

THE BARD
GRADUATE
CENTER

BRUNO
MATHSSON
ARCHITECT
AND DESIGNER

ON VIEW
MARCH 22
THROUGH
JUNE 10, 2007



From "Grasshopper" to MoMA

A fifth-generation master woodworker from Värnamo, Sweden, Mathsson began working in the family furniture shop at age 16 and mastered the skills necessary to create traditional furniture. During the 1920s, he became interested in the formal and functional possibilities for furniture design that were created by the advent of modern materials, including

bentwood. In 1931 Mathsson left the historical conventions of his early training behind and developed his first chair, the *Grasshopper*.

By eschewing joined blocks of turned wood and upholstery in favor of hemp

webbing stretched across

a bentwood frame

meant to evoke a grasshopper's legs,

Mathsson took the

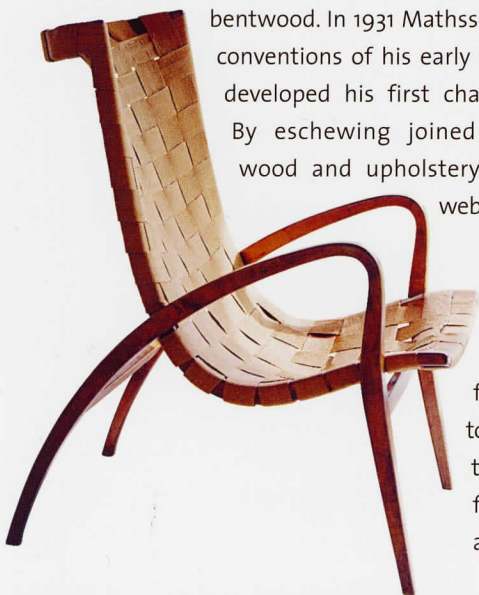
first step in his journey

to construct furniture

that was at once

functional, comfortable,

and beautiful.



Mathsson's international reputation was launched in 1937, when his *Eva* chair caught the attention of MoMA's Edgar Kaufmann Jr. at the World Exposition in Paris. Kaufmann recommended that MoMA purchase the *Eva* to outfit its public rooms. Mathsson also exhibited furniture in the Swedish pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, which provided further momentum for his extensive popularity and influence in the United States. During the 1940s, innovative design company Artek Pasco began to distribute the furniture, which appeared in numerous domestic and public buildings designed by leading modern architects across the country. Soon Mathsson's designs became visual synonyms for the "Swedish Modern" style that took America by storm during the middle of the 20th century.

Furnishing the Future

During the 1940s and 1950s, Mathsson began to apply the same ergonomic principles used in his chairs to other furnishings designed to increase efficiency in the office and facilitate relaxation at home. In 1943 Mathsson created a futuristic Manager's Office of Tomorrow that featured an unconventional grouping of furniture on casters; a tilted typewriter table; and a lounge chair with a low, horizontal book cradle positioned nearby, allowing the sitter to remain seated while accessing a book or magazine. Most radically, the chairs exhibited in this mock office displayed Mathsson's characteristic backwards tilt. As he explained, "Why should we sit up straight when we don't have to ... one can concentrate much better in a leisurely position."



In the 1960s Mathsson began working with tubular steel, introducing tables with span legs that facilitated both storage and transport by operating via a tension mechanism, and creating his first metal-frame chair, the *Jetson*. Named for the popular television series *The Jetsons*, the chair's revolutionary construction allowed its woven seat to rotate on a single, tubular

steel support. Mathsson also designed workstations made specifically for computer users. In 1979 he began a collaboration with Hewlett Packard that resulted in a terminal workstation featuring a tilted keyboard panel with an indentation—referred to by Mathsson as the "stomach hole"—that would support a user's arms in compliance with the recommendations of ergonomics experts.



Living with/in Nature

Mathsson's insistence that furniture should conform to the body is translated in his architecture as the conviction that the built environment should be integrated as seamlessly as possible into the natural one. Inspired by the flexible floor plans, new materials, and innovative construction methods of modernist architecture, his primary goal was to enhance the connection between interior and exterior space. His interest in technology expressed itself through the use of radiant floor heating, passive solar heat, and large spans of glass installed both as windows and integral structural components. One of the purest expressions of Mathsson's architectural vision is found in his weekend cottage at Frösakull (1960) on the western coast of Sweden. Built around an interior sun garden, sliding panels of corrugated plastic and spans of glass erase the boundary between inside and outside, creating an adaptable, open, exterior "living room."



