



**GRASSI**

Museum of  
Applied Arts  
Leipzig

## Press Release

### **A Chair and You**

**Exhibition 08.05.-06.10.2024 in the GRASSI Leipzig**

**With *A Chair and You*, the GRASSI Museum of Applied Arts is showing one of the world's most important private collections of chairs by over 100 artists, designers and architects from the 1960s to the present day. This extraordinary show is one of the highlights of 2024, the year in which the museum celebrates its 150th anniversary.**

**Since the late 1990s, Geneva-based entrepreneur and collector Thierry Barbier-Mueller brought together a large number of innovative and unusual chairs with a sculptural character that goes far beyond the usual typology.**

**The presentation of around 150 chairs was entrusted to the renown American artist, director and designer Robert Wilson. This exceptional scenography plunges the public into immersive worlds in which the chairs are treated as if they were the protagonists of a performing arts show. Sound, light and set design allow the public to discover this iconic design and its many variations in a unique way. Wilson critically engages with the objects and breathes life into them, giving them expressive autonomy.**

***A Chair and You* offers the visitor an "opera" in four acts and just as many stages – with a scenography in which the history of art and design from the 1960s to the present day is told through Thierry Barbier-Mueller's unique collection.**

#### **An "opera" in four acts: Presentation of the spaces**

##### **KALEIDOSCOPE SPACE**

The space remains closed. A cube whose interior is lined with mirrors serves as a showcase for the exhibits. Circular openings reveal the sculptural and metallic qualities of the chairs, which virtually melt into this reflective environment. The changing light intensifies the kaleidoscopic effect.

## **DARK SPACE**

Through a low, backlit door, dazzled visitors enter a dark and hushed room. As if floating in darkness, the chairs are revealed in turn by changing lights that give them a star-like aura. Like in a planetarium, spotlights direct our gaze to the exhibits, which are among the most striking chairs in the collection.

## **MEDIUM SPACE**

Calm, minimalism and geometry characterise the Medium Space. Straight, clean lines divide this monochrome landscape. Inspired by the formal language of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion (1929), the layout is structured by semi-transparent walls made of tulle. The open, soothing space is in dialogue with chairs that have strong architectural features. The soft and diffuse light contrasts with a metallic sound environment.

## **BRIGHT SPACE**

Islands made up of a dense network of some of the most colourful and eclectic chairs in the collection give visitors the illusion of getting lost in a forest, as if from a fantasy world. Bright colours, surprising materials, and curves predominate in this light-flooded space. The chairs have been intuitively arranged according to affinities and grouped around themes such as the animalistic, the sculptural, a pop factor, humour, or technical sophistication.

## **The Collection of Thierry Barbier-Mueller**

The chair embodies an exciting combination between aesthetics and use, a form whose range of possibilities is infinite. In the 1990s, Thierry Barbier-Mueller (1960–2023) became fascinated by the creativity, freshness and tremendous explosion of spontaneity of designers such as Ron Arad and Tom Dixon, especially in this field. His acquisitions grew spontaneously through new discoveries and encounters, resulting in a collection of over 650 chairs dating from the 1960s to the present day. Comprising about two-thirds unique pieces, prototypes, or works from limited editions, the collection reflects an interest in atypical objects, off the beaten track of industrial design. Far from wanting to put together an exhaustive and scientific corpus on the contemporary history of the chair, Barbier-Mueller was interested in everything that stood out as unique and innovative in the field. It was above all the object itself that captivated him. Its uniqueness, its plasticity, the humour it evokes, or its materiality. This collection brings together the work of internationally renowned creatives and more confidential positions, of various nationalities. It includes works by designers such as Ettore Sottsass, Isamu Noguchi, Martino Gamper and Maarten Baas as well as visual artists such as Donald Judd, Niki de Saint Phalle, Lawrence Weiner and Franz West.

