

Kno

A MODERNIST UNIVERSE

Brian Lutz



Knoll

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PAGE 1 Quote is sourced from Knoll video of Florence Knoll Bassett, prepared for 1999 sales meeting.

PAGE 4 Hans and Florence Knoll, photographed in front of the Knoll Planning Unit sample display wall in the 575 Madison Avenue showroom in New York. The photograph by Tony Vaccaro appeared in a feature on Knoll in the 22 May 1951 Look magazine.

PAGE 6 The winning seating and case goods entries of Cranbrook faculty members Eero Saarinen and Charles Eames, on display at the Organic Design in Home Furnishings exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition ran from 24 September until 9 November 1941.

PAGE 8-9 A Bertola Diamond chair in production, ca. 1960.

PAGE 94-95 Niels Diffrient’s technical drawing for a stacking chair version of his steel shell chair. April 1976.

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We were always so much more than a furniture manufacturing company. We were about good design.

— Florence Knoll

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THAT WHICH ENDURES

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Knoll to the history of contemporary design. The company's iconic furniture, striking graphics, innovative business practices, and enviable stable of talent not only defined the physical image of postwar corporate America; they helped secure the nation's role as the new heavyweight in the international design arena. It's surprising to learn how small Knoll was for much of this, but it is also a measure of the company's ultimate stock-in-trade—the power of ideas.

Many of those ideas were developed in-house. Some were revolutionary: with its renowned Planning Unit, Knoll introduced the first full-service design practice within a furniture company (as well as the first run by a woman). Other concepts were evolutionary: textile companies have always relied on swatches to demonstrate their product, but it was Knoll that pioneered the now-universal three-inch square of fabric attached to a folded paper identification card. Knoll also relied on solutions commissioned from outside the company. Eero Saarinen changed the shape and materials of furniture forever with his Pedestal line. Warren Platner twisted waterfalls of wire into elegant tables and chairs. And Frank Gehry rewrote the book on bending wood with his Cross Check and Power Play seating. Innovation is the hallmark here, and it is prominent no matter where you dip into the company's history for a look around.

This book traces the evolution of Knoll, from its beginnings as the hopeful enterprise of a dashing, passionate German émigré, to its present status as a global enterprise. It's an exciting tale, as success stories often are, and fascinating in its record of how the company so effectively tapped into the zeitgeist of American design, time and time again.

Knoll today still bears the stamp of its founders, even as its later leadership and staff have moved the company well beyond anything the Knolls themselves might have imagined. Above all, the company maintains Hans Knoll's commitment to modern design, no matter how the allied professions may have wavered over the last several decades. Further, Knoll management remains nimble and inventive, one of the hallmarks of the company's early years.

Yet in many ways, it is Florence Knoll's legacy that truly defines the company. She ran the Planning Unit. She designed the showrooms. She created Knoll textiles. Her designs filled the catalogs. Her planning process wooed the corporate clients. But beyond even all of this, she brought her company a roster of talent that was simply unprecedented. The list is startling even now: Harry Bertoia, Niels Diffrient, Ralph Rapson, Eero Saarinen, Richard Schultz, Marianne Strengell, even Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. To this day, Knoll's collections represent a virtual who's who of modernism, and it began largely with Florence Knoll and her friends. Mies was her instructor and confidante at the Illinois Institute of Technology (then the Armour Institute). Saarinen was her "big brother" from Cranbrook, where she had grown up and been educated with (and by) Bertoia, Diffrient, Rapson, Strengell, and Charles and Ray Eames.

Cranbrook's hothouse atmosphere inured Florence Knoll to an environment where ideas are prized, and where design is understood as one of the arts, right alongside painting, or weaving, or sculpture. Eliel Saarinen built Cranbrook to embody the German notion of *gesamtkunstwerk*, and Florence Knoll brought that concept with her to the company. It's no wonder so many of the pieces designed for Knoll are considered works of art, and thus timeless. They were created to be exactly that.

In the end, that sense of timelessness is what one thinks about when thinking about Knoll. Even as the company has changed over the years, its catalog of products by leading architects and designers has continued to be its front line. Their designs, which build upon the legacy of the company's founders, more often than not, have simply become Knoll. And they will remain that way.

REED KROLOFF

Director, Cranbrook Academy of Art and Art Museum

THE HISTORY OF KNOLL







◀ Hans Knoll, the dashing young founder of the Hans G. Knoll Furniture Company, in his New York office at 575 Madison Avenue in the early 1950s. The design of the small office, by his wife Florence, was an achievement of executive style and planning efficiency.

