

CHAPTER 2

Design Icons: Conserving Mass-Produced Furniture

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Key Terms: design icon, iteration, edition, core identity, musealization, object biography, ecology of care, casuistry, performative turn, afterlife

Key Questions:

- How does conservation contribute to the generation of the icon?
- How does object biography help us understand mass production?
- How should we proceed when condition issues compromise the form?

Introduction: Chairs as Design Icons

Chairs, as quintessential design objects, hold a special place in the canon of modern and contemporary design. As designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby explain: “Furniture design has a history of using chairs as vehicles for exploring new design philosophies and visions everyday life” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 17). With a clear and accessible function, almost all museum visitors are familiar with the form in its most basic iteration, providing a shared point of reference for its display. Materials convey their own messages, whether soft, durable, sleek, or shiny. Once accessioned into museum collections, a chair becomes one in name only, as policies undoubtedly prohibit actual sitting on the piece (a rare exception is programs such as “Please be seated” at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, that encourage sitting as a way of experiencing a special separate category of furniture designated as gallery furnishings [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2024]). Like other multiples in museum collections, they offer distinct advantages and challenges for research and treatment.

This chapter investigates the preservation of mass-produced design objects through two familiar icons of seating design: the *Air Line Chair* (Kem Weber, 1934–1935) and the inflatable *Blow Chair* (De Pas, D’Urbino, Lomazzi, and Scolari, designed in 1967, and manufactured by Zanotta). Both chairs are influential examples of important design movements of the 20th century that have maintained their relevance today. Multiple **iterations** of each exist across disparate collections and even within the

same collection; however, they often vary widely in condition, which requires different approaches to their shared materials and initial construction. Preservation strategies must acknowledge both the materiality of collections and their associated physical needs, as well as the values and boundaries of the works as defined through institutional processes.

These case studies illustrate the differing approaches conservators might adopt when delving into object-based research of mass-produced, multiple objects like chairs. In reviewing the *Air Line Chair*, practical, treatment-centered material concerns and an extensive technical investigation are synthesized to consider a protocol for care. The *Blow Chair* review addresses questions of value and form from a more theoretical standpoint, given the chair's supposed "immateriality," and examines how condition issues impact the status of design objects within collections. Importantly, both studies discuss iconic chair forms that occur in multiples and **editions**, allowing a casuistic approach (Wharton, 2018) to guide these discussions and unpack the conservators' perspectives.

Questions regarding the **core identities** of works operate at the heart of the care practices that define and maintain iconic artworks in museum collections (Davis, 2021; Finn, 2021; Laurenson, 2006; Wharton, 2018, p. 59). Certain chemical changes over time may cause visual shifts in appearance, for instance, the yellowed PVC of a first-edition *Blow Chair*. This type of material aging is often expected by conservation professionals. Museums must then determine at what point these changes compromise the integrity of the original design while making decisions about display and preservation according to established institutional priorities. The variance in treatment across iterations of design objects in different collections leads to distinct trajectories and unique histories—building into the **object biography** (Drazin, 2020; Gosden & Marshall, 1999; Joy, 2009; Kopytoff, 1986). This attention and any related physical transformation, as informed by institutional practice, reinforce the identification of these designs as noteworthy—that is, as icons.

From Commodity to Icon

It has long been acknowledged that **musealization**—that is, the acquisition of works into a museum collection—sparks a series of ontological changes in which a commodity is transformed into a "museum object," subject to new regimens of value—that is, monetary, historic, and authenticity (Appadurai, 1986). On the part of the collecting institution, this change requires a new level of responsibility for the treatment and preservation of the object. This attention is both dictated by museum professionals' ethical guidelines and sense of best practices, and reflective of the acquisition's change in socially constructed classifications (Alberti, 2005; Benzecry & Rubio, 2018; Hoskins, 2006; Rubio, 2020 among others). Further, many museum mission statements contain language that articulate these demands clearly. The consequences of a work moving from a thing in the world into a "museum object" are discernible in collections management practices and institutional ontologies as much as in gallery display and the discursive activities of criticism and publication.

