



Text by Carol Berens

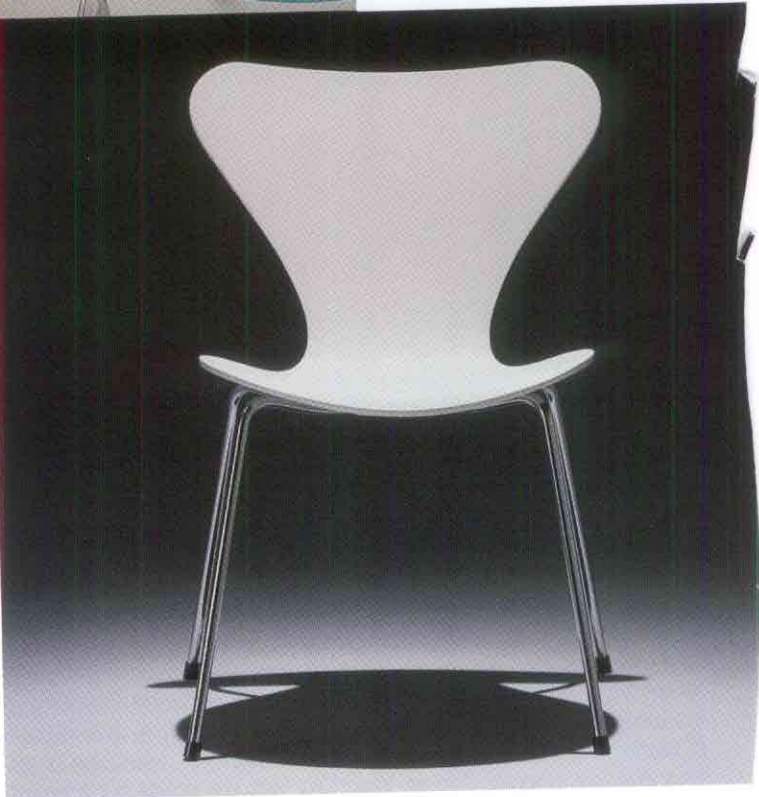
LEFT: The Ant chair by Arne Jacobsen for Fritz Hansen, 1952.
BELOW AND OPPOSITE: 3107 chair by Arne Jacobsen for Fritz Hansen, 1955

design theft?

The story of the elegant Jacobsen 3107 chair is not only a chronicle of one man's vision, but also of legal battles fought over reproductions and knock-offs

Few icons of modernism are more ubiquitous in today's interiors than the Jacobsen chair. Combining utility with whimsy, the Jacobsen chair is perfectly at home in lofts featured in glossy magazines, the latest downtown restaurant and, in derivative form, Pottery Barn catalogues. It is as modern today as when it was originally designed over 40 years ago. The story of this elegantly simple plywood chair is not only a chronicle of post-war invention and one man's vision, but also of legal battles. Money and principle collide when patents expire, knock-offs proliferate, and furniture breaks out from the designers' world to the general public's.

Recently, I looked for dining room chairs and was soon confronted with the question - "Why should I spend \$375 when I can get what looks like the same chair for \$110?" Normally I consider myself a design purist, but how solid is my philosophy when hundreds of dollars are at stake? My answer, and yours, provokes dissension and debate. Reproductions and knock-offs make design more available. Designers and manufacturers who invest time, effort, and money to create new furniture cry "design theft." The Jacobsen chair spotlights this issue. >



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Elegant and light, the Jacobsen chair parts company with other minimal furniture by being comfortable and, perhaps more importantly, looking comfortable. It is easy to like. Its anthropomorphic image attracts us: Wide shoulders flare out, the waist cinches in. One piece of curved plywood sits atop four tubular polished chrome legs. Details and materials impart resiliency, balance and comfort. In middle age, it now finds itself on top of the fashion curve. Just as that other hour-glass 1950s look, the "simple little dress," this chair works from morning to night, adapting to all kinds of scenes - kitchen tables, conference rooms, cafeterias, or just posing in advertisements for fashionable spaces.

Dubbed the *Ant* when Danish architect Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) designed it in 1952, the original three-legged chair's most famous four-legged descendant is variously called the *3107* or the *Series 7* by furniture mavens and "the Jacobsen chair" by the rest of us. The *Series 7*, developed in 1955, is the most widely sold chair in Denmark where it has been in continuous production since its inception. In America, this chair was familiar mainly to designers and 1950s design aficionados until the early '90s. Today, Jacobsen-styled chairs permeate the market as stores and catalogues manufacture their own

slightly modified models. The resurgent popularity of post-war design, clever marketing, as well as legal loopholes, brought about this recent flourishing.

Jacobsen, an advocate of the International Style, exercised complete design control over all aspects of his architectural projects, including fixtures and furniture. His chairs, with their curved lines and human scale, tempered his otherwise rectangular and spare interiors. As part of his architectural education, Jacobsen, a graduate of the Royal Danish Academy of Arts, also studied furniture design and absorbed its emphasis of combining production techniques with design ideas. With his chairs, Jacobsen joined the many post-war architects and designers who experimented with adapting technology to objects of everyday life. Pursuing the Bauhaus goal of providing affordable and well-designed furniture to the general public, Jacobsen established a maximum retail price for the chair in Denmark.

