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## Children's Furniture

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# *Eselsohren*

JOURNAL OF HISTORY OF ART,  
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VOL. IV, 2024, NO. 1+2

## Kid-Size

From Toy, to Table, to Town  
Spielzeug, Möbel, Stadt

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## *Eselsohren*

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Otakar Máčel  
*Children's Furniture*

# Children's Furniture

Otakar Máčel

Asked to write about furniture design for children seemed to me at first sight rather straightforward. Exploring the literature, however, made it clear that the subject is quite a broad and complex one.<sup>1</sup> It was going to be less easy than I thought. The wide diversity of psychological, pedagogical and didactic standpoints, the varying cultural backgrounds, and the heterogeneity of the genre – from cradle to space hopper – all contribute to a haziness of the subject's boundaries that makes it practically impossible to treat it as a general topic. So what can count as children's furniture? Small chairs and tables? Undoubtedly – but not these alone. It begins with the cradle and the baby walker (Fig.1.1-10), which is so pre-eminently the first item of childhood furniture that it has become a metaphor for the origin of something in its own right. But a perambulator can also serve as a cradle when stationary; does that make it an item of furniture rather than a vehicle? There are child-specific furniture types, such as high chairs, baby walkers and playpens. And then there are cot beds, potty chairs, child-sized toy cupboards or wardrobes and small chairs and tables, which are on the whole scaled-down versions of adult furniture possibly adapted to child use in various ways.

Historically, the wide choice of children's

furniture is a relatively recent phenomenon. Separate furniture for children was once a luxury restricted to wealthy households, if indeed people ever thought about it. It was not until the nineteenth century, with the rise of the middle classes and the emergence of a furniture industry that children's furniture became a product to be bought in a shop instead of something that had to be commissioned from a local craftsman. The firm Thonet, which manufactured furniture on an industrial scale as early as the mid 19th century, first added children's furniture to its catalogue in 1866. Initially there were six models for children and by 1911 the range had expanded to include no less than 98 models.<sup>2</sup> (Fig.2.1,2) the volume of Thonet's children's furniture had by that time risen to some 30 thousand items annually, forming nearly 3% of the firm's total furniture production<sup>3</sup>.

School furniture – a specific kind of children's furniture – also began to emerge in the 19th century. It consisted initially of school desks and later of separate chairs with tables, developing into a distinct typology in the 20th century. Another unarguably child-related furniture type was the Thonet nursing chair, initially marketed specifically for wet-nurses. Its low, backward-sloping seat (the legs were 34 cm high at the front and 28 cm at the rear)





FIG. 1.1 Child about to be taught to walk with a baby walker. Sketch by Giulio Romano, 1517/18  
 FIG. 1.2 Patrician interior with cradle and baby walker, 16th century ; FIG. 1.3 Cradle, Vienna  
 ca. 1820/30, FIG. 1.4 Cradle of crown prince Rudolf, Vienna. Designer: Franz Podany, 1858;  
 ABB. 1.5 Cradle No. 1. Manufacturer: Gebrüder Thonet, Vienna, ca. 1880; FIG. 1.6 Cradle.  
 Designer: Josef Hoffmann. Manufacturer: J. + J. Kohn, Vienna, ca. 1905/10; FIG. 1.7 Late 18th  
 century baby walker ABB. 1.8 Baby walker, mid-19th century; FIG. 1.9 Walking frame, ca.  
 1850; FIG. 1.10 Baby walker with circular table for playing with toys, mid-19th century





Romano, 1517/18  
3 Cradle, Vienna  
Podany, 1858;  
FIG.1.6 Cradle.  
FIG.1.7 Late 18th  
talking frame, ca.  
18th century

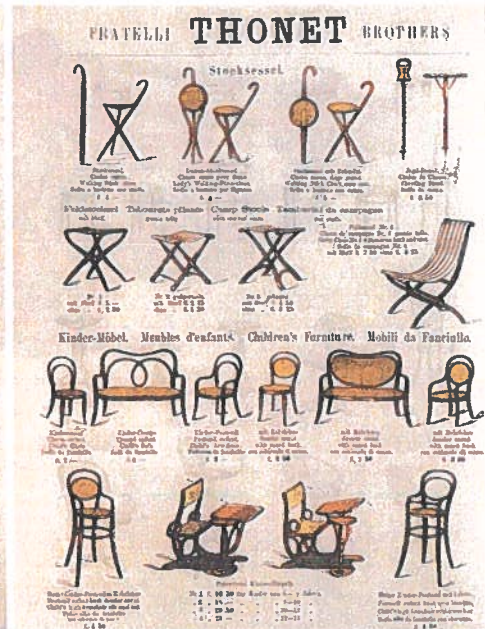
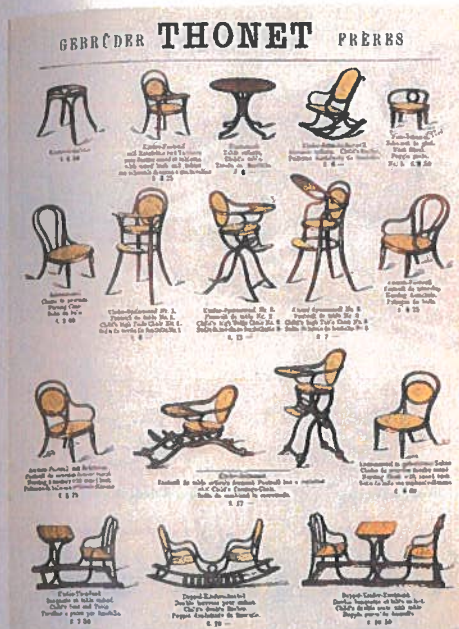


FIG.2.1,2 Sales catalogue, Gebrüder Thonet, Vienna, 1885

offered greater comfort for the wet-nurse and the baby. Last but not least, there is a loosely-defined category that covers furniture types – transformable or not – which are designed to double as playthings, or which are actual toys on which a child can sit such as hobby-horses or wooden blocks. (Fig.3.1-7) Of course, a child can turn almost anything into a plaything. Inevitably I have had to restrict the scope of this article – and given my background knowledge – it was logical for me to focus on designers of modern furniture who took an interest in designing also for children in the first half of the twentieth century. The Swedish social activist, author and educational reform advocate Ellen Key proclaimed the twentieth century as “the century of the child” in her 1900 book *Barnet århundrede*.

She appealed above all for children to be able to enjoy individual development and a better education, even though she could not at that time predict what innovations the new century would bring. She was vague about the role of furniture designed specifically for children, while much more explicit and pragmatic views on the matter were those expressed by Maria Montessori.<sup>5</sup> Children’s furniture, the Italian pedagogue and physician argued, was important as a stimulus to the perception of the spatial and material surroundings. It must therefore be light in weight so that a child could easily move it, and its dimensions must be proportionate to the size of the child. It must moreover give room to the child’s imagination, but at the same time had to be beautiful and well-made. Beauty and artistry are adult concepts, subjective and prone to