Applying the object biography framework is complex for design icons: each manifestation can be thought of as an iteration with more or less variance from an ideal. A **design icon** can be traced through these iterations' various life histories, which in turn unveil institutional activities that also reinforce its valued status. This care then sets future expectations for the presentation and display of iterations of the design. This "design icon" approach shares similarities with a "biographical" approach to the histories of display and activation of installation/variable works of art (van de Vall et al., 2011) as each edition contributes to the broader acceptance of the "identity" of the work. While the "iconic" status of art and design is a multifaceted social construction involving the artists/designers, art market, and the public, among other influences, museums play a formative role in the canonization and perpetuation of design icons.

These codified transformations of objects grow out of museums' structure and embedded roles and responsibilities. The established practices that both determine and sustain institutional value ultimately lead to what sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio has explored as an "**ecology of care**"—significantly focusing on the "regenerative" activities of maintenance and conservation among those more commonly explored in museum theory and criticism (Rubio, 2020, pp. 314–315). From the perspective of conservators, this argument foregrounds that preservation concerns are inherent to sustaining this value structure but are not always accounted for in art and design history.

The Trouble With Icons

The first complication with addressing icons in museum collections comes from the distinction between the design icon and the design object. In product design, iconic designs by prize-winning designers that form the canon of 20th-century production have continued relevance, and maintain value across a secondary market for "originals" as well as sustaining a market for later editions and even knockoffs. Today, their manufacturers often refer to these "iconic" designs by this term, but also embrace the terminology of "heritage" designs.

For design collections, industrially produced objects manufactured in large numbers open up a range of questions different from those of singular artworks found in art museums. An idealized form or function may be privileged over the historic material artifact, particularly for examples of commercially available products. As multiple examples of the same designs enter collections, the following question arises: are they truly interchangeable if they have each obtained unique institutionally recognized status?

The term "icon" as used in the design world invokes older religious material culture in which objects have intangible value or significance, such as the gold-ground Eastern Orthodox panels featuring the Madonna and Child or Christian saints. In the religious context, iconic objects operate on a metaphysical level, proffering a spiritual connection between the worshipper and the representation being honored, by linking a physical and a performative manifestation through acts of faith. In order

for traditional religious icons to function properly, the icon maker followed particular technical rules (Espinola, 1992, p. 17). The modern use of the term builds on the idea that the significance of a specific object persists beyond its materiality through its performance and reperformance (Catriota, 2019; Taylor & Marçal, 2022).

As with historic examples of the more traditional form of icon, certain demands must be met for an instance of a design to be legitimate, even when editioned in large numbers by their original manufacturers. For a work of industrial design, these constraints correspond to manufacturing sets and drawings—and tolerances within production. Specifications for industrially produced products determine the starting conditions for whether or not a particular version represents the original design, but what happens as that physical form changes over time, creating a discrepancy between the object's form and the original design concept?

Case Study: The *Air Line Chair*

The *Air Line Chair*, designed by Kem Weber in 1934, featured a streamlined wood frame and was intended to be inexpensive, sold in a box, and assembled by the customer. The chair was not a commercial success, but 300 were manufactured and later incorporated into the interiors of the new Disney Studios in 1939 where they were embraced by the employees and celebrated for their appearance and function. In the latter part of the 20th century the *Air Line Chair* began entering museum collections and was recognized as an icon of the *Streamline Moderne* style (Fig. 2.1).

Associated with Art Deco, *Streamline Moderne* used curved aerodynamic lines to create a sleek and future-forward appeal. Functionality and availability to the masses were also emphasized, as in the *Bauhaus* movement, which was happening simultaneously in Weber's native country Germany. Weber's first job was with Bruno Paul, a founding member of the *Deutscher Werkbund*, a group of designers, artists, and architects that advocated good design and craftsmanship for mass-produced goods and architecture. Their motto—*From Sofa Cushions to City-building* [*Vom Sofakissen zum Städtebau*—summarized their broad interests. A critical perception at the turn of the 20th century was that rapid industrialization was creating a decline in the integrity and standard of decorative and fine art. In other parts of Europe this was notably represented by the concurrent *Arts and Crafts* movement. The *Werkbund* sought to merge the efforts of applied arts and industry by having the artists directing the machines to create a progressive national style. Inherent within this agenda was the resulting debate regarding standardization versus individual artistic expression (Campbell, 1978). These early ideas of craftsmanship paired with marketability and mass production were pivotal in the development of Kem Weber's theory and practice of design.

