



Mies van der Rohe

Barcelona chair 1929 designed, 1960s manufactured

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (designer)

Germany/United States 1886-1969

Knoll International, New York (licensee)

United States est. 1938

William Latchford & Sons Pty Ltd,

North Melbourne and Box Hill (manufacturer)

Australia 1953-1986

Barcelona chair 1929 designed, 1960s manufactured

leather, stainless steel, other materials

75.0 x 74.6 x 76.5 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by William Latchford & Sons Pty Ltd, 1968 (1971-D5)

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The *Barcelona chair* was designed for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition by Mies van der Rohe, a German architect who, along with Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, became one of the leading exponents of modern architecture.

From 1929 to 1933 he was the director of the revolutionary school of art, architecture and design in Germany known as the Bauhaus. In contrast to the traditional pupil–teacher relationship, the school fostered the idea of a community of artists working together to produce functional objects, often based on simple geometric forms. It aimed to position art firmly in everyday life by promoting design to the same level as fine art.

Mies van der Rohe also designed the stark and futuristic German pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona exhibition. It exemplified his ideal of universal, simplified architecture that employed modern materials such as industrial steel and plate glass to define elegant spaces. He described his buildings as 'skin and bones' architecture, which is reflected in his often-quoted aphorism 'less is more'.

The *Barcelona chair* was designed in collaboration with Lilly Reich, the architect and designer who was Mies van der Rohe's long-time business partner and companion until his emigration to the United States in 1938. It was conceived as a ceremonial seat for King Alfonso XIII of Spain and his queen to occupy at the exhibition's opening ceremonies. Its form is based on an ancient Roman folding stool called a *sella curulis*. This stool had curved legs, was upholstered, and was used by the highest civil officials in ancient Rome. Although the *Barcelona chair* is thoroughly modern in appearance, its manufacturing methods were surprisingly traditional and extremely labour intensive.

Based on the cantilever principle to enhance a feeling of lightness, the *Barcelona chair* employed leather straps to suspend leather-covered cushions from a chrome-plated steel frame. The original frame was designed to be bolted together. The advent of stainless steel and seamless ground welding allowed Mies van der Rohe to re-design the chair in 1950 to include a smooth frame formed by a seamless piece of metal. He also replaced the expensive pigskin used in the original chair with cowhide.

The chair was a commercial success and has been in production for nearly eighty years, but the design clearly presented problems for Mies van der Rohe who is known to have commented in 1930:

The chair is a very difficult object. Everyone who has ever tried to make one knows that. There are endless possibilities and many problems – the chair has to be light, it has to be strong, it has to be comfortable. It is almost easier to build a sky scraper than a chair.

Amanda Dunsmore

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (diseñador)

Alemania/Estados Unidos 1886–1969

Knoll International, New York (concesionario)

Estados Unidos est. 1938

William Latchford & Sons Pty Ltd,

North Melbourne and Box Hill (manufactura)

Australia 1953–1986

Silla Barcelona, (diseñada en 1929), (fabricada en los años 60)

cuero, acero inoxidable, (otros materiales)

75,00 x 74,60 x 76,50 cms

Galería Nacional de Victoria, Melbourne

Presentada por William Latchford & Sons Pty Ltd, 1968 (1971-D5)

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La silla Barcelona y el pabellón alemán de la Exposición Internacional de Barcelona de 1929 fueron diseñados por el arquitecto alemán Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, quien, junto con Walter Gropius y Le Corbusier, se convertiría en uno de los líderes de la arquitectura moderna.

Desde 1929 hasta 1933, fue director de la Bauhaus, la revolucionaria escuela de arte, arquitectura y diseño alemana. En contraste con el sistema tradicional de relación profesor/alumno, la escuela fomentaba la idea de una comunidad de artistas que trabajaban juntos para crear objetos funcionales, a menudo de formas geométricas sencillas, con el fin de introducir el arte en la vida cotidiana, promocionando el diseño para colocarlo al mismo nivel que las bellas artes.

El puro y futurístico pabellón alemán fue ejemplo del ideal de van der Rohe de una arquitectura universal simplificada que empleara materiales modernos como el acero industrial y las láminas de vidrio para definir elegantes espacios. Van der Rohe describió sus edificios como arquitectura de "piel y huesos" característica reflejada en su famoso y frecuentemente citado aforismo "Menos es más".

Diseñó la silla Barcelona en colaboración con Lilly Reich, arquitecta y diseñadora, que fue su socia y compañera durante un largo período hasta su emigración a Estados Unidos en 1938. Fue concebida para servir de asiento a los reyes de España, Alfonso XIII y Victoria Eugenia, en la ceremonia de apertura de la exposición. Su forma está inspirada en la silla curulis, antigua silla usada por los magistrados romanos, de patas curvadas y asiento acolchado. Aunque la silla Barcelona es absolutamente moderna, el método de su fabricación es sorprendentemente tradicional y extremadamente laborioso.

Basada en el principio del voladizo para realzar la sensación de ligereza, la silla Barcelona emplea tiras de cuero para soportar los almohadones recubiertos de piel sobre un armazón de acero cromado. El armazón original estaba sujeto con bulones, pero la llegada del acero inoxidable y de la soldadura sin costuras permitió a van der Rohe rediseñar la silla en 1950 y utilizar un armazón pulido de una sola pieza metálica. También reemplazó la costosa piel de cerdo usada en la silla original por cuero de bovino.