In the autumn of 1938 an ambitious young German immigrant named Hans Knoll tacked up a sign over the door of a second-floor room he had rented in New York, proclaiming the space “Factory Nr 1.” Knoll, the third generation of a Stuttgart furniture family, came to New York the year before to make a name for himself as a messenger of modernism. He brought with him little more than a belief that America was ready for the style of furniture of a new European movement, plus the experience and determination necessary to build a successful furniture company. He possessed one other essential quality: his passion for modernist design was unbounded and infectious. He was, by all accounts, the best salesman that anyone in the fledgling U.S. furniture industry had ever witnessed, and it didn’t hurt his chances for success that he was also strikingly handsome. Gordon Bunshaft, the architect who became best known for his early work in establishing the modernist International Style in the American urban landscape, recalled a sales call that Knoll made on Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York: “Hans Knoll came into our office in the winter of 1937. He was just in from Germany and he was selling a special flat spring for upholstered seats. I was new and our office had just started, and we were interested in furniture for buildings at the World’s Fair in New York in 1939. He was a young fellow, very blonde, very enthusiastic, just beginning.”¹

Hans Knoll (1914–1955) was the second son of a furniture manufacturer named Walter Knoll. Walter’s father, Wilhelm Knoll, started the family furniture business in 1865, first selling leather before gaining a reputation for quality upholstery and a line of seating that he produced. The Knoll

reputation for quality led to the company’s appointment as “Supplier to the Court” of the Württemberg monarchy in nineteenth-century Germany. In 1907 Wilhelm Knoll’s two sons, Wilhelm II and Walter, took over the operations of the company and began to look beyond their existing collection and customer base for new opportunities and inspiration.

The year 1907 was significant for a broader reason, for it was this year that the Deutscher Werkbund was formed in Munich, Germany. The Werkbund, an organization of the leading figures in German arts and architecture, created a manifesto that prescribed a union of “art, industry and artisanship.”² The machine age had arrived, and it was a modernist decision to utilize mass production to serve the growing class of working consumers. Patronage of the applied arts of the Craft era had long been the exclusive province of the privileged class; modernists believed mass consumption could only be enabled by mass production. The Werkbund believed, further, that the introduction of art to the equation would elevate the quality of industrial production. An early rift in Werkbund thinking on the importance of industrial standardization, however, divided the members into two camps, and by the 1914 Werkbund Congress in Cologne, those favoring standardized or mass production stood in opposition to those, such as the Belgian Henri van de Velde, who said, “As long as there are artists in the Werkbund . . . they will protest against any proposed canon. The artist is essentially and intimately a passionate individualist, a spontaneous creator.”³ Mass production had come to be viewed as the antithesis of artistic individuality.



The priority of the machine, and of mass production, was an open debate when the Bauhaus opened in 1919. The Bauhaus was the successor to the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts, an institute steeped in tradition, and the appointment of the modernist architect Walter Gropius as its director was a show of commitment of the Weimar fathers to the role of technology in Germany's future. Gropius, long a believer in the importance of prefabrication and standardization in architecture, wrote in 1910 of an idealized "prosperous union of art and technology,"⁴ and by 1919 he had abandoned his strict adherence to industrial standardization and accepted what he called "the surplus value contributed to industry by the artist's spiritual labor."⁵ This new position established a philosophical central ground that became the basis for Gropius's formal agenda at the Bauhaus. Gropius held that the creative participation of the artist ensured a higher level of quality in industry, which served to advance the social order, and with this thesis he succeeded in unifying the modernist Werkbund manifesto. Walter Gropius never regarded what he accomplished at the Bauhaus as the establishment of a "Bauhaus style." This, he felt, smacked of a stifling militancy. What Gropius sought and what he achieved was creative openness, a method, not a mandate, of exploration that could be replicated in response to mass prosperity. It was the culture of modernist thinking, not its objects, that would transform twentieth-century society.

The history of Knoll is thick with Bauhaus references. Bauhaus designers and their designs became icons of the company's style and success, and as a result the Bauhaus is often charted as Knoll's starting point, even though the earliest "Bauhaus design" was not introduced into the Knoll collection until 1948, ten years after the company was founded.⁶ The more important influence of the Bauhaus on Knoll gestation was the clarity of form, the honesty of materials, the creative elevation of industrial production, and Walter Gropius's union of art and technology, which became the foundation for modernist design in America. It was this visionary balance of art and industry that was the substance of Hans Knoll's modernist message to America.

◀ The poster for the 1914 Deutscher Werkbund Exposition was designed by Peter Behrens, a Werkbund member and a leading figure in the development of architectural modernism in early twentieth-century Germany. Behrens's protégés included Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier. For his poster Behrens chose to portray a youthful Prometheus, the mythic figure said to have given man the arts and sciences, astride a horse, here a symbol of the power of industry.

▼ The Deutscher Werkbund Exposition hall, Cologne, 1914, designed by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer. This view, from the courtyard, shows the office wing, a modernist architectural triumph. Completely free of any ornament or historic reference, the uninterrupted glass curtain walls were an aesthetic introduction to the modernist concept of the consideration of volume rather than mass.

