

# THE DANISH CHAIR BY RIETVELD

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In the collection of Aldo and Hannie van Eyck there are two chairs by Gerrit Rietveld: a piano chair, lot nr. 1086 and the so-called Danish chair, lot nr. 1087. The piano chair is a classic design by Rietveld. The Danish chair, on the other hand, is much less well-known. It was first shown at an exhibition in Denmark in 1952, where it stood out among the more traditional exhibits. Reviews described it as "well-proportioned, but primitive and heavy." It was given the name "Danish Chair" not because it was produced in Denmark, but because it was shown for the first time at this exhibition.

## Technique and influences

Because the chair is made of bentwood, it is often compared to the designs of Charles and Ray Eames. During the war years, they experimented with a new technique: high-frequency lamination. In this technique, veneer layers are coated with formaldehyde glue and pressed into a mold to be heated with high-frequency electric waves (much like a microwave oven), causing the glue to harden quickly. This allowed layers of wood to be bent simultaneously in three dimensions, making it possible for instance to create seat shells. Eames's most famous application was the leg-splint, a wooden brace for the US Army.

This method differs fundamentally from the pre-war technique, which used more traditional adhesives and allowed for the bending of molded parts in only one direction (two-dimensionally). Pioneers of this older method include Alvar Aalto, Gerald Summers, Marcel Breuer, and Rietveld himself. As early as the 1920s, he experimented with bent and glued plywood and fibre for chair seats. His most famous example is the 1927 "Beugel Chair," in which he created the seat and backrest as a single unit for the first time. (shown her):



## inv.nr. 429 A 005

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld (Utrecht 1888 - Utrecht 1964)

Beugelstoel (Bracket Chair) f40,- en f 20,- ca. 1927

ingekleurde foto (coloured photograph)

on loan 1985

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht / Rietveld Schröderarchief ©

Pictoright

Upon closer inspection of the Danish chair, six curved wooden parts stand out. Although the chair appears complex, almost all the components are curved in only one direction and are not three-dimensional. Therefore, the comparison with Eames furniture is inappropriate. The chair is more closely related to the furniture Marcel Breuer designed for Isokon in London in the late 1930s. In that sense, Rietveld's Danish chair is more of a pre-war design, manufactured using the techniques available at the time.

## Exhibition of 1946

In 1946, the GKF (Association of Practitioners of the applied Arts) launched a competition to design furniture that took into account material scarcity and serial production. However, the design was not to compromise form and practicality. In reviews of the GKF exhibition later that year, Rietveld was mentioned as a pioneer of innovation. His aluminum chair attracted considerable attention at the exhibition. Although, according to the author, this chair "is not directly practical, it does point to the potential of serial production—perhaps even in plastic."

Another review describes a small Rietveld armchair as follows: "The same applies to the three sheets of plywood, which he bent and shaped to such lengths that a light armchair was created that can be manufactured at minimal cost as soon as the materials are available again." This description fits the Danish chair well—suggesting that it may have been exhibited as early as 1946.

## Letters and Versions

From two letters from Rietveld from 1955 and 1956, in which he asks his son Jan to order two chairs, the Hülsmann company in Amsterdam appears to be the manufacturer. Sculptor Wessel Couzijn commissioned the two pieces, and Rietveld instructed his son on the colour and shape of the backrest. He preferred a beautiful, rounded backrest, which Gerard van de Groenekan could make, and a spray-painted red and white colour scheme. However one of Couzijn's chairs is painted grey and white.

The current chair in auction shows an identical production and color scheme and both have a straight backrest. Red paint layers are visible beneath the purple paint, indicating that it was repainted at a later date. The current chair in auction shows a similar make and colour scheme as the chair of Wessel Couzijn, currently on display in the Dutch Museum, RSGA in Culemborg.

(Ref. for this Couzijn chair, see Sotheby's New York, June 15th 2011, lot nr. 108 and Wright Auctions, Chicago, June 7th, 2023, 'Living in Design: the Michael & Gabrielle Boyd Collection', lot nr. 114)

The Amsterdam carpentry and furniture factory Hülsmann possessed the expertise to laminate wood. The company is known to have held patents for interior and furniture components that were registered before the war.

## World exhibition and dating

In 1958, Rietveld designed the "Ideal Apartment" for the Brussels World's Fair. The Danish chair is mentioned in internal notes, but ultimately not shown. A production drawing of the chair from 1957 bears a separate pencil note: "last model April '46." This supports the idea that the chair was already in existence shortly after the war. The review describing the small armchair at the GKF-exhibition could provide further support.

The combination of two-dimensional bending and parallels with Breuer's Isokon furniture possibly points to a design rooted in the late 1930s. The existence of a prototype in volcanic fibre, the material Rietveld was already experimenting with in the 1920s, could also point to an earlier date.



## Other samples

There are currently eleven known examples of the Danish chair, mostly in museum collections.

- Two early versions with rounded backrests and a red-and-white colour scheme are in the collections of Delft University of Technology and the Centraal Museum Utrecht.
- The Centraal Museum also owns a prototype in volcanic fibre and a steel version. (shown below)
- Four colour-painted chairs with straight backrests, including those by Couzijn and Aldo van Eyck
- Three examples with a clear lacquer finish, like the one shown in Denmark in 1952 exist, one of them bears a Hülsmann brand mark.



**Gerrit Rietveld, prototype lage stoel (T201404)**

Periode: 2014-02-22 - 2014-04-13

Locatie: Centraal Museum, Utrecht

Centraal Museum Utrecht / foto Ernst Moritz

## Importance

The Danish chair embodies the reconstruction period: light, compact, functional, and suitable for mass production. The design once again illustrates Rietveld's search for efficiency and innovation. Although less well-known than his iconic works, the Danish chair forms an important link between pre- and post-war design, in which he didn't shy away from new materials and production methods.

## inv.nr. 555 A 006

Gerrit Thomas Rietveld (Utrecht 1888 - Utrecht 1964)

Deense stoel ca. 1946-1950

Inkt op transparant, ingekleurd met geel potlood (Ink on transparent, coloured with yellow pen-cil)

On loan 1985

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht / Rietveld Schröderarchief ©

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