to explain over the phone why his object is designed in a certain way and how it ought to be made - so simple that it endows the object with a distinctive character.'* - Vico Magistretti<sup>7</sup>

For most of the century, the visual vocabulary that defined technology and progress was "ascetic and purist, based on clean, simple forms with bare surfaces." During the 1920s, this ascetic flourished when progressive designers believed to have developed an appropriate aesthetic response to industrial production. Their designs were based on economy and efficiency. This form of modernism defined by the process of 'stripping away' had begun earlier in the century with such pioneers as Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Josef Hoffman, who "dematerialized surfaces by painting them white and reduced furniture to simple, mathematical shapes; in the process, they legitimized abstraction as a source of new form."<sup>4</sup>



Metal Furniture first began appearing in modern homes in the 1920s, when the public was attempting to discover how exactly to embrace this new design aesthetic. Recognized in the nineteenth century, metal furniture was used commonly in gardens, pavement cafés and hospitals, but "in the living rooms of the 1920s it was new and unusual. New and relevant materials had to be found, and they had to be suitable for mass production: it is only in this context that the choice of metal for domestic furniture can be fully appreciated."<sup>7</sup> Two particular designs stood out at this time; tubular steel chairs, one designed by Dutch architect Mart Stam and another by Ludwig Meis van der Rohe, attracted "particular attentions due to their unconventional design: they were cantilevered, and their shape was reduced to a bare minimum.... The chairs had no "body: [they] resembled a skeleton, with the seat almost floating in the air. This floating – this "sitting in the air" – made for a completely new experience."<sup>7</sup> As an individual form of expression Mies van der Rohe] regarded the curve as "too arbitrary, which is why he

subjected it to the strict laws of geometry with its vocabulary of semicircle, circle and square.”<sup>7</sup> Stam’s chair was cubic in composition with a 20mm thick steel tube, lacquered grey or black. The seat and back were made of coarsely woven strips of rubber or fabric. “Stam used rubber in his quest for the application of modern, contemporary materials.”<sup>7</sup> Mies van der Rohe’s concept was also based on the continuous tubular steel frame and on the cantilever principle. He used heavier gauge at 24mm.<sup>7</sup>



During this time, Le Corbusier had already established himself as a recognized and advanced architect and had also become the chief theorist of the “rationalized, efficient modern interior.”<sup>4</sup> His works and writings promoted the “minimum dwelling, mass produced both in its exterior fabric and interior fittings and economical in space in cost.” In 1921, Le Corbusier wrote that the “house was a machine for living in,” suggesting an ideal form suitable for standardized industrial methods, and clean, efficient living. He advocated for open uncluttered spaces with furniture that resembled industrial equipment, inspired heavily by ideas of mass production and mass market. Corbusier envisioned furniture as universal “domestic equipment,” which should be scaled to the proportions of the human body. The point of his “machine aesthetic,” however, was not that design should become machinelike, but that mass production and functional design could create less expensive and better furniture – a reaction against the notion that “good” furniture was a privilege of the upper classes.<sup>3</sup> In 1927, his firm began to design furniture that was “as radical as his buildings in its statement of new principles.”<sup>4</sup> He quickly turned to metal as the “furniture medium most expressive of modern industrial technology.”<sup>4</sup> In 1929, a curved tubular-steel and black leather chaise lounge, dubbed a “Rest Machine” by Le Corbusier himself, rested on an H-shaped stretcher, which allowed it to be variously positioned for maximum comfort; it appeared in the interior, the firm realized, for Salon d’Automne.

*“The completely new chaise lounge, again with a continuous steel tube frame, is one of his most beautiful designs. The steel tube rises in a curve from the long U-shaped base, the bent upper part hovering without support above the base – a challenging variation of the cantilever theme, with the strict geometric shape abandoned in favour of ergonomic lines. His sketches reveal that the design of this chaise was based on his first cantilever chair, but with the seat and back made fro reclining.”<sup>4</sup>*



*“With more boldness and intrepidity than it is possible to credit, and with an absolute scorn for historicizing forms, [his] sole consideration being logic, the architect Le Corbusier...has presented what [he] calls the interior equipment of a dwelling, signaling by that, that [he] is the enemy of all decorative refinements and that with [his] intelligence alone [he] places [himself] purely and simply before a problem to be solved.”<sup>4</sup>*

At the prominent Bauhaus art and design school, Walter Gropius also expressed similar ideas about standardization and rationalization. Gropius wrote that “standard products and buildings necessitated the elimination of the personal content of the designers and all the otherwise non-generic or non-essential features.”<sup>4</sup>

The view of the home as a uniform mass-produced object combined with the aesthetic of austerity symbolized modern machine-age culture in the 1920s.

*“The problem was that the ‘machine for living in’ reflected an attitude toward the home that was simple too uncompromising for its inhabitants, who added their own [personalization]...to the bare interiors. Yet, it has remained powerfully influential as a measure of modernity in this century, and many of the most innovative industrial and interiors designs were conceived with its aesthetics standards in mind.”<sup>4</sup>*

The contemporary chair is influenced heavily by Le Corbusier’s chaise lounge, among other iconic chairs of the early 20th century. An emphasis on human proportions and qualities and feminine silhouettes evolves the



traditional ‘chaise’ form. Sensual curves, evocative of a female figure, inform the shape of this chair. The curved frame permits the chair to oscillate, mimicking female movement. The user can choose their desired angle of repose by moving the steel rod along grooves set into the bottom of the frame. The modern design is furthered through the selection of Corian, a malleable plastic, and steel, in reference to the classic ‘tube’, as the focal point of the material palette. Corian is a material that is rapidly gaining popularity in the 21st century. Recognized as a pliable material that can adopt the shapes of the

human form, its plastic qualities allow for seamless planes and waves, while also allowing for an ease of mass-production. The strength of the plastic lends the seat its thin profile while still maintaining its curved form.

The strength properties of steel were utilized for the construction of the classic chaise. Due to its ease and efficiency of production and assembly, the popularity of the material has not diminished. Once-popular steel tubes have been replaced with rectangular tubes for structural and aesthetic purposes. The rod carries the load of the Corian while also maintaining a thin profile, giving the chair a delicate silhouette, and emphasizing the sensual form. This modern chaise maintains the elegance and structure of the past, while updating the form and materials for the present.



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