La silla fue un éxito comercial y aún continúa su producción desde hace casi ochenta años, pero su diseño fue claramente problemático para van der Rohe, que, en 1930, declaró:

La silla es un objeto muy difícil; todo el que haya intentado hacer una lo sabe. Hay infinitas posibilidades y muchos problemas: la silla tiene que ser ligera, tiene que ser fuerte, tiene que ser cómoda. Es casi más fácil construir un rascacielos que una silla

Thinking and discussing before the visit

- What does the word 'design' mean to you? In what ways is it different from your definition of art?
- Imagine what life would be like without design. Discuss the types of design that affect our everyday lives. Consider interior design, industrial design, graphic design, architecture, landscape design, multimedia design and fashion design.
- To what extent is design affected by cultural differences and changes in fashion? Consider the effects of globalisation.
- In what ways might people view a mass-produced item differently from one that is made only once by a designer or artist?
- How has mass production influenced trends in design?
- What role do form or function play in design? Which aspect is most important in your opinion? Give examples that support your argument.
- What new challenges and opportunities have been presented to furniture and industrial designers from the twentieth century onwards? Consider the role of new technologies and materials, and the new contexts in which design of this sort is needed, such as recreation centres, public transport and airports.
- Select a photograph (or take your own photograph) of a designed object in your environment that you particularly like, such as a car, billboard, chair, textile, magazine or CD cover, building or T-shirt. Discuss the following:
 - » What aspects of it do you like?
 - » What materials have been used to make it?
 - » What tools, machinery and modern technologies might have been used to make it?
 - » How have the elements of design (such as colour, line, shape, tone, form and texture) and the principles of design (such as balance, unity, variety, rhythm, and positive and negative space) been used to effect?
 - » What might the designer have seen or heard that could have inspired their design? Consider nature, machinery, designs in history and music.
 - » What processes did the designer have to work through to achieve the finished product?
 - » Discuss whether the design will become unfashionable with time or whether it possesses qualities that will make it equally relevant in one hundred years?

Gallery visit activities

Look carefully at the chair.

- What materials have been used to construct the chair?
- Describe each part of the chair in detail. For example, find words that describe the shape of the legs and their colour, thickness and surface texture.
- What other types of chair from the past and present does it remind you of? Explain why.
- What elements and principles of design such as balance and contrast have been incorporated in the chair design? Consider in what ways the seat and the back contrast with the legs?
- A cantilever is a beam supported at one end only, such as a diving board that is anchored at one end and stretches out over a pool. How can you tell that this chair has been designed using the cantilever principle?
- Suggest other areas of design or architecture where this principle is used.
- What factors suggest this chair was made in the twentieth century?

Why might consumers be more interested in design than ever before? Consider contemporary life styles, the role of advertising, and modern manufacturing techniques.

Take a mental 'walk' through your typical day, picturing all the examples of design you see from the moment you get up until you go to bed at night. In pairs, discuss the type of designs you pictured. Choose one of these designs and think about how you might improve it

Create your own name for this chair based on your observations.

Considering the changes that have taken place in fashion since this chair was designed, why is it still popular today? Discuss the qualities that have enabled it to transcend the time in which it was made.

Gallery visit activities, continued

- If you could change one element of the design, what would it be and why? Consider the materials, colour and form.
- Spot the inspiration! Furniture designers are often inspired by nature, objects in the manmade environment or fashions in design from other times in history. Take a walk through the NGV's gallery of twentieth-century decorative arts. Choose a chair that particularly attracts you and guess what might have inspired the designer.

Post-visit activities

Using libraries and the internet, investigate the vibrancy and innovation of contemporary Spanish design:

- Research the work of renowned contemporary Spanish architect Rafael Moneo.
- Visit the website of architect and designer Juli Capella:
<http://www.capellaweb.com/website/index.html>
- The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, designed by Frank Gehry, is one of the most famous examples of contemporary architecture in the world. Locate photographs of it and discuss its unique materials and design features.

http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/secciones/el_museo/el_edificio.php?idioma=en
- Using libraries and the internet, research the life and work of architect Mies van der Rohe who designed the *Barcelona chair*.
- Find out about his buildings and in particular the German pavilion, 1929, where the chair was first displayed.

<http://www.miesbcn.com/en/pavillion.html>
- Redesign the *Barcelona chair* using different materials, colours or shapes and by adding texture and pattern. Discuss how the new elements detract or add to the original design.
- Inspired by the simple elements of the *Barcelona chair*, design a chair for your home that you believe will still be popular in one hundred years time.
- Imagine you are an interior designer. Research interior decorating magazines and homeware shops. Design and draw or collage a contemporary living-area setting that incorporates the *Barcelona chair* in white or black. Consider colours and textures of the wall and floor, and additional items such as sculpture, paintings, lighting and window coverings.

Discuss the reasons why Mies van der Rohe said: 'The chair is a very difficult object. Everyone who has ever tried to make one knows that. There are endless possibilities and many problems — the chair has to be light, it has to be strong, it has to be comfortable. It is almost easier to build a sky scraper than a chair'.

Considering this quote, do you think Mies van der Rohe would agree with the expression 'form follows function'?

Mies van der Rohe was closely linked to the Bauhaus, a progressive school of art, architecture and design in Germany from 1919 to 1933.

Find out what the ideals and aims of the school were. Discuss the ways in which these are reflected in the German pavilion and the *Barcelona chair*. Think about the relationship between furniture design and architecture.

Imagine you were developing a marketing campaign for the *Barcelona chair* in today's world. Design an advertisement for a billboard or magazine page. Consider image, text, art elements, scale and the context of your advertisement.