

Antiques

Wendy Moonan

Modern Furniture For the Middle Class, Designed by a Swedish Star

Three floors of the Bard Graduate Center, at 18 West 86th Street in Manhattan, are filled with curvy, modern, bent and laminated beech, easy chairs and chaise longues with woven, webbed seating — perfect for any beach house. There are daybeds with adjustable reading stands and companion floor-level book “cribs,” armchairs with rotating bases and elliptical blond dining tables with spindly legs that seem to float above the floor. A film on one wall depicts a glass house in a forest by the sea.

If this sounds idyllic, it is. The exhibition “Bruno Mathsson: Architect and Designer” showcases the innovative designs of this Swedish creator, who lived from 1907 to 1988. It also promotes the ideology that, for most of the 20th century, informed modern Swedish design for the middle class: “the conviction that a well-functioning and aesthetically appealing environment, with architecture at its core, would lead to an improved quality of life,” as Dag Widman, a former curator at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, puts it in the show’s catalog.

The show has photographs and models of some of Mathsson’s 40 buildings (factories, schools and houses), drawings and examples of his furniture, and a whole room, recreated from a house he designed in 1960, that visitors may enter.

This exhibition, the first about Mathsson in New York, has been seen in Stockholm and Paris. Its catalog is said to be the first book about Mathsson in English.

“He is the last modernist whose history has not been told,” said Hedvig Hedqvist, a Swedish design historian who organized the show with Karin Aberg Waern, a curator of the Swedish Museum of Architecture in Stockholm, to celebrate Mathsson’s 100th birthday.

Mathsson was probably Sweden’s most successful modern furniture designer in the 20th century. His birch tables rest on thin bunched-rod steel legs. His undulating chairs are light, both visually and literally (because webbing is used instead of upholstery). A self-taught student of ergonomics, Mathsson designed chairs to accommodate the contours of the human body.



Patrick Johansson

A Bruno Mathsson lounge chair, one of his signature designs.

Mathsson “was striving for a clearly modern concept, distinct from the prototypes of the past,” Mr. Widman writes. It was “furniture design that put function foremost, both experimentally and in practice, using lightweight materials that were also inexpensive.”

Mathsson began designing furniture in 1931. A fifth-generation cabinetmaker from poor, rural Varnamo, he dropped out of school at 16 to join his father’s workshop. “The family wasn’t poor, but they didn’t have much,” Ms. Hedqvist said.

Mathsson seems to have had an insatiable curiosity about the modern movement then sweeping across Europe. For several years he arranged to borrow current design books and periodicals from the Robhska Museum in Gothenburg.

In 1930 he won a cash prize for his craftsmanship and went to Stockholm to see Gunnar Asplund’s exhibition on Modern houses and Swedish Functionalism. Mathsson then designed three chairs: a work chair, an easy chair and a lounge chair, each with a continuous wood frame and webbing, key motifs he would continue to refine for decades.

“He really was a genius,” said Cecilia Woodley Lindblom of Scandinavian Design in New York, who has sold Mathsson furniture for 53 years. “He knew how to laminate wood in water, not steam, so it bent slowly and never came apart. His furniture is indestructible.”

Mathsson experimented with new materials. “At one point he used paper webbing, which is more durable than jute or hemp, and linen,” Ms. Lindblom said.

Mathsson’s international reputation grew and, in 1936 the Robhska Museum gave him a show. In 1937 he participated in the Paris International Expo. An American, Edgar Kaufmann Jr., saw his furniture there and ordered 20 pieces for the Museum of Modern Art. Mathsson was included in eight design exhibitions at MoMA from 1940 to 1955.

In 1939 his furniture was in the Swedish pavilion at the World’s Fair in New York and at the Golden Gate International Exhibition in San Francisco. In the 1940s Artek-Pascoe, a distributor of furniture by the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto in America, added Mathsson’s work. After World War II, cutting-edge de-

sign boutiques like Bonnier’s in New York and Baldwin Kingrey in Chicago carried it.

Mathsson furniture “became a symbol for Swedish modern,” Mr. Widman writes. Nonetheless it never went mass market, probably because Mathsson refused requests by distributors of modern furniture, like Knoll, to make and sell his designs. (He was by all accounts a control freak.)

He wouldn’t collaborate with anyone until the 1960s, when Dux Industries of Sweden took on production of some of his chair designs (including the tubular-steel model Jetson, which was named after the American television animated series). Later he allowed Tendo of Japan to manufacture some of his designs on a smaller scale for the Japanese market.

Today Bruno Mathsson International in Varnamo still produces some Mathsson furniture (as does Dux), which may explain why the vintage pieces are not regularly seen at American auction houses.

“I’ve probably sold only 50 to 75 pieces over the last six years,” said Richard Wright, owner of the Wright auction house in Chicago. “Mathsson doesn’t have as much intellectual or market appeal as the Danes Hans Wegner or Finn Juhl.” He said he thought the situation could change.

“He’s off the radar — his work is really undervalued,” said Josh Holdeman, Christie’s specialist in 20th-century design. “Right now everyone is focused on French mid-20th-century design and totally contemporary work.”

James Zemaitis, the design specialist at Sotheby’s, said, “The fact we can’t develop a secondary market doesn’t mean Mathsson’s designs aren’t great.”

Frank Marasciello, the 20th-century expert at Bonhams, said there is a market for “first-generation” Mathsson designs. “Mathsson’s firm didn’t have the huge output of some of the well-known factories,” he said, “so when you find Mathsson originals from the 1940s, they are valuable.” Mathsson, who did little to promote his career, never achieved the popularity of his Scandinavian contemporaries: Saarinen, Aalto, Asplund, Wegner, Juhl, Arne Jacobsen and Poul Kjaerholm.

“His work was more curvy and animated than theirs,” said Lee Mindel, a New York architect and a fan. “It’s different. It combined function, romance and heart.”