



FLORENCE KNOLL CIRCA 1960

DESIGN TEAMS

HANS KNOLL AND FLORENCE SCHUST JOINED FORCES TO CREATE A MODERN FURNITURE EMPIRE, WHICH HAS ENDURED DUE TO, IN PART, COLLABORATIONS WITH SOME OF THE MORE PROMINENT DESIGNERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY. THE ODD PART? MANY WERE NOT FAMOUS FOR DESIGNING FURNITURE BY **RON SHIPMON**



REM KOOLHAAS 2013

GREAT DESIGN IS OFTEN A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT. When done well, it solves old problems in new ways. It can start out revolutionary and then, over time, become classic. Great design is fresh and ambitious, evidencing craftsmanship meant to withstand the test of time. It may evoke historic objects of beauty, the essence of modernity or some combination of both.

By those measures, the furniture company **KNOLL** has been in the vanguard of great design for three quarters of a century — in part because it often engaged with the most unlikely of architects, artists and fashion designers, and put them to work designing for your living room and office.

Hans Knoll's first unlikely collaborator was a spunky 26-year-old American architect and furniture designer, **FLORENCE SCHUST**, who in 1943 convinced him that she could bring new business to his company. Her grand idea was this: "Expand interior design to include working with architects."

Her insight proved prescient, and between his business acumen and her design prowess, they grew the nascent company into an international arbiter of style. Three years later they married, and she went on to become a full business partner.

Interested in more than merely decorating, the Knolls focused on developing furniture designs that would become icons of 20th-century interiors. Many of these would ultimately end up included in the collections of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (moma.org) and the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum (cooperhewitt.org). They remain highly collectible today.

After her husband's demise in a car accident in 1955, Florence took over operation of the company and would lead it through some uncertain times before retiring in 1957. Though she would go on to bring her eye for proportion and her attention to detail to projects outside of the company, her work at Knoll

contributed immeasurably to the rise of modernism in America. Her collaborative spirit and daring aesthetic live on to this day, influencing new generations of designers.

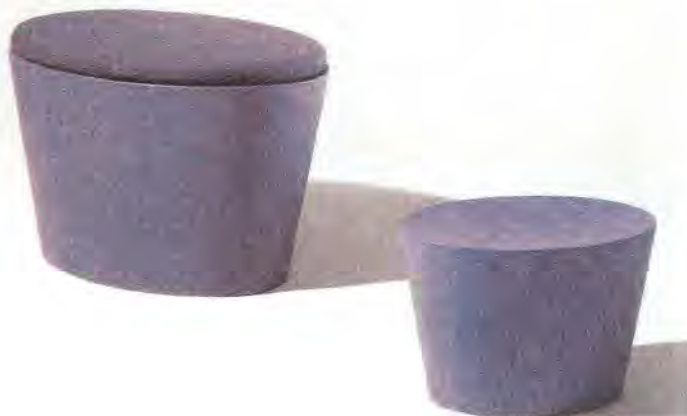
To commemorate that inspiration, on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, Knoll, Inc. and Dutch architect **REM KOOLHAAS** introduced "Tools for Life," a new collection of furniture by OMA, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Koolhaas is one of the most provocative thinkers of his generation, and with this collection, he joins Knoll's pantheon of modern masters, which includes such figures as **FRANK GEHRY**, **MAYA LIN**, **GEORGE NAKASHIMA**, **LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE**, **STEPHEN SPROUSE** and many more.

FROM BARCELONA WITH LOVE

Long before the Netherlands gave us Rem, Germany gave us Mies. **LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE** is highly regarded as one of the more important figures in the history of architecture,



LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE



MAYA LIN

and his “less is more” approach to design was the gold standard for generations of architects. Some of his most memorable projects include the massive Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, and the dramatic National Gallery in Berlin, Germany.

But long before that, the minimalist genius created what was, in 1929, probably the most recognizable new chair in the world (*pictured, above, left*). The Barcelona Chair (and ottoman) were conceived for that year’s Barcelona International Exposition of that year. Designed to offer King Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria Eugenia of Spain a place to rest during the Exposition (though they never sat down), the chairs were a milestone of modern design because of their elegant simplicity and the industrial technology used to create them. The design mixes luxurious fabrics and leather, combined with modern chrome frames. Van der Rohe eventually expanded the collection to include the Barcelona Couch and the Four Seasons Barstool (created for the famed Four Seasons Restaurant bar in New York City). In 1948, Mies granted Knoll exclusive rights to produce his furniture, including the Barcelona collection.

SEEING THE CURVE

Frequently cited as a benchmark of modern cross-national design, **MAYA LIN** is an architectural designer and artist (sculpture and landscape art), whose work draws influence from Japanese gardens, American Indian earthen

mounds, traditions passed down by her parents, and her design training at Yale University. She is the architect for the Museum of Chinese in America (mocanyc.org), but she is, perhaps, most widely known as the person who created the striking black-walled design of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, in Washington, D.C.

Lin’s work is recognized for its keen sense of elegant beauty and clear inspirations from nature. These elements are gracefully displayed in her designs for Maya Lin’s collection of Stones for Knoll (*pictured above, right*). The coffee tables were commissioned in 1998 in celebration of the company’s sixtieth anniversary. Reflecting on the concept behind the collection, Lin explained: “At the heart of this furniture collection for Knoll is my love for the land, which can be traced back to my childhood in the rolling hills of southeastern Ohio.”

Lin describes their simple shape in poetic terms: “It goes back to a childhood fascination we all have — that moment when you discover that the earth is round,” she says, “and you walk around trying to see that curve.”

