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Issue 2 * Summer 07 * 5,50 €

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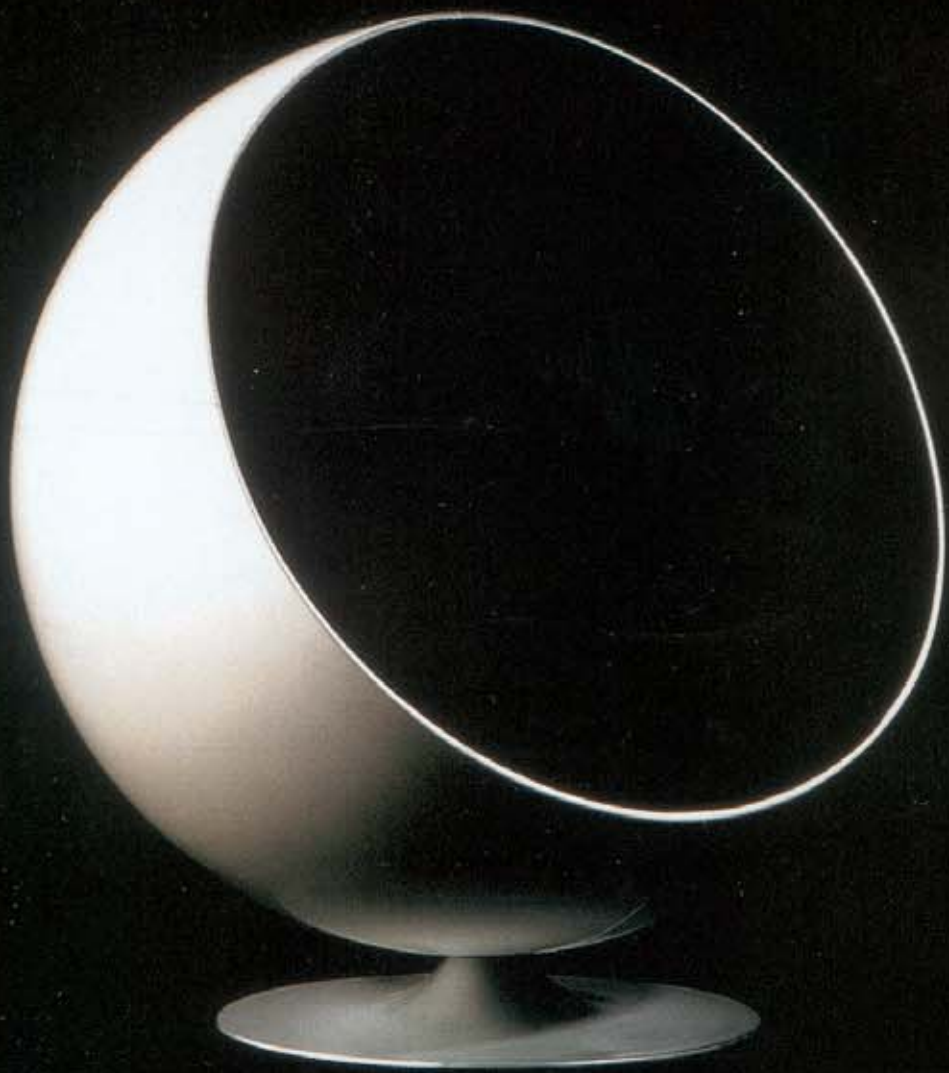
