

Florence Knoll

by Maureen Footer

A PIONEER OF MIDCENTURY DESIGN HELPED TO USHER IN THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT

With glamour and chic, from 1943 to her retirement in 1966, Florence Knoll Bassett, who turns 90 next month, championed the concept of architect-designed furniture and diffused it in a broad swath from corporate America to the Elysée Palace. While such celebrated 18th-century architects as William Kent and Robert Adams designed exquisite furniture for specific houses, Florence Knoll Bassett produced architect-designed furniture for the Knoll line that was available to the public at large for affordable prices.

At a time when few women were architects or businesswomen—especially in the rarified group driving the Modernist movement—she was arguably the most influential woman in 20th-century design, and this year the design world is celebrating her. The Wolfsonian Museum in Miami honored Florence Knoll Bassett in early March as a design legend and announced the creation of an annual Florence Knoll Design Award. A book on her theory of space planning is in the offing. And the accolades continue.

In 1943, 26-year old architect Florence Schust was hired by Hans Knoll, a charismatic German émigré who had recently established a furniture enterprise in New York. Knoll had been commissioned to design an office for Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, and needed a designer. Knoll found Schust, who had apprenticed with Mies, Breuer and Gropius, and thus was the beginning of an extraordinary design career and a personal relationship—they married in 1946. (Knoll died in 1955, and she remarried Henry Hood Bassett in 1958.)

“Good design is good business” was a Knoll maxim, and Knoll Bassett proved a superb conduit. Through designs that defined the modern aesthetic, she transformed the Hans G. Knoll Furniture Company into Knoll Associates—the purveyors of international modern style.

Prior to her architectural studies, Knoll Bassett studied in the 1930s at Cranbrook Academy under the directorship of Eliel Saarinen, father of Eero. It was a stellar period: Charles Eames, Ralph Rapson, Ray Kaiser and Harry Bertoia were also students at the time. These Cranbrook associations were to shape the evolution of Knoll.

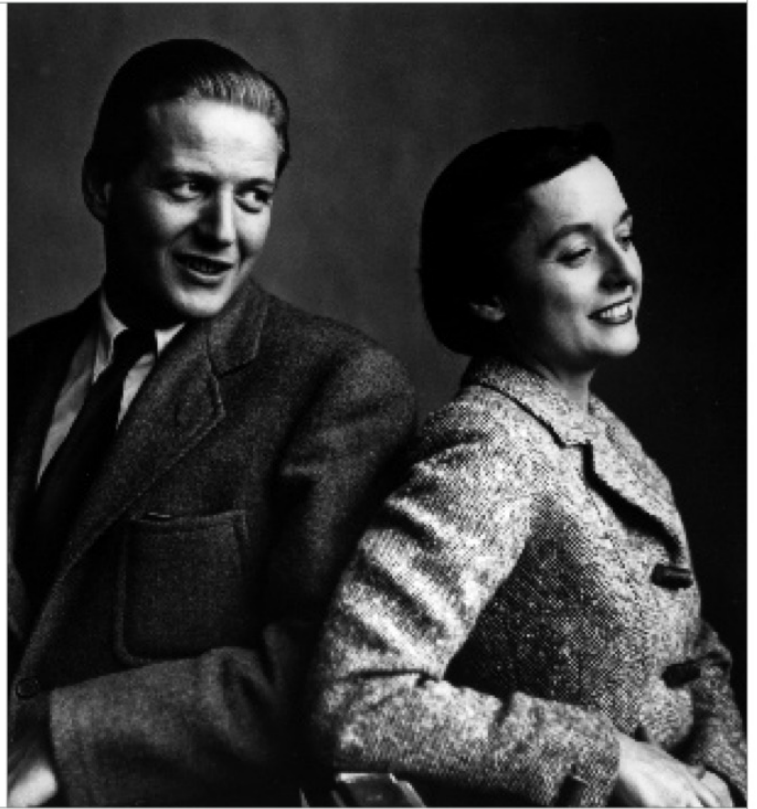
When Knoll Bassett first started at



A Woman's Touch | Florence Knoll Bassett (ABOVE) came to Knoll in 1943 and transformed the company into one of the foremost purveyors of international modern style. **Bench Mark** | Like so many of her groundbreaking designs that ushered in the rise of Modernism, Florence Knoll's signature bench (BELOW) is characterized by the clean lines and sharp angles of mid-20th-century modern design and architecture. See Resources.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KNOLL



True Icon | Knoll Basset's pieces for Knoll, including her side chair (TOP LEFT), continue to be much-copied classics. **Design Duo** | Hans Knoll hired Florence Schust (ABOVE RIGHT) in 1943 as a designer. They married in 1946. **Office Space** | One of Knoll Basset's greatest contributions to Knoll was the Planning Unit, which handled interior design for corporate clients and Knoll showrooms, including the company's original showroom in New York (ABOVE LEFT). **Color Fusion** | Harry Bertoina's innovative side chair (BOTTOM), available in an array of colors, remains a fixture of midcentury design. See Resources.





Plastic Fantastic | *Of the many pieces Florence Knoll Bassett commissioned through the years, one line was by close friend Eero Saarinen. His Tulip Chair and Stool (ABOVE) were exercises in clarifying form, ridding interiors of what be called the "slum of legs." See Resources.*

Knoll, she was unimpressed with the company's furniture—wood pieces with a Danish sensibility. With her Miesian training, she favored clean lines and modern materials such as stainless steel and plastic. She persuaded Eero Saarinen to contribute designs to Knoll such as the womb chair and the Pedestal series, including the Tulip Chair and what is now known as the Saarinen table. She was also instrumental in having the furniture company provide Harry Bertoia with studio space where he parlayed his interest in sculpture into the famous wire chair. When she needed large-scale pieces for public spaces, Knoll Bassett convinced Mies to grant Knoll production rights to his Barcelona furniture. In fact, Knoll Bassett was one of the first to associate designers' names with pieces they created. These associations reinforced the message of Knoll: This wasn't just furniture, it was Design.

Knoll Bassett also brought her own designs to the line. With their squared-off lines and paired-down elegance, her sofa, credenza and coffee table continue to be distinctive and much-copied classics.

With Knoll Bassett at the helm, the Planning Unit—created when she joined the company to handle interior design for corporate clients as well as Knoll showrooms—transformed the way the executive office looked. From Stimson's office, the company moved on to prestigious commissions from the Rockefeller family offices, General Motors and CBS. Through space planning and design, Knoll Bassett related the function and design of the interiors to the architecture. "We showed the way to save square footage," she once said. "We made it logical and functional, but at the same time we tried to make it human." As a result, awkwardly placed reproduction furniture gave way to clean, uncluttered offices that used space efficiently.

Terence Riley, director of the Miami Art Museum and former Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, states that Knoll Bassett's great contribution to Knoll was her Bauhaus-derived "belief in the possibility of industry and design working hand-in-glove." Indeed, the furniture was not only beautifully conceived, but also exquisitely finished—the modern equivalent of fine 18th-century atelier workmanship. (In 1972 the Louvre mounted a Knoll retrospective, and the furniture looked gloriously timeless in its aristocratic halls.)

Many experts believe that Florence and Hans Knoll personified modern design. "They put a face on this lovely new thing called modernism," says Lutz. "They made it so much more approachable, inviting and personal." Thanks in large part to Knoll Bassett, modernism left its lofty realm and gracefully entered homes around the world. ✨

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KNOLL