



Interview with Hans Eichenberger

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Interview with Hans Eichenberger
Patrizia Crivelli, design promotion, Federal Office of Culture,
and Christian Jaquet, communications consultant,
former president of the Swiss Graphic Design Foundation
Halen, Herrenschwanden near Bern,
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Patrizia Crivelli (PC)

Mr. Eichenberger, thank you for inviting Christian Jaquet, your friend of many years, and me [head of Design Promotion at the Federal Office of Culture] to your home to talk with you about your work and the thoughts behind it. As a designer, you look back on a rich and creative life. Now at the age of 90, you have been awarded the Swiss Grand Award for Design. What does that mean to you?

Hans Eichenberger (HE)

Am I the oldest? [laughs] Naturally, I'm overjoyed. That's clear. You first called my daughter and then she came and brought me flowers and told me what had been going on behind my back! It certainly comes as a great surprise. Especially for someone who is not an academic, right? But I did graduate from secondary school. I've been so lucky with the people who crossed my path. It already began when I was an apprentice, especially at the vocational school.

Christian Jaquet (CJ)

You did an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker. And where did you attend vocational school during that time?

HE

It was in Langenthal, yes, it was very good – especially with our teacher Mr. Müller, who later became the director of the vocational school in Bern. During my apprenticeship – it took 3 ½ years – I also did my military basic training. It was during the war and after doing my 17 weeks, it took me another six months to finish up my apprenticeship. There's an interesting story about the Army: they wanted to promote me to sergeant but my lieutenant was against it, he had enough bad sergeants already, he said. So I said to him, "and officers?" They didn't promote me but I later I became the youngest private first class in the Swiss Army.

PC

What did you make as an apprentice? Furniture, interior decoration and what else?

HE

Yes, all that and coffins, too. In the end I got the best grades on the final examination in Oberraargau.

CJ

Looking back, were you already thinking of doing something more progressive when you made your first pieces of furniture?

HE

Yes, I really thought then that there must be something *different*. My father was working for BIGLA, an important furniture factory in those days. They had already started manufacturing modern steel-tube furniture before the war. And I knew a young architect from the village, he was really clever! We did a lot of things together, sports, too. I learned a lot of important things from him. Afterwards I spent 1 ½ years in St. Gallen, as a draughtsman. I had a very strict boss, but he

was good. But it wasn't really satisfactory somehow and so I came home again. I found a new job in Solothurn in the field of interior architecture. One day I told my boss that I wanted to go to Paris, I had found a few addresses.

PC

Why Paris?

HE

Yes, why Paris. Paris was where Modernism was happening, and that attracted a lot of architects and graphic artists. But my language barrier was high.

PC

Where did you find these addresses in Paris?

HE

I collected them. I had addresses of the companies and the names of the people. I looked them up in Paris with my portfolio under my arm and tried to talk to them but I could barely speak French. But then, after 10 to 14 days, somebody made an appointment with me. And I found somebody who would take me.

CJ

And that was Marcel Gascoin?

HE

Yes, I found a job with him in 1950 and it was interesting. It was so soon after the war and Gascoin had commissions from the government for the reconstruction of the bombed out cities of Le Havre and Rouen. We created furniture for the people who moved into the new blocks of flats.

PC

Wasn't a certain type of furniture required? I imagine it had to be mass-produced, simple and inexpensive.

HE

Yes, we worked together with a company in the French Jura; they were makers of plywood. That was extremely interesting. I had never focused on that area and had never designed anything of that kind.

CJ

What did the basic furnishings of these blocks of flats in Le Havre und Rouen look like?

HE

Very simple: bed, table, chair, and that was basically it. And we tried to find architectural solutions for the problem of storage – with built-in closets. We still have the same problem today. The goal is essentially to be able to move house with bed, table and chairs with the architecture taking care of the rest.

CJ

Reading about the time you spent with Gascoin, we learn that you also acquired a feeling for design that endures – although the idea of sustainability didn't exist yet in those days.

