

# *Pernilla.*

## **A brief research of who she was and where she came from**

In February 2015 me and my class from Basic Year at the Rietveld Design Academy visited the exhibition “Possessed by chairs” at the Gocrums Museum.

The intention of the exhibition in Gocrum was to celebrate the history of design through picking out around 90 iconic chairs from the 100 past years. 90 chairs exhibited, a pretty broad selection from everywhere – everything from Scandinavian classics like Eero Aarnios famous Balls Chair, Hans J Wegners Papa Bear arm chair, chairs by Alvar Alto to international classics such as the MR 20, and off course – a couple of chairs made by the Dutch famous architect Gerrit Rieveld.

During my experience of this exhibition of the more than 90 chairs, some questions popped up to my mind at one point. With looking at 90 chairs and every single one made by a male designer I couldn't stop asking me: if all this chairs were made by my men, who were they made for? Also for men? When I once thought about this I couldn't stop looking at the chairs from another perspective.

I also somehow got a feeling that a lot of the chairs that were exhibited had a great aura of power in themselves and that one had to have a bit of courage to actually sit in them. I got a feeling of some position of power in the interaction with many of the chairs and I this

brought me to even more questions about the purpose and the receiver of the chair, who it was meant for? Not many of them had a relaxed and non-hierarchic voice, which for me often is what I am looking for when I want to do the act of “sitting”.

But walking thorough this selection of chairs it was one that caught my eyes and that said something else to me.

It was a leaned back chair that almost reminded me about a sunlounger, with a light green textile cover in a kind of plating webbing technique. For me the chair were manifesting a feeling of enjoy and desire and in comparison to the other chairs that I felt were speaking about something else I got very touched by it.

When the title of the chair got clear for me it even more triggered me, because this chair actually had a woman's name - “Pernilla”. A chair made for a woman? Later on I also found it kind of funny that the designer was a Swedish one, as I'm also Swedish. Did I unconscious recognize the chair from home our is it something underlying in the Scandinavian design that I'm not aware of but that has an impact? Why did I felt that I so easily could relate to this chair? Who was this Bruno Mathsson and who was Pernilla? I by this decided to make my research for our designclass around this questions.



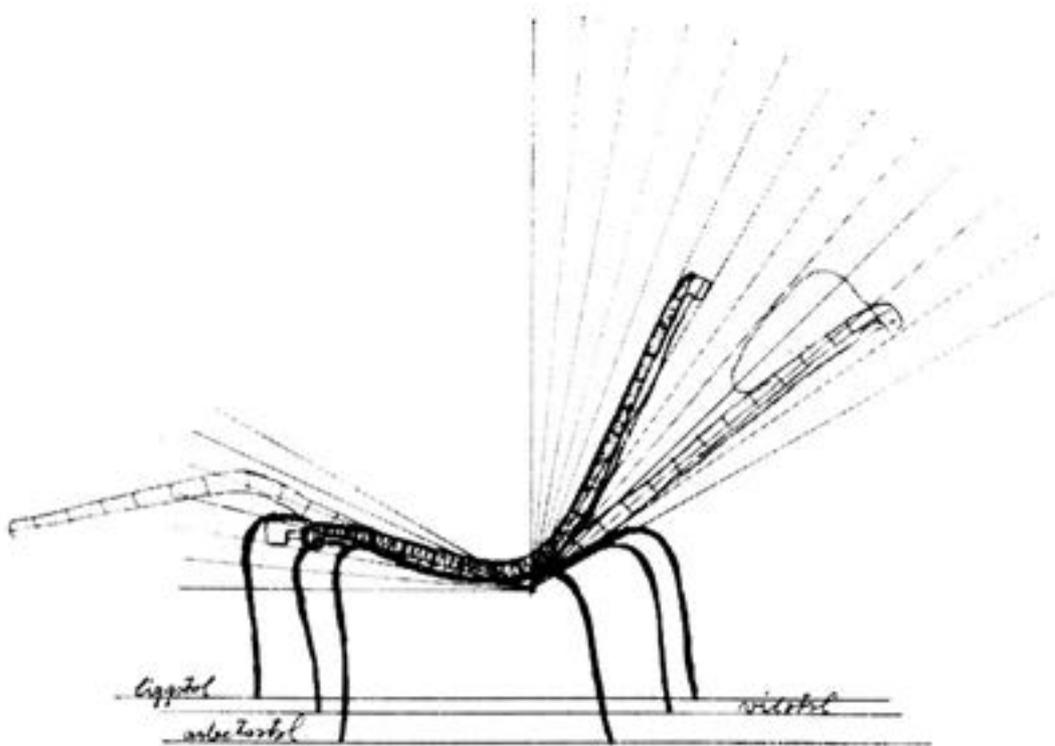
## **WHERE IT ALL BEGAN**

Bruno Mathsson was born in a small city in the south of Sweden called Värnamo. Since Bruno was the fifth generation in a family of master cabinet makers Bruno was learn early how to to carpeting by his father. Värnamo was a small place a bit isolated from the rest of the world but this was not something that stopped Bruno from getting input from his surrounding world. After a visit at the Roohska Art and Crafts Museum in Gothenburg and he kept the contact with the manager of the museum and by him were able to borrow literature from the museum. Soon large boxes filled with books were sent by trains between Gothenburg and Varnamo and by this Bruno had the chance and opportunity to educate himself through a detailed study.

