



Origins and Holdings of the Vitra Design Museum Collections

The Vitra Design Museum collections evolved from modest beginnings in the 1980s to become one of the world's most important collections of modern furniture. In 1989, the collections included some 1000 objects. In the years since, they have grown to encompass approximately 6000 pieces. Two furniture collections – one compiled by Rolf Fehlbaum for Vitra starting in the early 1980s, the other that I began as a personal initiative in the late 1960s – came together to form the foundation of the Vitra Design Museum collections.

My own collection arose from an interest in the earliest examples of industrially produced furniture, Michael Thonet's bentwood chairs. I was fascinated by the many variations of the designs, both functional and decorative, but even more so by Thonet's vision of industrial mass production, realized through innovations in technology, design and marketing. The collection documented the development of manufacturing techniques, materials and forms of modern furniture from the beginning of the nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century. The focus was on laminated plywood and bentwood pieces by Michael Thonet, Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffmann, Alvar Aalto and Charles & Ray Eames, as well as tubular steel furniture designed by Mart Stam, Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

In addition, I had also acquired examples of furniture made from papier mâché, Bakelite and fibreglass – materials likewise used in mass production – as well as archival documentation including photos of working processes, sales catalogues, publications on historic exhibitions and corresponding trade literature. Alongside important designs by the Eameses and George Nelson – both central pillars of Vitra's furniture production – Rolf Fehlbaum's collection also encompassed works by European designers such as Alvar Aalto, Jean Prouvé and Gerrit Rietveld. A sampling of some 150 pieces from the collection was exhibited on platforms in a large office space at Vitra as a historic model and inspiration for employees and customers.

Our joint collaboration began in 1987. Following his acquisition of a portion of my collection in 1988, Rolf Fehlbaum charged me with the task of systematically building up and expanding the combined holdings. To provide the objects with a dedicated venue, Fehlbaum had asked the architect Frank Gehry in 1986 to create plans for a small museum building. The building – originally conceived as a place to house the collections and show the holdings to friends, customers and business partners – became the present-day Vitra Design Museum, as well as Gehry's first built project on European soil. My own proposals went beyond the original idea of merely displaying the collections to embrace the concept of a publicly accessible museum that would operate independently from the company. In addition to its own programme of exhibitions based on the collections, it would also show alternating temporary exhibitions.

As founding director, I opened Vitra Design Museum in 1989 and have watched it grow into an important international facility with a diverse yet distinctive profile. In the two decades of our collaboration, Rolf Fehlbaum and I have worked with the Museum's head of collections, Serge Mauduit, to find and obtain the best examples of industrially produced furniture through individual purchases, auctions or the acquisition of complete estates. By far the most important acquisition was the complete three-dimensional estate of Charles & Ray Eames, which we obtained in 1988. In addition to designs that went into production, this estate also contains studies and prototypes that are of inestimable value in documenting and examining the creative processes underpinning the couple's work. No doubt the pre-eminent highlight of the collections, this estate is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that it made its way from Venice, California, to Weil am Rhein.

The other important estate holdings in the collections include furniture, drawings, manuscripts and photos from the office of George Nelson; the patents and correspondence of Anton Lorenz, the éminence grise of the international tubular steel furniture industry; and the artefacts and documents collected by Alexander Girard, who accumulated samples of textiles, paper and other objects from all over the world and initiated an influential dialogue in the 1950s

between the fields of design and folk art. The works of Harry Bertoia, Verner Panton and Eero Saarinen are also represented with extensive holdings in the Museum's collections, with the Panton estate containing many of his iconic fabric designs.

Surveying the collections as a whole, the following areas emerge as focal points: the period from the 1850s to the turn of the century shows a focus on bentwood furniture, the designs of Viennese architects and pieces by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Frank Lloyd Wright. The first three decades of the twentieth century are most prominently represented by the work of Gerrit Rietveld, Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Bauhaus, as well as Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret. Along with the sizeable holdings from American sources, particularly Charles & Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen and Harry Bertoia, the period up to the Second World War is also defined by the French 'constructeur' Jean Prouvé, whose work is superbly documented with his most significant furniture designs, as well as many of his facade elements. From Scandinavia, there are designs by such figures as Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen, Hans Wegner, Poul Kjaerholm and Verner Panton and, from Italy, pieces by Gio Ponti, Carlo Mollino, Achille Castiglioni, Studio Memphis and Alchimia. Furnishings from the Arts and Crafts movement along with Art Deco and Art Nouveau are represented, albeit with relatively few examples. Taking the position that subsequent developments in modern furniture can only be fully understood as the ideological and stylistic heirs of these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movements, the earlier periods would presumably be the mostly likely candidates for expansion within the collections.

The collections cover nearly all areas of furniture for everyday use: seating for the home, children's furniture, interior concepts for cooperative living, office furnishings and, finally, modern forms of nomadic living. For the period starting in the 1960s, there are also numerous examples of furniture that reflect contemporary art and then, from the 1980s onwards, an increasing number of objects produced as one-off pieces or in limited editions from designers who emphasize the concept of individual authorship in their work. By no means exclusively limited to industrial furniture, the collections also include quite a few models that were produced individually or in small series. They too have their rightful place at Vitra Design Museum in recognition of their formal, structural, technological or functional contributions to the development of industrial furniture design.

In addition to a minor section on consumer electronics – principally consisting of a collection of Braun electronic devices – a group of industrially produced lighting is being developed under the direction of Raymond Fehlbauer that allows the Museum's exhibitions to more aptly portray the design history of the home environment. The selection criteria here correspond to those in the area of furniture. A key difference lies in the time frame for the different areas, as

the period of industrially manufactured electric lighting does not begin until the later years of the nineteenth century with the inventions of Thomas Alva Edison. The collection starts with Peter Behrens followed by the Bauhaus designers Christian Dell, Marianne Brandt and Wilhelm Wagenfeld. Scandinavian designers like Poul Henningsen and Verner Panton, the latter of whom made significant contributions in this area, are likewise represented. There are also numerous Italian works, such as those by Gino Sarfatti or Angelo Lelli, along with creations by Serge Mouille. Notable among the important figures from more recent years is Ingo Maurer with his poetic light sculptures.

As a source of information, the library and archives are as important to the work of the Museum as the furniture collection itself. Extensive holdings of the 250 most important journals and magazines and some 9500 book titles on furniture design, architecture and related disciplines, as well as archives with company catalogues, photos, films, drawings and written documents form the basis for our scholarly research and writings.

A collection that extends up to the present will always be incomplete. The more recent an object, the more difficult it is to assess its historic significance. With the veritable flood of designs over the last twenty years – including many one-off pieces and limited editions that by their very nature have attained tremendous publicity – collectors must exercise particular caution when considering acquisitions of current products. It is precisely in this sensitive area, however, that the expertise and visual judgment of Rolf Fehlbaum has always played an essential role. In regard to the collections' gaps in the truly historic decades of design history, these will become smaller over time, even if some can no longer be entirely eliminated – either because the missing objects are extremely rare and the few that do exist are firmly rooted in other collections, or because they simply no longer exist at all.

The picture the Vitra Design Museum collections sketch of the history of modern furniture design may be incomplete, but precisely because of its deliberately restricted focus, it is considerably more distinct and coherent than many of the leading collections of publicly operated institutions.

Alexander von Vegesack, 2008

Alexander von Vegesack has been founding director of the Vitra Design Museum since 1989. Since taking up this position, von Vegesack has established a highly diverse and international programme of design and architecture exhibitions, issued numerous publications, initiated an annual international museum conference and launched an internationally renowned seminar series.