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Mies van der Rohe Chair

RISD Museum

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I'm Dietrich Neumann. I teach the History of Modern Architecture at Brown University. One of my favorite pieces in this collection is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Cantilever chair. For me it's one of the key examples of Modernist design. I think Mies talked about reducing things to what he called *beinahe nichts* which is German for "almost nothing." I think here you have a chair that is reduced to almost nothing.

The idea of using metal tubing for chairs like the ones you see here was in the air in the mid 1920s, so he was certainly not the only one experimenting with it.

There was a young Dutch designer named Mart Stam who was a designer and architect. He had a meeting with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Stuttgart on November 22nd, 1926. He has worked on a chair that had the central idea of being a Cantilever chair, which means that the seat is only supported on one end. He had put it together out of tubes, pipes, and pipe fittings; it was very angular. He had supported the tubes inside with solid rods of steel and painted the whole thing, and he showed it to Mies in a little sketch at that meeting in November 1926 to Stuttgart.

Mies took Mart Stam's idea of a Cantilever chair and made it much more elegant, and in way more beautiful, more comfortable, and more interesting one has to say, because the stiff angular design of those tubes and pipe fittings that Mart Stam had developed was now replaced by a curve and by a very precisely calculated tube of steel that ended up being resilient. That's the big difference. Of course there were later court cases about who had really invented the Cantilever chair, and it was decided in Mies's favor because he had added something really new: the idea that this was almost acting like a spring, if you'd like. And indeed when you sit on it you'll feel that it goes down a little bit. Mies was always fond of talking about how it would help you get up because it was like a spring. Mies was a little heavyset in his later years, so it was very important for him to get out of these chairs.

So Mies managed to put a chair together that was still of course based on this initial idea of not having support for the seat in the back, but added elegance, beauty, and comfort to it.