HE

I still can't figure out what the word 'sustainability' means! To me, it's just a matter of design that lasts through time and continues to serve its purpose. And anybody who designs furniture should feel a sense of responsibility in that respect.

CJ

Nonetheless, hundreds of new chairs are designed every year.

HE

Yes, that's true! Niklaus Morgenthaler said to me: "For Pete's sake, you and your damned chairs, we have enough already – enough, I say!"

PC

In Paris, were you also connected with the circle around Le Corbusier?

HE

No, not directly. But Charlotte Perriand had just created the first non-wood drawer and Gascoin used these for his closets. I also knew Swiss architects who were working for Jean Prouvé.

PC

So there were always important influences and an awareness of the latest developments?

HE

Yes, and the other draughtsmen too – there were seven or eight engineers working for Gascoin – they gave me important things to read from which I was able to learn quite a lot.

PC

You have created 45 chairs in your life as a designer. Do you have any clear favourites – something like the chair you love most?

HE

In terms of time, it's that one [points to a photograph of the *SAFFA* chair], though it's got the wrong title. I designed it when nobody was talking about *SAFFA* yet [Swiss Exhibition of Women's Work, 1958]. The people organizing *SAFFA* discovered it at Wohnbedarf, a furniture store in Zurich. That meant something like 700 to 800 chairs. Later the arts and crafts museum in Zurich furnished the entrance hall with *SAFFA* chairs. And the same thing happened at the school in Basel, but there they used the HE *Anti* chair. And now the latest news: last year the ETH, the Federal Institute of Technology, bought 50 *SAFFA* chairs, a design that is 60 years old! That's really something to be pleased about.

CJ

And I'm sure you are still happy about the intelligent design of the two steel tubes for the legs and arms that come together and move apart again.

HE

Yes, I guess that was the most striking thing about it.

CJ

But you also have to recognise it, be aware of it; not that many people are used to analysing the construction of a design. By the way, why was the characteristic cane wrapping replaced?

HE

Cane is outrageously expensive and making the wrapping was done in the home, a cottage industry. So it was a question of price. I definitely prefer the cane wrapping because the form and also the movement of the two parts that pull apart are retained when you wrap cane around them like bandaging.

PC

When you came back to Bern from Paris, you opened a shop on Gerechtigkeitsgasse. What motivated you, what did you sell and how long did you do business there?

HE

I was in Paris and heard from my sister that a group of people wanted to set up shop in the old town to sell their products. They were graphic artists, potters, weavers, 14 people altogether. I was asked if I wanted to join them. Then we started and I think we never saw a penny in there. And then I said, "That won't do." And they closed down. I took over and kept it up for another year and a half but the earnings were no better than before. But at least I met some architects and other people who noticed that I was a designer.

PC

Theo Jakob didn't have anything to do with the shop, did he? Even though you were practically neighbours. His store was across the street.

HE

No, not really, but I got to know him better because he stocked lamps out of folded paper from Denmark, which I liked and ordered from him.

CJ

Speaking of lamps, in 1954 you designed a floor lamp as a present for your wife, and it became really famous.

HE

There are, of course, a lot of lamps where you can adjust the height. But I asked myself what the poor wiring was doing in there. That must be dangerous for the electricity. And then I said to myself, no, now you're going to make an adjustable lamp where you can see how it works. And I made it for my wife for Christmas.

CJ

After designing that floor lamp, you didn't really get involved in making lamps, did you?

HE

When the first sections of the motorways were built in Switzerland, I was called in and asked to make prototypes for the illumination. But it soon got too complicated for me.

CJ

Too complicated? In what respect? Because of the electricity?

HE

Yes, I wasn't trained in that field and didn't know enough about it. You know, I have a problem with anything you can't see.

CJ

That is a very important statement of yours – about seeing and understanding.

PC

How did you meet Theo Jakob?

HE

At first I had hardly any contact with Theo. But soon – how was it again? – I met Kurt Thut and Robert Haussmann at the opening of Theo's remodelled premises. That was a huge stroke of luck. At the time, Röbi and his brother Peter had a shop at Werdmühleplatz in Zurich. I drove there from Bern in my "deux chevaux" to deliver my *SAFFA* chairs and the floor lamps – but naturally, always with the proviso: "only without rain". Because the lamps stuck up out of the open 2CV. It looked like a porcupine.

