



Courtesy of Kartell

Need to Know

# 23 Types of Chairs, Explained

From the foldable director's chair to the Eames lounge, here are the seats that changed the course of design history

By Stephanie Sporn

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No design object has been consistently reinvented more than the chair. In use since ancient times, the chair began as a status symbol. “All types of chairs descended from the folding stool, which Ole Wanscher, the great mid-20th-century Danish furniture designer and historian, described as ‘the ancient symbol of dignity,’” James Zemaitis, New York gallery [R & Company](#)’s curator and director of museum relations, tells AD PRO. Royals and ecclesiastical figures used folding stools, ideal for their portability, on the battlefield and in the church. As for the ubiquity of chairs today, Susanne Graner, head of collections

and archives at the [Vitra Design Museum](#) in Weil am Rhein, Germany, points to industrialization: “The bentwood chairs from the Jugendstil and Arts and Crafts eras look completely different than the cantilever designs created just 20 years later during the Bauhaus movement. Industrialization brought new technology and materials, so the idea of what a chair could be changed dramatically.” That means there are a *lot* of different styles of chairs available today.

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Whatever the need is, there’s a chair to match. “Gaming chairs, for example, wouldn’t have been possible 30 or 40 years ago,” adds Graner, noting how leisure continues to shape design. Here, we’ve compiled a selection of chair styles that revolutionized the industry. So sit back in your recliner, kick up the footrest, and get comfy—these are all of the types of chairs you need to know.

## What are the most common types of chairs?

While folding and stacking chairs are abundant due to their functionality and convenience, [dining chairs](#), specifically the side chair (an armless seat with a straight back), may be the most common type of chair. “Of course, with COVID-19, the classic office chair has had a comeback,” adds Graner. As professions have become more computer based over the last few decades, ergonomics has played an increasingly important role in chair design.

## How has chair design evolved over time?

“I look at the history of modern chair design as being primarily the story of low-cost materials—plywood, steel, aluminum, plastic—and how designers worked with these materials to revolutionize seating,” explains Zemaitis. “First up was tubular steel in the 1920s. Then came bent plywood in the 1930s though ’50s, and plastic in the 1960s.”

As with all industries, sustainability is top of mind for many furniture makers today. To cut back on the need for new materials, some designers have cleverly found ways to incorporate waste or upcycling into their products. Graner shares that the Vitra Design Museum [recently acquired](#) a chair made from decommissioned army chairs parts. The seat is the brainchild of [El Warcha Design Studio](#), a Tunisian collective founded in 2016 that engages local communities by making urban furniture and art installations.

## Who are the makers behind some of today’s most interesting chair designs?

“It’s important to be aware that modern design history is often skewed toward Western perspectives, so the challenge for us as a museum and as curators is to overcome these limits and see what other stories there are in the world, like El Warcha, for example,” says Graner. Two makers Graner praises are [Gunjan Gupta](#), an Indian designer whose Old Bori Throne chair, composed of everyday objects like jute bags, was featured in Vitra Design Museum’s 2021 exhibition “[Here We Are! Women in Design 1900 – Today](#)”; and [Jomo Tariku](#), an Ethiopian American artist and industrial designer inspired by traditional African design. Multiple chairs by Tariku were featured in Marvel’s 2022 film [Black Panther: Wakanda Forever](#) and his work can also be seen in The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An

Afrofuturist Period Room.” Graner additionally highlights Argentinian digital artist [Andrés Reisinger](#), whose sculptural Hortensia chair exists both in the metaverse and real life.

## The 23 chairs you need to know

### 1. 45 Chair

Among the most iconic pieces of Danish furniture design is Finn Juhl’s 45 chair, which Zemaitis calls a “masterpiece.” When the chair debuted in 1945 at the annual Cabinetmakers’ Guild Exhibition, it mesmerized audiences with its form—a space between the frame and seat make the curved backrest and seat appear as if floating. The chair can be purchased today at stores including [DWR](#), and comes in oak or walnut with textile or leather upholstery.



Model 45 Chair

\$12,144 at DWR

### 2. Adirondack Chair

Aspiring to create the “perfect outdoor chair” for his New York lake house at Lake Champlain, Thomas Lee conceived the Westport chair (named after the town in which it was designed) in 1903. Emblematic of American vacations and outdoor lounging, the chair would go on to become known as an Adirondack chair, after the Adirondack mountain range in New York.

