Take a seat

Sculptural rockers and Sixties classics, skull patterns and knotted cord... Design experts Gareth Williams and Stephen Bayley and sports writer Anna Kessel find themselves sitting comfortably on 12 very different chairs. By Dominic Lutyens Photographs Alun Callender Styling Sophie Brown

Sitting pretty: (facing page, from left) Anna Kessel, Stephen Bayley and Gareth Williams

For furniture designers, producing a new chair is a tough call. Arguably, it's an extraneous exercise – a vain attempt to reinvent the wheel. How can designers improve on so universal and timeless design as the basic armchair or recliner? As Stephen Bayley, the *Observer*'s design critic, says, 'Unless there's an imminent breakthrough in human anatomy a new chair will never be innovative.'

Yet this doesn't deter designers from taking up the challenge. Every year – and to much fanfare at the Milan Furniture Fair – new chairs are unveiled. Their manufacturers are quick to claim they have broken new ground through the experimental manipulation of materials or through the introduction of new colours (for that season at least) or shape. Personal taste largely determines what chairs we buy, although this is also influenced by fashion and the chairs' desirability as status symbols. 'Leather is no longer the dominating upholstery fabric,' says Andrew Kidd, deputy editor of *Cabinet Maker* magazine. 'It's giving way to florals inspired by the vogue for vintage patterns. Colours are clean: fresh pinks and pea greens and charcoal grey.'

Yet functionality remains a key concern: if we're just flopping into a chair for a tea and a fag, comfort may not be essential, but it most certainly is if we're watching a DVD or settling down to a good book. Even those who shop at high-end furniture shops set great store by comfort: 'When people buy our chairs, their main criterion is functionality,' says Tony Cunningham, co-owner of London furniture shop twentytwentyone, which stocks 20th-century classics. 'Next come aesthetics – shape and fabric. Another draw is the "celebrity" of the piece: customers will often be familiar with the designer's status and the brand value associated with a manufacturer. Our advice to customers after a design classic is to buy the licensed version of an iconic design – as in endorsed by the designer or by his or her estate – as you get what you pay for.' From a collecting point of view, buying an original or licensed version raises the resale value. ▶