*And Their
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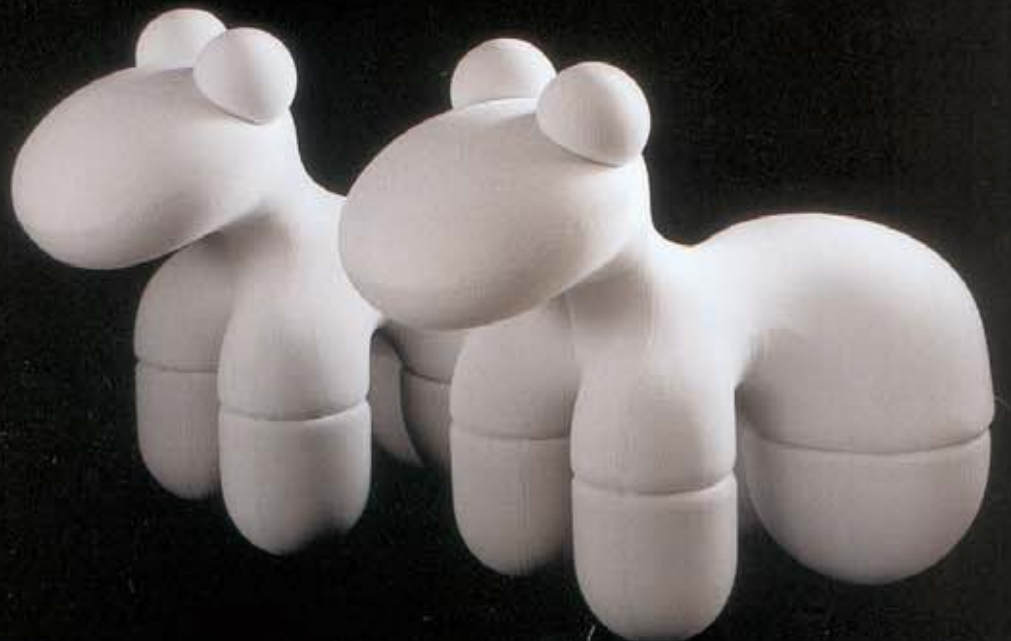
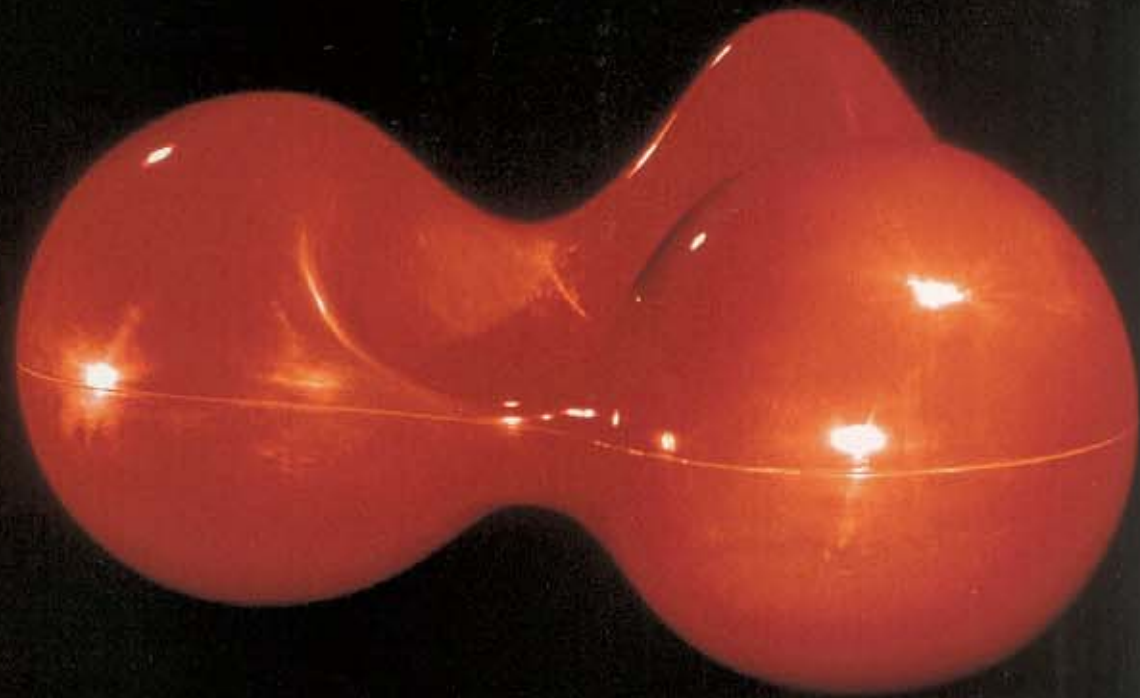


