



THE CASE FOR CONSERVATION OF THE MODERN CLASSICS

This article is a highly opinionated essay intended to enlighten owners of original modern classics to the pitfalls in the industry currently, in order to allow them to make the best choices for their intentions and pocketbooks. It is also intended for manufacturers, to bring to light what conservators need to do our jobs properly. ~ D. Katie Powell, 2004

I sit on a leather Equa Chair from the first year it was made, and my husband sits on a 25-year-old leather Eames Executive Chair. We own a 30-year-old leather Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman. All are old enough that they have gone beyond that worn comfy look and are entering the time when they need to be restored and reupholstered. To retain the potential for value to accrue as modern antiques, which I believe they will be in 100 years, they need to be cared for properly.

“Proper care” to a furniture conservator means repairing them in accordance with the original design intentions, utilizing the original cleaned and conserved innards whenever possible, though often this is not possible, especially in the case of modern classics. Many modern pieces are made with innards that deconstruct after 50 years, are no longer intact when the need for reupholstery arises, and must be completely replaced. Reupholstery should be done with appropriate fabric or leather, and whenever possible, original build-up, or stuffings. Hardware, if damaged or missing, needs to be of original design.

Collectors, authenticators, and appraisers of antique furniture are particular about original finishes, patina, and original upholstery. It is not possible to utilize pieces in homes and offices without wearing out the upholstery,



¹ *Wassily Chair by Marcel Breuer, original leather, private client.*

and while original upholstery in mint condition is always going to be most desirable, appropriate upholstery can be utilized without harming the overall value.



Owners need to be educated on the current trend within many modern companies, so they will have their options open to them when it comes time to repair or refurbish their modern collectables.²

My first warning to owners of modern pieces: If you choose to send your piece directly to the manufacturer to be repaired or reupholstered, verify that the stuffings utilized are the same as the piece you own, which means that replacements

are made exactly as they were at the time the piece was manufactured! We have found that on several modern pieces, the new replacement parts are made of materials that are inferior at worst, and different at best, than was utilized in the original pieces. Innards that were once down or Pincore® or solid latex may be made of newer, and in many cases, cheaper, products. A wood that was used on your piece may not be available now due to it becoming an endangered species. Feet or other metal parts may be slightly different. So the piece will be made of parts that are genuine to the company, but not genuine to the historical materials of the time it was manufactured.

Besides feeling the difference (down cannot be faked), or seeing a difference, the original manufacturer denigrating the innards with replacement parts has the same affect as a poor upholsterer using poor techniques and innards – the piece is devalued!

A few years ago we were asked to conserve a very old, original Egg Chair by Arne Jacobson. Our clients had bought it through an antique dealer who specialized in modern classics, but it had been upholstered inappropriately



² Linstead Copper Table, private client, above; Egg Chair badly reupholstered prior to treatment, private client, below. Button holes were drilled into the back to hold the inappropriate upholstery fabric.

in thick beige nylon tweed with a heavy rubberized backing, and several big tweed buttons pierced the frame in order to make the fabric conform to the curve. From a collector's point of view, the piece was ruined. However, our clients love rescuing wonderful pieces, and love the lines of the Egg Chair. To that end, they engaged our services in restoring it as best we could.

As conservators, we began our research by going straight to the current manufacturer³ to procure information on the ins and outs of repairing the frame, the adhesive used, and techniques, seam patterns, and any other information they could supply. We presented our credentials. To our surprise, the manufacturer would not work with us. They suggested that our clients ship the piece to Europe where they would repair and reupholster the piece! We presented this option to our clients, however, sending the piece to Europe was out of the question, as it is for many owners.

We were stymied. We understood proprietary information, and offered to sign any agreement, but they would not budge. We are entrusted with items several centuries old and certainly worth more monetarily than any Egg Chair, but somehow they thought we might steal their secrets and produce knock-offs in another country and sell them cheap! Were the corporations really of the belief that industrial spies would take the time to pose as conservators in order to steal the information they needed to manufacture the Egg Chair? If one is going to rip off a classic, they must simply buy a classic and copy it in cheaper materials, and it has already been done – cheap reproductions from foreign countries are commonplace and usually easily identifiable.

No option through the manufacturer's company was proffered. This left us wondering if they were really interested in the life of the pieces they created, for it is our opinion, that if owners have trouble getting their classics properly reupholstered and repaired they will end up as landfill or be poorly reupholstered, therefore devalued.⁴

On our own, we researched new Egg Chairs. We



³ Also, this manufacturer is not to be singled out, but this story is true. In our experience most manufacturers we have approached on modern classics will not work with conservators due to proprietary rights. Also, we do not know if the current manufacturer of the Egg Chair uses authentic period materials to restore the Egg Chairs or utilizes new materials which are not historic, and do not intend to suggest that in this editorial.

⁴ Egg Chair during treatment, with hundreds of pins (egg chair acupuncture) holding the seam for hand-stitching to begin.

purchased an appropriate ICF woolen crepe and had Knoll International⁵ certify the cloth's ability to perform. Knoll was kind enough to endure our frequent trips to their showroom to turn the chairs upside down and take photographs of them, all in order to restore the chair correctly.

An upholsterer in private practice in NYC⁶ who successfully reupholstered several Egg Chairs was generous enough to share his experiences with the complexities of this chair and materials used. He corroborated our thoughts as to which adhesives were originally used.

The Egg Chair was technically ruined from the perspective of a conservator. We excavated our Egg Chair, and analyzed the adhesives. The innards were relatively intact, though compromised, which gave us enough information to replicate materials and methods used, though the manufacturer might have given us techniques to make treatment easier. Finally, the project was carefully mapped out in detail.⁷



⁵ Knoll was the sales representative at the time.

⁶ We regret that we lost track of him; he moved his shop and we were never able to locate him at another address.

⁷ Egg Chair after treatment, private client.

When we completed the chair, it looked beautiful, and we felt we had done the best job possible under the circumstances. It was, in the end, more like working on a piece from two centuries ago, manufacturer's long gone, with only our eyes, the original intact parts of the piece as clues, ingenuity, methodical testing and experience to help us. However, in eras long gone, there was some predictability to most crafts-persons techniques. With modern classics, advances in industrial manufacturing have made many pieces unique in their construction.

This project, and many other experiences, emphasizes the need for manufacturers to become attentive to the need for training and sharing the proper techniques with obviously trained professionals trying to serve their clients, many of whom are not going to send their pieces half-way around the world to be repaired. I think it is true that most manufacturers are primarily thinking only of customers who have relatively new pieces which have been damaged in transit or failed and are under warranty. But now we are beginning to see more and more clients who have classic pieces that either they purchased in the 50's and early 60's, or have been handed down to them or bought through dealers and at garage sales. They know they have important pieces, which we can easily verify, and want to take care of them properly. What we would like is to have the manufacturers who are still in business assist us in doing the jobs properly. They can do this by making their replacement parts in the manner they were made originally, even if it means that the client has an option to buy these at a slightly higher price. They can also share manufacturers "secrets" with verifiable conservators. At this time, in any of the modern pieces we have conserved, we have had no good will assist or options from any of the manufacturers we have contacted.

This essay is a warning and a plea. Affordable training programs, licensing agreements with conservators, or contractual agreements — or, simply, checking the credentials of the person requesting information — need to be adopted by manufacturers of classic modern antiques. Referrals to qualified professionals like ourselves who would be willing to work with one of the above suggestions need be made. In addition, some sort of dealership rates for appropriate parts need be made available to conservators.