Brooklyn Museum and the Air Line Chair

The first iteration of the *Air Line Chair* was called the *Bentlock* chair, unveiled in 1931 at The American Union of Decorative Artists and Craftsmen (AUDAC) exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

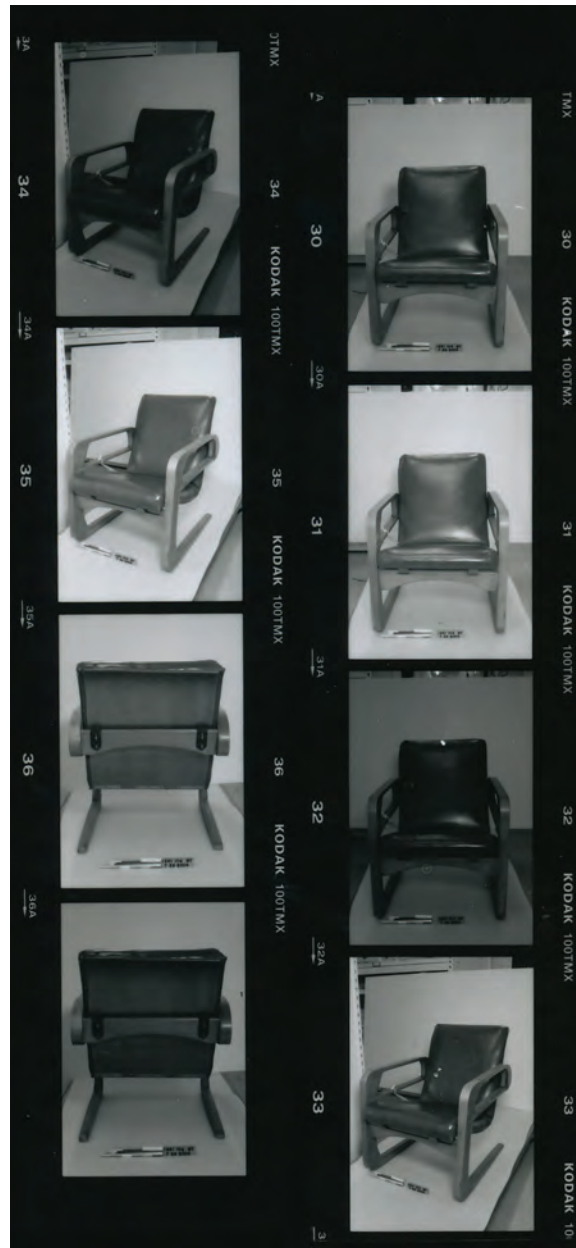


Figure 2.1 Brooklyn Museum *Air Line Chair* Conservation images from 2004 (Source: Brooklyn Museum Conservation Lab).

The *Air Line Chair* design was refined in the years after the AUDAC exhibit, and it was Weber's desire that it be sold in pieces so that the user might play a pivotal role in the activation of the piece through assembly. Early press images show a model in a fur coat carrying the box, then opening it and assembling the chair. Beautiful,

comfortable, utilitarian, and economic, the chair embodied everything Weber felt good design should be. Weber in his letters and contracts of this period wrote the name as two words *Air Line*; however, subsequent literature and various museum records have it spelled as one (Long, 2014; Fig. 2.2).

The chair was well received, and in 1935, it was featured in design periodicals and newspapers including *Architectural Record* and *Creative Design*. Weber coordinated with a local cabinetmaker to create the *Air Line Chair Company* and produce approximately 300 *Air Line* chairs, but the plan had always been to put it into mass production. Unfortunately, Weber never found a manufacturer and the few hundred chairs he had made by the *Air Line Chair Company* ended up in storage in their original boxes until 1939.

Use Life at *Disney Studios*

In 1938, Kem Weber was hired by Walt Disney as chief designer for the new Disney Studios in Burbank, California. Disney was devoted to creating an artistic campus-like environment on 51 acres of land. The elaborate studio was designed to house approximately 800 employees and included barber shops, a coffee shop and restaurant, offices, projection rooms, and a soundstage. In many ways, it was a precursor to the Google and Tech industry work complexes of today.

