

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe & Lilly Reich

Furniture and Interiors Christiane Lange



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Funding for this publication was provided by the Friends of the Krefeld Art Museums. The accompanying exhibition was sponsored by the private Swiss bank Pictet & Cie and the Friends of the Krefeld Art Museums.



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FOREWORD

It is so natural for the names Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich to be mentioned in the Lange family that I cannot recall ever having not known them. Lange House, which is now a museum, is only partially responsible for this. The more indelible influence emanates from the fact that some of the numerous pieces of furniture designed by Mies and Reich for various Hermann Lange projects continued to be used by members of the Lange family. Invited by one or the other great aunt to tea, one sat on "their" chairs and ate at "their" tables and was surrounded by other beautiful objects they designed and produced in the 1910s and 1920s. Despite this—or perhaps because of this—it was not until I acquired a previously unknown series of outdoor and indoor shots taken in 1930 of Lange House and Esters House that I felt compelled to more closely explore the history of this furniture and thus also the history of the productive cooperation between Mies van der Rohe, Lilly Reich, and the Krefeld businessman Hermann Lange, which went far beyond the building of Lange House.

This research was initially planned as a personal undertaking. However, due to the discovery of an extraordinarily substantial amount of original furniture designed by Mies and Reich, the idea emerged to present it to a broader public in a publication and an exhibition.

The furniture executed for Hermann Lange and his family was produced at the height of the creative working partnership between Mies and Reich and constitutes a representative cross-section of this work, which until now had not been assembled together in a catalogue raisonné.

This book and the exhibition "Mies van der Rohe & Lilly Reich: Furniture and Interiors" in Lange House in Krefeld would not have been possible without the unconditional cooperation of the current owners, who patiently endured the photographer Ivan Baschang temporarily turning their apartments into a photography studio and who for a period of three months will uncomplainingly sit on furniture from Ikea while their sofas, tables, and chairs are being examined by interested visitors to the exhibition. My heartfelt thanks go out to them as well as to the Friends of the Krefeld Art Museums and the private Swiss bank Pictet & Cie for their generous support of this project. I had indispensable conversations with the architects Paul and Johannes Robbrecht and Caroline Vanbiervliet about issues related to the format of the exhibition and would like to thank them for their insightful guidance. I also want to extend my thanks to Martin Hentschel and his team at the Krefeld Art Museums, who assisted in the realization of the project; to Nina Senger and Mathias Gatza for their professional support and for their tireless scrutiny of the manuscript; and to Rudolf Bertig for his creation of the computer reconstructions.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my father, Werner Lange, whose precise and detailed recollections were an inexhaustible source of knowledge.

Christiane Lange December 2006



1 Hermann Lange, 1930s

INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) and Lilly Reich (1885–1947) first met the energetic Krefeld businessman and art collector Hermann Lange (1874–1942) in early 1927 at the latest (figs. 1–3). In February of that year, Carl Nierendorf had displayed some of Mies' work in his Berlin gallery and later claimed to have introduced him to his client Hermann Lange. This was the beginning of an extensive collaboration which included many projects and went on to involve Hermann Lange's family, friends, and business. After Mies moved to the United States in 1938 and Hermann Lange died in 1942, Lilly Reich and Lange's son, Ulrich, continued working together. The connection to the Lange family lasted until 1949, when Mies refused to realize a smaller version of the house that had been designed for Ulrich Lange in 1935.

Eight projects originated during this period, and Lilly Reich executed five other commissions on her own. The designs for the Krefeld Golf Club (1930), the home for Ulrich Lange (1935), and the corporate headquarters for the Vereinigte Seidenwebereien AG (United Silk-Weaving Mills Corporation [Verseidag], 1937) were never realized. Other projects were of a temporary nature, such as the trade-fair booths for the Verein deutscher Seidenwebereien (Association of German Silk-Weaving Mills). Today the only testimonials to this productive meeting of minds are the ensemble of private homes for Hermann Lange and Joseph Esters (1928), Verseidag's dye works in Krefeld, and numerous pieces of furniture. The furniture was created in 1928/29 for the Lange House, and in 1930 for the Berlin apartment belonging to Lange's daughter Mildred and her husband, Carl Wilhelm Crous, which Mies and Reich furnished in 1930. Mr. and Mrs. Crous remained loyal to these furnishings all their lives, moving them from apartment to apartment, and Lilly Reich continued to add bits and pieces into the 1940s. This is why the decor, including the doorbell plate, has survived more or less in its entirety to this day. It is primarily owing to this fact that this book is able to present a large number of the pieces of furniture designed by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich that have never appeared in any publication. It may be that this "old furniture" never landed in the children's bedroom, then the basement, and finally on the refuse heap, because the timeless aesthetic and material quality of the designs—whose clarity and perfection set them apart from a good deal of contemporary furniture, even at the time of their manufacture—revealed its impact over the years.

