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Form, Function and Fantasy



Eero Aarnio, best known for the “space-age” chairs he designed in the 1960s and ‘70s, is still creating. His current projects range from sleek metal door fixtures to a new rocking chair.

Eero Aarnio nods affectionately at the prototype of his famous Globe chair: “It was 1962. I was freelance, with a wife, two kids, no work and plenty of troubles – so I decided to design a big, roomy easy chair.”

Like many meaningful developments throughout design history, the Globe did not appear in a flash of inspiration. “As I

pondered, sketched and pondered yet again,” he says, “the chair gradually assumed a sphere-like shape, until it dawned on me: Why not a completely round chair?”

He fashioned it first in miniature from a ping-pong ball, a piece of cardboard and a spot of glue. Later, when the proportions were established on one-to-one scale drawings, Eero recalls travelling back and forth to a schoolroom in Salo, south-western Finland, where he con-

structed the full-size prototype mould from an intricate mesh of plywood and soggy brown paper.

It was tough, messy work. As it dried overnight it shrank and burst. He added all the newspaper he could scrounge, and “when that did not suffice, I raided the children’s toilets and then the teachers’ washrooms for toilet paper,” he recalls. Finally, it succeeded and the form was later covered with a shell of fibreglass – a first for furniture.



Aarnio relaxes in a pair of Bubble chairs, left. His Formula Chair, above, was inspired by auto racer Mika Häkkinen's world championship. The Ball chair, below, creates a cosy nook for private conversations.



The upholstered Globe sat in Aarnio's home until it was noticed by Iiro Santalahti of Finnish furniture company Askö's German subsidiary. Santalahti was insightful, recognising the futuristic creation as a potential vehicle to boost Askö's corporate image abroad.

From Tribulation to Triumph

When the chair was finally launched at the 1965 Cologne Furniture Fair, the baby boomers loved it. As Bob Dylan sang *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and NASA pushed hard to put a man on the Moon by the end of the decade, Aarnio's Globe had a perfect takeoff, went rapidly into orbit and catapulted Finnish furniture design out of post-war frugality and into the space age.

Up to then, wood had been considered the only proper material for furniture – at least by the purists. "But wood has its limitations," counters Aarnio. "Fibreglass, on the other hand, gave me enormous freedom."

It sure did. The Globe was instrumental in launching Aarnio's illustrious career and providing him with the autonomy he

had always dreamed of. The press were ecstatic. It was the most photographed exhibit at the fair and a perfect icon for the latter half of the century.

In short, it was love at first sight. Everybody who was anybody had to be seen in it. The first to place an order was an enthusiastic Italian who ordered six on the spot. The sales representative did not dare mention that the buyer was admiring the only Globe chair in existence.

This was enough to open the floodgates. During the exhibition week alone, buyers from some 30 countries ordered the Globe, and within days Askö became a force to be reckoned with in the chic salons of New York, London and Milan.

Fun Furniture Fascinates

Aarnio's shrewd sense of style and his unprejudiced attitude to new materials turned out to be a potent formula. The world of interior design was subsequently blessed with the Bubble, Pastil and Tomato chairs and later the Copacabana and Screw tables.

Commenting on his capricious Pony design, he paraphrases Hemingway: "A chair is a chair is a chair – but a seat does not have to be a chair." One of Aarnio's earliest chairs was a spool-shaped wicker creation christened the Mushroom by its US distributors. Its staying power was reaffirmed when a fibreglass version went into production in the late 1990s, over 40 years after the original was completed.

Aarnio's early work is unprejudiced and transcends fashion; it is as valid today as it ever was. While many designers become caught up in a perpetual struggle to "recreate" the must-have look of the day, his design language weathers the vicissitudes of time and shifting tastes. In short, decades later Aarnio's bold statements do not look dated.

North-South Axis

The man himself is spontaneous and slightly restless – dare one suggest gregarious – but never random. "It all happens here," he says, pointing to his forehead.

Aarnio would prefer to be thought of as international – though one senses he is not impressed with the urge to categorise. He is impressed with the Italians, though. For years he has been designing ➤

“The Italians encourage creativity. You are totally free to design something really new – then it’s art!”



high-end metal door handles for Valli & Valli. “I fully understand why the Italians are number one in design,” he says. “They epitomise the free spirit; they encourage creativity, and more importantly, they give me the crucial freedom I need.”

He continues: “When I occasionally inquire about a design detail, they invariably respond by saying, ‘Don’t ask! You’re the king! Your job is to design, our job is to find a technological solution.’ With that sort of carte blanche you are totally free to design something really new – then it’s art!”

Aarnio has an innate sense

of how an object is used – and he is not beholden to that worst constraint of all, “good taste”.

Still Riding High

However much he might present himself as international, Aarnio’s reassuring style, like the Finns as a people, demonstrates endurance, reserve and a great regard for harmony. The Globe’s form is proof enough of the Finn’s need to detach himself from the concerns of everyday life. Yet Aarnio’s detachment is also forward-looking.

If one were to attempt to describe the spirit of the latter half of the 20th century with

half a dozen design objects, Eero Aarnio’s Globe chair could well be one of them. Long before the words “innovator” and “pioneer” became over-used, he genuinely earned the right to such accolades. At a turn of the century dominated by consumer detritus, brash throwaways, and flash-in-the-pan trends, Aarnio, who will turn 70 next year, serves as a bridge linking the best of two centuries.

The possibilities are far from exhausted. He points to a two-metre-long fax list of exclusive retail outlets pinned to a huge gliding wall that serves as his drawing board and comments, “Virtually all of my

creations are still in production.”

As active and consistently inventive as ever, he is currently producing a 200-page illustrated book of his life’s work to be published in English and – yes – Chinese.

One gets an exclusive sneak preview of his up-and-coming release, a snug rocking chair characterised by a gracious, effortless curve, further proof of Baudelaire’s loosely-translated dictum that style has nothing whatsoever to do with time.

“It will be an international success,” Aarnio concludes confidently.

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