FOR THE FASHIONISTA

STEPHEN SPROUSE gained notoriety in the 1980s with the debut of his punk rock- and graffiti-influenced clothing line. His pieces featured fluorescent colors and graphic text, superimposed on 1960s silhouettes. The collection won him the approval of the fashion world, along with a coveted special award by the Council of

Fashion Designers of America. For the next 25 years, he made a career out of mixing so-called “high and low culture.” Sprouse is perhaps best remembered for his graffitied handbags and the Stephen Sprouse sneaker, both designed for Louis Vuitton.

Eager to match artistic visions, in 2003 KnollTextiles invited Sprouse to create a new collection. The resulting designs (*one of which is pictured opposite, bottom*) included camouflage, neon colors and a graffiti version of the Declaration of Independence. He even used a special fluorescent yarn to create a design he called “Techno Tweed.” As part of the collaboration, Sprouse also hand-lettered a limited number of Knoll Studio pieces with his signature felt-tip marker.

SIMPLICITY ABOVE ALL

In 2008, German industrial designers **MARKUS JEHS** and **JÜRGEN LAUB** approached Knoll with a lounge chair proposal. Inspired by the grids found in the work of Knoll collaborators Harry Bertoia, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Florence Knoll, the team developed a segmented seating surface that appears to be nothing more than a sculpted blanket (*pictured opposite, above*). This gels with Jehs and Laub’s basic design philosophy: They do not want to make furniture or products that are loud. Thus, their structures tend toward simplicity.

Before joining the Knoll family of collaborators, Markus Jehs and Jürgen Laub studied

industrial design at the noted German university, Hochschule für Gestaltung Schwäbisch Gmünd. Their friendship was cemented while interning in New York, leading them to open Jehs+Laub in 1994. The duo has designed furniture and lighting for many of the world's leading design companies, including Thonet, Cassina and Fritz Hansen. Their interior design portfolio includes the master concept of worldwide showrooms for Mercedes-Benz.

KOOLHAAS WORLDVIEW

This brings us back to Rem Koolhaas, the latest in Knoll's parade of prominent collaborators. Koolhaas is a recipient of the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize and has been listed among *Time's* 100 Most Influential People in the World. His Knoll collaboration, "Tools for Life," offers a vision of furniture that has been specially designed to fit the ebb and flow of today's work and social lives.

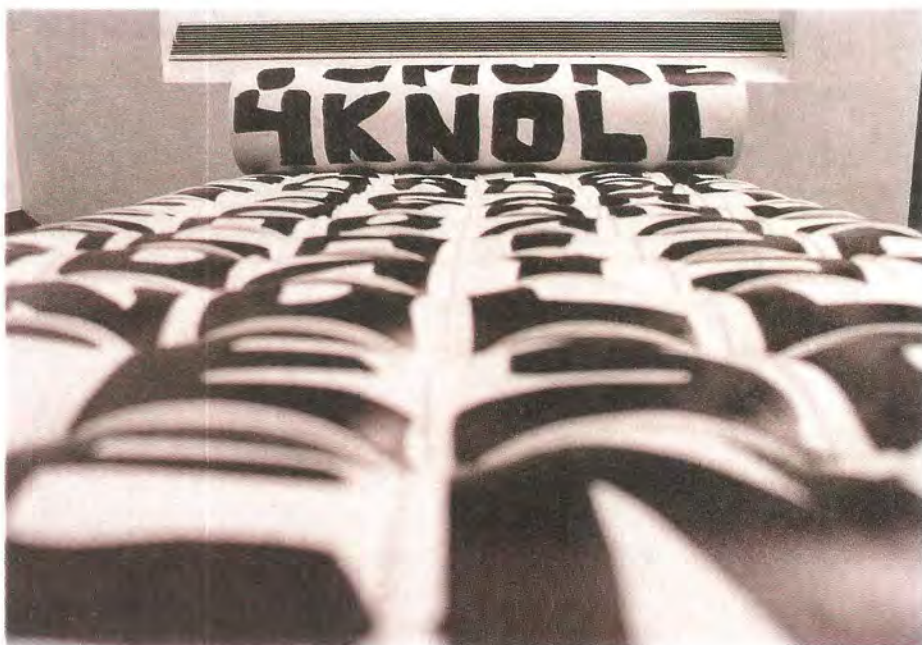
Commenting on the endeavor, Koolhaas said, "We wanted to create a range of furniture that performs in very precise but also in completely unpredictable ways, furniture that not only contributes to the interior but also to the animation." This reflects Koolhaas's long-held belief that furniture should be understood not merely as a design statement but as a high-performance tool.

"I want to talk about *work* and not *the office* — the distinction being that today people work everywhere," added Benjamin Pardo, Knoll director of design. "With that in mind, the OMA pieces are more kinetic than static: Many are easily adjustable so that with changes in height, adjacency and degree of privacy, almost any space can be transformed to a place of work." But the furniture's striking materials would be engaging in any environment: Clear acrylic is juxtaposed with concrete; glass with leather; travertine with steel — beguiling and engaging contrasts that draw attention to every curve and seam.

The collection is yet another impressive offering from the little furniture company formed by Hans and Florence Knoll that went on to become a steadfast champion of the confluence of art and industry. Through their furniture, they helped inspire and popularize modernism in America's interiors. Over the company's 65 years, Knoll's designs have better connected people to their work, their



MARKUS JEHS | JÜRGEN LAUB



STEPHEN SPROUSE

lives and their world. In some cases, their aesthetics have evolved; in others, they've endured. Having shaped the history of modern furniture, Knoll remains revolutionary today.

And it started with a profound concept: Sometimes the best furniture designs come from minds that didn't set out to design furniture in the first place.