A book documenting the entire collection was published in 2022. It will be available at our bookshop:

*The Spirit of Chairs. The Chair Collection of Thierry Barbier-Mueller*, October 2022, Lars Mueller Publishers GmbH, 384 pages, 927 illustrations

## Thierry Barbier-Mueller – Quotes

### A collector

"I don't think I ever became a collector. One day I simply discovered that I was one. I mean, it didn't happen as a result of a conscious trigger, it's not an engine that you set in motion or a decision that you make, but rather something that expresses and manifests itself. And which, in a way, lives within you for many reasons". *Le matin dimanche*

"Sacha Guitry spoke of "showcase" collectors and "closet" collectors. I belong more to the latter: the connection with the works and the act of collecting seem to me to be necessarily bound up with privacy and mystery." *The Spirit of Chairs*

"The years have taught me [...] that sharing with other art lovers and enthusiasts, sincerely and with simplicity, is neither hubris nor worldly vanity, but rather helps to breathe life into the artworks I have chosen to conserve. And that the resonance produced by these exchanges also enriches my life". *The Spirit of Chairs*

"I should like to confess, first of all, that I originally wasn't thinking of assembling a collection. The initial purchase of a chair by a designer—was it André Dubreuil? Ron Arad? Tom Dixon?—felt like an imperative and was followed by another, then another, like a thread that you pull and unwind slowly at first, with curiosity and caution, then with increasing speed, faster and faster, and finally, with conviction and freneticism." *The Spirit of Chairs*

### About the chairs

"A chair is a chair for one and all! Revolutionary, wacky, innovative, humorous, ironic, joyous, elegant, boring, surprising, spare, mysterious, makeshift, cheeky, brutal, sophisticated, practical, impractical, or straight-out unusable, the character of each piece is understandable to everyone." *The Spirit of Chairs*

## Robert Wilson – Biography

Born in Waco, Texas, Wilson is among the world's foremost theatre and visual artists. His works for the stage unconventionally integrate a wide variety of artistic media, including dance, movement, lighting, sculpture, music and text. His images are aesthetically striking and emotionally charged, and his productions have earned the acclaim of audiences and critics worldwide.

After being educated at the University of Texas and Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, Wilson founded the New York-based performance collective The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds in the mid-1960s, and developed his first signature works, including *Deafman Glance* (1970) and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974-1975). With Philip Glass he wrote the seminal opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976).

Wilson's artistic collaborations include many writers and musicians such as Heiner Müller, Tom Waits, Susan Sontag, Laurie Anderson, William Burroughs, Lou Reed, Jessye Norman and Anna Calvi. He has also left his imprint on masterworks such as Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Brecht/Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Goethe's *Faust*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Jean de la Fontaine's *Fables*, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Verdi's *La Traviata* and Sophocles' *Oedipus*.

Wilson's drawings, paintings and sculptures have been presented around the world in hundreds of solo and group exhibitions, and his works are held in private collections and museums throughout the world.

Wilson has been honoured with numerous awards for excellence, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination, two Premio Ubu awards, the Golden Lion of the Venice Biennale, and an Olivier Award. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as the German Academy of the Arts, and holds eight Honorary Doctorate degrees. France pronounced him Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters (2003) and Officer of the Legion of Honour (2014); Germany awarded him the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit (2014). He was honored in October of 2023 in Tokyo with the Praemium imperiale. Wilson is the founder and Artistic Director of The Watermill Center, a laboratory for the Arts in Water Mill, New York.

### **Scenography by Robert Wilson in a museum context**

In 2018, he curated and designed a large retrospective on Max Ernst, called *The Hat Makes the Man*, at the Max Ernst Museum near Cologne, Germany. In 2013 Wilson was "Artiste invite" at the Louvre Museum in Paris. In this capacity he curated and designed the exhibitions *Living Rooms* and *Lady Gaga Video Portraits*. Many of his video portraits have been shown all over the world in over 70 solo and group exhibitions since 2005, notably at PS1 New York, Hamburger Kunsthalle, ZKM, Onassis Cultural Centre and Villa Panza. In 2004 he created the exhibition *Images of the Body. The Museum Interpreted by Robert Wilson* for the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Barcelona. For the Vitra Design Museum, he designed a retrospective on designer Isamu Noguchi in 2001, which then toured internationally, including to the Noguchi Garden Museum in New York. His installation *14 Stations* was shown in 2000-2001 in Oberammergau, Germany, and at MASS MoCA.