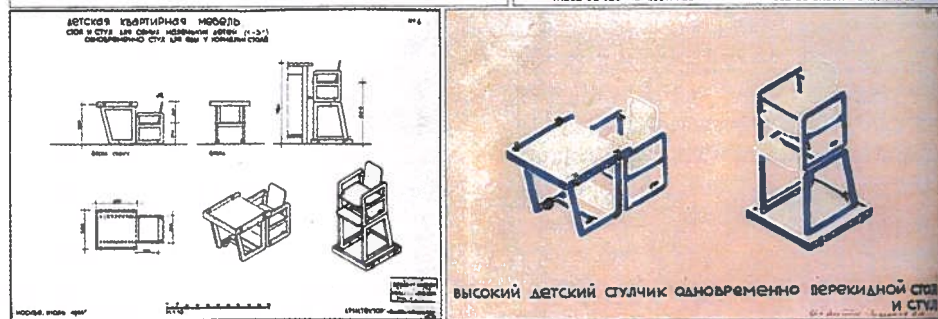
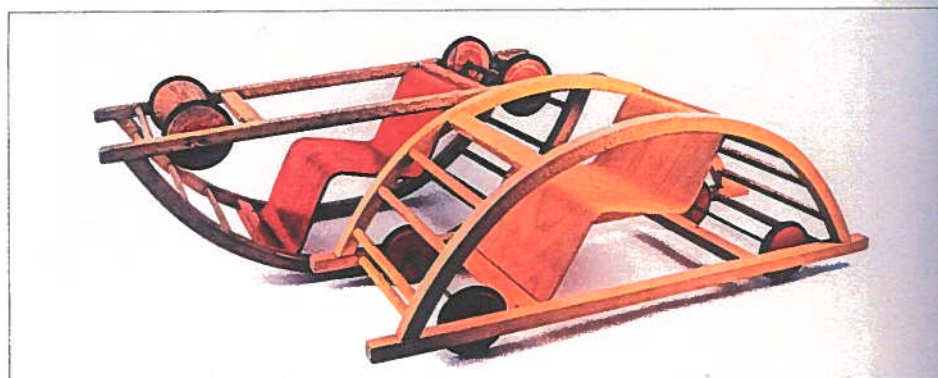


FIG.3.1 Rocking car. Designer: Hans Brockhage (supervisors: Erwin Andrä and Mart Stam, Academy of Arts, Dresden), 1950

FIG.3.2,3 Multifunctional design object to be used as cradle, bed, rocking device, table to play on, table. Sales catalogue of the Belgian firm 'Monbeguin', ca. 1935. Also produced in the Czech Republic

Rocking device, 'Monbeguin', ca. 1935

FIG.3.4,5 Multifunctional children's furniture. Design: Margarite Schütte-Lihotzky, ca. 1935

FIG.3.6 Combination of rocking device for mother and child. Designers: Elisabetta Gonzo and Alessandro Vichari, 1993

FIG.3.7 Dutch riding and rolling high chair, 20th century, chair collection TU Delft



FIG.4 Tripp Trapp chair, a Norwegian invention. Designer: Peter Opsvik, 1972. "The chair that grows with the child"; FIG.5 'Zocker Colani'. The Zocker chair for children. Designer: Luigi Colani, 1972

change with the times; the child, on the other hand, has to take what he or she is given. That is presumably why Maria Montessori placed an emphasis on good quality and attractive design.<sup>6</sup>

A different characterization of children's furniture was given (for example) by Helmuth Lotz, editor of the Deutsche Werkbund magazine "Die Form". Lotz devoted brief attention to the subject in his booklet *Wie richte ich meine Wohnung ein?* ("How Should I Furnish My Home") in 1930. It was wrong, he argued, to consider children's furniture merely as miniature versions of adult equivalents. Furniture for children had to be simple in construction, free as far as possible of sharp corners and edges, finished in cheerful colours and easy to move and to clean. His

final remark may today seem a little strange, however: a child must be able to sit with a good posture so as not be "enfeebled" by slouching<sup>7</sup>.

The author of another booklet on home furnishing from the same period, the Dutchman Paul Bromberg, did not write about specific designs for children's furniture but about the furnishing in general: "A toddler does not need a lot of furniture – a small mattress, a table and a toy cupboard. ... Besides the mattress, the toddler should have access to a few cubes which would serve not only for sitting on but also as playthings (for building a tower or doll's house for example)."<sup>8</sup> The preference for cubes is presumably an echo of Fröbel's outlook on infant education with its emphasis on playing with building blocks.<sup>9</sup>

In recommending furniture sizes that are proportionate to the size of the child, Maria Montessori touched on a practical problem that resembles (although perhaps to a lesser degree) that of children's shoes and clothing: children insist on growing. What age groups should the makers target with their children's furniture? Some types of furniture such as cribs and high chairs are necessarily related only to a specific age group.<sup>10</sup> For others, the situation is less well-defined. A recent visit to an IKEA store (in Delft, as it happens) revealed that, out of ten children's chairs, only two were identified as being designed for a specific age group: one model for 3 years or older, and another for ages 3 to 6 years. Other children's chairs were not marked with specific age groups, but all had the same seat height, 30 cm, for children aged 3 to 10 years. This seat height seems to be some kind of standard, if with minor deviations. The old Thonet chairs for children had a seat height of 32 cm but later, in the 1930s, the steel tube children's chairs made by Gispén also had a 30 cm seat height.<sup>11</sup>

For children who are taller but not yet ready for an adult chair, it is sometimes possible to find chairs with a higher seat or with a seat of adjustable height. One such chair is the Tripp-Trapp Chair of 1972 by the Norwegian designer Peter Opsvik.<sup>12</sup> (Fig.4) It was promoted with the slogan "the chair that grows with the child." A furniture type in which age group plays a greater part, however, is that of the school desk. In this case, two sizes are insufficient. The firm of Thonet, for example, developed "Schulbank no. 2112452" during World War I and offered it in seven sizes, targeting children from the first class of the primary school to secondary school age.<sup>13</sup>

The simplest and most unambiguous category of children's furniture is that of reduced-size versions of furniture designed for the adult market. Basing such "miniatures" on existing models, whether by anonymous or well known designers, is the easiest way to arrive at a product. The design already exists and the makers are experienced in its production; it just has to be scaled down to some extent. Children's furniture in this category lacks specific child-oriented features apart from size. The scaling process is predominantly one-way: a large chair is miniaturized. A rare example of the reverse process is the Zocker by Luigi Colani, a chair or seating element for children dating from 1972, (Fig.5) which was transposed into a version for grown-ups only a year later as the *Sitzgerät Colani*. A less well known instance is noted by the Thonet specialist Jiří Uhlíř: the first six children's furniture designs of 1866 included a small rocking chair. It sold poorly and was deleted from the catalogue in 1883, but the design reappeared in a later edition among the "adult" furniture as Rocking Chair No. 10.<sup>14</sup>

A succession of well-known designers or manufacturers have engaged in the miniaturization of adult furniture. Alvar Aalto, Marcel Breuer, Harry Bertioia, Charles Eames, Willem Hendrik Gispén and others made child versions of their own designs. A good example is the steel-tube chair B34½ and a slightly larger version B34¾ as well as the small table B53 by the firm Thonet in 1930-31.<sup>15</sup> (Fig.6) The chair is a reduced version of Breuer's B34, one of his basic models for the Thonet tube furniture range of 1929 when the firm first started making steel-framed furniture. An interesting detail is that there were two "child sizes", making some variation



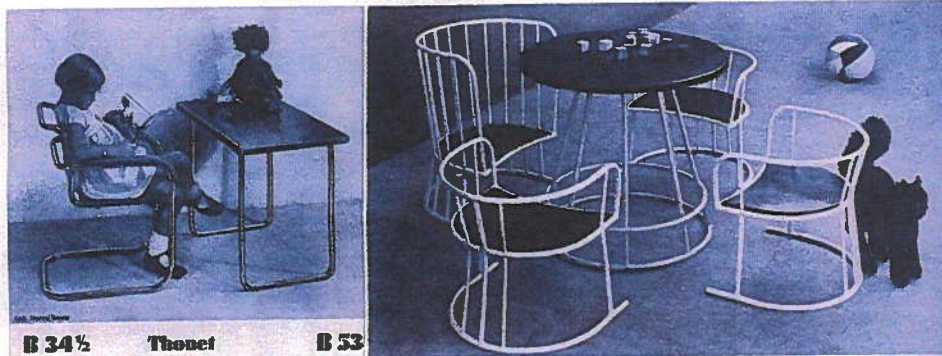


FIG.6 Scaled-down furniture. Designer: Marcel Breuer, 1929. From sales catalogue *Gebrüder Thonet*, 1930. Shown is Jaina Schlemmer; FIG.7 Set of children's furniture. Designer: Karel Ort, 1930

possible according to age group.

