

TOYS BY DESIGN

# Mini Design Chairs

CAN'T AFFORD AN ORIGINAL EAMES LOUNGER? DON'T STRESS; BUY THE SMALL VERSION INSTEAD

BY STEVEN HELLER



Red Blue Chair, Gerrit Rietveld, 1923



Organic chair, Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen, 1940



Ball Chair, Eero Aarnio, 1963

Collecting chairs by Rietveld, Eames, and all the other Modernist brand name designers has become an obsession of mine... as long as they cost less than \$20 a piece. But when was the last time you found even cheap replicas of Jean Prouve, Marc Newson, or Eero Saarinen furniture for such a bargain price? If your sights are on Ebay or Design Within (a.k.a. Beyond) Reach, you're looking too high—literally. Instead, follow my eyes down low, to the tabletop.

The classic chairs I collect are miniatures, and they are beautifully true to the originals. My interest in minis began a few years ago when I saw (and coveted) an entire collection of the miniature Vitra chairs. The problem was, Vitra's exquisitely made replicas are much too expensive, and my liquidity is limited.

Then I stumbled upon "The Mini Designer Chair Collection" by ReacJapan. Compared to the Vitra replicas, these are considerably smaller and more cheaply made. Arguably, though, they satisfy my miniature chair fetishist needs. They are the three-dimensional equivalent to baseball cards, since the handsomely designed boxes in which they come do not reveal what model chair is inside. There are a few "Mickey Mantles," like Gerrit Rietveld's wooden Red and Blue Chair, which I've still not been able to find. Then there's Le Corbusier's chaise longue, which I unwittingly gave to someone as a gift. I haven't been able to locate another since (and the someone won't give it back). One of the stores from which I buy my chairs, Toy Tokyo in Manhattan, said it was okay for me to look in the package before I buy, but it doesn't seem fair somehow.

This miniature chair fascination of mine is indicative of an increasing interest in playing with classic Modernist design through toys and games at large. It starts innocently enough, a Calder-influenced mobile or Mondrian-esque puzzle (in my case, procuring doll furniture for young children), which

becomes the pretense for developing a collection of Modernist "keepsakes," of which there are surprisingly many.

My first adventure into Modernist toyland was with the Lenin Tribune designed by El Lissitzky from 1920-1924. In 1984 (a fitting Orwellian year for celebrating utopia), Paul Groenendijk and Piet Vollaard issued a set of five avant garde architectural cut-out and paste-up models, of which the Tribune was seemingly the easiest one to construct. They are now quite rare. My kit, owing to my inability to use an Xacto without harming my outer and inner extremities, has remained intact, waiting for a dexterous architectural student willing to cut and construct this historic monument. In fact, it would take an architectural model maker to build this so it doesn't fall down.

I was also recently smitten by the Brinca Dada kit of cardboard modern furniture for the Dylan House, inspired by the minimalist masterpieces of Paul Rudolph and Tadao Ando. The doll-house version, which has five living spaces on three levels, is created in 3/4" scale and "furniture is sold separately." In fact, I bought the furniture, hoping that construction would not result in the usual frustration. And for the first few pieces (the bathtub, refrigerator, kitchen table, and sink counter top) it was clear sailing. And then came the bed. The cardboard cracked. The pieces collapsed. Once more, I felt humiliated, like the junior high kid who failed shop for two years in a row. I've given up on the Dylan furniture, but not on Brinca Dada. I'm about to start on The Maison Furniture collection for the Edward House and Bennett House. I dare it to confound me.

As I see it, miniature Modernism serves two distinct purposes: It is an opportunity to possess Modern masterpieces at a suitable scale. And it enables the wanná-be collector a chance to trade with others, without spending an excessive fortune.

Whoever said Modernism was not fun? ♣



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—STEVEN HELLER

Molded Plastic Side Chair with wooden base, Charles and Ray Eames, 1950



Bibendum Chair, Eileen Gray, 1925



Robie House Chair, Frank Lloyd Wright, 1908