



STORY
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Humorous, joyful, elegant, cheeky, off-key, or frankly impractical, the chairs in Thierry Barbier-Mueller's collection are like a gallery of characters who embody 60 years of creative daring. The late Geneva-based entrepreneur was a worthy representative of a long line of collectors, who cultivated an astute fascination with chairs. He was a great lover of contemporary art and design, and was as discreet about his acquisitions as his appetite for them was boundless. Today, his daughters are continuing their family legacy with respect and affection. Here, Marie, Valentine, Zoé, Sophie, and Inès Barbier-Mueller evoke the memory of their father, a daring pioneer whose collection traversed the boundaries between furniture and sculpture, art and design.

**What attracted your father to collecting?
Did his family inspire or encourage him?**

Collecting is a family tradition that began with our great-grandfather Josef Müller and his sister Gertrud Dübi-Müller. It was continued by our grandparents, Monique and Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller, and so our father and his two brothers were steeped in the tradition. While they may not have been explicitly encouraged to collect, their relationship to art was certainly shaped by their forebears. Like them, our father saw art as a stimulating field of discovery, and he explored it boldly and passionately, never worrying too much about conventions or possible logistical or financial constraints.

How did he come to collect chairs?

It began with the simple desire to live with original pieces of furniture. There was no conscious decision; as he said, "I originally wasn't thinking of assembling a collection. An initial purchase of a chair...felt like an imperative and was followed by another, then another, like a thread that you pull and unwind, slowly at first, with curiosity and caution, then with increasing speed, faster and faster, and finally with conviction and freneticism." Our father is suggesting a force greater than himself, an almost mystical



impulsion that, we are certain, is known to all collectors. This is a world where, at first, instinct and gut feeling dominate. In this sense, our father essentially collected pieces that sparked in him an emotion, an interesting idea, or led him to experience a moment of aesthetic or spiritual elevation. For him, the art of the chair was a form of free expression that encouraged personal discovery as opposed to simple recognition. It was the possibilities of material, scale, and function offered by this object that he found particularly compelling.

Do you think this collection can be read as a portrait of your father?

Absolutely. Our father combined a delicate sensibility with a great depth of spirit and unusual intellectual appetite and fervor. That is why his collection, which includes more than 650 chairs by 363 designers, artists, and architects, is utterly eclectic, rich in shades and colors, so to speak. His approach was neither conventional nor systematic or academic; hence he assembled pieces of great formal and conceptual diversity, mixing established and more obscure angles. His collection was a space in which he let himself be guided by his curiosity, making acquisitions that could

Previous pages: this steel *Experimental Chair Design* (2 ft 11 in high) by the British designer Tom Dixon is a prototype that was made in 1980. Above: Stefan Wewerka (1928–2013), a member of the influential Team 10 group of architects and designers, created this *Klassenraumstuhl* in 1971

(top, edition 17/40) from red lacquered wood (2 ft 4 in high). In a less traditional material, the unique *Post-Steltman* (c. 2000) by Alessandro Guerriero is made of colored acrylic glass (2 ft 4 in high). Guerriero founded the post-radical avant-garde design group Studio Alchimia in Milan in

1976 with his sister Adriana. Below: an example of chairs that play with gravity is Choi Byung-Hoon's unique *Afterimage 01-105* of 2001. Made of black faux leather and stainless steel (3 ft 3 in high), the chair needs no legs, with the heavy granite rock counterbalancing the weight of a seated person



Bruno Munari's *Chair for Very Brief Visits* was conceived in 1945 with a humorous approach to an otherwise traditional chair design – the seat being on a steep slope. It was manufactured in 1998 (this example, edition 3/9) from waxed walnut wood, marquetry, and aluminum, and stands 3 ft 5 in high