This was not the first time that Marcel Breuer scaled down his adult designs for children. In 1922, while at the Bauhaus, he designed the wooden children's chair ti 3a, which is a miniature version of his normal chair ti 3d.<sup>16</sup> It was then still inspired by Rietveld, but the B34 was a cantilevered design, i.e. without rear legs, with a chrome-plated steel tube frame and a seat and back panel of woven split cane in beech wood frames. The frame consisted of two sections: a closed loop of tubing beginning with a floor sled that extends upwards to form the front legs and then backwards to form armrests; and an open-ended frame for the backrest and seat which is suspended between the front legs and armrests. This chair exemplified the ideal of its period as regards physical and optical lightness, transparency and hygiene. It exuded the machine aesthetic and an air of modernity. These characteristics of the B34½ were not specifically related to children's furniture, however, but were general features of all Marcel Breuer's steel-tube chairs. That children's versions were produced can in any case be ascribed to the vogue for

tube furniture starting in 1930; it was not so much Marcel Breuer's own idea as an initiative of the manufacturer, whose range had already included children's versions of beech wood chairs for some years. Other makers of tube-framed furniture had of course sold children's chairs before the War, but only in a limited number of models which were generally simple miniatures of the standard range.<sup>17</sup> An exception to this is the charming ensemble by the Czech designer Karel Ort, manufactured by Hynek Gottwald in the town Brandýs nad Orlicí.<sup>18</sup> It includes child-height chairs and an armchair, a small table, a cot, a toy-cupboard and a playpen. It was executed in white-lacquered metal tube (other colours not being evident in the monochrome photo). The furniture was certainly modern, but the rounded shapes and the white tube frame made it less austere and more clearly designed for children. (Fig.7)

While it is doubtful whether the miniaturization of normal chairs involved much attention to the needs of children, matters were different when it came to children's furniture designed for specific buildings. I have in mind

here the new kindergartens and infant care institutions, where the advancing insights placed increasing importance on light, air and hygiene. A well-known example is the *Asilo d'infanzia di Sant'Elia* in Como, designed by the architect Giuseppe Terragni<sup>19</sup> in 1934-37. The light, airy and playful space was meant to minimize the physical and optical limitations experienced by the children. Steel-tube chairs and tables were suitable for an interior of that kind, embodying a similar modernity to the building itself with their optical lightness, limited space occupancy and compliance with hygienic standards. The small chairs, with four legs on a sled base, lacquered steel tubing and plywood seat and back, are not spectacular in formal respects but are simple and practical.<sup>20</sup> Terragni had in fact modified an existing type for the kindergarten.<sup>21</sup> (Fig.8) A somewhat more striking example is the furniture of two children's institutions in Coimbra, Portugal. The photo of *Parque Infantil Dr. Oliveira Salazar* shows a spacious modern hall with four large windows, with children sitting on steel-tube chairs at steel-tube tables. The chairs appear to be a miniature version of a chair designed by the Luckhardt brothers.<sup>22</sup> The photo of the restroom of *Jardim de Infância D. Maria do Rosgate Salazar* shows a long hall containing not only child-sized folding chairs and a table with steel tube frames, but also reclining chairs for the resting infants. These chairs are based on a downsized chaise longue by Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand which Thonet transformed into a rocking chair in 1932 by adding an ellipse of steel tubing on each side.<sup>23</sup> Both buildings were completed in 1936-37 and owed their existence to the initiative of the physician Dr. Bissaya

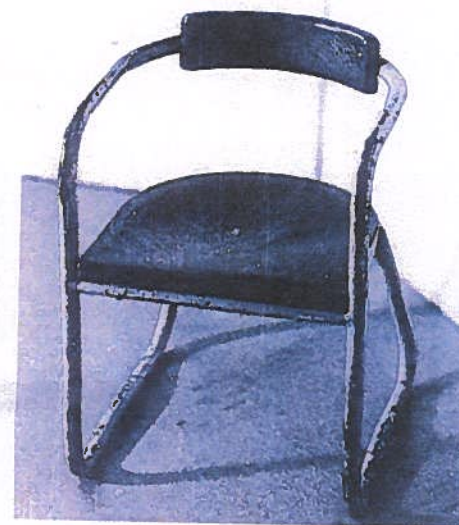


FIG.8 Model of a chair for the *'Asilo d'infanzia Sant'Elia'* in Como. Designer: Giuseppe Terragni, 1934f.

Barreto who, together with the architect Luiz Benaventa, devoted efforts to creating modern and hygienic social institutions including the furniture.<sup>24</sup> (Fig.9,10) The Italian and Portuguese chair examples were in fact also miniaturized versions for kindergartens. It appears from illustrations in the literature, however, that most pre-war kindergarten/infant school furniture was designed specifically for Montessori schools.<sup>25</sup> The school interiors are often austere spaces with plenty of daylight and space, containing small chairs, generally of wood and without armrests, as well as small tables and cupboards. The furniture was simple in construction, light enough for children to move, and unspectacular in design. A good example was the *Städtischer Kindergarten* furnished by Franz Singer and Friedl Dicker in Vienna's Goethehof development. Goethehof was built in 1924 as a municipal housing complex with a kindergarten





FIG.9 Restroom in the 'Jardim d'Infancia' with reclining chairs for children, Coimbra. Architect and designer: Luiz Benavente, 1936/37



FIG.10 Hall in the 'Parque infantil' with child-size folding chairs and tables, Coimbra. Architect and designer: Luiz Benavente, 1936/37

pavilion on the internal courtyard. Singer and Dicker were commissioned to refurnish the kindergarten in accordance with Montessori principles in 1930.<sup>26</sup> The children had to learn to explore the environment independently and to gain experience of materials and of space. Besides playing, the children learned simple household tasks such as dishwashing, cleaning and tidying things away. Each child had a drawer for personal items such as a toothbrush and a towel marked to identify its owner. The furnishings thus included not only chairs and tables but also cupboards for play and learning materials and for personal hygiene requisites. The interiors were bright and efficient: the cloakroom could double as a restroom for example. The children's chairs were planned partly to have steel-tube frames, at least according to the drawings, but in the end wood-framed stackable chairs, with or without armrests, were provided. The armrests were made shorter than normal to make the chairs stowable under the tables.

The sympathy that modern architects and designers express for the doctrine of Maria Montessori is not really surprising. Both parties strive in their particular areas for innovation, for an honest, pure use of materials and for hygienic ideals, although the Italian pedagogue and physician rejected bare, white interiors as sterile and monotonous.<sup>26</sup> The children's furniture designs of the Bauhaus in Weimar were also much liked by the kindergartens, which ordered many of the furniture designs of Marcel Breuer and Alma Siedhoff-Buscher in 1924-25. While Breuer's wooden chairs were miniatures of his normal models (Fig. 11), the Kinderspielschrank T124 by Siedhoff-Buscher, 1924, was really designed from a child's viewpoint and in accor-



FIG.11 Children's furniture, Bauhauswerkstätten. Designer: Marcel Breuer, 1924

dance with the new educational principles.<sup>28</sup> Buscher's cupboard included removable coloured blocks, one of them fitted with castors, which could also serve as toy-boxes or as improvised tables and chairs. One of the cupboard doors had an opening at the top to act as a proscenium for a puppet show. Buscher was already known for her wooden toys and for the child's bedroom she designed in the Versuchshaus am Horn, a house where the Bauhaus presented its novel designs to the public in 1923. (Fig. 12.1-4) A similar-looking cabinet is illustrated in the booklet by Paul Bromberg.<sup>29</sup> It is a photo of a model child's room by the Silesian architect Emil Lange – probably not coincidentally, for Lange was building trades manager and later syndic of the Bauhaus from 1922 to 1924, before establishing his own architecture firm in Breslau (Wrocław) (Fig. 12.5).