Kem Weber saw the opportunity to sell to Disney the couple hundred *Air Line* chairs he had in storage and put these into the designs for the production rooms and animator's studios. The chairs were immediately popular with the artists who felt it



Figure 2.2 Photos from the original *Air Line Chair* marketing campaign. (a) A woman holding the flat packed chair and (b) assembling the chair (Copyright University of California, Santa Barbara).

was comfortable and could work with their drawing boards laid across the sturdy wooden arms.

The seat covers on most Disney Airline chairs are the same brown faux leather seen on the Brooklyn Museum example. Early images of the chairs in the new studios show them with a fabric seat, but this wore out quickly and was replaced with the brown faux leather material. There are two images showing the making of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) that depict the chairs with the fabric in one image and with the faux leather in the other, indicating some chairs may have been re-covered sometime in the 1950s. The Disney and Kem Weber archives have no record of when the re-covering occurred or whether Weber was involved in choosing the new material, but in an interview from 1940 he says, “The covering is a type of automobile seat cover,” which implies that the intended cover material was a durable faux leather (Weber, 1940). Weber had certainly used faux leather for other designs from the same time such as the LC-52 lounge chair manufactured by the Lloyd Manufacturing Company (1934–1935), where “Weber worked with Lloyd in choosing upholstery, selecting an array of fabrics in various patterns and ‘leatherette,’ an early version of a plasticized textile, for the seat and back” (Long, 2014). Furthermore, much of the tubular steel furniture Weber designed for Lloyd in the 1930s appears to have faux leather upholstery.

Faux leather, with its nod to the furniture traditions of the past and the clean glossy effects of technological innovation, perfectly encapsulates the Kem Weber aesthetic. Moreover, the desire for inexpensive practical fabrics that could withstand the wear and tear of repeated use was in line with Weber’s design principles and would have steered him directly toward a material like *Naugahyde*. Unfortunately it is not possible to definitively identify the material as Naugahyde (see *Analysis and Materials Identification*), but the history of Naugahyde is illustrative of many faux leathers of the early 20th century. It was named after Naugatuck, Connecticut, where it was invented in the 1920s and trademarked in 1936.

Early versions of Naugahyde were rubber-based and used primarily by the railroad and automotive industries. Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) leather substitute was developed in the 1940s. Although Naugahyde is a brand name, it has become synonymous with *leatherette*—a term used to describe any faux leather. Naugahyde was proudly marketed as plastic, and the advantages were many. It came in a complete range of colors and textures and was described as nonporous, unaffected by heat, cold, rain, as well as spilled foods or drinks, oils, or greases (Kanigel, 2007). Naugahyde was marketed as relatively indestructible and early ads claimed it could be cleaned easily with soap and water. Care and cleaning instructions of the time likely included advice on waxing the surface to restore its shine, based on guidelines on the current (2019) Naugahyde website. They state, “To restore luster, a light coat of spray furniture wax can be used. Apply for 30 seconds and follow with a light buffing using a clean white cloth.”

Air Line Chair Enters Museum Collections

Throughout the 1970s the *Air Line Chair* lost popularity with the workforce at Disney and many were stacked in the basement of the Animation Production Building at the

studio, with the upholstered seat and back portion detached from the wood frame and piled one on top of another. Dave Bossert, a former Disney employee, writes in his 2018 book:

A number of chairs “disappeared” over the years or were given away until one sold at a furniture auction for thousands of dollars. Then the studio tagged all the remaining chairs, and they became even more of a status symbol at the studio. As artists left and the chairs went back to the warehouse, many were redistributed to executives on the studio lot. As of this writing, there are approximately 115 chairs of the original 200 still at the Walt Disney Company. (Bossert, 2018)

A great number of the chairs to leave Disney found their way to museum collections at The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), Milwaukee Art Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cooper Hewitt, Dallas Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Kirkland Museum, and more. Most were accessioned in the 1990s and 2000s (Fig. 2.3).

In 2017, surface deposits were found on the faux leather seat cover fabric on the Brooklyn Museum chair, sparking a search that revealed multiple chairs in other museum collections. Two of the institutions (Milwaukee, Dallas) reported a grimy or oily surface in areas that may or may not be related to the issues on the Brooklyn chair. The Cooper Hewitt Chair displayed two areas of a sticky surface disruption. The Brooklyn, Cooper Hewitt, and Dallas chairs all had a dark resinous material on



Figure 2.3 Illustration of Airline chairs (Illustration by Merit Myers).

the upholstery near the wooden elements, suggesting a furniture polish that had been applied sloppily to the wood and gotten on the seat.

