

Lie back and think of Denmark

Poul Kjaerholm cast an ambiguous shadow over Scandinavian design. Not as famous as his contemporaries, he was in some sense quintessentially Scandinavian: strong, sober and self-effacing. **Johanna Lenander** finds out why he was built to last

The work of Danish furniture designer Poul Kjaerholm is the embodiment of Scandinavian modern. Its serene lines and function-friendly forms bespeak high ideals and careful craftsmanship, values that trigger nostalgia in many.

Kjaerholm fans, however, argue that the most important qualities of his work have nothing to do with the past. 'The strange thing is his designs look like they could have been created yesterday,' says the New York-based architect Michael Sheridan, who is an expert on Danish design.

Sheridan explores this timeless quality in the first museum retrospective of Kjaerholm's work, at the modern art museum Louisiana, outside Copenhagen. The exhibition, which features 75 pieces of furniture and more

than 150 drawings and sketches, follows Kjaerholm's career from his early days as a young cabinetmaker to international design icon.

Kjaerholm, who died of lung cancer in 1980 at age 51 (he smoked three packs a day, according to Sheridan), designed furniture up until his death and was a professor of furniture design at the Copenhagen School of Arts and Crafts from 1952 to 1956 and at the Royal Danish Academy of Arts until 1976.

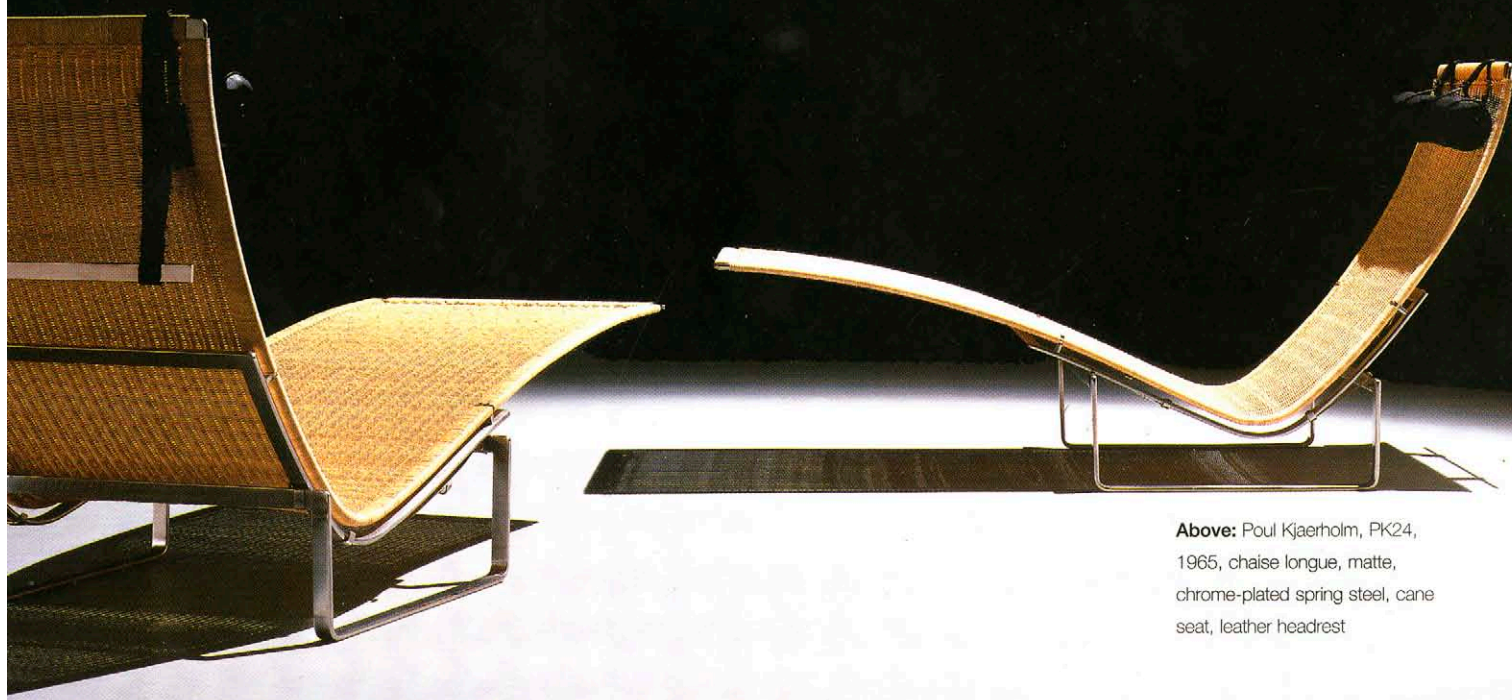
Although not as well known as his contemporaries Hans Wegner, Arne Jacobsen and Verner Panton, he is revered in design circles. So why do connoisseurs find Kjaerholm's oeuvre better and more time resistant than the designs of Charles and Ray Eames and Mies van der Rohe?

