

Design: Enduring splendor of Mies van der Rohe Design

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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pg. 207

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The Barcelona chair is the Rolls-Royce of furniture. Designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1929, it is, almost 50 years later, cult object and status symbol nonpareil. The subtle curves of its "X" frame of polished stainless steel and its broad, buttoned cushions of natural leather are almost universally familiar; a matched pair gives the approved stamp of classic, contemporary elegance to everything from corporate headquarters to the homes of the affluent.

It follows naturally that the Barcelona chair, which now costs \$1,680, is also one of the most knocked-off designs in history. Imitations and adaptations using standard metal tubing, plastic-covered cushions and curious colors provide very, very faint whiffs of Miesian splendor at bargain prices in almost any furniture store.

But to see the originals one must go to the home of a collector or to the Museum of Modern Art's Design Collection and Mies Archives. A few faithful reproductions, including the Barcelona chair and a side chair called the Brno chair (all Mies furniture is known by the name of the place for which the architect designed it), have been manufactured by Knoll International since the 1950's and 60's. And they sell steadily, even at stratospheric prices.

Knoll is currently adding eight "new" Mies items to the line, all designed in the 1930's, to be available next fall. Included in this group is a handsome recliner of 1932 which has never been produced before, made from drawings in the Mies Archives, as well as a chaise longue, a coffee table and an armchair.

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Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969).

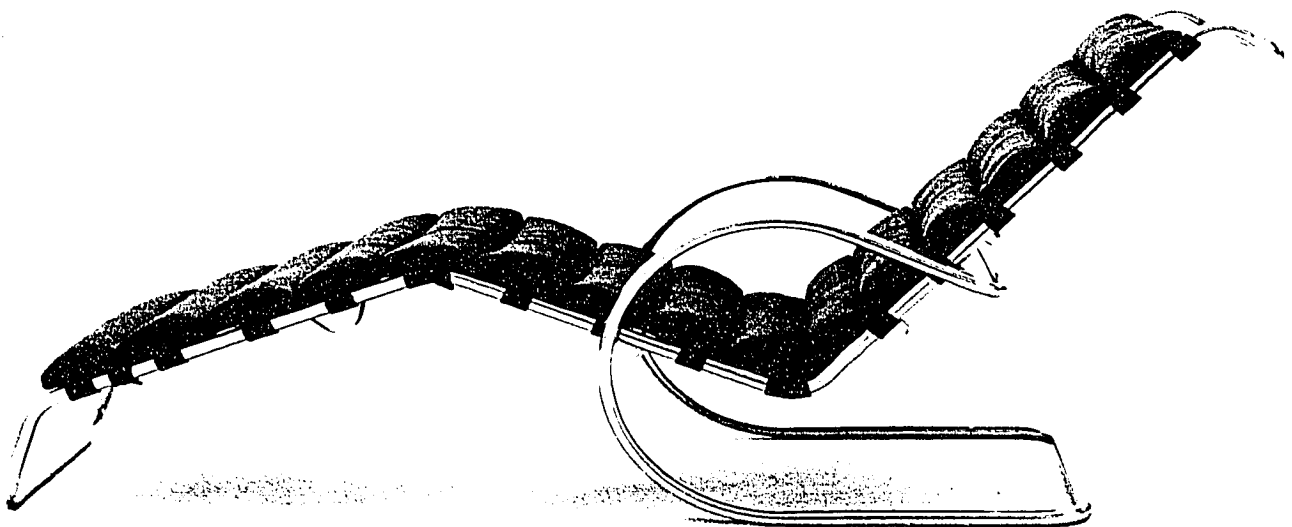
that reproduce famous prototypes. The museum will get royalties on these and the other new models, and the public will get classics of Cartier quality. (The recliner will retail, through architects and designers, for about \$1,200, plus fabric.) A diamond or a Mies chair is forever.

An exhibition of these new pieces, plus the originals made in the 1930's and a selection of Mies's furniture drawings, opens March 3 at the Museum of Modern Art, where it can be seen through May 3. Sponsored by the Department of Architecture and Design and funded by Knoll International, it has been directed by Ludwig Glaeser, who heads the Mies Archives and who has also prepared an excellent, comprehensive catalogue.