Conversations with Michelle Barger, Head of Conservation at SFMOMA, revealed that their chair (accessioned 1991) also had an oily, tacky substance over the cover fabric surface and it was assumed that it was a plasticizer coming out of the composition. In 2003, various aqueous solutions with different detergents were tested, but Barger reported that in the end the only effective treatment was saliva, cleared with deionized water. The chair was on view over the course of 2 years and needed to be retreated halfway through as the tacky material continued to come to the surface and collected dust in a very disfiguring way. Regular monitoring in storage showed it continued to have an oily tacky surface (Barger, 2019).

Analysis and Materials Identification

It was initially assumed that liquid surface deposits on the Brooklyn chair were related to plastic deterioration, as the files indicated the cover material was Naugahyde, imitation leather made of PVC plastic coating atop fabric backing. PVC deterioration is a well-documented occurrence in many 20th-century collections and usually results in plasticizers, such as phthalates, leaching from the surface. Samples were taken from three areas on the seat and back. However, when they were analyzed by Brenda Keneghan using FTIR,¹ the surface accumulations were characterized as natural resins and oils—rosin and China wood oil (Keneghan, 2019).

This was further complicated when the survey of chairs at other museums resulted in a mixed terminology describing what appeared to be the same material. While several museums called the cover fabric Naugahyde, there were conflicting records describing it as leather (Milwaukee Art Museum) and oil cloth (LACMA and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston). A new question arose as to whether the material was PVC or some earlier version of a faux leather, and so samples were taken from the cover material of the Brooklyn Museum Chair and analyzed, again by Brenda Keneghan using FTIR. The seating material of the Brooklyn Museum *Air Line Chair* was ultimately identified as PVC filled with calcium carbonate (Keneghan, 2019). The fibrous back was cuprammonium rayon. It is not possible to definitively attribute this material as trademarked Naugahyde. However, conversations with representatives at Uniroyal Global (the current manufacturer of Naugahyde) have stated that the materials identified were likely used during production in the 1940–50s.

The surface of the Brooklyn Museum *Air Line Chair* is covered in a natural rosin and oil coating that was applied sometime during the life of the chair. The results do not indicate that the PVC plastic is actively deteriorating, but the undesired surface effect is due to the aging of an applied oil-based coating. As mentioned previously, the Naugahyde care and cleaning instructions encourage the use of “furniture wax”

¹Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) performed by Brenda Keneghan at the Victoria and Albert Museum Conservation Department. Number of sample scans: 32; Number of background scans: 32; Resolution: 4.000; Sample gain: 1.0; Optical velocity: 1.8988; Aperture: 80.00; Detector: MCT/A Beamsplitter; KBr Source: IR.

to “restore luster.” What remains to be discovered is when the material was applied and how many of the chairs may have been affected. For example, it is possible that an oily surface on other chairs resulted in the misidentification of the material as “oilcloth.” Because the SFMOMA chair was accessioned in 1991 and displayed a related surface issue, it is plausible that a similar, if not the same, coating was applied to the cover fabric of that chair.

In this case study, inquiries into the history of a collection of chairs help preserve the “icon” by connecting the examples across multiple institutions and providing material identification that applies to all. Every chair with the original Disney faux leather is now identified as having PVC upholstery. These are the first steps in the process to “**crowd treat**” this group of connected objects. Further examination will determine if they were all coated in the same oil-based material and whether that results in unfavorable surface issues in every storage/display situation. Building on this shared history of a mass-produced design icon will elucidate how differences in environment and handling affect preservation.

Case Study: *Blow Chair*

Blow Chair persists as an icon of Pop furniture design as evidenced by its inclusion in the institutional design canon. Designed in 1967 by Italian architects Jonathan de Pas, Donato D’Urbino, Paolo Lomazzi (partners in the firm DDL Studio), and Carla Scolari, the chair consists of an inflatable PVC form featuring two stacked “U”-shaped components that form the base and arm rests, plus a head cushion and a removable seat cushion (Lomazzi Studio, 1967; Fig. 2.4a). The form of the chair was predicated on a new technology of the period, high-frequency welding.