Kjaerholm once said, 'I'd rather

express the character of the material than my own character' – and Sheridan thinks the secret behind his greatness was his lack of design ego and respect for his material.

'He came from a long tradition of craftsmanship,' says Sheridan, pointing to the young Kjaerholm's training as a cabinetmaker. 'He saw himself as a furniture architect, not a furniture designer. His work had nothing to do with stylised design. For Mies and the Bauhaus, furniture was all about form and visual effect.'

William Lee of New York's Modern Link, a design collective and shop that carries vintage mid-century furniture as well as its own line, finds the high quality of Kjaerholm's work desirable. 'If you look closely at work by the American modernists you find flaws,' he says, ▶



Above: Poul Kjaerholm, PK24, 1965, chaise longue, matte, chrome-plated spring steel, cane seat, leather headrest

◀ 'But with Kjaerholm and the other Scandinavians, you discover more and more beauty. It's not a superficial, form-driven style.

Kjaerholm's furniture looks even better now that it has aged, as the patina of time adds character to the light and sleek shapes. His obsessive attention to construction and detail made the stuff practically indestructible. Each component was hand made.

'In the beginning of his career he was very driven by the socialist ideal of making furniture that was accessible for everyone, says Sheridan. 'It ended up being very expensive, but he justified that by saying it was good value in terms of longevity.

To many design fans, Kjaerholm and his contemporaries are still the most radical creators to come out of Scandinavia. While Italy, France and Holland have moved on to produce contemporary design innovators, Scandinavia seems stuck in Wegner, Kjaerholm, Jacobsen and Aalto.

Is the shadow of Nordic modern movement so long it has stifled the design climate in Sweden, Denmark and Finland? Sheridan thinks the greatness of Kjaerholm *et al* was partly due to social and political forces.

Scandinavia transformed from agriculture-based economies to industrialised, urban societies in the first half of the 20th century. 'The rise of Danish design and Nordic modernism, Sheridan says, 'resulted from a unique moment in history and the overlapping of different ways of seeing the world.

The Swedish artist Jonas Nobel, of the experimental and performance-oriented design collective Uglycute, puts it more simply. 'The social-democratic governments were busy creating a new society. The modernists' furniture fit in with that ideal.

That large-scale, collective vision, Nobel says, is no longer relevant. 'Today our political life is scattered and there are a multitude of influences from all over the place, which personally think is healthy.

Sheridan prefers the outsider's perspective: 'The idea of Nordic modernism is rooted in a Nordic culture that is different from everywhere else and



Left: Poul Kjaerholm PK22, 1956, light ear chair, spring steel and canvas, leather or cane; PK61, 1956, table with slate top.

'If you look closely, you don't find flaws, as you would with American modernism just more and more beauty'

today that difference has largely been eroded. But if Scandinavian societies have changed, how come their design scene hasn't changed with them?

There are signs of hope. Nobel, who teaches at Stockholm's Konstfack and Beckman design schools, says the modernist ideology has finally started to subside in the classrooms, giving way to a whole new wave of Scandinavian expressionism.

'A lot has happened in the past six years. There are a lot of designers out

there who are examining new ways to work with craft and material. It's partly because people like me are beginning to show up on school faculties. And then in 20 years we'll have a rebellion against that. Which is exactly the way it should be.

'The Work of Poul Kjaerholm'
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