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STYLE | DESIGN

5 Overexposed ‘It’ Chairs—and What to Buy Instead

We asked interiors pros to name the iconic seats that show up too often—especially as cheap knockoffs—and what fresher alternatives they’d recommend



We see these famous chairs and their reproductions so frequently, designers admit they’ve lost some of their distinctiveness. Below, the pros propose equally chic alternatives. ILLUSTRATION: THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM

By Kelsey Mulvey

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IT’S HARD TO RESIST famous furniture. Such pieces radiate cachet. Museums house them, coffee-table books document them, pretty much everyone acknowledges their beauty. “There is something inspiring and fun about being able to experience pieces that are equal parts function and sculpture,” said Maria Gossett of Pixel Design Collaborative, in Decatur, Ga. The downside: Their universal appeal can lead to numbing ubiquity.

“If I see another Pierre Jeanneret Chandigarh chair positioned as though it’s the most rare object to behold, I will burst into flames,” said Los Angeles interior designer Madeline Stuart. “How many of these chairs could possibly have been made?”

A lot, if you count near-copies and cheap knockoffs. In 2017, Be Original Americas, a New York-based nonprofit that educates consumers about the value of authentic design, worked with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to seize $15.1 million of counterfeit furnishings and design.

We asked interiors pros to identify iconic modern chairs they consider overexposed and then suggest vintage or current seats that would be less hackneyed—but equally chic—additions to your home.

Cool Recliners

One needn't be schooled in Charles and Ray Eames's decadeslong design legacy to know their **Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman**. With its famously comfy molded plywood and leather cushions, the designers set out to mimic the grasp of a baseball mitt. Since its 1956 debut, the set has popped up everywhere from Dr. Frasier Crane's Seattle high-rise to the Art Institute of Chicago's permanent collection. And one of the many dupes is probably sitting in the lobby of your friend's apartment complex, says Jennifer Fisher, a designer in Austin, Texas.



From left: The classic Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman; Striad Lounge Chair, Mid Back with 4-Star Swivel, and Ottoman by Markus Jehs and Jürgen Laub, from $3,595 and $1,495, HermanMiller.com

THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM; MARK SEELEN

Fellow designer Lonn Combs of Easton Combs in New Marlborough, Mass., recommends the **Striad Lounge Chair and Ottoman**, a fresher alternative with "a similar gravitas as the Eames chair." German designers Markus Jehs and Jürgen Laub relied on molded layers and individually upholstered foam cushions—taking their cues from high-performance ski-boots

—and ultimately created “a striking silhouette that looks elegant from many angles,” said Combs.

Game of Thrones

For the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, German-born designer Ludwig Mies van der Rohe—and, say some sources, designer Lilly Reich—devised a seat for Spain’s king and queen. Brooklyn designer Andrea Fisk appreciates how well their **Barcelona chair**’s slim chrome frame and tufted leather upholstery let you sit at a comfortable, ergonomic angle. Produced by Knoll for 71 years and relentlessly cloned by others, the perch has lost its luster, say some.



From left: The classic Barcelona Chair; Butaque Chair by Clara Porset, $4,639, Luteca, 833-758-8322

THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM (BARCELONA)

Fisk’s alternative: The **Butaque Chair** by Cuban-born designer Clara Porset. A modern take on a traditional Latin American seat of the same name, it evokes the Barcelona chair’s posture in a fresher, more-versatile way. Luteca’s version, of maple wood and hide, authorized by Porset’s estate, is based on the model she created in the mid-20th century for Mexican architect Luis Barragán. “While the Barcelona chair feels at home in a clean, modern space, the softer and lighter Butaque Chair can also look great in a more traditional setting.”

Inspired Perches

A charming detail about Hans J. Wegner's **Wishbone Chair** has been forgotten over the 75 years of its production and reproduction: The form pays homage to the chairs of China's Ming dynasty. "It's an iconic modern Danish design that was one of many riffs on a Chinese classic," said San Francisco designer Anand Sheth of the gently embracing chair. "Nowadays, we don't really talk about that inspiration. We just think of this chair as a go-to because it is thoughtfully articulated, made of natural materials and is as comfortable as it is elegant." Sheth admits the seat's specialness has been "watered down."



From left: The classic Wishbone Chair; Moto Chair, $1,825, Medium-Small.com
THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM; NICHOLAS V. RUIZ

In its place, he recommends the **Moto Chair**, designed and crafted in the San Francisco studio of Medium Small. Shown here in earthy walnut, the seat's visible joinery showcases its construction. Like the Wishbone, it offers a graceful ergonomic backrest and beautiful negative spaces. Its close-to-home inspiration? California highway culture.

Sling Seats

Gossett considers Marcel Breuer's **Wassily Chair**, created in 1925, "the most avant-garde interpretation of the leather armchair to date." Rejecting the übermasculine, monolithic silhouettes typical of leather chairs, the Hungarian architect strung strips of upholstery across a lightweight tubular steel frame (inspired by his first bicycle) to create distinctive negative spaces. But with replicas proliferating at big-box retailers like Target and Amazon, Gossett suggests the **Olmit Sling Chair** instead.





From left: The classic Wassily Chair; Olmit Sling Chair, $14,500, BDDW, 212-625-1230
THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM (WASSILY)

Made in Pennsylvania by BDDW and designed by founder Tyler Hays, it frames out an airy cradle like Breuer’s chair but swaps out steel for bronze. “It builds on the material use of the metal frame and leather sling in a similarly sculptural way,” said Gossett of the swoopy chair, noting it can add personality to a “variety of environments, from classic residences to ultramodern offices.” The addition of a built-in side table offers “a fun update to a classic,” she said.

Scissor-Leg Sisters

Made with woven cane and bug-resistant teak, Pierre Jeanneret’s **Chandigarh dining chair** is one of many the Swiss architect designed in the 1950s for Chandigarh, a city built for a newly independent India. Though many were later discarded or sold for a few rupees, “as the pared-back European aesthetic gained popularity, so did the chair,” said Julia Sobrepeña King of Studio Roene in Los Angeles. King considers it “one of the most overexposed chairs today,” noting the glut of cheap copies and high-profile fans (Kourtney Kardashian Barker owns 12 originals of the armed model).



From left: The classic Chandigarh dining chair; Lina Bo Bardi Sete de Abril MASP Chair, $4,148, ETEL, 832-487-9228

THE ELLAPHANT IN THE ROOM; FERNANDO LASZLO

Instead, King recommends the **Sete de Abril MASP Chair**, created by Italian-born Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1947. Both chairs feature scissor-style legs and natural materials and “were designed with utility in mind,” said King. (The MASP can be folded and stacked.) And both are seen as icons worthy of galleries and museums, she said. An original MASP lists for $75,000 on 1stDibs, but authorized reissues by Brazilian company ETEL cost less.

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