Previous exhibition designs and website of the artist: [robertwilson.com](http://robertwilson.com)

### **Robert Wilson - Quotes**

#### **Painting with light**

„When we first met the team, the first thing we talked about was light. It reminded me of what Louis Kahn used to say when I was at architecture school: students must start with light.

(...) Light isn't something you do after you've designed an exhibition; it's an integral part of the project. Hence, we started with the lighting. In the theatre, people often laughed at me when the first thing I did was light a production. Light is structural, light is architectural, it's the element that helps us hear and see."

"I was very impressed by my meeting with Luchino Visconti in 1974. I watched him work for two hours as he painted with light. I knew from then on that one can paint with light onstage, and that's what I've been doing since. I wanted to be a painter when I was younger, but I wasn't very good. What I could do on stage, I couldn't do on canvas."

#### **Robert Wilson, collector**

"I am myself a collector. I started when I was very young. I collected flint stones. I think it comes from a compulsion or something. (...) I was about eleven years old when I received my first chair. It was a trigger to collect chairs. (...) I wasn't so interested in sitting on a chair, but I liked looking at them, and a chair for me was like a sculpture.

(...) In 1968 I started to create my first chair, which is now featured in Thierry Barbier-Mueller's collection."

### ***A Chair and You, a sound experience***

"I work with all elements at the same time. From the beginning, I think about light. I also think about the soundscape. What do I hear? What's the sound like in the first room, how is it in the second, how is it in the third? What's the last thing that I hear? On Broadway, you always have to 'start strong and end big.' In theatre, the last thing you hear or see is the most important. Sometimes, if you do something at the very end that seems right, the audience might forgive you for what you've been doing all evening!"

### **Scenography**

"Regarding the selection of objects for *A Chair and You*, I'm especially interested in how the chairs are placed. (...) Each group helps me see the other, simply because of the way they are organised. This is what is exciting about designing an exhibition. (...) I often work with counterpoint, which allows you to look at one thing against another."

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#### **Curators:**

Chantal Prod'Hom, Lausanne/ CH  
Charlotte Savolainen-Mailler, Genf/ CH

#### **Exhibition Structure and Design:**

Robert Wilson/ New York, USA

**Scenography:** Annick Lavallée-Benny/ Montreal, CA

**Lighting Design:** Marcello Lumaca/ Mailand/ IT

**Sound Design:** Dario Felli/ Rom / IT

**Personal Assistant to Robert Wilson:** Liam Krumstroh

**Project coordination GRASSI Museum of Applied Arts:** Miriam Heckhoff

**Graphics/Advertising:** kocmoc.brand/ Leipzig

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**A co-production by Fondation Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, and mudac - Museum of Contemporary Design and Applied Arts, Lausanne, adapted for the GRASSI Museum of Applied Arts.**

**mudac**

**The exhibition is under the patronage of Her Excellency Livia Leu, Ambassador of Switzerland to the Federal Republic of Germany.**



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

Schweizerische Botschaft in der  
Bundesrepublik Deutschland

**Exhibition dates:  
08.05.2023 – 06.10.2024**

**Press conference in the presence of Robert Wilson:  
Tue, 07.05.2024, 11 am**

**Opening of the exhibition in the presence of Robert Wilson:  
Tue, 07.05.2024, 7 pm**

The exhibition is accompanied by a program of events and activities.

A book documenting the entire chair collection is available in the museum bookshop:

*The Spirit of Chairs. The Chair Collection of Thierry Barbier-Mueller*, October 2022, Lars Mueller Publishers GmbH, 384 pages, 927 illustrations, 22x30cm (English/ French)  
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ISBN 978-3-03778-711-3, French

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