Chair - Superleggera

Object: Chair

Place of origin: Milan (manufactured)

Date: 1957 (designed)
1965 (manufactured)

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

Materials and Techniques: Natural finished ash chair with finely woven 'twill' cane seat

Museum number: CIRC.325-1970

Gallery location: Furniture, Room 133, The Dr Susan Weber Gallery, case BY2, shelf CASE, box WALL

Public access description

The Superleggera is one of the icons of post-war Italian design and is the most well known example of furniture design by the leading Italian architect Gio Ponti, largely due to its lightness in both aesthetic and real terms. The Superleggera ('beyond light') weighs just 1.7kg; its legs have a triangular section with a maximum diameter of a mere 18mm. Ponti was inspired by a nineteenth century chair with a woven straw seat and ladder back called the Chiavari chair. The Superleggera 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
Superleggera, designed by Gio Ponti, made by Cassina, Italian 1965

Physical description
Ladderback ash frame side chair with woven cane seat whose slender, angled profile gives the chair its lightweight appearance. The natural ash frame consists of solid pieces of wood joined with dowel joints. The four legs taper downwards and have a triangular cross-section with a maximum diameter of eighteen millimetres (it is this triangular section that enabled the increasing lightness between the Leggera (W.4-2011) and Superleggera chairs.) 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 stretchers located just above and below the stretchers at front and back. The back legs extend vertically to become the two seat back lightly rounded, angular shaped uprights, which taper upwards towards the top of the chair. 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 close-caned in a twill-weave using very narrow widths of cane nailed to the chair rails, without the need for drilling. The weave completely covers the four side rails, while the flat surface of the top of the front legs is exposed and slightly raised to the level of the weave.

Dimensions
Height: 83 cm, Width: 40 cm, Depth: 45 cm, Height: 43.5 cm to top of seat

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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. He was active in both promoting, interpreting and working with the nation's plentiful supply of crafts and artisanal practitioners. The Superleggera 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 Superleggera ('beyond light') was the culmination of Ponti's search for the lightest chair possible. This desire for lightness is played out in other areas of the architect's work, from the Pirelli building in Milano to the Taranto cathedral in the south of Italy. 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, who Ponti had been collaborating with since the 1940s, for the first class dining rooms of the Conte Grande ocean liner. By 1951 the design had been refined into 646, the Leggera chair produced by Cassina and unveiled at that year's Triennale di Milano, the international art, design and architecture exhibition.

The Superleggera epitomises the co-existence of artisanal and industrial scales of production in post-war Italy. The seat was hand woven by female impagliatrici (chair weavers) who lived in the Chiavari hinterlands. The frame was mass-produced in Cassina's factory in Meda, located to the north of Milan in the heart of the Brianza furniture making area. First established in the late eighteenth century, the firm had...
been taken over by brothers Cesare and Umberto Cassina in 1927. While the firm progressed from artisanal to industrial scales of production in the 1940s, skilled craftsmen continued to define Cassina's workforce and were indispensable in its manufacturing process. Umberto Cassina said of the firm's head carpenter, Fausto Redaelli: 'without him, the Superleggera could not exist.'

Artisanal skills were instrumental to increase lightness of the chair. Despite describing the Leggera as 'ultra light' in Domus, in the early 1950s Ponti wrote to Cassina to ask him to 'affettare' (slice up) the Leggera to make it even thinner; the manufacturer presented Redaelli with the challenge, stating 'if you aren't able, leave it alone and I'll do it myself'. The final result was the Superleggera, a chair that combined aesthetic and actual lightness - the ash chair weighs just 1.66 kilograms, whose triangular tapered legs have a maximum diameter of just eighteen millimetres.

Historical significance: The Superleggera is one of the icons of post-war Italian design and is the most well known example of furniture design by the leading Italian architect Gio Ponti. largely due to its lightness in both aesthetic and real terms. The Superleggera (beyond light') weighs just 1.7kg and its legs have a triangular cross-section with a maximum diameter of a mere 18mm. The culmination of a near decade of research to create the lightest chair possible, Cassina put the chair into production in 1957, and they still manufacture the chair today. The Superleggera was nominated for the prestigious Compasso D'Oro design award on its release.

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/O156932/superleggera-chair-ponti-gio/