

# Design Classics of the Future

Experts suggest a few recent products that may stick around for generations to come.

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The Bilboquet lamp by the French designer Philippe Malouin. [Flos](#)

By **Arlene Hirst**

Aug. 31, 2023, 5:02 a.m. ET

This article is part of our [Design special section](#) about new interpretations of antique design styles.

What makes a design a classic? New products flood the market

every year, yet very few have long lives and lasting impact. The lounge chair designed by Charles and Ray Eames is as coveted today as it was in 1956, the year it was introduced. (Probably even more so.) Richard Sapper's Tizio table lamp has illuminated the work spaces of thousands of users who were born after it made its first appearance in 1971. Both products are enshrined in museums.

"A classic is something beautiful that can be acknowledged by everyone," said Maria Cristina Didero, a Milan-based design curator and author. "But what is classic design to experts may be different from what people see who just want to furnish a home with beautiful objects."

Ms. Didero assigned to the first category Bruno Munari's Chair for Very Brief Visits, a piece designed in 1945 that has a sloped seat that is uncomfortable to perch on and is therefore more of a philosophical meditation about furniture than anything you would offer to a guest.

And definitions of classics change over time, she said. A coat rack produced by the Italian company Gufram, in 1972, in the shape of a cactus earned its stature because it rebelled against conventional tastes. Today, it is celebrated as a cheerful piece of Pop Art.

In whatever way consensus is reached, there is little argument about the works that furnish the pantheon of golden oldies. But what about recently produced designs? Which will be classics down the road?

Ms. Didero nominated the Bilboquet lamp by the French designer Philippe Malouin, a flexible table light assembled with magnets that was previewed at the 2023 Milan Furniture Fair and will be available next year from Flos. "It's a good combination of present sensibilities and past masterpieces," she said, finding echoes of the Italian master Vico Magistretti's 1965 Eclipse lamp.

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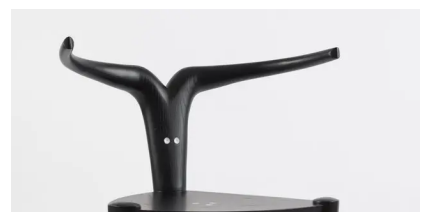
She also gave a shout out to Candy Cubes (2014), chunky, geometric tables by the Netherlands-based designer Sabine Marcelis. "I like Sabine's work as it is refined and pure, and her interpretations of colors and finishes are unique," she said.

“It’s difficult to say what will be classics in the future,” said Giulio Cappellini, a designer and art director who helped launch the careers of Jasper Morrison, Tom Dixon, Marcel Wanders and many other contemporary design stars. “In the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s, there were really classics and high concepts, but in the last few years there are many nice products but it’s hard to find strong products.”

An exception is the British architect Norman Foster’s minimal Ixa light from Artemide (2022), which Mr. Cappellini finds “quite interesting; it could be the new Tizio.” He also singled out Mr. Wanders’s recent Skynest pendant light with woven LED strips from Flos as “a very contemporary interpretation of an old chandelier. It’s something new in technology, and it’s also a beautiful image.”

But his No. 1 pick was the Alfi chair designed by Mr. Morrison for the American furniture company Emeco (2015), which consists of fully recycled materials, including polypropylene mixed with wood fiber, and is already in the permanent collection of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. “Alfi is an honest product, simple and timeless,” he said.

(Alfi was also the choice of the design entrepreneur and author Murray Moss, who said, “I’m almost surprised that I didn’t see it coming. It’s so correct in so many ways.”)





Kathryn Hiesinger, a senior decorative arts curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, laid down her criteria for classics in simple terms: “I prize originality and quality,” she said. “Trained as an art historian, I think in terms of historical, cultural and technological significance as well as aesthetic achievement.”

Ms. Hiesinger said she would select almost any of Naoto Fukasawa’s products for Muji. (The museum is planning a Fukasawa show for 2024, Ms. Hiesinger said.) The Japanese designer’s appliances — and his toaster above all else — are ordinary objects that have been transformed into collectible art with “a clean-lined simplicity of form, surface and meticulous functionality that make them both anonymous and universal,” she said. “Perhaps they are the best expression of Bauhaus functionalism.”



The Muji toaster.

Her colleagues Colin Fanning and Alisa Chiles, assistant curators in the museum’s European decorative arts and sculpture department, voted for the Danish design firm GamFratesi’s midcentury-inspired Beetle chair (2013), the remote-controllable Stagg EKG electric kettle by the San Francisco company Fellow and a steel outdoor furniture collection called Palissade, by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.

At least one expert prized environmental factors above all others when considering designs that deserved to last. “There are a lot of beautiful things, but what will make a real difference?” asked Aric Chen, the director of Het Nieuwe Instituut, a museum of

architecture, design and digital culture in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. “It is not necessarily about objects, but the way we produce objects — rethinking life cycles.”

Mr. Chen proposed Sunne, a solar-powered aluminum window lamp by Marjan van Aubel that first appeared as a Kickstarter campaign in 2021.

“What will become classics of our time will be a mix of craft-forward objects, as well as products that may not appeal to the masses but have cult followings,” said Asli Altay, the head of communications and content at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. She specified handmade wood dolls that transmit music, designed by Teenage Engineering, a group of young Swedes. She also praised the construction of the Nigerian designer Nifemi Marcus-Bello’s M2 shelf made of African mahogany and powder-coated steel.



The Nigerian designer Nifemi Marcus-Bello’s M2 shelf made of African mahogany and powder-coated steel. Jide Ayeni

“To me, a classic has three qualities,” said Bobbye Tigerman, the curator of decorative arts and design at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “It reflects the time in which it was made, it demonstrates outstanding craftsmanship and it has a timeless visual appeal. Her pick: the Nyala chair by Jomo Tariku, which signals the designer’s Ethiopian heritage and his concern for

antelope native to the Bale Mountains in that country. Nyala's organic curves "give it a timeless visual allure," she said.

Gus Casely-Hayford, the director of the V&A East Museum, which is scheduled to open in his home base, London, in 2024, saw practicality as the foundation for future recognition. "I live in a city with nine million people and over three million cars," he said. "It's impossible to get around. You start to think about having a bike, but so often people find them stolen."

Which is why he nominated the Brompton electric bicycle, first introduced in 2017. "Small and compact, it folds down to the size of a piece of luggage that you might take with you on a plane, but it can be ridden by anyone of any size," he said. "Bikes were originally designed in the 1880s. This is a foldable, electric, timeless invention that feels incredibly timely."

Marc Benda, the co-founder of Friedman Benda in Manhattan, which deals in limited-edition designs, pleaded guilty to self-interest when he singled out the Trauma Chair (2020) by Samuel Ross, a British industrial and fashion designer his gallery represents. "The chair, which has already entered the collections of two museums, is really a reaction to the events of three years ago," Mr. Benda said, referring to the protests after the killing of George Floyd by a police officer. "It's a Black voice addressing issues of social justice."

Though his gallery objects are not widely available, Mr. Benda said, they should still qualify for admission into the canon of classics. "They can be seen and appreciated in museums and on Instagram," he said. "It's not only about acquiring."

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 3, 2023, Section F, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: Classics of the Future. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)



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