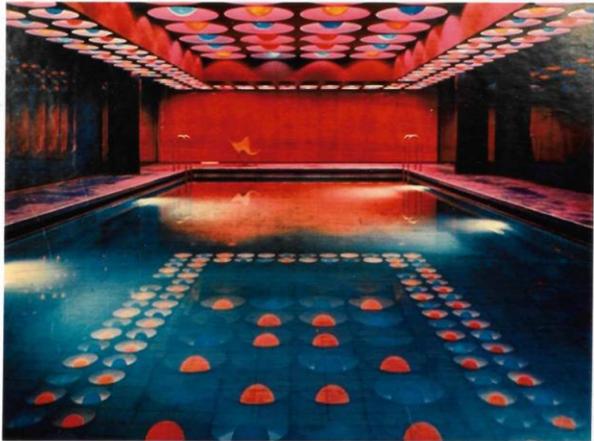
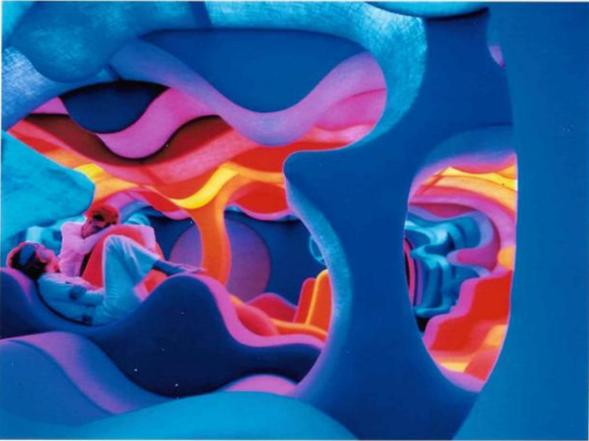


# **“CONE HEART CHAIR”, 1959 by Verner Panton Spotlight Paper by Bob Schneeweiss, 2017**



The first time I saw the Paton **Cone Heart Chair** was at the Palm Springs Art Museum Palm Desert in 2016. There it stood on display with a photo of Donna McMillian with her leg joyfully extended. The chair was welcoming and evoked a happy mood. We were invited to sit in it and I have a great picture of me smiling from this chair. Little did I know that the Paton Cone Heart Chair was a revolution.

Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Elvis Presley, and Verner Panton's, ideas and accomplishments were met with great skepticism and vilification by the establishment. But time and perspective proved them to be forward thinking, and imprinted the direction of their areas of expertise and greater society.

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## **Verner Panton: Denmark 1926-1998**

Panton was born on the island of Funen in the municipality of Gentofte, an affluent coastal community about 110 miles from the Danish capital of Copenhagen. Panton's hometown is an important port and one of the hubs of the Danish Modern furniture design and manufacturing industry.

Denmark was invaded by Germany in 1940 and remained under Nazi occupation for the entire War. Life in Denmark was austere in that period, but the Danes adapted. By age 24 Verner became active in the Danish resistance movement. There is no clear proof that Panton was an active saboteur in the closing of the port of Odense; but his revolutionary thoughts and designs might point in that direction.

Panton's parents wanted him to be an architect and encouraged him to attend the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Design and Conservation. Matured by his war experience, he followed that curriculum at the renowned 250-year-old academy. He was exposed to community that studied painting, sculpture, graphics, architecture, and photography; it was an incubator for new ideas. The Post-War environment also became a place for liberation from much of the past. Denmark was in great need of new housing, public services, furniture, and domestic products. It was imperative that things developed rapidly.

At the Academy, Panton was mentored by Arne Jacobsen, an architect 22 years his senior. Jacobsen had many large commissions and was considered one of the leaders of the Danish Modern furniture movement. He was experimenting with plastic and how it might be molded, and strengthened, for use in furniture. After graduating in 1951 Panton went to work for Jacobsen in his architectural firm, and was invited to work on the **Ant Chair**. The chair was made of veneer and plastic. It later entered greater production composed of one molded piece of plastic serving as the back/seat and tubular steel for legs. It was lightweight stable, stackable, and minimized the tangling of the user's feet.