PHOTOGRAPHS: PATRICK COFFELLEN/COURTESY OF THE BARBIER-MUELLER MUSEUM/DACS 2024

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Opposite: this *Bold Chair* was designed by Big Game and manufactured by Moustache in 2007 (edition 7/100; 2 ft 6 in high). The polyurethane-foam-and-steel-tubing chair form is covered in polyester textile

sock-like sleeving that can be removed and replaced. This page, left: *Crown Chair*, designed by Tom Dixon in 1988, is made of gold-plated welded steel (3 ft 5 in high, edition of 60). It illustrates Dixon's belief in ignoring stylistic trends but aiming to reinvigorate the freshness of

British design; he once said, "I design for longevity, and I want something to be anti-fashion." Above, left: the Italian designer Alessandro Mendini (1931–2019) created the *Zabro* collection for Zanotta, including pieces such as this metamorphic

chair/table (1984; lacquered wood and leather, 4 ft 6 in high), inspired by traditional Italian artistic handcrafts. Above, right: Ron Arad's *Narrow Papardelle* of 1992 is made of chromed metal and stainless steel mesh (3 ft 6 in high, edition 10/20)

sometimes be compulsive or risky. We had quite a few surprises!

Why are most of the chairs from after 1960?

Our father felt a natural affinity with the artists of his own day and so mainly collected chairs by his contemporaries. He particularly liked having to exercise his own judgment for pieces yet to attain canonical status.

Did he have any favorite chairs?

He chose each chair himself and appreciated each one for its unique qualities. But he was particularly fond of prototypes [see Tom Dixon's *Experimental Chair Design* on pages 56–57]. In his view, they represented the purest expression of the creative act, and they carried a sense of risk. The fact that certain artists, such as Pol Quadens, Robert Wilson, Ron Arad, and Tom Dixon, are especially well represented in the collection is certainly indicative of our father's appreciation of their work. He collected in depth the artists he loved or those who simply intrigued him. Some of the abovementioned designers were key to the origin of the collection, our father having developed a fascination for the Creative Salvage movement in the 1990s, when it was that he started taking an interest in furniture and chairs in particular.

This collection was kept secret until the *A Chair and You* exhibition at Mudac in

Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2022–23. What prompted your father to make it public?

For our father, collecting was above all a personal act. For many years, he kept his collection of art and design out of the public eye, showing it only to a limited circle. But then the idea of an exhibition about his collection of chairs came up with Chantal Prod'hom, the then director of Mudac, whose sincere enthusiasm and kindness won him over. They agreed that such a project deserved a special scenography and that the American theater director Robert Wilson should be approached. Bob is a family friend who shared our father's fascination with the sculptural potential of the chair and the freedom with which certain artists explored this everyday object. Even so, it took our father almost a year to pluck up the courage to put the idea to him, whereas it took Bob only about 12 hours to accept! This adventure gave our father a taste for venturing outside his comfort zone, as evidenced in a statement recorded in the book about his collection, *The Spirit of Chairs*: "The years have taught me...that sharing with other art lovers and enthusiasts, sincerely and with simplicity, is neither hubris nor worldly vanity, but rather helps to breathe life into the artworks

I have chosen to conserve. And that the resonance produced by these exchanges also enriches my life."

Is the continuation of the exhibition a good way of honoring your father's legacy?

It is very important to us to honor our father's memory and to keep his collection alive. Shortly after his passing, the Grassi Museum of Applied Arts in Leipzig decided to host the exhibition. We were thrilled as it meant so much to our father. Thanks to the work done by Bob and his team, and by Chantal Prod'hom and Charlotte Savolainen-Mailler (the curator of the collection), this ambitious production was developed for a new venue with a view to being adaptable to a great variety of spaces in future. We are also working to ensure the exhibition can travel beyond this second German chapter and reach a wider audience still. Another project that is particularly significant, and that we are very excited about, is a collaboration with the Musée Jenisch in Vevey, Switzerland, planned for 2025. This will feature a set of works on paper from our father's collection – another of his great passions. ♦

Translated by Charles Penwarden



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THE DAUGHTERS OF THIERRY BARBIER-WUELLER WOULD LIKE TO WARMLY THANK CHARLOTTE SAVOLAINEN-MAILLER AND CLARISSE COLLARD (FORMER CURATOR OF THE COLLECTION) FOR THEIR VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON THIS INTERVIEW