This volume focuses on the furniture and spaces designed by Mies van der Rohe and Reich for Hermann Lange in Krefeld and for Mildred and Carl Wilhelm Crous in Berlin. Since there has yet to be a catalogue raisonné detailing all of the furniture designs by Mies and Reich, this book attempts to present extensive information on each individual design and its specific context. In the course of putting this volume together it became clear that in previous publications on this subject, the number of open questions is greater than the number that have been answered. For instance, the manufacturers of many of the individual items, especially the wood furniture, are



2 Lilly Reich, 1930s

mostly unidentified. In the case of the furniture series—such as the MR 10 cantilever chair or the Barcelona chair—the issue of how they were produced is paramount. It was not possible to clear up all of the questions, and sometimes new ones arose. Importance was first and foremost placed on documenting the furniture that has been preserved and providing quality reproductions thereof. Since the provenance and dates of the furniture have been confirmed without a doubt, this volume will prove a valuable reference for further research.

Up to now it has also not been clear what role Lilly Reich played in the designs for rooms and furniture by Mies van der Rohe. Mies and Reich worked together closely from 1926 to 1939, and they exchanged artistic ideas constantly. Some of the projects are officially regarded as collaborations, but her name does not appear in association with others. In determining what she contributed to the design process, the answers are largely based on supposition and extend as far as the marked chauvinism with which Lilly Reich was relegated to the domestic realm (fabrics and colors).

An attempt was made to examine and analyze the very different traces of their working relationship, one particular goal being to clarify an obvious contradiction between the popular opinions of researchers and what has been handed down orally: Lilly Reich was as present within the Lange family as was Mies van der Rohe. "She was the interior designer," it was simply said. With the aid of previously unknown sources and forensic handwriting analysis, new insight has been gained into this creative partnership.

The designs shown here originated in the short time period between 1927 and 1930. This puts them directly at the center of Mies and Reich's room and furniture developments, forerunners of which were created for Wolf House at Guben (1925–27). Their apex can be found in the so-called Barcelona Pavilion (1929), Tugendhat House (1928–30), and in the structures by Reich and Mies for the Berlin Building Exhibition in 1931.

At the time they were being used for Lange and Crous, the cantilever chairs were already being produced in series; the furniture made of flat bar steel had just been developed. All of them repeatedly appear in various projects by Mies and Reich. The wood furniture was designed and produced especially for individual commissions. Yet even these go beyond the individual project, as during the period they worked together, Mies and Reich developed design standards that they used time and again. An analysis of the methods and time period that resulted in the designs for Lange and Crous will lead to an exploration of the fundamental design strategies of both artists.



3 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1920s

HERMANN LANGE, LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE, AND LILLY REICH:

THEIR MEETING AND COOPERATION

For the 1931 Berlin Building Exhibition, Mies van der Rohe designed a house for a childless couple, a work in which he uncompromisingly transposed his pioneering idea of the open floor plan into the private sphere. Bedrooms, dining area, and living room were separated by wall panels which had been set into the steel skeleton of the building. Only the kitchen and the bathroom had lockable doors. In retrospect, the house is "the last work he realized that still represented his style of the 1920s: that striving for the flowing, searching, subjectively arranged space which also characterized the early country-house projects, the Barcelona Pavilion, and Tugendhat House."¹ Mies had photographs taken of the house and its rooms, something he had done for all of his projects. This allowed him a lasting influence over the reception of his architecture that should not be underestimated—he controlled the publishing rights to the images and only permitted publication of photographs of his architecture that he had personally authorized.

One of these photographs (fig. 4) shows the living area of the house.² A group consisting of two Tugendhat chairs (cat. no. 22), a Barcelona chair (cat. no. 27), and a Tugendhat table (cat. no. 28) stands on a dark, rectangular rug, which along with the adjacent wall panel made of wood forms the backdrop for the furniture arrangement. The photographer took an unusual position for this picture. Due to reasons of space, most photographs of the house show the rooms from a diagonal perspective, yet he decided to take this picture from a central one. The graphic austerity of the spatial arrangement consisting of overlapping surfaces and lines as well as sections of light and dark is intensified by the perspective, which turns it into an exciting, abstract composition. Hanging alone on a white wall—like a programmatic counterpoint in its midst—is Vassily Kandinsky's *Improvisation 21* from 1911. Kandinsky creates a dynamic composition of circular movement out of non-representational surfaces, torn color fields, and lines that does not, however, at any point attempt to project beyond the surface of the painting. As mobile as it is reserved, Kandinsky's composition mirrors Mies' architectural aspiration using other means. Mies deliberately contrasts the open, fluid layout with surfaces and fields whose meaning and function he himself defined down to the last detail. The space is not meant to dissolve into nothing; rather, the goal of the spatial structure is to direct the flow.

However, the presence of Kandinsky's *Improvisation 21* in the context of this house has yet another meaning: the work belonged to Hermann Lange. He had acquired it around 1913 for his collection³ and lent it to Mies in 1931 for the Berlin Building Exhibition. Even though the more important impulse for Mies placing the work in such a central position was the closeness to Kandinsky in terms of content, this gesture can also be understood as a silent homage to Hermann Lange, with whom by that time Mies had already worked on six projects.

Joint Projects

When Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich met Krefeld silk manufacturer and art collector Hermann Lange in 1927, an acquaintanceship was formed that led to eight projects, some of which were realized. On her own, Reich carried out yet another five commissions for Lange, his family, and his business.

The beginning of their work together was the Café Samt und Seide (Velvet and Silk Café) Mies and Lilly had constructed for the trade fair Die Mode der Dame (Ladies' Fashion), which took place in Berlin from September 21–October 16, 1927 (fig. 5). The work was commissioned by the



4 Living area, Mies van der Rohe House, Building Exhibition, Berlin, 1931