

UNITY IN THREE

Myren, the Danish word for Ant, is the name of 'Arne Jacobsen's (1902-1971) most famous design'. I fell in love with the three-legged Ant chair in the 1990s when I began to learn more about Jacobsen's designs thanks to my Danish partner – who thinks of Jacobsen as somewhat of a hero.

According to Kjeld Vindum, The Ant (conceived in 1951 and produced in 1952) marked 'the beginning, the starting point of all his major works in furniture. The chairs – and it was chairs – which gave Arne Jacobsen an international reputation as a furniture designer'. The Ant became the predecessor to a stable of organically shaped chairs: The Swan; The Egg; The Tongue; The Drop and The Pot.

Jacobsen's personal, softened expression of hard-edged Modernism is defined in the sexy, curvilinear form of The Ant. Vindum tells us this is a corollary of its manufacturing technique:

"In order to mould the double-curved seat shell in one piece, it was necessary to narrow it at the joint between seat and back. This was the technical argument for the characteristic waisted profile which was to give the chair its name: The Ant. But this narrowing and the three legs of the tubular steel frame are also expressions of the need to minimise the use of materials – a characteristic of Arne Jacobsen's works from that period."³

It is Jacobsen's direction towards reduction, notable in the three legs of the Ant chair (and in his cutlery designed in 1957), that makes his work especially exciting. Vindum tells us that "despite heavy pressure, Arne Jacobsen refused to supply The Ant with four legs, but a four-legged version was put into production after his death"⁴. This was a disrespectful mistake, the three legs – in part – capture The Ant's playful personality and inimitable form.

Top, Number certificate for Arne Jacobsen Centenary Package, 2002, Fritz Hansen and Louis Poulsen.
Bottom, Unity Carving, Origin unknown.



To mark the one hundred year anniversary of Arne Jacobsen's birth in 2002, the Danish furniture and lighting manufacturers Fritz Hansen and Louis Poulsen collaborated to produce the ultimate collectors piece, a limited edition centenary package made up of: "An egg-shaped, three-legged table with a thin top in black lazured ash veneer on angled chromed steel legs. 3 three-legged Ant chairs in black lazured laminated, moulded ash veneer with chromed steel legs. A Stelling pendant [lamp] with shade in blown opal three-layered glass."⁵

My partner and I bought, and revere the centenary package. However, something appeared unbalanced. The third chair always sat vacant. On a subliminal level it suggested asymmetry – fundamental to our work as graphic designers – could somehow be extended to our relationship. And so in 2004, we declared our partnership open, and it wasn't long before we met our third partner. To friends this quasi-polygamy was unorthodox, but for us it made for harmonious asymmetry.

The following year at a celebration of African culture in London's east-end, while browsing an art stall, I found an intriguing carving. Made from one piece of wood, the three interlocking, movable figures spoke of the united relationship I had with my two partners. The stallholder explained it was a Unity Carving, symbolising the African struggle for freedom and the unity of the family. I fell in love again. I bought it, the price was negligible.

The Unity Carving's lack of provenance, unlike The Ant, doesn't trouble me. It has no need for validation, for placement, its mystery is its charm. Website purveyors of African objects reinforce my belief that "it takes highly skilled artisans to create them."⁶

Below, Myren (The Ant), 1952 (Reproduction, 2002), Designer: Arne Jacobsen.



Certainly the link between The Ant – a mass-produced, First World piece of industrial design – and the Unity Carving – a handmade decorative craft object from the Third World – is in the skill of their respective creators. I value these objects, The Ant for its physical expression of the vision and unique aesthetic of its modernist, obsessive designer. The Unity Carving for its Wabi-Sabi qualities – its imperfections, its anonymity and unconventional beauty.

My ownership of The Ant and the Unity Carving comments on my embracing of the unconventional, centering around an axis of three. A three-legged chair, a three-way relationship encapsulated in a modest and asymmetric wood carving. Unity for me lies in three.

End notes. Vindum, K. (1999) "The Ant" in Danish Design Centre (ed) Arne Jacobsen Architect & Designer. Copenhagen: Danish Design Centre, p.48.
Vindum, K. (1999) "The Ant and the organic form" in Danish Design Centre (ed) Arne Jacobsen Architect & Designer. Copenhagen: Danish Design Centre, p.8, Ibid. pp.8-9, Vindum, K. (1999) "The Ant" in Danish Design Centre (ed) Arne Jacobsen Architect & Designer. Copenhagen: Danish Design Centre, p.48.
"Arne Jacobsen's 100 years – centenary package" Scandinavian Design.com <http://www.scandinaviandesign.com/arnejacobsen/0201.htm>