

Sitting pretty

A legendary designer revisits an iconic chair

By Nick Pope



Philippe Starck's latest reinterpretation of Christian Dior's Medallion chair combines ultramodernity and tradition

"This is perhaps the most high-tech chair in the world today," says Philippe Starck, pointing to a chair that, with all due respect to one of the most celebrated designers of the past century, looks suspiciously low-tech. The tapered metal frame is too fine to host a Bluetooth speaker, there is no robot masseuse hiding within its plush upholstery, and you can forget about asking it to order a pizza. But sitting in Milan's 18th-century Palazzo Citterio on the eve of the Salone Del Mobile design festival in April, where the Frenchman's latest take on Christian Dior's iconic Medallion chair was being unveiled for the first time, its ultramodern bona fides soon became clear.

The collaboration with Dior Maison began in 2022, when Starck was tasked with reimagining the oval-backed, Louis XVI-style seat that the fashion house's founder introduced to his Parisian boutique in 1947. It wasn't the first time that the chair, traditionally decorated with the label's hallmark toile de Jouy motif, had been reinterpreted. A year prior, Dior had picked 17 artists, architects and designers from across the globe to produce their own avant-garde takes. But they were one-off creations; Starck's version, marking the chair's 75th anniversary, would be made available to the public and, true to his industrial ethos, Starck wanted to strip things back to basics. He sought to, in his own words, "find the soul".

"Why was Christian Dior in love with this? The only way to understand is to take everything out and go to the skeleton, the bone," he says, nodding towards the uber-minimalist chairs he came up with — named "Miss Dior" after Christian's sister, Catherine — which are dotted around the room. "When you have the bone, you understand what it is. When you get to the minimum, you can guarantee it's timeless."

That meant finding a factory with the ambition to realise his ascetic aesthetic, forging a

metal chair that was built to last but also delicate to look at; some parts of the chair would be only 1cm thick. "Everybody told us, 'It would be nice, but it's impossible,'" says Starck, recalling the drawn-out process. "Only one, in Italy, said 'I think I can try to do it.'" In Brescia, Lombardy, an enterprising factory that primarily worked with car and aeroplane parts, came up with a solution in the form of a "cold flow" process: molten aluminium would be injected into a mould, which would form a robust, uninterrupted silhouette — available with one or two armrests, or without, and in a range of galvanised finishes.

In 2023, Starck has reinvented the frame once more, this time in tribute to the very man who brought it to life in the first place. Enter: the Monsieur Dior armchair. "We are flesh. We are not skeletons, for now," Starck reasons, darkly. "Our flesh asks for flesh. This was the theory. This one is human."

Don't worry, he's not being literal: the familiar frame, made to the same state-of-the-art standard as its Miss Dior counterpart, is available in polished or lacquered aluminium, pink, black or silver, and now comes with cushioning: it can be upholstered in grey, ecru bouclé, black or orange leather, or in three shades of toile de Jouy (pink, black and fluorescent orange). It's joined by a family of couture creations — what Dior calls "the most comprehensive collection of furniture ever created for the House" — including variations on the Miss Dior chair as well as tables and stools. But the Monsieur Dior armchair, like the man who inspired it, leaves a lasting impression and holds everything in its orbit, seamlessly stitching the past with the present. Oh, and it's just as comfortable as it looks — even without that robot masseuse. ○ *Monsieur Dior chair, from £5,400, Dior; 160-162 New Bond Street, London W1 or dior.com*