The simple, mass-produced chair made from molded plywood and tubular legs can be traced from the 1940s Eames chair in which two pieces of double-curved molded plywood were attached to a squat tubular metal frame. That chair had in turn evolved from Aalto's single bent plywood chair. The wartime aviation industry developed

methods of steambending plywood in two directions to structurally strengthen objects and reduce the amount of material needed. This method intrigued Jacobsen, whose motto, "economy plus function equals style," guided his work. Collaborating closely with the manufacturer Fritz Hansen, he sought to further pare the plywood chair down to essentials.

The *Ant* began life in a cafeteria near Copenhagen. The rectangular building was composed of concrete and glass - hard materials that needed the softening effects of curves and wood. This original three-legged, stackable chair was an immediate success. The Museum of Modern Art acquired it for its Design Collection in 1955. International design shows featured it. Jacobsen and Fritz Hansen continued working on different versions but always maintained organic, amusing shapes and its stackable quality. Installed in a row, the chair's rounded, wide backs and narrow centers create a visual rhythm as the slightly splayed legs touch, leaving slivers of space between the turned-up seats.

Though his chairs imparted humor, apparently Jacobsen did not. He was famous for his inflexibility and persistence. It was only after his death (but with the approval of his widow, Jonna Jacobsen) that the *Ant* and the *Series 7* were produced in a variety of colors and with accessories such as cushions and arm rests. ICF, the chair's American distributor until this year, credits the rise in popularity to the recalibration of the color palette in the early 1990s. Its showroom always displayed the chair with its full range of colors, usually around a white table. Few could resist it. Dan Fogelson, Vice President of Marketing of the ICF Group, remarked, "Seeing a stack of chairs in every color was like looking at ice cream."

The chair's specifications have barely changed since they were developed by Jacobsen and Fritz Hansen. Resilience and comfort are built in. Two layers of cotton textile are sandwiched between >73



Installed in a row, the chairs create a visual rhythm

OPPOSITE: The *Ant* was originally designed for a factory cafeteria. At Arrow International it reprises this role in the corporate cafeteria. Stephanie Mallis, designer. Kallmann McKinnell & Wood Architects. **THIS PAGE TOP:** At the Miller Performing Arts Center at Alfred University, Kallmann McKinnell & Wood Architects took advantage of the chair's rounded, wide backs and narrow centers to create a visual rhythm to the rows of seating. **BOTTOM:** For the Suissa Miller Advertising agency project, Brian Murphy of BAM Construction/Design developed the project color scheme around the Jacobsen chairs



(BOTTOM) COURTESY BAM DESIGN

Design Theft?

(continued from page 51) nine layers of laminated, sliced veneer. The 10mm thick shell is then bent and molded in three dimensions. Steel tube legs (as slender as physically possible) are attached on the bottom of the seat by rubber cushions, so that the seat and legs are separated, allowing for movement while sitting. It is a beautifully made chair, famous for its veneer matching, hand-sanded lacquer finish and exquisite connections.

Knoll now distributes the Hansen-produced chair through designers and architects. Other manufacturers, such as Pala-zzetti and Nuovo Melodrom, specialize in selling both to the trade and retail, and have showrooms open to the public. Their Jacob-sen chair versions are quite similar to the original, but have changed shapes, colors and production details and, of course, price, charging almost \$200 less per chair on a retail basis. Other stores are getting into the act. Two years ago, the Pottery Barn introduced its own version, sidestepping authorship by dubbing it the *Tivoli* chair. Through reproduction, these chairs are becoming the everyday objects in America that they are in Denmark.

How can they do this? The law distinguishes between ideas and execution. Ideas are free and have no protection. Objects such as furniture are patented, a protection that lasts 14 years. Many famous post-war furniture design patents have obviously lapsed. By making slight changes in proportions, materials, and details to a piece of furniture, a manufacturer can call a product its own. In fact, furniture relies as much if not more on production methods, connections, attention to details, and the practicalities of manufacture than design. As Jeffrey Osborne, former director of design for Knoll, succinctly stated, "Ideas are easy, resolving for production is difficult."

But what from afar looks similar is really quite different. Whether they use them or not, all agree that the cheaper versions are not as well made as the Hansen chair. Designers specifying chairs see the difference, and if their clients (and budgets) agreed, they would opt for the original. There have always been two furniture markets in America - the designer world of quality which is somewhat hidden from the public, and the retail world available to all. Reproductions bridge these two worlds.

Fashion trends are complex and delicate, the whys and > 74

(continued from page 73) wherefore often a mystery. The Jacobsen chair perfectly captured the design sensibility of the late 1990s. It represents modernism with a dash of humor - a way of exhibiting good taste while avoiding ostentation. Original and derivative designs in fact need each other. Imitations sell because the original captures the design moment so well, in turn increasing sales of the original for those who want the quality. Up to a point, that is. Any designer asked about the Jacobsen chair inevitably responds, "They're brilliant chairs, a classic." "I was using them before they were in all the magazines," however, quickly follows. The chairs have been popular for a while and we will soon know whether the style has crested. The price has crept up, a result of increased costs from Hansen's factory as well as the change from ICF to Knoll, broadening the cost spread between the original and copies. What will designers and their clients whose projects need lots of chairs for cafeterias or conference rooms do? Pay the higher price? Buy a knock-off? Find a different chair?

Tastes shift. Savvy retailers such as Crate and Barrel and Pottery Barn have specialized in quickly responding to changes in design sensibilities. Much to designers' collective dismay, you will probably be able to spot new chair trends in store windows and catalogues soon. Are they copy cats or "good design" messengers spreading the word? Which one will you buy? ■