PC

And in 1964, the three of you with Theo Jakob and Peter Haussmann launched the "Swiss Design" collection.

HE

Yes, by then he had eliminated the capital T and the lower-case h, so it was already teo jakob – under the influence of Alfred Hablützel, his graphic artist who was new on the job. We launched the "Swiss Design" collection under the aegis of teo.

PC

So there were also new jobs for you? "Swiss Design" was not just a matter of existing furniture. It gave you the chance to develop new products, didn't it?

HE

No, not really. We had to find as many retailers as possible for our existing models. Important was the number of shops that had "Swiss Design" in stock. But it never really took off, though it's still nice to think that my models were once used in an airport in the United States and in Japanese cities.

PC

You're officially known as a Designer and Interior Architect.

HE

These titles are thanks to the Swiss Werkbund and I was so arrogant as to use them!

CJ

But that is actually what you did! Through your close friendship with Atelier 5, you worked as an interior architect very early on. And you have described to me how you used to collaborate – that you would sometimes go home in full agreement after meetings and then ended up designing alternatives that were better after all, right? And another thing that seems important to me, you didn't just act in accordance with a brief.

HE

Yes, that's also in a report by Atelier 5 in this publication [Hans Eichenberger shows us a magazine and reads aloud from the text in question].

"... and it also seems legitimate to report on our many years of collaboration with Hans Eichenberger – with the intention of explaining why this collaboration is still as delightfully fresh as it was on day one, after over 35 years and so many shared projects. It's about a maximum of reality, in other words as little interpretation as possible. No one likes talking about it but the initiated are in the know: when an architect isn't sure how to proceed, he goes to the interior architect, explains his project and shows him the half-finished building. The interior architect is dispatched with a sheaf of plans and come back a little while later with another sheaf of plans containing his ideas and drafts, in colour if possible and with variations; there is none of that when we work with Hans Eichenberger..."

CJ

When you work as an interior architect, you think beyond the horizon of a piece of furniture to sit on. You have to design an entire living space that has a purpose and that has to have an atmosphere and much more. Did this larger context appeal to you?

HE

Yes, certainly. Interior architecture always appealed to me and working with Atelier 5 was ideal.

CJ

Tell me, you have always had wonderful and loyal clients. As a rule, did you show them your designs which they then manufactured or did you often have to implement specific assignments that they gave you?

HE

I never actually did that. Maybe the lounge chair commissioned by Strässle was an exception. To my mind it's still a good piece of furniture. Although you can't beat Corbusier's chaise longue. Mine has armrests and is a little bit wider and longer – like people are today. And you don't have to get up to adjust the back.

CJ

Ordinarily, you are not a designer who carries out assignments, for instance, for a client who might say, "I need a high-backed chair for a senior citizens' home." Instead, you go to the client with your designs.

HE

Yes, but in a way I like your example of an assignment. And if somebody approached me with that request, I would do it or at least try to. But otherwise I always brought my own stuff.

PC

When I look at your work, it seems to me that it bears the stamp of meticulous care and reduction. You do your thinking and also do practical experiments to come up with a really fitting solution.

HE

Yes, I'm always interested in an intelligent solution. That probably also explains the success of the pillar box that I designed in 1992 for WOGG. That's a space-saving column-shaped container with a revolving magnetic wall all around as a noticeboard and an interior that can accommodate a great variety of uses. They ended up selling over 10,000 of them.

CJ

In conclusion, I would like to tell readers that you have invited us to visit you in the trailblazing Halen housing estate, house no. 64, into which you moved with your wife in 1960.

PC

And we had the privilege of conducting this conversation in your studio with its very special genius loci, where you have implemented such enduring and innovative ideas over the course of so many decades. We thank you for this wonderful opportunity.

Interview conducted in German

Translation: Catherine Schelbert