The Italian furniture company Zanotta (1954–present) first manufactured the chair in 1967–8 in bright primary colors such as red, blue, and yellow as well as in a colorless variation. The chair was sold with a foot pump to allow the user to inflate the chair and deflate as needed. The whole package (Fig. 2.4b) also originally

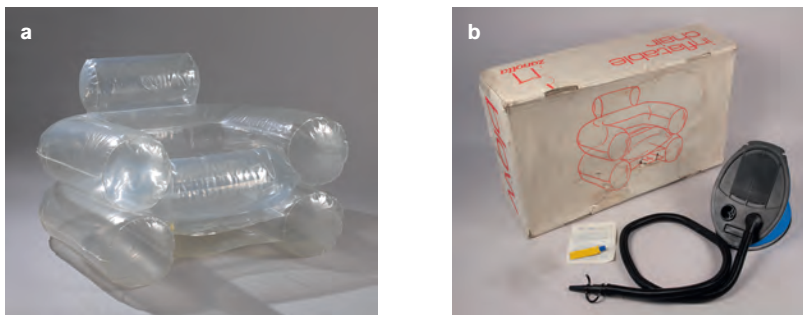


Figure 2.4 (a) *Blow Chair*, 1967; Designed by Jonathan de Pas (Italian, 1932–1991); Manufactured by Zanotta S.p.A. (Italy); Seam-welded sheet polyvinyl chloride (PVC); H x W x D (inflated): 83.8 x 120 x 102.9 cm (33 x 47 1/4 x 40 1/2 inch); Gift from the George R. Kravis II Collection; 2019-29-20-a,b. Matt Flynn © Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. (b) Original box and accessories (Photo: Jessica Walther).

included a repair kit, an indication of the tendency of inflatable objects to tear and become unusable. Like the *Air Line Chair*, the need to interact with the chair in order to use it also incorporates an element of performance; the user must create it first using a tool expressly designed for this purpose. We describe several examples at Cooper Hewitt and other museums to understand how the long-term instability of the plastic form has been negotiated in different contexts.

Cooper Hewitt and the Blow Chair(s)

Cooper Hewitt's first *Blow Chair* was acquired in 1971, immediately following its display in the 1968 Smithsonian exhibition *Please Be Seated* (Schwartz, 1968; Fig. 2.5). Cooper Hewitt requested that the contemporary examples be gifted to the museum, and the *Blow Chair* subsequently made its way into the collection.

At some point the museum's first *Blow Chair* was deflated and placed in a flat archival box, where it remained over the years. The chair, no longer a chair but simply a folded skin, received conservation attention during a plastics survey, at which point only the cushion could be located. In the survey, conservators noted that the PVC had become embrittled and discolored. At least two attempts had been made at some



Figure 2.5 (a–c) Visitors apparently took the museum at its word to “Please Be Seated,” an exhibition of chairs presented by the Cooper Hewitt Museum of Design, in the Arts and Industries Building, with Secretary S. Dillon Ripley. 67450, https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_372429. Smithsonian Institution Archives, Acc. 11-008, Box 12, Image No. OPA-1413.

point to patch holes or damage in the cushion, and the cellulose nitrate-containing adhesive used (presumably the same adhesive that came with the chair itself in the repair kit) had likewise embrittled and discolored with age. More disturbing were the obvious signs of mold within the interior of the PVC form; the old repairs along with this mold prevented any attempt at inflation (Webb et al., 2000). No longer active as a locus of performance and play, the chair slid from cutting-edge collection object (when it was a contemporary acquisition in the early 1970s) to possible biohazard and thoroughly compromised material—in other words, sliding back from museum object to thing (Rubio, 2016).

Before long, another example of the chair became available through a generous bequest. The second *Blow Chair* arrived in its original box, complete with a foot pump and patch repair kit as advertised (Fig. 2.5b). Records indicated that the object had been purchased through an auction house with a note that said the chair was from the original production run and had never been inflated.² Given the poor condition of the 1971 version and condition issues that arose during deflation, the new version was stored inflated (Fig. 2.5a). It is now generally recommended to keep inflatable chairs inflated in order to monitor for leaks, even while in storage. This “passive” attention from conservation and collections management is but one way that the icon of the inflatable chair is maintained. Compared to the discolored, repaired cushion of the first *Blow Chair*, the new version was in impeccable condition, with clear transparent PVC and the welds all intact, casting doubt on whether it could belong to the late 1960s first production run of the design. The two chairs both presented partial histories that left many questions unanswered.