Following the relocation of the Bauhaus to Dessau, its activities in Weimar were taken over by the Architecture Academy - Staatliche Bauhochschule - under the directorship of Otto Bartning. One of the teachers who remained in Weimar was Erich Dieckmann, who contributed to furnishing the smoking



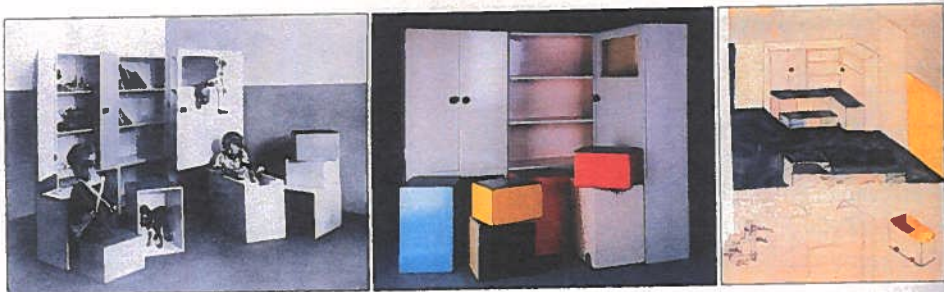


FIG.12.1 Sales catalogue of the Bauhaus cabinetmaker's products, 1925. Shown are: Joost Siedhoff and Karin Schlemmer at play; FIG.12.2 Children's cupboard. Designer: Alma Siedhoff-Buscher, 1923; FIG.12.3 Sketch for a play-cupboard for the children's room in the 'Versuchshaus am Horn' in Weimar. Designer: Alma Siedhoff-Buscher, 1923

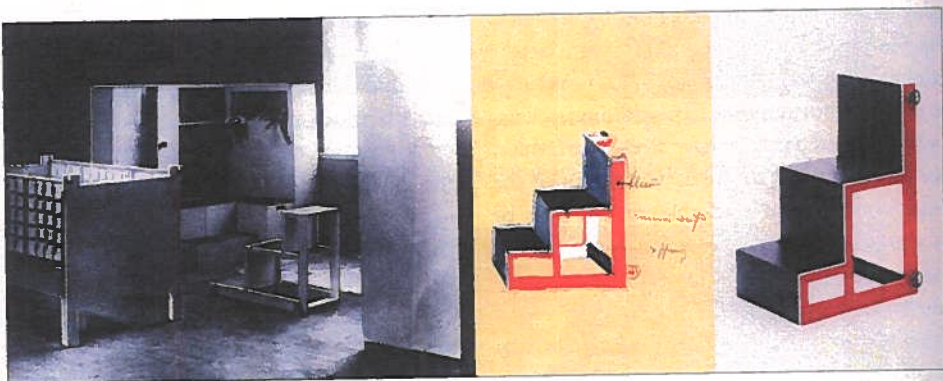


FIG.12.4 Foto of the children's room furniture for the 'Jugendfürsorge-Ausstellung' in Weimar, 1924; FIG.12.5.B&C Sketch for a ladder chair and its replica. Designer: Alma Siedhoff-Buscher

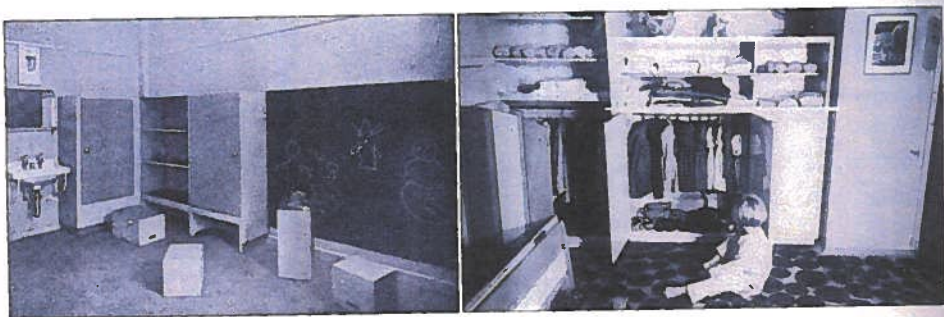


FIG.12.6 Silesian model of children's furniture. Designer: Emil Lange, second half of the 1920s; FIG.12.7 Cupboard for children, varnished in different colours. Designer: Gerrit T. Rietveld, 1947

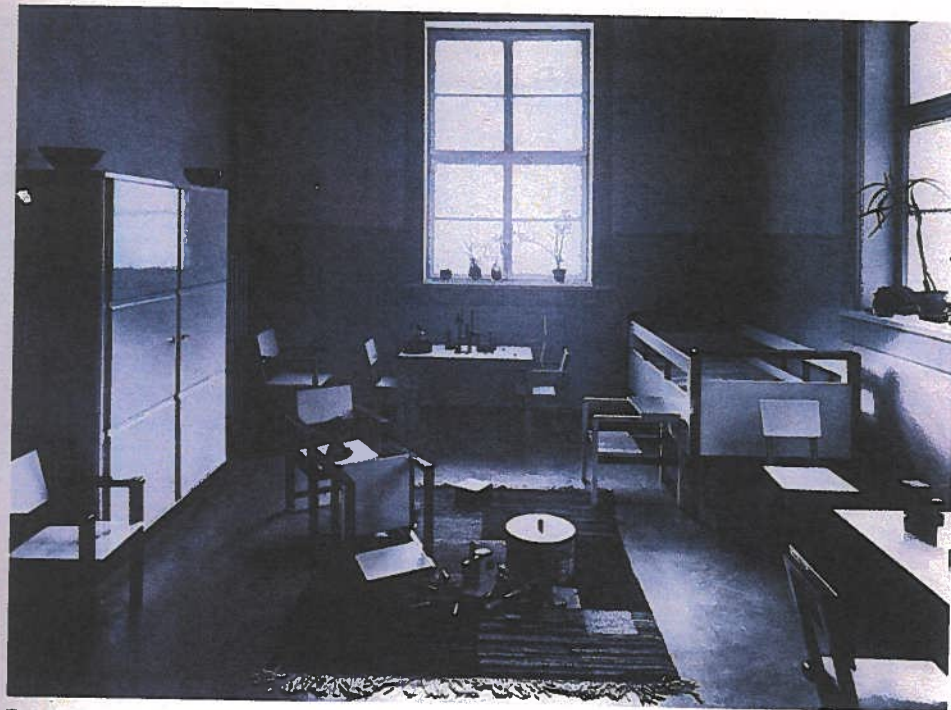


FIG.13 Model furniture for a children's room. Designer: Erich Dieckmann, 1928

room in Versuchshaus am Horn. His furniture designs were also used for the infant schools in the artist's colony 'Freilandsiedlung Gildenhall' in Neuruppin, 1926 and in the 'Feodora Kinderheim' in Weimar, 1930 and other places. His designs were simple, with a clear construction using wood joints. The rectangular child's chair with armrests is a miniature of his normal chairs, but Dieckmann also adapted this model into a Leiterstuhl – a step chair, which a small person could use for getting into bed. The beech wood children's chairs with sloping rear legs and backs had an interesting construction: the sloping supports of the backrest and the sloping rear legs balanced one another, thereby increasing the

stability of the chair.<sup>30</sup> (Fig.13) Comparably simple children's furniture was also designed by the Frankfurt architect Ferdinand Kramer, which he used to furnish the municipal kindergarten on Hallgartenstrasse, Frankfurt, in 1925-26. (Fig.14)

