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IN CONVERSATION WITH...
EERO AARNIO

By turning simple shapes like a ball, a screw and an animal into emblems of the global contemporary design scene, the Finnish octogenarian has always persuaded people to dream beyond form and purpose

TEXT BY ISHA SINGH SAWHNEY



"...MY FUTURE FATHER-IN-LAW SHOWED ME HOW TO WEAVE A RATTAN BASKET. I FINISHED ONE...AND REALISED IT WOULD MAKE A GOOD STOOL"

Nordic design has been implicitly linked to a creative vocabulary way ahead of its time. At the helm is Eero Aarnio, who has been pushing the boundaries of furniture and product design for five decades now. Famous for using different tame and wild life as inspiration for conceptualising chairs; ghosts for lamps and screws for tables, the Helsinki born designer has experimented widely with plastics, colours and organic forms. He started working in an era when the country was in the throws of progressivism and industrialisation, and consciously broke away from the norms.

One of Eero's first fauna inspired creations, the Pony chair, is an extension of his unconventional outlook, created seemingly for children but speaks volumes to adults with a playful bent of mind. He has since brought out probably half of the animal kingdom: A penguin (Pingy), dinosaur (Dino), birds (Paloma and Peacock), dogs (Wuff and Nuusku), horse (Rosinante rocker) and a duck (Duck timer), to name a few. You might have spotted his revolutionary chairs and tables across pop culture media in the last few decades. First starring in the '60s British sci-fi TV show Prisoners, and later in the more widely recalled Men in Black, the Ball chair is at the cornerstone of his designs – it was made so that his "entire family of four could sit in it".

The Finnish veteran's earliest design influences were his brothers – ten and 20 years older than him, they returned from the war between Soviet Union and Finland in the '30s, to work as a cartographer and a graphic designer in a publishing house. As a teenager who spent hours at a public library close to home, he later honed his aesthetic at the School of Applied Arts and Helsinki's Institute of Industrial Arts.

After serving in the army in '58, he spent four years as a designer for big companies in Finland, and in '62 turned to freelancing, making his presence felt through contests across Europe.

Fibreglass may have brought him international fame, but rattan was his first muse. "During Christmas in 1954, my future father-in-law showed me how to weave a rattan basket. I finished one, turned it upside down and realised it would make a good stool." That piece was called Juttujakkara ("mushroom" in English) – his first successful product as a freelance designer. It was initially manufactured in Finland by the Industry of the Blind, SOKEVA in 1960, then the production was moved to Hong Kong and later to Sulawesi, Indonesia. "Of all my designs, this stool has been longest on the market and is still produced in small numbers and sold by Artek in Finland," says Eero proudly.

His love for boats steered him towards fibreglass, now his *raison d'être*. "I fell in love with its unlimited possibilities for unrestricted design and free imagination", he adds. Its roundness of form was ideal for making a ball, and achieved the strongest construction with minimal use of the material. "The Ball and Bubble chairs, a drop of water and the globe all belong to the same family of universal shapes," elaborates the designer, whose works can be seen in prestigious museums around the world like Victoria and Albert Museum in London and MoMA in New York. The Bubble chair that followed the Ball in 1968 was also a masterpiece, made without any moulds.

With the energy crisis in 1973, many of his products were discontinued. Post the '90s, Eero would come through with the Savoy chair, a skillful mix of plywood and metal tubes. Always interested in new ways of

production as long as his designs were realised with "a maximum liberty of formation", he toiled through the last two decades, designing the Haiku lamp, Parabel Table and Focus chairs. His lighting stories too continue to challenge seriousness. Eero explains the idea behind the Bottle of Light: "It came from an old fairy tale where simpletons built a house without windows and then attempted to carry light into it with sacks, where the latter are replaced by bottles".

Tracing the Nordic design sensibility to his country's sparse but young population, the 83 year old attributes this radical affinity to the use of technological innovations and materials. "Open minds and curious attitudes help a lot. I once explained to a journalist in Paris, that it's a question of the age and the culture of the country. Older nations have very long roots and old traditions which are not easy to change." Currently on his studio floor, in the small town of Veikkola, Aarnio's future projects include a steel office furniture line, two seaters, a ceramic collection with lights and two rotational moulded lamps. ♦

BUILDING HIMSELF UP

► In 1950, an 18 year old Eero spent a few years taking photographs to make money for university. As a freelance designer, he worked with a Finnish advertising agency and won a competition for envisioning a cigarette package

► In 1972, he worked as a construction foreman, and did his first house and studio. In 1988, he again designed and created his present home studio out of wood, steel, ceramics and aerated concrete building blocks

Eero Aarnio, Helsinki.
Website: www.eero-aarnio.com



SCREW TABLES

Eero always wondered what it would be like to live like a giant, and this 1992 design exemplifies that brainwave. The logic here was simple – he saw how a screw could easily serve as a table, with its flat head as the top and thread as stand.

TIPI

The designer also tried to break away from traditional arm-chairs with backrests and legs – “A seat doesn’t necessarily have to be a chair,” he once said. Tipi, a beakless bird shaped settee, made in 2002, clarifies his point.



AND MORE...

Eero's imagination is almost childlike, but every fibreglass creation shows ingenious functionality

PRODUCED BY ISHA SINGH SAWHNEY

PUPPY

You can tell Eero feels right at home when he designs for kids. Case in point, this abstract toy for kids made out of rotational moulded polyethylene for Magis, in 2005. It is ideal for outdoor use, but we can't decide which colour is perfect: Red, white, black or fluorescent green.



BALL CHAIR Brought out in 1963, this is arguably his most famous design. If you can't get the life sized version, you can purchase its authentic miniature from Vitra Design Museum Shop

PASTIL CHAIR

Another international design staple, the 1967 seater is a visual nod to a sweet! It can be used outdoors (it can float on water too) and inside, but we love it because of its timeless, beautifully contoured silhouette.