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Maurice-Claude Vidili's circa-1971 Sphère d'Isolation, on offer in Sotheby's Important Design auction on July 30 in New York.
PHOTO: COURTESY SOTHEBY'S

This Fascinating 1970s Isolation Sphere Takes Self-Quarantine to New Extremes

A product of the decade's plastic-furniture boom, this design is more ideal than ever for those looking to switch up their work-from-home routines

BY STEPHANIE SPORN

JULY 24, 2020

In its most literal sense, the adage “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” can be applied to the history of furniture. For centuries, the basic structure of a desk and chair has remained virtually unchanged. While colors, styles, and ornamentation have evolved to reflect shifting tastes, the desk’s basic, free-form design has rarely been challenged—that is, until Maurice-Claude Vidili came along.

The French architect and designer's most famous creation, the Sphère d'Isolation, is coming up for sale in Sotheby's New York's Important Design auction on July 30, and it remains as novel and intriguing today as it did when it launched 50 years ago.



Vidili's Sphère d'Isolation photographed outside in Barryville, New York.

PHOTO: LUXPRODUCTIONS, COURTESY MAISON GERARD

ADAM—Brussels Design Museum has a similar example in its permanent collection, but with only about 28 Isolation Spheres known to have been made, its appearance at auction marks the rare chance to own one of the 1970s' most daring designs. Influenced by space exploration and comprised largely of newly available materials like polyester, the sphere includes a cushioned seating area, fluorescent lighting and table lamp, storage and shelving, electric outlets, and a window. Apropos for a 21st-century user, its hi-fi speakers can now be controlled through a smartphone.



Inside Maurice-Claude Vidili's i>circa-1971 Sphère d'Isolation Model No. S2, on offer at Sotheby's.
PHOTO: COURTESY SOTHEBY'S

The sphere, which is roughly six feet in diameter, was first produced in 1971 with the help of Plastiques de Bourgogne, a company that specialized in limited-edition, high-design furniture, including the sinuous Charles Zuhlener chaise longue from the 1960s. The Isolation Sphere that Sotheby's is offering is the second model of three iterations. While this lot is ideal for one or two people, the first model, which had additional storage space and a small table, could accommodate up to four. Model No. S3 was the outdoor version, which had a waterproof exterior and closing door.

A July 1971 *Time* article called “Womb with a View” said this of the design: “That classic concept—a search for primal security—is precisely what French designer Claude Vidili had in mind when he came up with the idea for his ‘Isolation Sphere.’” The same passage also notes that the sphere could be ordered in other colors and that an indoor model cost \$1,600 and the outdoor variety was \$1,900.

“That’s what’s so fascinating about design—it speaks to the kind of time we’re living in”

MARINE HARTOGS, SOTHEBY’S 20TH-CENTURY DESIGN SENIOR SPECIALIST

While the Isolation Sphere’s foremost purpose was to be a self-contained office, its other potential uses ranged from serving as a quiet zone on construction sites to a private meeting area. The design seems to anticipate the modern meditation pod and the need to withdraw from daily stress and chaos. While the Isolation Sphere did not achieve mass commercial success, Marine Hartogs, vice president and senior specialist in Sotheby’s 20th-century design department, calls its retreatlike appeal “poetic.”

“You have to think that in 1971, something today that seems so natural—somewhere where’d you go to retreat from the busy outside world—was very avant-garde when everything was about community and working together,” Hartogs tells *Galerie*. “This would be the perfect thing to mass manufacture for offices today.”



The Sphère d'Isolation illuminated.

PHOTO: COURTESY SOTHEBY'S

When Hartogs took the Isolation Sphere in as an auction consignment, it was long before the COVID-19 pandemic gave the lot a whole new relevance. She shares that while she originally assumed a museum would place the winning bid, desire from private collectors, particularly ones interested in fully realized and demountable designs, such as those by Jean Prouvé, has increased.

“That’s what’s so fascinating about design—it speaks to the kind of time we’re living in,” the specialist says. “It will be interesting to see how all of our desks do as well because now people are spending more time than ever working from home, and they want to create the perfect space.”