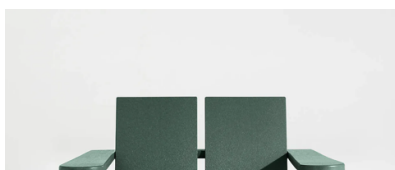
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Typically made of wood, the chair sits low to the ground to ensure stability on mountainous terrain, while featuring a tall slanted back, sloped seat, and wide arms for relaxation.



Paso Adirondack Chair

\$499 at Crate and Barrel



### 3. Barcelona Chair

German American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe created the [Barcelona chair](#) in 1929 when he was selected to design the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona. “He conceived the chairs and stools as a resting place for the King and Queen of Spain. We think he based the designs on the campaign chairs of Ancient Rome with their signature crisscross frames,” says Enrico Colzani, head of MillerKnoll global contract marketing and Knoll brand president, of the leather-and-chrome seat, which is currently produced by Knoll. Novel for its incorporation of Industrial Age materials, “the Barcelona chair exudes a simple elegance that epitomizes Mies van der Rohe’s most famous ‘less is more’ approach.” Alexandra Schwartz, curator of modern and contemporary art, craft, and design at New York’s Museum of Arts and Design adds, “It is also supremely comfortable, making it equally at home in corporate waiting rooms and private homes.”

#### Barcelona Chair



\$8,134 at Knoll

Courtesy of Knoll

### 4. Bentwood Chair

During the 1850s, German Austrian cabinet maker Michael Thonet ignited a “revolution in chair construction and innovation,” says Graner. While working in Vienna he developed a system for bending solid beech wood by using steam, resulting in what is often called the first piece of mass-produced furniture, the 1859 No. 14 chair (today offered as [214](#)). Also known as the Vienna Coffee House chair, it would give way to the [French bistro chair](#), both of which remain extremely popular as today. Lightweight and durable, Thonet’s chair featured modular components that could be packed into a one-cubic-meter box, shipped, and assembled on site.



**N.14 Chair**

Buy It at Archiproducts

## 5. Bergère Chair

With an upholstered seat, back, and armrests, the bergère chair was introduced in the 17th century during the reign of Louis XIV when furniture became less formal and more comfortable. The chair's armrests are set farther back on the wide, deep seat to accommodate the voluminous fashions worn at the time. The bergère is similar to a fauteuil, as they are both upholstered chairs with exposed wood frames, however, the latter has open sides. Both make wonderful [accent chairs](#).



**Lyon Chair**

\$995 at RH

Courtesy of RH

## 6. Cantilever Chair

As opposed to a typical chair with four legs, cantilever chairs feature a single or pair of legs attached to one end of the seat and form an L-shaped base. Dutch architect Mart Stam is credited with designing the first steel-tubing cantilever chair, which relied on standard gas pipes and pipe joint fittings, for the 1927 Die Wohnung architecture exhibition at the Weißenhofsiedlung Stuttgart. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (attributed with producing the first bent tubular steel chair, the Wassily, in 1925) created variations of the cantilever chair, which became a prevalent Bauhaus design. “The continuous line of steel supporting a cantilevered seat remains one of the most copied concepts in 20th-century furniture,” says Colzani.



Courtesy of Knoll

#### Cesca Chair

\$1,169 at DWR

### 7. Chaise Longue

This elongated design allows the sitter to elevate their feet in a reclined position. “My favorite chair designs are mostly versions of the [lounge chair](#) or the *chaise longue*,” says Zemaitis. “From [Charlotte Perriand](#)’s tubular steel chaise in the 1920s, to Marcel Breuer’s Long and Short chairs in bent plywood, to contemporary aluminum masterworks, such as Marc Newson’s Lockheed Lounge and Joris Laarman’s Bone chair.”



#### Carlisle English Arm Upholstered Chaise Lounge

\$1,499 at Pottery Barn

### 8. Chesterfield Chair

This traditional chair, derived from the Chesterfield sofa, was commissioned by the fourth Earl of Chesterfield in England during the 1700s. Both pieces of furniture share rolled arms, deep button-tufted upholstery, and nailhead trimming. The back and arms are also at the same height.

#### Italia Chesterfield Leather Chair

\$6,300 at RH



Courtesy of RH

## 9. Club Chair

Evoking the roomy chairs found in English gentlemen's clubs in the 19th century, the club chair rose to popularity during the 20th century, with a 1920s French model being called the "fauteuil comfortable." Often upholstered in leather, this type of chair has rounded edges and arms, typically with a low back and armrests. Club chairs became widespread in living rooms, for as Graner notes, "They correspond with the invention of television and this moment when suddenly people have more leisure time."