Eero Saarino - living legend

The world-famous designer celebrates his 75th birthday this year and talks to us about his products and his relationship with design.



Clockwise from top left
Ball chair, Mushroom,
Tomato chair, Pony, Focus
chair.





The Ball Chair, designed by Eero Aarnio over 40 years ago, is one of the world's best-known design products. It's found in every respected design opus, often on the cover. It has acted in numerous movies, including James Bond, and has been featured in literally thousands of advertising photos. Its popularity shows no signs of waning. The man behind the Ball Chair has had a long career designing familiar hit products and he shows no signs of slowing down. He's done designs for the new Artek line and is currently working on several projects he can't really talk about.

We agree on the Aarnio's home, which has already been featured in Italy's *Elle Décor* and five other international magazines, as a suitable venue for the interview. The youthful and energetic couple lives on a lake in a house designed by Eero, decorated in white. I've never met them, but they welcome me into their home like an old friend. Eero's wife Pirkko has made us all lunch. The Aarnio's have a big shelf full of design books and international design magazines, with interviews and pictures of products Eero has designed. They've had to go over the same stuff many times over the years, so we're not going to talk about his life story, but about design and how products are created,

in general. At first glance, Eero is a lot like you'd think he'd be, based on his products. He laughs a lot, talks warmly of his children and grandchildren. He gives me a tour of his home, takes me out to see the smoke sauna and the ice where the children skate.

Aarnio designs his products for use, not to be admired from afar as design icons. Grownups and children love them equally and looking at them puts you in a good mood. Aarnio's style is recognizable and could be called childlike and humorous, in a manner of speaking, even though every contour and detail is carefully thought out. Aarnio is a great admirer of the way children see things.

All I needed was a sawhorse, a log of aspen, an axe and a knife. The end result could be anything.

»Children are so uninhibited. I wish there was a way to hold on to that as an adult«, he says. Aarnio himself seems to have retained the ability to get excited about things the way children do. That's a rare trait and has probably contributed to his success. A couple of years ago, the Italian manufacturer, Magis, contacted him and expressed a desire to work with him. The Puppy-chair Eero designed for them was a success. At the fair, businessmen rode them, all excited like little children.

Eero places a lot of importance on the ability to work with his hands. He's always made drawings and models. »All I needed was a sawhorse, a log of aspen, an axe and a knife. The end result could be anything«. When he was a child, he didn't think about career choices. He grew up during the war, so survival was foremost on everyone's minds. He was interested in drawing, so he applied to study architecture, but he wasn't good enough at math. He got a job as an architectural trainee and studied math at the university. Someone suggested that he apply to study at the University of Art and Design. That's when all the pieces fell into place.

Aarnio has made the prototypes for many of his products himself. There are many funny anecdotes to tell about the process. He made





the prototype for the Ball Chair at the school where his father-in-law taught woodwork. He ran out of paper making the fiberglass body, so the school had to surrender a significant part of its toilet paper stores. Eventually, Eero woke up the village pharmacist in the middle of the night, because he needed some more hardener. Through trial and error, he managed to finish the prototype.

At first, Eero tried to sell the chair himself, but the marketing director of Asko Furniture saw the Ball Chair when he came to see a line of pine furniture Eero had designed, and became interested. They made a model, almost secretly, and the company's technical director said he'd eat his hat if the chair sold. The CEO of Asko in Germany took the chair to the 1966 fair in Cologne and soon Eero received a telegram: »Aarnio get over here right now«. It was a runaway success and the chair was sold to 30 countries. It quickly became a design classic.

It can get a little dark to read in the autumn, and Eero wanted to develop a transparent bubble, but he wasn't sure how it might be manufactured. He looked through the yellow pages and found a company that made skylights. He chanced upon an adventurous business owner, who took one look at the drawing and decided he'd give it a try. An acrylic plate was heated, a round metal ring placed

over it and the chair was blown into shape, like a soap bubble. The Bubble Chair was born.

Aarnio was never short of crazy ideas. He makes a lot of sketches and stores them in plastic pockets for future use. He sees three-dimensional shapes in his head and sketches them out from the top, side and front. A computer is only needed for archiving and marketing. Sometimes the ideas stew in his head for years before the right manufacturer is found. For example, the design for Aarnio's Keinu-rocking chair, launched by Artek at last year's design fair in Milan, dates back to 1983. Even the most famous designers have a hard time getting funding for their prototypes.

Old objects are quite clever. It's amazing what they accomplished with the tools they used at the time.

Aarnio has made it a habit to finance his products and look for partners himself. »Factory owners need to be more courageous. If you can't compete with your prices, you need to invest in design«, Aarnio states.

Aarnio has no idols in the world of design. He recommends a visit to the National Museum in Helsinki to check out the work of our ancestors. »Old objects are quite clever and it's amazing to think what they accomplished with the tools they used at the time. It's all about the same thing, still«. Instead of design, Eero follows modern architecture, since there's a lot happening in that field. The Aarnios travel a lot. A few years ago they rented a car and 800 kilometers just to see Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water Houses in the States. He also enjoys the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

He encourages young designers to get into the business. »Go for it. It's a lot of fun and if you're not afraid of hard work, you should give it a try. But you must be active and willing to learn from your mistakes«. You should be able to build your own models. Knowing how to draw is not enough. »Being successful is not that hard. It's not an easy business, though, and I learn new things every year. When creating new things is what you do, you never know what's coming next«, Eero says with a laugh. *