Investigation: Original or Later Edition?

The gaps in the object biographies of these two objects and our need to complete the story through tracking down other examples highlight how the story of a single design is constructed of many incomplete, fragmented biographies that must be stitched together to complete a coherent story. Altogether, we located 29 examples across 10 museum collections and those held privately.

We performed materials analysis, contacted the manufacturer, and marshaled together a corpus of *Blow Chairs* in other collections to better understand the history of its production and its significance for conservation and presentation of the design icon. Unfortunately, non-destructive instrumental analysis did not yield significant differences between the two *Blow Chairs* at Cooper Hewitt—both are composed of PVC and expected phthalate-based plasticizers. Communication with Zanotta confirmed that the packaging of the second chair was consistent with the 1967 first manufacturing run; however, no archival documents related to later packaging designs were available. Scouring examples of boxed *Blow Chairs* in auction records and museum collections revealed inconsistent subtle variations in packaging not linked to manufacturing date.

Zanotta was able to confirm that there were three distinct production periods for *Blow*: 1967–8; 1989–91; and 1999–2011 (Zanotta, personal communication, 2020).

²Purchased by the George Kravis collection in 2016, Quittenbaum auction house (auction 127A Lot 173).

Close observation revealed a significant change in form not noted in published documents: specifically, the first cushion has three delineated sections while the second chair has four. At least one copy of the original design drawing specified three sections for the cushion; other institutions and collections have reported three sections on assumed first production run objects and four on items understood to be later (Casciani, 1988, p. 86). Rather than focusing on these differences as challenges to authenticity, considering multiples helps assert value in the evolution of the design. Change is an essential step in design when function and commercial concerns force iterative approaches.

Aside from the seemingly straightforward question of whether or not the second *Blow Chair* pertained to the first production run, other concerns arose about the change in status of the first chair in light of the acquisition of the second example. Replacement of the museum's incomplete and damaged version arguably offered an opportunity for regeneration of the iconic *Blow* design. What is actually being collected when a museum acquires a design icon? Is it simply the concept of the *Blow Chair* form, as represented by whatever example best expresses this? What role does materiality play here, and its related messy needs for a stable storage environment, thoughtful care, and system of checks and repairs? Does it matter whether the PVC itself is a formula in use in industry during the 1960s or a later version, employed during a more recent production run at Zanotta? Addressing these questions requires disentangling the social as opposed to the material construction of the iconic *Blow Chair*.

Backups and Replacements: The Multiple at Work

Zanotta's initial launch of *Blow*, at an affordable price, coincided with several commercial product lines featuring inflatable furniture. The ubiquity of these inflatable designs forces the question, why did the De Pas et al. design become the canonical inflatable chair featured in museums and still collected today? Museum exhibitions of the period undoubtedly contributed to its status. In total, three major museums included the chair in high-profile design exhibitions in the 5 years after its first issue, including at the V&A and Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

An example of *Blow* was purchased in 1970 for the V&A's *Modern Chairs (1918–1970)* exhibition. When it was surveyed in the mid-1990s, it was already in poor condition. The condition issues included discoloring of the PVC, similar to that of the first Cooper Hewitt version, as well as a puncture to the seat cushion that prevented inflation (Griffith, 1996). The condition of the 1970 chair prevented its inclusion in the V&A's 2012 reinstallation of furniture collection. Instead, a newly manufactured example, also in the colorless variation, was purchased in 2011 and remains on display (to present). In choosing to display the newly manufactured example, the museum prioritized narratives embodied by form and concept over that of "original" material history.