The **Ant Chair** had a long and lasting imprint on Panton's thinking and his career. He soon realized that he was more interested in developing designs for furniture and roomscales, than the creation of structures. Still young and looking for how he might develop his career, he purchased a Volkswagen bus and converted it into a mobile graphic studio. He traveled extensively throughout Europe acquainting himself with international design, developing contacts of follow designers, manufacturers, and retailers.

In 1955 the renowned Danish furniture manufacturer **Fritz Hansen** produced Paton's **Tivoli and Bachelor chairs**; the former was designed for a restaurant in Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens. It was stackable and could be used indoors and outdoors. The **Tivoli** had a tubular metal frame and the seat and back were made of a vinyl coated black

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cord. This chair was awarded the Best Classic Design at the Scandinavian Furniture Fair in 2015 by Denmark’s premier home magazine **Bo Bedre**.

Now recognized for his designs, Panton began to experiment with new ideas and veered from what is the minimalist, clean pure lines, employing wood and other natural materials in Danish modern furniture. The break with the traditionalist came when the **Cone Chair** was revealed in 1958. It takes its shape from the geometric figure for which it is named. The padded shell forms the back and the armrests, and together with the soft seat cushion, creates an exceptionally comfortable armchair. It is mounted on an elegant stainless steel swivel cruciform base that allows the chair to be turned 360°. The chair was designed for Panton’s parents’ restaurant on the island of Funen. Months later when the chair was displayed in a gallery in New York’s SoHo district it caused such a commotion that traffic stopped, and police had to be employed to manage the crowds that wanted to see and sit in it.

## **CONE HEART CHAIR**

Produced by Vitra 1959

Body: GRP (glassfibre reinforced plastic laminated),

Upholstery: Lightly padded with polyurethane foam. Seat cushion. Red wool fabric.

Base: Stainless steel cruciform base, satin finish

Glides: Plastic

40.5”W X 24.5” D X 35”H seat height 15”

Promised gift of Donna and Cargill MacMillen, Jr.

The **Cone Heart Chair** is a natural development and the next step on the developmental timeline after the **Cone Chair**. Panton recalled that the idea for the cone and the heart cone arose from sketches where the profile let the seat slope down from the back and attach itself to the foot of the chair at an acute angle. Panton’s challenge was with the balance and ergonomics of the chair.

Work done in the war efforts with glass fibre (fiber) and his own experimenting freed Panton to create models in the shapes that had not existed before in furniture.

As its predecessor, the **Cone Heart Chair** rises from the stainless steel cruciform base into a silhouette of a heart. The large projecting wings of this comfortable chair create a modern interpretation of the classic wing chair.

Some critics were upset with Panton’s departure from the traditional, and there were designers who made remarks about both the **Cone** and the **Cone Heart Chairs**. Professor of product design at the University of Design in Karlsruhe, Volker Albus said: “Panton was the most Italian Scandinavian, his chair does not follow function, it follows fun.” This was not meant as a compliment. Albus thought both the shape and the red color were too unrestrained. Manufacturers who refused to make the chair told Panton

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“it can’t even be called a chair, it has no legs”. A well know furniture dealer even suggested organizing a collection and paying Panton to stay out of an important trade show. Maybe the most amusing criticism of the **Cone Heart Chair** was that it was too sexy. That statement makes me think of the song “The Sex is In the Heel” from the Broadway show Kinky Boots. The **Cone Heart Chair** under its red dress is indeed sexy.

Panton’s response to the positive and negative remarks was to continue in the belief that all his creations should be both geometric and organic, and should evoke emotion. This was evident when I sat in the chair at The Galen. There is an immediate response to the designer’s intent. My own experience was to smile, sit back, and to pose for a picture. I know I was enjoying something special.

Addressing the red upholstery, it was the original color of both the **Cone** and the **Cone Heart Chairs**. The color red could evoke fire, blood, energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination, passion, desire, and love. I might hypnotize the choice of red for the Cone Heart Chair is intended to emphasizes energy, strong emotion, and love.