Kramer reused this model for the nursery of a model flat by Mies van der Rohe in the 1927 Weissenhof exhibition in Stuttgart.<sup>31</sup> (Fig.14) Kramer's colleague in the Frankfurt housing projects, the Viennese architect Franz Schuster, also designed children's furniture, which was fabricated by the company of Walter Knoll in Feurbach.<sup>32</sup> (Fig.15) Schuster was acquainted with the principles of Maria Montessori, having designed the



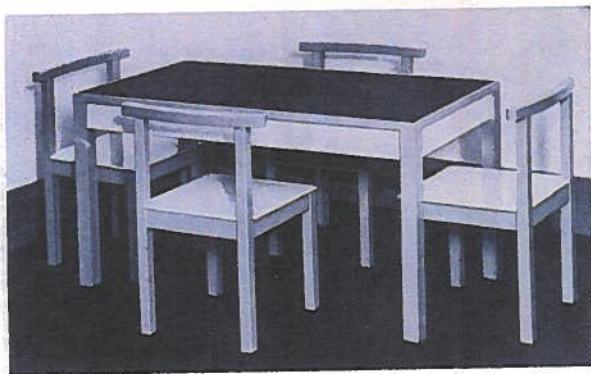


FIG.14 Table and chairs for children for a Kindergarten in Frankfurt/Main. Designer: Ferdinand Kramer, 1925/26



FIG.15 Children's furniture for the 'Haus der Kinder', Vienna. Designer: Franz Schuster, ca. 1926



FIG.16 Chairs for a children's house 'Jugendheim in Aachen'. Designers: Rudolf Schwarz und Hans Schwippert, 1929/30

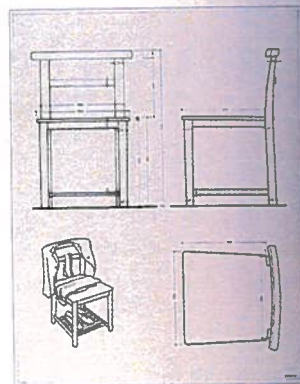
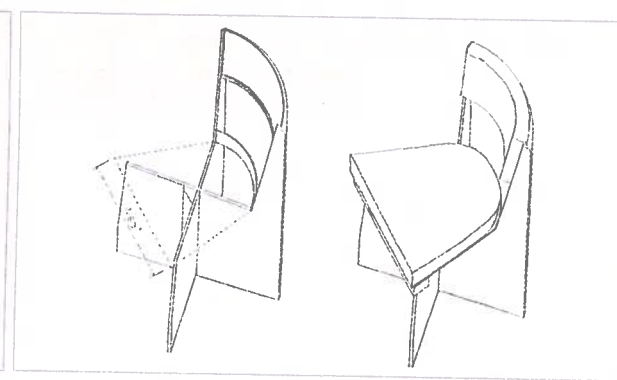


FIG.17 Chair for the Montessori Kindergarten in Wassenaar. Designer: Piet Zwart, 1937; FIG.18 Plywood tables and chairs in two versions for adults and children. Designer: Kit Nicholson, 1935



Montessori kindergarten Haus der Kinder on Rudolfsplatz, Vienna, in 1931. Montessori-inspired children's chairs did not necessarily have a traditional appearance. The furniture of the Versuchsschule in Aachen, designed by Rudolf Schwarz and Hans Schwippert in 1930, displays many rounded features; the chairs have textile seats and back panels attached by bands and cords to the round bars of the frame.<sup>33</sup> (Fig.16) The chair by the Dutch designer Piet Zwart for the Montessori kindergarten in Wassenaar, 1937, also has an unusual construction: its beech wood frame consists of six planks plus a square panel as the seat. The two planks that form the rear legs extend upwards as a backrest and are joined at the top by a strip of aluminium.<sup>34</sup> (Fig.17)

There are of course many other interesting examples of children's furniture designed for schools, such as that of the Oak Lane Country Day School in Philadelphia by George Howe and William Lescage, 1929, one of the first modern school buildings in the USA; the children's chairs seem to be made of bent plywood panels, although the lack of ad-

ditional data makes it hard to confirm this.<sup>35</sup> I can also say little about the typical school desks such as those in the open-air school in Suresnes by Eugène Beaudouin and Marcel Lods, 1935-36<sup>36</sup>, because it is not a children's furniture item which is also used in a nursery. A number of modern architects in France devoted efforts to designing such furniture, such as Robert Mallet Stevens, René Cravoisier, Pierre Chareau, René Herbst and others. The results were exhibited at the Salon des Arts Ménagers in Paris in 1936.

There are interesting children's furniture designs besides those to be found in Montessori kindergartens and infant schools (although the ideas of the Italian pedagogue and physician were also highly influential outside schools). For example the architect Kit Nicholson, brother of painter Ben Nicholson, designed standardized furniture for the new Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham, south-east London, in 1935. (Fig.18) The tables and chairs of this experimental centre for preventative social medicine were fabricated of plywood in two sizes, one for adults and another for children. The mint-green lacquered chairs



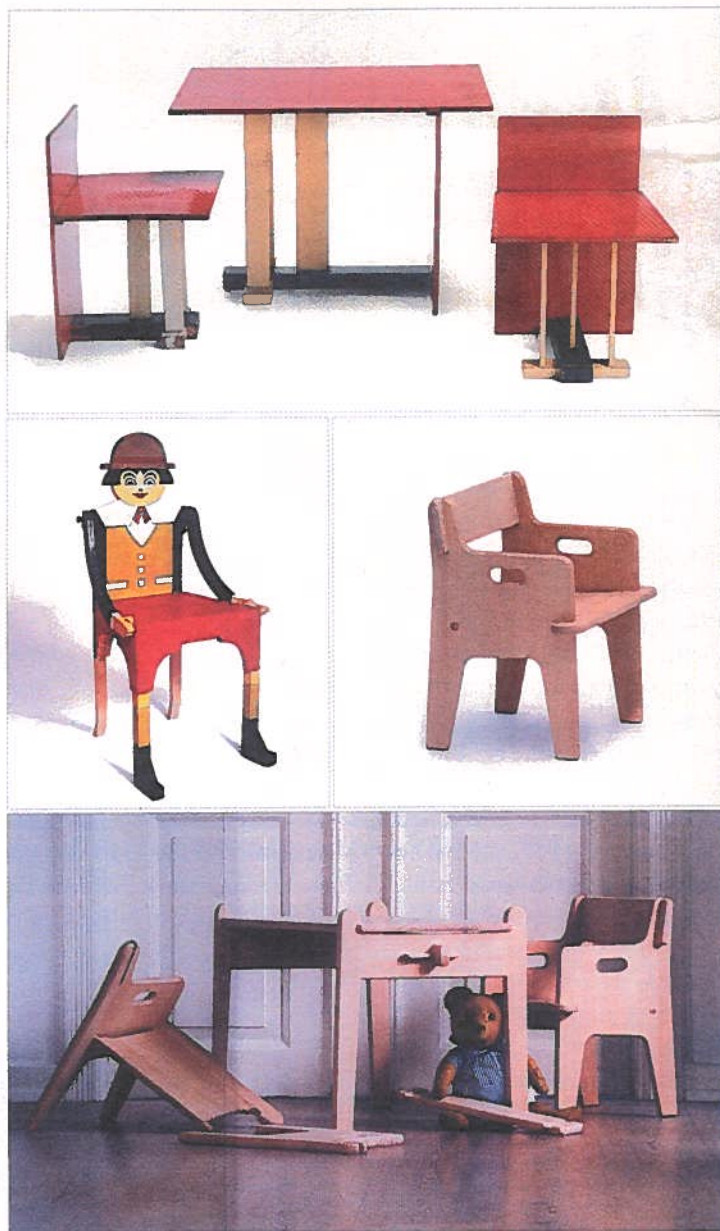


FIG.19 Children's furniture ensemble. Designer: Cor Alons, 1926; FIG.20 Cartoon-character-like chair. Designer: Antonio Rubino, 1928; FIG.21.1,2 Peter's chair, a self-assembly-kit. Designer: Hans J. Wegner, 1944