Recent presentations of the chair have embraced its ethereal nature through whimsical display strategies, suspending it from the ceiling or mounting it on a wall. While the V&A simply erected a platform above the rest of the chairs on view

below, in 2012 the Triennale Design Museum in Milan exhibited at least six *Blow Chairs* in a tribute to DDL (Paolo Lomazzi, Donato D'Urbino, and Jonathan de Pas), titled “Il gioco e le regole” (The game and the rules) (Fig. 2.6). The exhibition itself was designed by Lomazzi and D'Urbino (De Pas having passed away in 1991) and included the *Blow Chair* (in various colors of transparent PVC) among other works floating above the viewers. The Triennale museum repeated this floating presentation again in 2018/19 for “Stories. Italian Design” (Lusiardi, 2018). This floating approach was also taken in a 2021 exhibition design for the Art Institute of Chicago where the museum's example was shown for the first time.

These repeated museum installations reinscribe the *Blow Chair* into the canon of design icons. The contextual presentations described earlier reinforce certain aspects of the icon's associations over others—the playful levity of the design is made explicit by presenting it floating above other objects. Two aspects have become enshrined in these presentations: the effect of the immaterial material (air) that gives *Blow* its form, and its correlate, the performative ability to present the inflatable chair as inflated, itself wholly dependent on the stability of its plastic material and seams.

Discussion: Casuistry for Icons

This chapter presented two examples of chairs that have become icons in their own right through acquisition, display, and conservation attention within numerous well-known museums. Comparing the mass-produced objects has been valuable in determining how different factors affect their condition. Although the *Air Line Chair* never received the mass production runs that the *Blow Chair* enjoyed, with the shifting design of the latter and nostalgic reissues, conservators and curators are still faced with questions regarding the intended form and the physical reality of aging media, especially aging modern materials like plastics and coated upholstery fabrics.



Figure 2.6 Blow chair

Unifying treatment approaches across museums cement expectations vis-à-vis visual appearance and form of the objects in question, in what has been termed a “**casuistry**” approach (Taylor and Marçal, 2022; van Saaze, 2013; Wharton, 2018). As shown with *Blow Chair*, at times the material integrity of a single historic example is inadequate to sustain the iconic status of a mass-produced work of design, and other examples are pursued—each of which contributes specific biographies to realize the full potential of the form. Within these iterations, the accepted design encompasses a discrete range of presentation, for example, the chairs come in an accepted range of colors, while other variance (i.e., between cushion variations) has apparently gone unexamined.

Although the materiality of each individual iteration of both the *Air Line Chair* and *Blow Chair* cannot be denied, with their shifting surface appearances and forms, the larger concept of each chair itself subsumes observed differences. Ritualized institutional activities surrounding the pieces—both hidden such as preventive conservation and storage, as well as public facing in the galleries and examples of scholarship—maintain and continually regenerate an idealized status. These actions and choices in turn establish expectations of how icons should be presented, a self-reinforcing cycle.

The works themselves are subject to this “recentering” (Castriota, 2019), as much when they are re-presented in new contexts in exhibitions as while they linger in solitude in storage. Even under conditions of fastidious care, objects made of modern polymeric materials degrade, albeit slower than outside the protective confines of museum storage. Despite the differences in approaches to the conservation of specific examples (i.e., to undertake lengthy conservation interventions or to present a second example instead) and subsequent impacts on the appearance of the specific objects, the physical presence of these designs in museums’ collections storage, virtual presence in online museum databases, ongoing maintenance rituals, and repeated exhibition all reinforce their identity as icons.

While the *Air Line Chair* PVC upholstery still presents as a “leather,” the transparent PVC of the initially acquired *Blow Chair* did not age as well and the transformation has resulted in an unacceptable color shift. While interest in, and acceptance of, aged plastics in museum collections has grown, determining the optimal level of visible change for iconic designs is complicated and lines blur between undesirable damage, like decay from mold attack, and expected color shift, like the yellowing of polymeric materials. This sort of age-related patina might validate authenticity and communicate “original” to viewers; however, when severity of change undermines recognition, the object may be seen as unduly compromised.

The accoutrements included with *Blow* enabled users’ performance and engagement in a direct way (as in the required acts of inflation). The repair kit further allowed for individuated alterations, altering the physicality of the piece. However, visible mends in *Blow Chairs* have not been exhibited in museum examples—the standard for display-quality artworks requires them to be repaired invisibly and repairs are rarely, if ever, disclosed. While the cumulative actions of many actors behind the scenes contribute to the “passive” maintenance of museum objects, rarely are such efforts made visible. Ironically, this care and institutional attention operates to reinforce the design’s status as icon (Learner et al., 2014).