**Monica Swivel Club Chair**

\$2,095 at One Kings Lane

## 10. Director's Chair

Gold Medal Camp Furniture invented the director's chair in 1892 and introduced the lightweight design at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. It still produces the award-winning style under [Gold Medal Chairs](#) today, but, of course, a variety of the low-back chairs that fold from side to side are now available from other vendors and come in a multitude of materials (such as leather). The director's chair became popular on movie sets during the silent film era, hence its enduring associations with filmmaking. More recently we've seen them stand in as chic dining room chairs or desk chairs, though they may not be the most ergonomic examples of either.



**Luna Director Chair**

~~\$349~~ \$244 at One Kings Lane





## 11. Eames Lounge Chair

In the 1950s, Charles and Ray Eames's experimentations with molding plywood reached a crescendo with the [Eames lounge chair and ottoman](#). With a wood-and-leather seat on a six-legged base, the design represented a luxurious, modern take on the 19th-century club chair. Charles famously described his ambitions for the reclining chair as having the “warm, receptive look of a well-used first baseman’s mitt.” After debuting on national television in 1956 on NBC’s show *Home* with Arlene Francis, the Eames lounge chair and ottoman was an instant success. [Herman Miller](#) produces the legendary design today in two sizes and a variety of wood veneers and upholstery options.



**Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman**

\$6,495 at Design Within Reach

## 12. Egg Chair

Launched in 1958, midcentury architect Arne Jacobsen designed his famous Egg and Swan chairs for Copenhagen’s cutting-edge [SAS Royal Hotel](#) (now Radisson Collection Royal Hotel), which opened in 1960. The minimalist building—the capital city’s first skyscraper an enduring symbol of modernity—was designed by Jacobsen and built by Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) as a hotel and airport terminal for the airline. Rather than a steel frame and wood, the Egg chair was shaped from a hard foam material that was padded and upholstered in a process more akin to sculpting. The rounded, winged form sits on a swivel base. After furniture manufacturer [Fritz Hansen](#) secured the rights for this method in the mid 1950s, Jacobsen employed it for the Egg chair, which the company still produces today.



**Egg Chair**





\$10,545 at DWR

### 13. Ghost Chair

Notoriously copied, the [Louis Ghost chair](#) was conceived by French architect Philippe Starck for Kartell, an Italian company specializing in contemporary plastic furniture, in 2002. The design, which injects polycarbonate into a single mold, is a modern and transparent take on the classic Louis XVI upholstered armchair. Originally rendered in clear polycarbonate, the indoor-outdoor, stackable chair comes in a variety of colors and has spawned other seating styles by Kartell, such as bar stools.

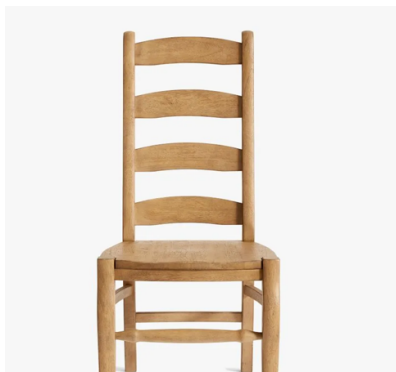


**Louis Ghost Chair**

\$540 at DWR

### 14. Ladderback Chair

The ladderback (or slatback) chair takes its names from its back's horizontal, ladder-like spindles. As a side chair, it is among the most common chair types, having a rich history in Europe (stemming back to the Middle Ages), as well as in colonial America.



**Wynn Ladderback Chair**

\$349 at Pottery Barn

## 15. Ming Chair

The Ming dynasty, which ruled in China from 1368 to 1644, was known for its intricately carved wooden furniture, with huanghuali, a type of Asian rosewood, being the most highly prized material. According to Michelle Cheng, senior specialist at the Chinese Works of Art Department at Christie's, a huanghuali folding chair is among the most iconic designs in Asian art. "Wherever the Chinese Emperor went, he had a folding chair, so this type of chair became the most prestigious, and families wealthy enough to have one, would always seat the most distinguished person in the room in this type of chair," Cheng tells AD PRO. This March, Christie's sold a [huanghuali folding chair](#) for \$2.8 million. "These chairs have influenced the entire course of 20th-century design."



Chinese Ming Style Lacquer & Cowhide Arm Chair

~~\$2,200~~ \$1,650 at 1stDibs

## 16. Rocking Chair

Outdoor wooden rocking chairs appeared during the early 18th century in England and typically resembled a high back Windsor chair with a rounded base. In 1860, Thonet created a Bentwood variety, while in America, several iterations emerged in New England and beyond. Of course, today rockers have entered domestic interiors, their gentle back-and-forth motion rendering them an ideal seat for calmness and contemplation. Loveseat versions can also be found on the market today.