were each assembled from four pieces of birch plywood: two upright pieces intersecting to function as front and rear legs, a seat and a backrest. The rear "legs" also supported the back. The crossed configuration of the chair base corresponded to the cross-shaped section of the building's concrete supporting pillars.<sup>48</sup> Of an entirely different character but also made of wooden slabs, the children's furniture ensemble by the The Hague designer Cor Alons dates from 1926. The chairs, painted red, black and white and clearly inspired by De Stijl, mark the transition of Alons from the relatively traditional Hague School to functionalism.<sup>39</sup> (Fig.19) Children's furniture similarly consisting of lacquered wooden planks was designed by the architect and furniture designer Hendrik Wouda, a colleague of Alons. The Art Deco style ensemble, fabricated by the firm Pander en Zonen from The Hague, consisted of child-size chairs, an armchair, a bench, a table and two cupboards. They were clearly finished in colours although the exact colours cannot be distinguished in the monochrome photographs. Unlike Alons's ensemble, Wouda rounded off all the corners of the furniture in his design.<sup>40</sup>

The children's furniture discussed so far may be described as serious and functional, the only light-hearted note being perhaps a touch of colour. A child's chair in a form such as a teddy bear or a muppet with a toothbrush and toothpaste was an almost exclusively post war phenomenon<sup>41</sup>, although there were a few earlier examples. A pars pro toto for the latter is the informal design by the Italian illustrator, graphic artist, children's magazine editor and incidental children's furniture designer Antonio Rubino (1880-1964). In 1928, he designed a small chair as part of a nursery en-

semble, probably on behalf of the department store La Rinascente. The chair resembled one of his cartoon characters, integrated into a simple four legged wooden chair as though inviting its user to sit on the figure's lap. The cheerful cartoon character and its bright red, black and yellow colours could be relied on to appeal to a small child.<sup>42</sup> (Fig.20)

As mentioned earlier in this article, miniature versions of adult furniture are not the same as child-oriented design, but are in the first instance targeted at the market. A design aimed at a specific child may be considered the opposite of this, regardless of whether it remains a unique object or is later put into production. Such furniture was often designed for the family of a client friend or of the manufacturer himself. The Dutch designer and manufacturer Willem Hendrik Gispen, mentioned above, had a wooden cradle made for his own child in 1918. It was then still in the expressionistic Amsterdam School style, but later, in 1935 he designed a more austere cradle for the child of friends, with wooden panels and a steel tube frame. In 1922, the already mentioned Dutch designer, Piet Zwart, had designed a cradle for his clients, the Bruinzeel-Verkade family for whom he was later to design his famous kitchen ensemble. Zwart's cradle was a simple wicker basket supported on a frame of metal gas tubing connected by elbow fittings. The use of gas tubing is surprising, for its application in any furniture let alone a cradle was novel, particularly in 1922.<sup>44</sup> Later use of steel tube for cradles, such as that by Gispen or of Mario Ridolfi<sup>45</sup> in 1933, remained an exception. These objects were unique items, not intended for mass production or commerce. Matters could have taken a different



course. The well-known Danish furniture designer Hans J. Wegner designed in 1944 a child's chair to celebrate the occasion of the baptism of Peter, son of his friend, the designer and businessman Børge Mogensen. The chair took the form of a simple self-assembly kit consisting of four parts: two side pieces constituting the legs and armrests, the backrest and the seat, all with a smooth finish and rounded corners. The idea was that the child can assemble the chair unaided, or at least partially, treating the separate pieces as playthings – entirely in accordance with Montessori principles. Mogensen, director of the furniture company FDB, Association of Danish Consumer Organization appreciated the qualities of the chair and asked Wegner to design an accompanying child's table. Both items went into production under the name Peter's Chair and Table.<sup>46</sup> (Fig.21)

Gerrit Rietveld also designed furniture for the children of some of his customers, in particular for the Schelling and Jesse families. About half of the 17 or so children's furniture items were made for specific children. Not much is known about the potential of these designs for commercial exploitation. But Rietveld was an independent furniture maker. He sometimes made and sold multiple copies of a given chair design, and he collaborated with the interior design company Metz & Co from the late 1920s onwards. Rietveld made most of his children's furniture between 1918 and 1925. The designs became sporadic in the 1930s, unsurprisingly considering his gradual shift of interest from furniture to architecture in that period. The first design Rietveld made was a cradle for the daughter of the architect H.G.J. Schelling, born in May 1918. This cradle is not yet recognizable as a characteris-

tic Rietveld design, but had more Amsterdam School traits as did the accompanying commode. A combination of a playpen and a high chair for the same child, Johanna Karin Schelling, followed in 1918-19. (Fig.22.1,2) These items by this time bore the mark of Rietveld's new aesthetic. The child's chair was the first Rietveld object to appear in the magazine *De Stijl*, in 1919.<sup>47</sup> (Fig.23.1) It was accompanied by his own commentary, which included the statement, "Given the declared requirements – comfortable, stable sitting, adjustable in height, washable, not too heavy but strong – the aim was regularity as an unmistakable expression of the thing itself, without frivolous details."<sup>48</sup>

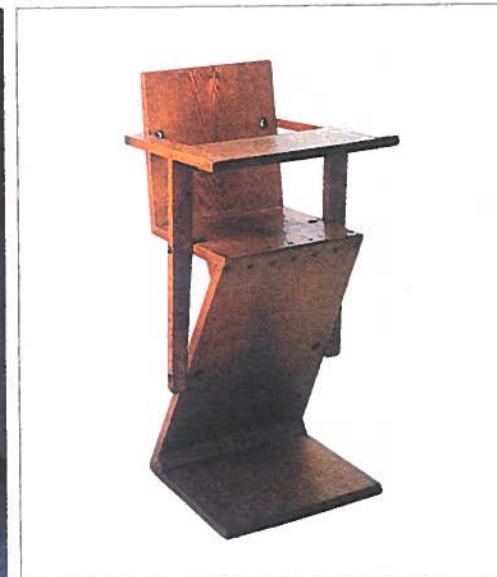
Rietveld also described the appearance and construction of the chair. The high chair had a rather self-enclosing form, but the next five children's chairs bore more similarity to the famous armchair of 1918 (later known as the Red-Blue Chair) – an additive construction of strips of wood resulting in a relatively open form. Four of these five chairs were made for specific children. The chairs adhere to the *De Stijl* aesthetic, although not all of them were in the associated primary colours.<sup>49</sup> They are brilliant designs but, apart from the overt purpose and the dimensions, they have little to do with children's needs. In one instance a child's chair was supplied with rounded extremities, on request of the client. They are not miniature versions of grown up chairs so much as demonstrations of Rietveld's design principles. There are also differences between individual copies of the same model, for Rietveld continued experimenting. The children's zigzag chair of 1940, probably manufactured by Metz & Co., is stable and has a wide, deep seat; but the children's zigzag chair



FIG.22.1,2 *Combination of high chair and playpen. Designer: Gerrit T. Rietveld, 1918*



FIG.23.1 *High chair. Designer: Gerrit T. Rietveld, 1919;* FIG.23.2 *Zigzag high chair. Designer: Gerrit T. Rietveld, 1940*





