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Scandinavian Seating

Hans Wegner's designs represent an alternative modern aesthetic

IT IS NOT A STRETCH to say that Hans Wegner joined the words "Danish" and "modern" as efficiently as he combined pieces of wood to make elegant chairs.

Wegner, who was 92 when he died Jan. 26, was the last of a generation of innovators such as Finn Juhl, Arne Jacobsen, and Poul Kjaerholm, who rose to international prominence in the 1950s on the strength of an alternative modern aesthetic. Theirs was steeped in Scandinavian reverence for craft.

Where Bauhaus devotees turned tubular steel into gymnastic cantilevers, Wegner sculpted straightforward forms in natural wood, which was warmer to the touch and easier to sand into organic curves. Both schools were modern in spirit, but the Dane's chairs seemed to have been carved on a summer day in the Nordic woods. In fact, they were produced by Denmark's major furniture manufacturers, from Johannes Hansen in the 1940s to Carl Hansen and PP Mobler today.

Wegner, a cabinetmaker who studied architecture, worked for Jacobsen on the town hall in Aarhus, Denmark. But chairs were his life's work. "A chair is to have no backside," he said. "It should be beautiful from all sides and angles."

Wegner's best-known chairs were Model No. 501, known as the Chair or the Round chair. With its curved bow of teak for a backrest, *Interiors* magazine dubbed it "the most beautiful chair in the world" in 1950, sparking a fashion for Danish design. During the 1961 presidential debates, Vice President Richard Nixon and Sen. John F. Kennedy sat on the Chair's woven-cane seats.

Wegner designed more than 500 chairs, many of which ended up in museum

collections. The Peacock chair riffed on the classic Windsor. A Valet chair supported a jacket and offered a box under the seat to store the rest of the outfit. The upholstered Ox chair competed with the Eames Lounge Chair. A Swivel desk chair rolled the sculpted Chair into the office. Wegner's three-legged Shell chair from 1963 required wood to curve in three directions and was produced in a limited series. The Y-backed Wishbone chair

remains a best seller for Carl Hansen & Son.

Though Wegner believed that no perfect chair had yet been devised, his best works preserve a legacy of pure form, clear purpose, and fine craftsmanship, which is the essence of good design.

The price of Wegnerian form: A pair of 1949 Chairs sold for \$8,000 in December at Phillips de Pury & Co. in New York. A 1960 Ox chair went for \$26,000. LINDA HALES



OBJECT Wishbone chair
ARTIST Hans Wegner
DATE 1949
PRICE \$499
SOURCE Hive, www.hivemodern.com

CARL HANSEN & SON