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CLEVER'S SEAT WEEK

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Getting a Grip on Instagram's Favorite Hand Chair

A little palm reading on the history of the beloved five-fingered seat

By Rachel Davies

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1: An 18th-century Russian chandelier suspended above vintage Baker sofas clad in a Clarence House silk velvet, Louis XV fauteuils, and a gold-leaf hand chair by Pedro Friedeberg in the home of Jorge Elias. Photo: Davies Roger

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On the north end of a roundabout in the Condesa neighborhood of Mexico City, if you glance at the top of a slim two-story building, it'll be difficult not to notice something unusual: a giant, gold, hand-shaped chair perched on the roof. Fans of Pedro Friedeberg will recognize it as one of the artist's most iconic pieces, the first of which he made back in 1962—regardless, it's a welcome oddity. Lately, it's become difficult to avoid seeing hand chairs all over the internet, whether they're in Pedro's graceful, wood style, the stubbier, technicolor versions made by plastics manufacturer RMI-C in the late 20th century, or the slender-finger fiberglass editions that date back to the '90s and early aughts. The five-fingered chair is clogging our Instagram feeds.

Some of the other designers responsible for making the palm a desired place to sit are contemporary brands like the Dutch Pols Pottens, Italian brand Estro Salotti Sosia Modern, Chinese manufacturers selling the chairs at wholesale cost on Alibaba, Urban Outfitters, and plenty of 20th-century makers whose chairs have outlived knowledge of their authorship. "I hate the hand chair because it has become an icon and thus a cliché, and this is vulgar and dangerous," Pedro told 1stdibs' Introspective Magazine in February of 2020, before the style hit its most recent popularity streak. Though he may resent the ubiquity, he doesn't necessarily have total ownership of the object.

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A Caio Reisewitz C-print and a Pedro Friedeberg hand chair share the entrance hall of Sig Bergamin's house in São Paulo.

Photo: Davies Roger

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“One of the oldest hand chairs I have is apparently from the 1800s in the Philippines; it was carved,” says Maritza Lerman Yoes of Mitzi’s Finds, the Instagram emporium that is inarguably the top spot to nab a hand chair of your own. “Hand chairs have a long history, and they have history in different places like Bali, [which has a version that] surprisingly wasn’t influenced by Pedro.”

The rise in interest is undeniable. According to Noel Fahden, Chairish’s vice president of merchandising, the search volume for hand chairs was at its highest in January of 2021. More recently, from July to August of this year, searches were up by 50%. It’s not a stretch to argue that the attraction to hand chairs is somewhat related to the onslaught of newly minted design fanatics who got into decorating their homes more personally over the course of the past year and a half. Maritza herself was never particularly design-minded, but she gravitated to the hand chairs.

“I first saw a hand chair way back in the ’70s; it was in one of my mom’s friend’s basements... I fell in love with it back then,” says Amy Caillile of Areia Designs. “In the ’70s, there was a lot more unique, handcrafted [furniture]. At that time, I think it was more acceptable, people were more willing to try new things, and a lot more color was involved.”

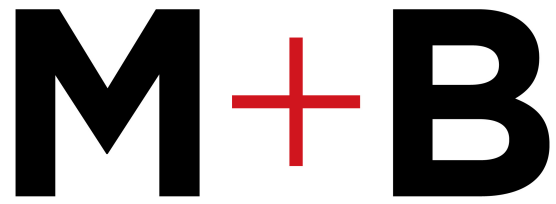
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A dining table full of right hand chairs in the colorful home of Animal Crackers designer Candice Molayem.

Photo: Kabir Affons

Stephanie Fig, who runs Georgia-based Fig House Vintage, first saw a Friedeberg hand chair about a decade ago and has sought them out for her shop since opening in 2014. The piece has always reminded her of a fond memory. “I took a photograph of my father-in-law’s hands, years ago before he passed, where he was chipping away at a pinecone for pine nuts,” she says. “I get stories like this all the time. I hear crazy stories like ‘I need this because it reminds me of when I met my first wife.’ [It makes you wonder,] why can’t furniture reflect how you’re feeling at the moment, or bring out an intense memory?”



Regardless of whether one's first impression was in the '70s in the flesh, or on the screen of an iPhone in 2021, the distinct look of the hand chair is deep in the membranes of home decor lovers all over the world.