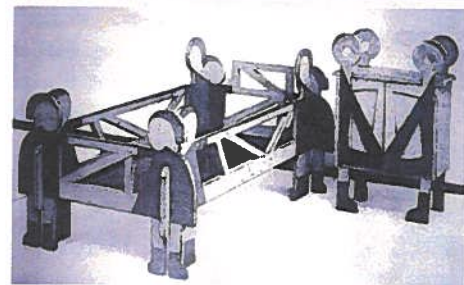


FIG.24.1 Furniture for a children's room. Designer: Giacomo Balla, 1917/18

FIG.24.2 Second edition of the children's room. Designer: Giacomo Balla, 1920

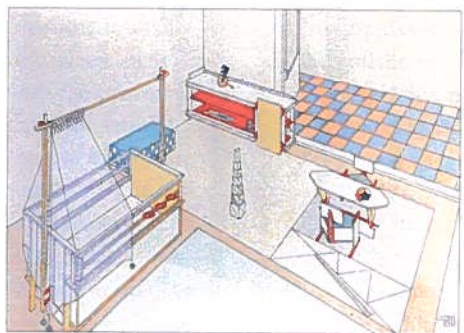


FIG.25 Children's room. Designers: Johannes Duiker and Bernard Bijvoet voor Duiker's daughters, 1923

version from Rietveld's own workshop, Jesse from 1944, had a different, tapering shape with a wide but very shallow seat. One may be forgiven for wondering whether little Jesse could actually sit on it.<sup>50</sup> (Fig.23.2)

So far this article has been about individual items of furniture, but we encounter as well completely furnished rooms for children.<sup>51</sup> The Italian futurist artist Giacomo Balla designed one such ensemble for his daughter Elica, who was born in 1914. The nursery contains a cot, cupboards, chair, two armchairs and a table. Two paintings with pictures of kittens against a background, reminiscent of Balla's futurist paintings, hang on the otherwise bare walls. The posts of the cot and the backrests of the armchairs are similarly futuristic. Apart from the table, the lightweight, easily movable child-sized items have a stylized cartoon-like figure at each corner, painted in blue, green and white. The figures can be interpreted as small children, which together with the cheerful colours makes the interior unmistakably that of a child's room. Judging from the photo, the construction was simple, a composite of interlocking flat panels.

Balla, as a regular visitor to Rome's Scuola d'Arte Educatrice of the painter Francesco Randone, an art school with an open-end curriculum, developed an interest in the artistic creativity and fantasy world of children.<sup>52</sup> At first sight this seems counter to the usual Futurist fascination with rapid motion and violent machines. But it is clear from the manifesto *Ricostruzione Futurista dell'Universo* ("Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe") drawn up by Balla and Fortunato Depero in 1915 that spontaneous, cheerful creativity was supposed to be the engine of the "reconstruction" of the universe. Reconstruction had to

start with the immediate surroundings. Balla took this precept literally, and, along with his paintings, sculptures and typography, he designed lamps, furniture and futuristic clothing (including a futuristic woollen sweater).<sup>53</sup> Balla's house in Rome was on show for some time as a Futurist visitor attraction. In this context, the attention Balla paid to the room interior of his daughter Elica (Italian word for propeller!) was not surprising. The furniture for a children's room was designed in 1917-1918. In 1920 a new version with less abstract child-figures was produced, possibly on behalf of the Marinetti and Cosmelli families, and in 1932 Balla also designed some more massive-looking "Cubist" children's furniture. (Fig.24.1,2)

The children's room by the Dutch architects Johannes Duiker and Bernard Bijvoet, published in 1923, is much more abstract.<sup>54</sup> The ensemble – a child's table with two chairs, a cradle, two cupboards, a tower of wooden blocks and a rug with asymmetric geometrical decorations – was probably designed for the nursery of Duiker's house in Zandvoort and for his daughters Louise and Fokke, born in 1920 and 1922 (Fig.25). The intention may have been commercial production, for in 1923 the furniture was exhibited together with Liberty products in the Amsterdam store of Metz & Co. It was also published in spring 1926 under the title of "chambre d'enfant" in the series "Les Arts de la Maison" edited by Christian Zervos. The furniture was made of wood lacquered in red, blue, white and yellow. Little more is known about it, except that a young neighbour bore witness to its presence in the home of the Duiker family: "My memories regarding Jan Duiker and his family in that Zandvoort period are very

sparse. But the furniture in the nursery made a big impression on me, especially the bright colours and the unusual shapes of the table and chairs."<sup>55</sup> This is rare as a child's observation about children's furniture. The neighbour boy Arthur Hofmans was seven years old in 1923, and Duiker moved to Amsterdam in 1925.

The respective contributions of the two architects, Duiker and Bijvoet, are hard to distinguish since they always cooperated on drawings until 1925. They are noted in Dutch architectural history as pioneers of modern architecture, in particular Duiker's Open Air School design in Amsterdam<sup>56</sup> and the Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum. The drawing of the nursery is sparing and geometrical, although hardly functionalist in spirit: it is too ornamental in colour and shape for that, especially the table and two chairs. A more plausible source of inspiration is the then flourishing De Stijl movement and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, on whom Duiker and Bijvoet modelled their work at the start of their career. But I doubt if that mattered to the neighbour boy!

Much more furniture for children was certainly designed by the avant-garde between the World Wars, but information about it is fairly scarce. The furniture presented here actually presents a sober picture. The designers and architects were generally occupied with the development of their own ideas, and their personal stylistic hallmarks are always visible in the resulting children's furniture designs. That is logical, of course, but it would be wrong to speak of design for children if a chair is merely the result of miniaturization. Other designers who created separate designs for children nonetheless based their designs on



concepts from the adult world. The children's furniture designs by Kramer and Schuster, for example, are patterned on their Frankfurter Volksmöbel: simple wooden furniture designed for municipal housing in Frankfurt. That they and others based their principles on the fundamentals of Maria Montessori is noteworthy but not illogical, for the avant-garde's pursuit of innovation was not directed solely at their own métier but at all the new insights of the period that seemed relevant – in this case including the new pedagogy. The outcome was sensible but sometimes dull children's furniture. In ideal cases, the design achieved a unification of architecture, furniture and education, as in Terragni's kindergarten. His chairs harmonized with the architecture but were in no way special or original. Furniture design was generally conventional, not only in the case of children's furniture. Special designs arise not exclusively from a creative impulse but also from an extraneous stimulus. We can thank the nursery ensembles by Balla and by Duiker & Bijvoet to the birth of their children. Finally, we must return to Rietveld. It is unknown whether he concerned himself to any extent with pedagogy, and as for comfortable sitting, he regarded an active posture as a requisite. He followed his own counsel. Rietveld's furniture for children is a marvellous document of his artistic development, but apart from scale (and apart from the high chairs) it bears little relation to children's needs.

It is a different matter for children, however. Their concept of beauty and comfort is not the same as an adult's. They take a different attitude to practical usage. You sit on the chair for a moment, and then turn it over so it changes into a car or a sailing boat!

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Translation from Dutch to English by V.I.C. Joseph

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See: e.g. Alexander von Vegesack (ed.): *Kid Size. The Material World of Childhood*, catalogue of Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein – Milan 1997; Laura Kaptein, Wim Prinsen: *Kinderstoelen*, catalogue of Nationale Vlechtsmuseum, Noordwolde 2009; J. Kinchin, A. O'Connor (eds.): *Century of the Child: Growing by Design*, catalogue of Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012; Barbara Makowski (ed.): *Kindermöbel + Spielobjekte*, Köln 1973; Eva B. Ottilinger (ed.): *Zappel, Philipp! Kindermöbel eine Designgeschichte*, Wien, Köln, Weimar 2007; Aidan O'Connor and Elna Svenle: *Century of the Child. Nordic Design for Children 1900 to Today*, catalogue Vandalorum Museum, Värnamo 2014

<sup>2</sup> Jiří Uhlíř: *Thonet, Porýní-Videň-Morava*, Olomouc 2001, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander von Vegesack: *op.cit.*, p.238.

