

EVER AU COURANT

It's "Birth of the Cool." It's the Chanel suit. Sophisticated and simple, aloof and inviting, prewar or post-9/11, it transcends conventions of time and taste, seamlessly weaving through decades of design whims and watersheds. And after over 70 years as one of the most iconic expressions of modernity, the Barcelona Chair shows no signs of aging.

A collaboration between architects Mies Van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, the Barcelona Chair was designed to serve as seating for the King and Queen of Spain in the German Pavilion at the 1929 International Exhibition in Barcelona. The Pavilion – Van der Rohe's futuristic union of steel, plate glass, marble and travertine – called for equally innovative thrones for the royals. Van der Rohe and Reich drew their inspiration from the footstools of Roman magistrates and folding chairs of the Pharaohs to create the sleek seat that quickly gained the reputation as a design worthy of kings.

Style connoisseurs know the original design featured bolted metal frames and pigskin upholstery; the chair we know today is the result of Van der Rohe's 1950 redesign incorporating stainless steel and bovine leather. But the compulsion for detail that began with the originals continues with Knoll, the licensed manufacturer since 1948, and earned the chair a MoMA Award in 1977. Each piece is upholstered with leather sourced from Alpine cattle and requires two days to hand sew the cushions from 126 pieces of leather cut from one hide. The frames are welded in single piece construction, hand-buffed to a pristine mirror finish and stamped with Van der Rohe's signature – the mark of authenticity in a world of knockoffs.

"He paid close attention to detail on this piece," says Carrie Kirby Rodman, a designer

with Twin Cities-based Martha O'Hara Designs. "When you pay attention to quality and craftsmanship it becomes a classic." Rodman has typically used the piece in contemporary settings but says it blends gracefully with other genres. "There are ways to work it in," she says. "It's a great piece for the corner of a bedroom. You can soften it with a pretty throw or your color choice." With over 800 color options, the Barcelona Chair can slip quietly into almost any décor.

And it's crept into our collective cultural psyche as the bastion of tasteful minimalism. It cradles Daniel Craig's well-toned tush in *Casino Royale*. It relaxes in President Charles Logan's retreat on the FOX hit *24*. "Start looking and you'll be surprised where you see it in everyday life," says Carrie. "It's a beautiful backdrop and that's why everyone uses it." Whether in a mansion or museum, a boardroom or big budget production, the Barcelona chair is always where we'd like to be. ■ **Ivy A. Gracie**