The handful of architects who established the modern esthetic in this century designed epochal buildings and much of the furniture that went into them. Although the buildings were one-of-a-kind gems, the furniture was meant for industrial production. Marcel Breuer's cane-and-tubing side chairs and Alvar Aalto's pale birch, bent-plywood chairs and tables, for example, helped set the style of the 20th century.

In most cases, what ended up in the mass, or class, market was originally produced for the elite and avant-garde. The Barcelona chair, in fact, was designed as a kind of throne. It was used in the German Pavilion at the International Exposition of 1929 at Barcelona. Both the building and the furniture—there were also ottomans and tables—have played the role of touchstones of modernism. The pavilion was dismantled right after the exposition, but its image has become immortal.

A templelike structure of travertine and glass with a serene, open interior precisely defined by marble and glass screen walls, the pavilion was conceived as a royal reception area. The chairs—there were two of them—were meant for the King and Queen of Spain, and one table was (Continued on Page 80)



Reclining chair (1932).

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Design

Continued from Page 70

to hold a golden book for their signatures. Another table was probably for ceremonial champagne. Several "X"-based ottomans were for lesser personages.

Mies's Tugendhat House, built at Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1930 and hopelessly damaged during the war, has become the definitive domestic expression of his understated luxe. The interiors, done with his collaborator, Lilly Reich, were alive with color unsuspected in the photographs that are all that remain; Mies's palette in later years was an austere black and white with natural fabrics and woods and the rich, somber hues of marble and bronze. The Tugendhat chair had a chrome-steel frame and arms and cushions of silken, silver-gray fabric. The Barcelona chairs that stood opposite on a natural wool rug were in emerald green leather. There was a ruby red chaise. The background was a screen wall of glowing, golden onyx.

