

TOP 5 ROVANIEMI
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FIGHTING FLAB,
STARVING HUNGER

PLASTIC DADDY
EERO AARNIO

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PLASTIC DADDY

HE IS EIGHTY YEARS OLD AND FULL OF ENTHUSIASM AND CHARM. IN THE '60S HIS BALL CHAIR TOOK THE WORLD BY STORM. MEET EERO AARNIO, FATHER OF ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC CHAIRS OF THE CENTURY.

During your childhood, Finland was at war. Please tell us about it.

When I was a kid there was a huge recession and then war, and this was felt especially in downtown Helsinki. We lived in Kallio. In those days when the bombings started, people rushed to the station and took trains to flee for the country. My mother and I were on one of these trips when our house got bombed. The neighbours died. Dad was running down to the cellar when a door fell on him, which actually saved his life. We were always hungry.

Was it easy to convince your parents that you wanted a career in design?

In those days all the little boys made models out of wood. We went to the basement where firewood was stored and started whittling things like army planes and war boats. The older boys taught us how. As we got better we even tried to make drones. I was good at this.

When I finished school I wanted to become an architect. Alvar Aalto and Eero Saarinen were well-known and Finnish architecture was on the world map.

How did you go from a love of architecture to design?

I wasn't good at maths, you see. So I enrolled at the Ateneum Institute of Industrial Arts instead.

Tell me the story of the Ball Chair and how you came into your element...

After we moved to our first home in Puotila in 1962, I wanted a big chair for the sitting room. To get the right size I drew a big circle and pinned it to the wall. I went to sit on a stool beside it. My wife Pirkko drew a line where my head would fit in. Those are the exact measurements of the chair today. I knew, however, no one would understand my vision of the chair if I did not prototype it...

The materials for the chair were very original, so how did you build the first prototype?

I had seen a great combination of materials – fibreglass, teak and metal – in the Turku boatyard. I was fascinated by fibreglass, from which you can make great shapes. Pirkko's brother, Raimo showed me how to build sailplanes. I used wood, paper and soluble glass to make the first model.

The Ball Chair was so surprising that making a commercial breakthrough must have been hard.

It was. We shipped the first chair to a Lahti-based company in a huge truck and tried to get them interested, but the bosses did not like it. Then I thought that since the Coca Cola logo was a red sphere, the chair would be suitable for them. I made the chair red, added the logo and took pictures of Pirkko inside it. There was a Coca Cola office in Ratakatu. They liked the Ball Chair but two months later they got a letter from headquarters in the United States: We have other ideas for our brand.

So I took the chair back home, painted it white again and invited over the head of marketing for Asko, who was a great guy. He loved the chair and ordered 100. But Asko was a wood furniture producer and they did not like the chair. The technical head said: If one chair sells, I will eat my hat. Then came the Cologne fair of 1966. I got a telegraph that I had to go. The chair was exhibited right at the door. An Italian guest bought six immediately and 30 firms from around the world placed orders. The technical head of Asko, however, didn't eat his hat!

Somehow the Ball Chair feels very much in tune with its time. Science fiction was all the rage. The Ball Chair inspired lots of movies and even *Playboy* front covers...

That is true. After the Cologne exhibition the chair was everywhere. The *New York Times* wrote about it immediately and many more magazines followed. The media thought it was inspired by the Sputnik, but it wasn't. The sphere is nature's ideal form – maximal strength, minimal materials – and that is where I got my inspiration.

You have designed many iconic chairs: the Ball, the Bubble, the Pastille, the Tomato, the Puppy, the Pony and the Formula. All show a great sense of humour. Tell me about your love for chairs and how you broke with the conventional wisdom of what a chair looks like...

That is true. I did. But then again I have made a lot of office furniture no one talks about. Office furniture is not sexy – it's daily bread – but it requires a lot of study of ergonomics and because it is produced in mass numbers you also have to think of the scale, automated construction methods and affordable end pricing.

I have seen pictures of your family using the Tomato Chair to slide on snow and float on water.

Is it true the Tomato came about as an exercise for a perfectly balanced lounging chair on water?

True. The Tomato came about because an American businessman said that he loved reading on his pool in the Pastille, but he wanted a more stable chair. I thought that was a good idea and designed the Tomato.

Is the Formula a result of your love of cars?

Actually I wanted to do a beautiful chair with a neck support, something aesthetic, almost like a sculpture. When we photographed it I put on a helmet and a flying scarf and positioned my legs as if to accelerate. Hence it got its name.

How do you start a design? Do you draw it first? Then model it?

I have the ability to visualise in three dimension so I first play with that vision in my head, and it is totally ready before I start drawing.

Is the process tortuous or do you have fun all along?

Absolutely! There must never be angst. If it doesn't feel right, I go for a swim, invite friends, do something fun. The creative process has to be enjoyed and loved.

The five words that best describe you are...

Positive, active, curious, full of ideas and humorous!

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

When I have an idea that can be realised and produce it. I might be on the sofa when an idea comes along and then in one hour I have a drawing. That is such a good feeling when it happens.

Do you have a life motto?

Freedom is snow without tracks! Of course it is easier to ski on tracks, but then you can only ski where others have been. I love the idea of making fresh tracks and starting something new.

The most perfect place in the world to relax is?

Home, of course.

Oh, Eero, I was hoping you would say the Ball Chair! ●

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