Chair - Leggera

Object: Chair

Place of origin: Milan (designed)
Meda (manufactured)

Date: 1951-1952 (designed)

Artist/Maker: Ponti, Gio, born 1891 - died 1979 (designer)
Cassina S.p.A. (manufacturer)

Materials and Techniques: Ash, seagrass

Museum number: W.4-2011

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

The Leggera (light) chair represents the first step towards an icon of Italian design, the 1957 Superleggera chair (Circ.325-1970). Both of these were designed by Gio Ponti, one of Italy’s most important twentieth century architects, and made by one its most innovative manufacturers, Cassina. The Leggera was part of Ponti’s search to design the lightest chair possible, for which he was inspired by a nineteenth century chair with woven straw seat and ladder back called the Chiavari chair. The Leggera is widely regarded as a modern interpretation of Italy’s craft tradition, a quality that made Italian design much admired in the 1950s.

Descriptive line

‘Leggera’ Chair, designed by Gio Ponti, Milan and made by Cassina, Meda, 1951-1952, ash with later white paint, seagrass seat.

Physical description

Ladderback ash frame side chair with woven seagrass seat whose slender, angled profile gives the chair its lightweight appearance. The frame consists of solid pieces of wood joined with dowel joints. The four legs taper downwards and have a rounded section (this become more sharply triangular in the later version of the chair, the Superleggera). Two thirds of the way up of both the front and back legs is a single rectangular stretcher with rounded top and bottom edges, and on either side of the chair are two similarly-shaped located just above and below the stretchers at the front and back. The back legs extend vertically to become the two seat back uprights, which taper upwards towards the top of the chair. The top surface of each seat upright is horizontal and circular in shape. Just below the top of the upright is one of two cross bars on the seat back, the other located further below at two thirds of the height of the back. At the height of the lower cross bar the seat upright lightly angles away from the front of the seat, and this angled profile continues to the top of the upright. This angled shape is echoed in the square seat, which tapers outwards towards the front of the chair. The seat is handwoven with twisted seagrass in a traditional envelope pattern, with four triangular sections that meet in the centre of the seat. The weave completely covers the four side rails, while the flat, rounded surface of the top of the front legs is exposed and flush with the level of the weave.

The seat of this example is the original and has sagged towards the centre of the chair as the weave has loosened. Staples on the underside of the seat were a later addition in an attempt to secure the weave. While the Leggera would have been produced in natural ash, a layer of white paint was applied to the chair in c. 1968 and this is now chipped in places.

Dimensions

Height: 82.5 cm, Depth: 41 cm, Width: 42 cm

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Object history note

The Milanese architect Gio Ponti had been designing modern furniture since the 1920s, when he was a co-founder of the Novecento group Il Labirinto. In his roles as architect, designer and founding editor of Domus magazine in 1928, Ponti is held up as a patron of Italy's craft tradition, and he was active in both promoting, interpreting and working with the nation's plentiful supply of crafts and artisanal practitioners. The Leggera chair is widely regarded as an example of this. A modern, design interpretation of a woven-seated ladderback chair from the Ligurian town of Chiavari, the Leggera is seen to epitomise the Janus-faced nature of Italian post-war design (although, while the Chiavari chair is seen as an example of some unchanging vernacular tradition, it was actually a nineteenth century invention).

The Leggera represents the first production version of Ponti’s search for the lightest chair possible, one that he would achieve in the Superleggera in 1957. Its origins date back to 1949, when Ponti designed a painted ash chair with brass-tipped legs, angled back and woven cane seat that was made by a Milanese cabinet maker called Giordano Chiesa. This chair became the basis for model 504, a small armchair with brass feet made by Cassina for the first class dining rooms of the Conte Grande ocean liner. Ponti had been collaborating with Cassina, a furniture manufacturer based in Meda, in the furniture making district of Brianza in the Milanese hinterlands since the 1940s.

Following a series of sketches, drawings, prototypes and developmental versions, by 1951 the Leggera chair - also known as model 646 - was put into production by Cassina and unveiled at the 1951 Triennale. In comparison to the first version of the chair, the legs have become significantly thinner and rounded and a second horizontal cross bar has been added to either side of the chair, in order to counter its increasing slenderness. Its wide acclaim at the Triennale was bolstered by Ponti, who put the chair on the cover of Domus in December 1951 and in March 1952 published an article on the as yet-unnamed chair. Entitled ‘Senza Aggettivi’ (Without Adjectives) Ponti described the chair as a 'chair-chair, that is a normal chair…light, fine, affordable…', the true "chair of always", a chair of 'truth, naturalness and simplicity'.

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The Leggera chair is a modern interpretation of a vernacular tradition from Chiavari, Liguria, Italy. It was initially realized in 1951 as a prototype and presented at the 1951 Triennale. The first series of production versions of the Leggera was manufactured by Cassina in 1954. After 1960, Cassina sought to modernise the chair by changing the materials and techniques and the proportions of the legs. The chair was produced in this form until 1967.
Historical significance: The Leggera is the first production version of one of the most 'iconic' examples of post-war Italian design, the Superleggera. Widely praised on its unveiling at the 1951 Triennale di Milano, the Leggera combines the qualities of aesthetic and actual lightness that Ponti would further develop for the Superleggera chair in 1957.

Historical context note
Gio Ponti (1891-1979) was one of Italy's leading architects of the twentieth century. As the artistic director of the porcelain manufacturer Richard Ginori in the 1920s and 1930s, founding editor of Domus magazine in 1928, and chief architect of the Pirelli building, Milan's first skyscraper completed in 1960, Ponti has been the architect most responsible for shaping Italy's design history.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1223755/leggera-chair-ponti-gio/