In 1930, at the age of 23 years, Bruno got the opportunity to for the first time put all his study and theories into real practice since he was commissioned to design a new chair for the Varnamo Hospital. Bruno took the chance to create something that he saw as less traditional and decided to make a chair without the old conventional and quite shabby sprung upholstery that the chairs of the hospitals used to have. He wanted to still keep the quality of comfort and he finally came to an unusual solution with a frame covered with plaited webbing supported by arms and legs in sold birch. The chair did not make any success though and the staff of the hospital nicknamed the chair “The Grasshopper” and did not use it for long until that put it in the attic. What they did not know by then was that this controversial chair and the technique of plaited webbing would later be considered as one of the most famous art and design technique and style in swedish history.

Even if this first mission didn't lead to an immediate prosperity Bruno continued his work and carefully studied "mechanics of sitting". He wanted to find the perfect sitting line, or curve and this he approached by different ways. One way of finding it he got through sitting in a snow-drift and then study the imprint his body had made. He began experimenting with techniques of bent laminating wood to gaining skills and found out composites of great strength with gracefully executed minimalist details.

Between 1933 and 1936 Bruno through this research of sitting in snow-drives and so on, Bruno got three



Liggstol = Deckchair  
Arbetsstol = Workingchair  
Vilostol = Restingchair

results amongst others that would come to be three of his famous basic chairs. It was three chairs in one series that he called "Working", "Easy" and "Loungechair" model 36. These chairs were all designed using one piece of frame covered with plated webbing supported by separate bent laminated legs.

## THE BREAKTHROUGH

The three basic chairs can more or less be seen as a breakthrough in Bruno Mathssons career because in 1936 Bruno got the opportunity to have an own exhibition in the Roohska Arts and Craft Museum (the same museum as where he got the books from in his earlier years) where he now could show his work for a much bigger audience. The exhibition were to become a big success and this led to a recognition of Bruno Mathson as one of the leaders in the design from Sweden.

One year after the exhibition Bruno was asked to participate in his first international exhibition in Paris, "Paris Expo", where he also won the Grand Prix for his bed "Paris" that he also showed. His furniture were received with a great appreciation and admiration and he got a lot of interested from all over the world. This also directed to an order of chairs from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The same year his

furniture also got represented at other exhibitions such as the world exhibition in New York and the Golden Gate-exhibition in San Francisco.

## **WORKING IN AND OUTSIDE OF SWEDEN**

Bruno Mathsson sometimes did struggle with the traditional approach that Sweden had to furniture design but still his country of home meant a lot to him and he decided to stay and run his business in his city of birth - Varnamo, all his life. Here were where he had his roots and he could in an safe and calm environment develop his work of design. But staying and working in Sweden didn't mean that he wouldn't strike for an international career. In early years he started to create a network around the world. In the 1940s he made a longer journey to the US with his fiancé Karin which result in lot of new inspiration which led to an architectural work that would become very famous were he built houses in glass. Houses placed in a city in Sweden called Kosta called and that is today week visited and called the Mathsson Glasshouses. The light was of great value for Bruno and that is something you can see both in his work in glass but also in the furnitures. A close relation to the nature is also something you easily do feel when you study Brunos work and in creating the glasshouses he were able to get an intimate and direct relation to the nature in the idea of what a building can be.

Later during the wintertimes Bruno used to go abroad and spend some time in Portugal, and leave Sweden for some months working in one of his own glasshouses that was established. He always tried to stay updated and this was something he got helped to through from time to time leave Sweden for some time. In the 1970s Bruno also had a work going on outside of Europe, through a panel discussing design with a several hundred interior architects in Tokyo.



The glasshouse (also designed by Bruno) in Portugal where Bruno and his wife spend their winters.

## **PERNILLA**

The huge prosperity that Bruno Mathsson and his surroundings experienced in the coming years meant hectic years for the small family company as the biggest of the production were sold by export. The Second World War did though soothe down the business a bit and for some years Bruno did put more effort to the domestic market. By this Bruno also got more time to develop his own design further and in 1944 he launched the classic chair for resting “Pernilla 2” and then one year later the deck chair “Pernilla”. It was a typically chair in the style of Bruno Mathsson where he used the technique of bending the laminating wood to get the curve he wanted and the plated webb in the color of light natural green that were covering the whole chair besides the armrests. “Pernilla” was also resourced with something that almost looked like a canterbury that the one that was sitting could use for reading without have to use the hands.

The chairs were booth named after a journalist from the Swedish Newspaper “Dagens Nyheter” who had



Bruno Mathsson sitting in his own chair named “Pernilla” in 1950.

earlier visit him for an interview in 1943.

## **BRUNO MATHSSON AS AN ARTIST**

Bruno Mathsson was a unique artist, he had a strong own intention and goal. He was a striking artist, got the self/will and had a lot of stubbornness. He was attracted by the simpleness where less is more. He always went for creative methods to reach the knowledge he needed for making the design he wanted, as for example the way of study the imprint of the body from the snow after sitting in it. His design was grasping for the pure form where finding the elegance was of a stronger impact. He always wanted to reach a good

combination of functionality, ergonomic quality and beauty.

Something that was typically for Brunos design was that he built the chairs by gluing the veneer in layers and by this reach a capacity of bending them in the line or curve which could meet the curve, motion, of sitting.

One more thing that signified Brunos products of design was that he all but always named the chairs by women. Eva, Mina an Miranda is beside “Pernilla” three of the most famous furnitures that he made that all were named after women he met and that had been important to him. This gave every chair a sense of certain identity.

Bruno Mathsson continued his work for several years and never lost the aim of always being up to date. In 1981, at seventy-four years of age, he created a workstation for computer users that was equipped with a so called “wing” that supports the users shoulders. The last piece of furniture Bruno Mathssons made he made at the age of 90, the easychair “Minister” in 1986.

Bruno Mathsson died in 1988 leaving behind a rich cultural heritage. Today Bruno Mathssons design is still very present and even though its 70 years since he was busy as a designer the chairs seems trendy and to stays young.

## **SOURCES**

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