<sup>4</sup> German translation: *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes*, Samuel Fischer Verlag, Berlin 1920. English translation: *The Century of the Child*, Putnam, New York/London 1909.

<sup>5</sup> Jutta Oldiges: *Maria Montessoris Konzept der vorbereiteten Umgebung – "Der Raum als bildende Lebenswelt"*, in Alexander von Vegesack, *op.cit.*, p. 175-181.

<sup>6</sup> See: Franziska Bollerey: *Apropos Kindergärten*, pp.117-143 and Katharina Hövelmann: *Eine „Welt der Kinder“ – Die Innenraumgestaltung des Montessori-Kindergartens von Friedl Dicker und Franz Singer im Goethehof in Wien*, pp. 81-97. Both in: Eselsöhren. *Journal of History of Art, Architecture and Urbanism*. Vol. III. 2020. No. 1+2. *Kid-Size. From Toy, to Table, to Town*. Spielzeug, Möbel, Stadt

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Lotz: *Wie richte ich meine Wohnung ein?*, Berlin 1930, p.151. See: Nicola von Albrecht and Imke Volkers: *Geschmack in der Kiste – Lernen vom Werkbund in this edition of Eselsöhren*

<sup>8</sup> Paul Bromberg: *Practische woninginrichting*, Amsterdam 1933, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> See: Franziska Bollerey: *'Kein Sein ohne Spiel'*, discussing the topic of playing with blocks in this edition of Eselsöhren

<sup>10</sup> The Dutch consumers' organization conducted a study of high chairs in 2017, for example, assuming an age range from 6 to 32 months.

<sup>11</sup> André Koch: W.H. Gispen, Rotterdam 2005, p.143. A slightly lower version existed for ages up to 2 years.

<sup>12</sup> See: *Century of the Child. Nordic Design for Children. 1900 to today*, catalogue, Vandalorum Museum, Värnamo 2014, pp. 126/127

<sup>13</sup> Jiří Uhlíř: *Thonet-Mundus a ti druží, Újezd u Brna 2011*, p. 67, 70.

<sup>14</sup> Jiří Uhlíř 2001 *op.cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>15</sup> See: *Thonet catalogue Thonet Stahlrohrmöbel, 1930-31*; Alexander von Vegesack: *Deutsche Stahlrohrmöbel*, Munich 1986, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> See: Magdalena Droste, Manfred Ludewig: *Marcel Breuer, Cologne 2001*, p. 50-51.

<sup>17</sup> In the Netherlands, the firms Cirkel, Gispen (models 250-254) and Elmar Berkovich for Metz, among others; in Czechoslovakia, the firms Robert Slezák (models 212¼, 213¾) and Hynek Gottwald; in Switzerland, the firm Embru which produced the rocking chair by Werner Max Moser and the child's cot by Max Ernst Haefeli; in Italy, the firm Columbus; etc.

<sup>18</sup> Werner Hoffmann: *Neue Raumkunst*, Stuttgart 1930, p. 88; Otakar Máčel: *2100 Metal Tubular Chairs*, Rotterdam 2006, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> See: Christoph Grafe: *Light, Air, Lights and Fairies. Giuseppe Terragni's Asilo d' infanzia in Como*. In: Eselsöhren, *op.cit.*, pp.73-80

<sup>20</sup> See: Raffaella Crespi: *Giuseppe Terragni Designer*, Milan 1983, fig.44.

<sup>21</sup> See: Otakar Máčel 2006, *op.cit.*, p. 55-56 for a typological review.

<sup>22</sup> It is the SS33 made by DESTA in 1931-32 and by Thonet from 1933 on – see: Otakar Máčel: *Hans Luckhardt, Stahlrohrmöbel*, Galerie Ulrich Fiedler Berlin 2015, p. 13-15.

<sup>23</sup> They resemble model B306-0, produced only in 1932 without attribution to Le Corbusier. See: Alexander von Vegesack, *op.cit.*, p.105. The Portuguese version was made by the firm Martins & Irmãos Teixeira.

<sup>24</sup> See: João Paulo Martins (ed.): *Furniture for Public Buildings in Portugal*, catalogue of Museu do Design en da Moda, Lisbon 2014, p. 10-17.

- <sup>25</sup> See: Juliet Kinchin, op.cit., pp. 48/49, 78, 100-101, 105-107. Alexander von Vegesack, 1997, p. 177-179, 186, 290.
- <sup>26</sup> Georg Schrom, Stefanie Trauttmansdorff: 2xBauhaus in Wien. Franz Singer, Friedl Dicker, Vienna 1988, pp. 63-70; See: Katharina Hövelmann, op.cit.,
- <sup>27</sup> Jutta Oldiges, op.cit., p. 180.
- <sup>28</sup> See: Siebenbrodt, Michael (ed.): Alma Siedhoff-Buscher. Eine neue Welt für Kinder, Weimar 2004; Hans Maria Wingler: Das Bauhaus, Cologne 2002, p. 305
- <sup>29</sup> Paul Bromberg, op.cit., p. 75.
- <sup>30</sup> For Dieckmann, see: Alexander von Vegesack (ed.): Erich Dieckmann, catalogue, Vitra Design Museum, 1990, pp. 12, 13, 52, 53, 82, 83, 120-123.
- <sup>31</sup> See: Claude Lichtenstein (ed.): Ferdinand Kramer, Giessen 1991, p. 161, 173; Alexander von Vegesack, 1997, op.cit., p. 290.
- <sup>32</sup> See: Wilhelm Lotz, op.cit., p. 151. Walter Knoll was the father of Hans Knoll, founder of Knoll International.
- <sup>33</sup> See: Jutta Oldiges, op.cit., p. 179.
- <sup>34</sup> Yvonne Brentjes: Piet Zwart 1885-1977. Vormingeneur, Zwolle 2008, p. 263.
- <sup>35</sup> Juliet Kinchin, op.cit., p. 105.
- <sup>36</sup> See: Franziska Bollerey: Der Neue Schulbau. In: Eselsohren, op.cit., pp. 145-168
- <sup>37</sup> See: Acier 1937, no. 1.
- <sup>38</sup> Juliet Kinchin, op.cit., p. 118; Charlotte and Peter Fiell: 1000 Chairs, Cologne 2000, p. 217.
- <sup>39</sup> Cor Alons, catalogue, Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague 1962, cat. no. 48
- <sup>40</sup> Paul Bromberg, op.cit., p. 73. More about Zwart's tubular steel design see C. van den Bruinhorst, Typotekisch interieur, BA scriptie, Leiden University 2014-2015; Y. Brentjes, op.cit., p. 89.
- <sup>41</sup> Alexander von Vegesack, 1997, op.cit., p. 264.
- <sup>42</sup> See: <http://www.pencil/gallery.php?210411928444>; M.P. Maino: Italy, the Unruly Child, in: Juliet Kinchin, op.cit., p. 69.
- <sup>43</sup> Mienke Simon Thomas (ed.): Gipsen Specials, catalogue, Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 2016, p. 37 and pp. 84/85.
- <sup>44</sup> Yvonne Brentjes, op.cit., p. 89.
- <sup>45</sup> Ridolfi presented the cradle at the fifth Triennial of Milan (1933). Roberto Aloï: L'Arredamento

moderno, Milan 1934, illus. 349.

- <sup>46</sup> Christian Holmsted Olesen: Peter's Chair. In: Aidan O'Connor and Elna Svenle: op.cit., pp. 74/75
- <sup>47</sup> Marijke Küper and Ida van Zijl: Gerrit Th. Rietveld. Het volledige werk (Complete Oeuvre), catalogue, Centraalmuseum Utrecht 1992, nos. 31-34, p. 71-73.
- <sup>48</sup> De Stijl 1919, volume 2 no. 9, p. 109, annexe XVIII.
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