A Relevant Legacy

Bruno Mathsson's distinctive, organic furniture designs, progressive approach to architecture, and incorporation of new materials and technology into his work established him as one of the most influential figures in 20th-century modernism. His accomplishments have a special relevance for contemporary architects and designers concerned with sustainable and humane design practices. Mathsson's ability to create designs that respond and adapt to changing lifestyles has created a legacy that will continue to inspire and delight designers and laypeople alike for generations to come.

BRUNO MATHSSON: ARCHITECT AND DESIGNER

A pioneer in the use of ergonomics in furniture design, Bruno Mathsson (1907–1988) is considered Sweden's most important furniture designer of the 20th century. Guided by his belief that "the manufacturing of chairs should be an art form so that sitting in one is not an art in itself," Mathsson embraced new materials and technology, using bentwood and tubular steel to create furniture for work and relaxation that both looked elegant and responded to the contours of the human form. The relationship between the human form and the built environment was also essential to his architecture. By using large spans of glass and open floor plans, Mathsson's houses connected interior and exterior spaces, bringing in natural light and integrating the landscape into the modern home. From March 22 through June 10, 2007, the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture presents an opportunity to consider the career of this innovative figure with the exhibition *Bruno Mathsson: Architect and Designer*.



GENERAL INFORMATION

LOCATION

18 West 86th Street,
between Central Park West
and Columbus Avenue, NYC

HOURS

Tuesday through Sunday:

11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Thursday: 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Free admission

Thursday evenings from

5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

CONTACT

Phone: 212-501-3023

Fax: 212-501-3097

TTY: 212-501-3012

E-mail: gallery@bgc.bard.edu

WEBSITE

www.bgc.bard.edu

ADMISSION

General \$3

Senior (65 and over) \$2

Student (with valid ID) \$2

TRANSPORTATION

The BGC is easily accessible by
public transportation:

Bus: M86 crosstown

M10 on Central Park West

M7 or M11 on

Columbus Avenue

Subway: B or C train to 86th
Street station



EXHIBITION TOURS

Group tours of the exhibition
may be scheduled Tuesday
through Friday between 11:15 a.m.
and 4:00 p.m., and on Thursday
evenings until 7:00 p.m. Advance
reservations are required for all
groups. Please call 212-501-3013.

Payment must be made in advance,
via check or credit card. The fees
for admission and guide(s) are:

1–20 visitors (single guide) \$75

21–40 visitors (two guides) \$100

UPCOMING EXHIBITION

*A Brass Menagerie: Metalwork
of the Aesthetic Movement*

July 12 - October 14, 2007

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Lectures, panels, and other
offerings are presented in

conjunction with this exhibition.
For further information, please
call 212-501-3011 or e-mail
programs@bgc.bard.edu.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

The BGC offers programs of study
leading to M.A. and Ph.D. degrees.
For further information, please
call 212-501-3019 or e-mail
admissions@bgc.bard.edu.

JOURNAL

The BGC publishes a semi-
annual journal, *Studies in the
Decorative Arts*, which presents
new scholarship in the field of
the decorative arts, design, and
culture. For further information
and/or to order, please call
212-501-3058 or e-mail
journal@bgc.bard.edu.

IMAGE CREDITS: All designs by Bruno Mathsson. **Cover:** Span leg (designed in collaboration with Piet Hein), circa 1964, Bruno Mathsson International; **Interior flap:** Southern face of the house at Golfvägen, 1955, Kevinge, Danderyd, Photographed in 2005 by Åke E:son Lindman; **Interior** (from left to right): *Grasshopper* armchair, 1931, Bruno Mathsson Archive, Värnamo; Corner of the Värnamo showroom, built circa 1950, Photograph by Åke E:son Lindman; *Jetson 66* chair, designed 1966, Bruno Mathsson International; Work room of the house at Södrakull, 1965, Photograph by Åke E:son Lindman