Ixtapa Rocking Chair

\$625 at One Kings Lane

## 17. Roly-Poly Chair

The Roly-Poly may be one of the most iconic living-room chairs of the 21st century. Multihyphenate British designer Faye Toogood created it in 2014 after the birth of her first child. “During the time that Faye was designing it, she was pregnant and struggling to find a comfortable chair,” says Graner on the design, which served as the signature image for the Vitra Design Museum’s “Women in Design” exhibition. While some, like Graner, compare the thick stubby legs to a baby elephant’s or the overall shape to children’s toys, others see the curved base an homage to motherhood. The soft edges are also particularly child friendly. While the initial chairs were cast in fiberglass, the Roly-Poly chairs come in an array of daring materials today, ranging from crystal glass to silver nitrate.



**Roly Poly Chair, Charcoal**

\$9,962 at 1stDibs

## 18. Stacking Chair

Danish designer Verner Panton is synonymous with avant-garde plastic furniture, a completely novel material in the 1960s. Conceived in 1959, the S-shaped Panton chair is, perhaps, the most iconic and sculptural stacking chair in history. Panton began working with Vitra in the early 1960s, and they jointly developed the Panton chair, which they introduced in 1967. Panton was the first designer to successfully create a cantilever chair without back legs from a single piece of plastic, and the chair also marked Vitra’s first independently developed product. The Swiss company still sells the style in a range of hues.



**Orange Original Panton S Chairs by Verner Panton for Herman Miller**

\$1,006 at 1stDibs

## 19. Tulip Chair

Eschewing the unsightly clutter of chair legs underneath tables, Finnish American architect Eero Saarinen designed the Tulip armchair in 1957 to pair with a Saarinen table, both of which featured a single pedestal base. Zemaitis calls Saarinen “the most superb chair designer of the 20th century,” adding that “his early examples were always so perfect that they became gigantic commercial successes.” For MAD Museum curator Alexandra Schwartz, the Tulip chair “came to represent the chic, space-age aesthetic of the 1960s.” Colzani of Knoll, which has produced the Tulip chair since 1957, believes it’s the chair’s “striking sculptural form with the use of a single, man-made material [that caused it to] instantly become the iconic representation of the possibilities and accomplishments of modern design.”



**Saarinen Tulip Arm Chair**

\$2,791 at DWR

## 20. Windsor Chair

Sturdy and economical, the Windsor chair has been a prevailing style, particularly for [dining](#), for centuries. While the original designer is unknown, the chair’s name began appearing in Great Britain in the early 18th century, possibly deriving from a town of the same name. Made from solid wood and featuring saddle seats and spindle backs, the style became popular in America during the 19th century and is frequently reinterpreted today.



**J 110 Arm Chair**

\$395 at Hay

## 21. Wingback Chair

With tall backs and side panels that extend for each arm, the wingback chair is an ideal reading chair. Believed to have been created in England in the 1600s, the wings helped shield drafts, enveloping the sitter in upholstery made cozier with the heat from a fireplace. In addition to Jacobsen's Egg chair, Danish designer Hans Wegner's 1951 Papa Bear chair is among the most famous examples of the wingback variety. This particular style featured outstretched arms and long back legs to give the sitter an ultra comfortable seat.



**Clinton Modern Wingback Chair**

\$2,315 at Rejuvenation

## 22. Wishbone Chair

Inspired by Ming chairs, Hans Wegner designed the durable yet elegant Wishbone chair, or the “CH24 chair,” in 1949, exclusively for Carl Hansen & Søn, which still offers the style. The curved back and armrest form a single piece, while the Y-shaped back helps stabilize the steam-bent top. More than 100 steps are required to manufacture each Wishbone chair, and its hand-woven seat alone takes an hour and approximately 120 meters of paper cord to create.



**Wishbone Chair**

\$635 at DWR

## 23. Womb Chair

Eero Saarinen's 1949 [Womb chair](#) was the answer to Florence Knoll's request for "a chair that was like a basket full of pillows." To create the rounded design, which features steel legs, indented armrests, and moveable cushions, Saarinen and Knoll enlisted the help of a boat builder in New Jersey who was experimenting with fiberglass and resin. "While it was originally designed to curl up in and read, the groundbreaking design, with its sweeping form, offers endless postures and extra room for elbows, books or for today's consumers, tablets," says Colzani.



**Womb Chair**

\$5,800 at DWR

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