Today the chair is sold by Vitra (the original manufacturer) in a variety of colors black, blue, tan, and brown. I do not know what Panton would think of this. Decaso an online website is currently selling a rare 1960 tobacco colored leather version of the **Cone Heart Chair**.

The **Cone Heart Chair** is currently on display in the PSAM’s “Montgomery Meets Modernism: Two Americas” exhibit. The use of molded fiberglass and plywood became prevalent in European furniture; and although Panton was not the only designer to be using these materials he raised the standard of what was considered the best in the field.

Panton’s creative designs expanded to lighting. In the PSAM collection adjacent to the **Cone Heart Chair** is the **Moon Pendant Lamp** (1960). It is made of metal with white lacquered finish and a fabric covered cord. It consists of 10 rings of diminishing size fitted on mobile bearings, so that each ring can be rotated. Arranged like a fan around the bulb, the rings can be adjusted to alter light, brightness and direction.

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## **Panton’s Impact**

From the late 1960’s until his death, Panton experienced much international recognition and success. His creative designs for lighting, and room design / roomscapes have been copied and adapted since their introduction.



The most ubiquitous of the lamps is the **Panthella Table Lamp**. The base and the shade acted as a reflector. The lamp was made of milky white acrylic and it created an effective distribution of light. Later the **Flower Pot** pendant lamp was such a success that it has been in production since 1964. There was a time when the **Flower Pot** was priced for a wide consumer market and hung over islands and counters worldwide.

Panton became the essence of cool. He had moved his career to Basel Switzerland and was connected to a greater design community. His designs were adapted and reproduced throughout the 1960s and 70s.

Hollywood also seems to have paid attention to Panton’s designs. Not satisfied to do lamps, he started designing lighting systems for entire rooms. Walls, ceilings and floors became surfaces that Panton started to light. Although he did not create the dance club for the film Saturday Night Fever (1977), the Spiegel Verlagshaus (Hamburg) swimming pool could easily be the model for that project. With pulsing lights on all surfaces the pool was a disco with water.

From the end of the 1960’s through the mid 1970’s, the chemical company Bayer rented a pleasure boat for the Cologne furniture fair and had it transformed into a temporary showroom. The main aim was to promote various synthetics products in connection with home furnishings. Verner Panton was commissioned no less than twice to design this exhibition, entitled 'Visona'. The 1970 'Visona 2' exhibition showed the Fantasy Roomscape. The room installations consisted of vibrant colors and organic forms that are one of the principal highlights of Panton's work. In terms of design history, this installation is regarded as one of the major spatial designs of the second half of the twentieth century.

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Rusty Smith and Stephen Cooper, the set designers for the Austin Powers films, have paid homage to Panton’s Visona 2. Referred to in *Variety*, they were responsible for creating a “groovy” environment for Powers to operate within. Critics of Italian designer Fabio Novembre say “he became famous by imitating every single Panton design from the Vitra chairs to the roomscales of Visona”. There can be no doubt that Mario Garbuglia was inspired by Panton when he designed the sets for the film *Barbarella*.

## **Conclusion**

In his lifetime, Panton received many awards, as well as being exhibited in major museums in Europe and the United States. His work is included in the collections of the Musee du Louvre, The Vitra Design Museum, Museum of Modern Art, The London Design Museum, German Historical Museum, and the Danish Museum of Art and Design.

Before his death in 1998, The Queen of Denmark conferred the Knight’s Cross of the Dannebrog Order upon Panton for his life’s work. 12 days after his death an exhibit *Light and Color* opened at the Traphot Museum in Kolding. But it was not until 2000 that Marianne Panton gave the Panton archives, encompassing a wealth of sketches, plans, models and files to the Vitra Design Museum for scholarly evaluation and ongoing preservation. At that time the VDM did a retrospective of Panton’s career.

Vilified as a young designer for departing from the Danish standards, Panton matured into a master of 20<sup>th</sup> century design, a modern classic of the highest order.

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