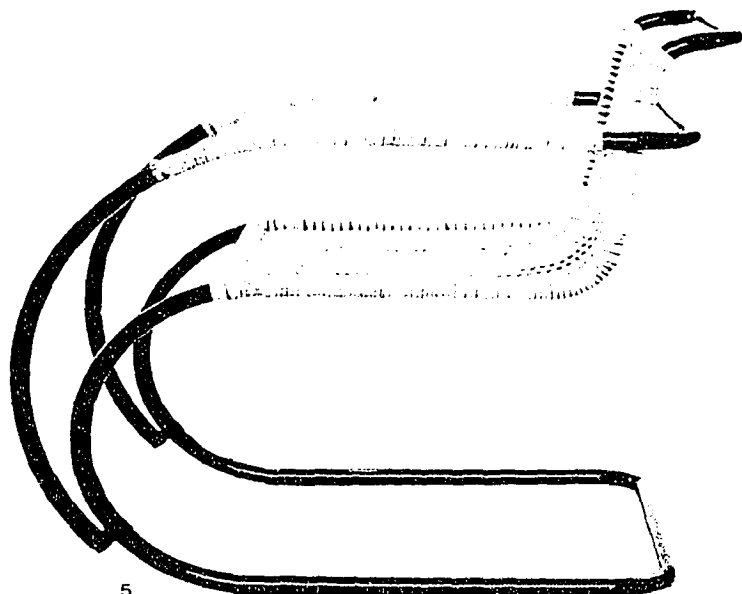
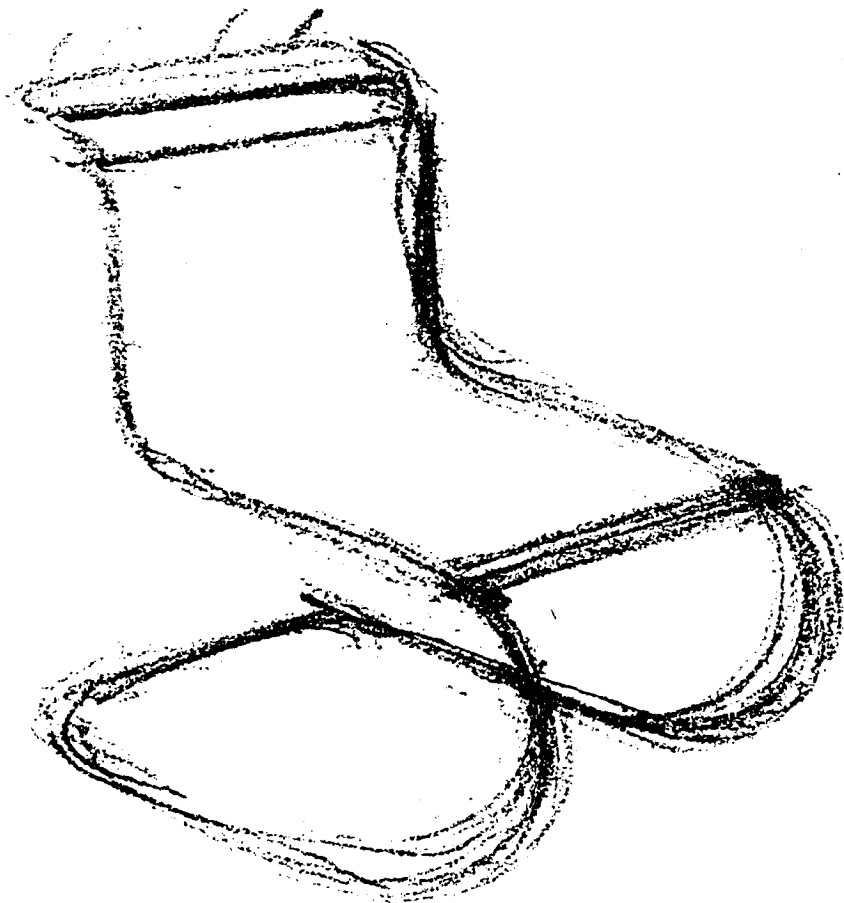
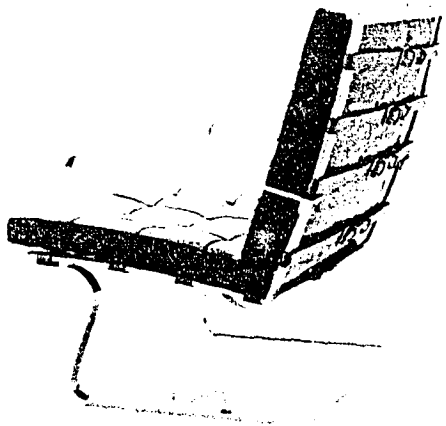
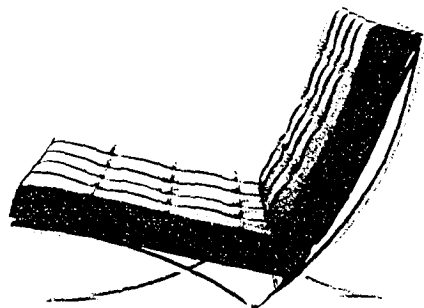
The Knoll versions of the newly produced furniture will offer, in addition to classic black and natural leather, a ribbed fabric in dark blue and a soft gold velvet fabric that suggest some of the hues and textures used in the 1930's. An off-white cowhide approximating the original white calf parchment of some of the smaller chairs will be available to those who care, and pay, enough.

As the drawings show, Mies designed by continuously refining "curvature studies," rather than by the popular mumbo jumbo of anthropomorphic analysis, in which body measurements are fitted to a designed form. He spoke of his rejects in the endless process as "graveyards of chairs." A large, solid man, he liked his furniture substantial. Almost everything he produced is superbly comfortable, with the notable exception of the Barcelona chair, which was clearly never meant for lounging.

The Mies Archives, established at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968 as a division of the museum's Department of Architecture and Design, is supported by independent funding. Begun with Mies's gift of 45 drawings in 1947, the collection now includes 15,000 drawings left by Mies's will when he died in 1969. There are 774 furniture drawings alone.

In the field of interior design, which exploits novelty and change and is as subject to fashion as clothes, this furniture endures. Fifty years is the threshold set by some for antiques. These nearly 50-year-old pieces do not date—their universal beauty relies on no nostalgia of time or place.

Like his buildings, Mies's furniture is the refined, exquisitely adjusted product of a superb sensibility that dealt in esthetic absolutes. "I don't want to be interesting," he is quoted as saying, "I just want to be good." Whatever he touched is more than good; it is the best. ■



1. Brno chair (1930).
2. Barcelona chair (1929).
3. Tugendhat chair (1930).
4. Study for side chair (early 1930's).
5. Side chair (1927).