

Know Your Knoll

An exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center, New York, adds a chapter to a lofty history

Without a doubt, Knoll is one of the great success stories in American design. From humble origins in the early 1940's—making use of wood and army-surplus webbing and outsourcing fabrication to cabinetmak-

ers—there emerged a multinational corporation capable of surviving founder Hans Knoll's sudden death in 1955 and the official retirement of his widow, Florence, a decade later. Such was the impact of Knoll on the mid-century landscape that a showroom from the late 1950's soon became a virtual blueprint for corporate environments worldwide, and Knoll remains relevant, offering reeditions of iconic early pieces, manufacturing new office systems, and producing a range of fabrics. The last, never before explored in a museum context, are the subject of "KnollTextiles: 1945-2010" at New York's Bard Graduate Center through July.

In the beginning, there was Hans Knoll. He came from a German furniture-making family, but he was a salesman not a designer. Then there was Jens Risom, fresh from the School of Arts and Crafts in Copenhagen—and scoping out the U.S. market. Knoll's debut line featured pieces both by Risom and by a Knoll family friend, Ernst Schwadron. The stylistic difference is palpable: lean versus chunky, spare versus busy, Nordic versus Teutonic. Fortunately for Knoll, not to mention for modernism, it was Risom's line that became the foundation for Knoll's look in the 1940's.

With a mid-'50's shift toward commercial clients, that look was progressively characterized by precision, elegance, and a concept of total

design. Knoll's stable of designers now included Franco Albini, Harry Bertoia, Donald Knorr, Herbert Matter, and Richard Schultz. The rest, as they say, is history.

Vintage Knoll was a staple at my first New York gallery, Lin-Weinberg. As early as 1994, we started collecting catalogs and ephemera, doing archival research, and buying as much early material as we could—there was little competition. We handled items as small as a Noguchi tripod table lamp and as large as a credenza that Florence Knoll designed for the CBS building. Once, at the Modernism fair, we set up an entire booth with a 1940's Knoll theme.

Pre-Internet, the furnishings somehow found their way to our door. So did Knoll executives Carl Magnusson and Al Pfeiffer, whose office was up the block. The two of them were determined to preserve Knoll's material heritage, and we wound up selling them about a dozen pieces for the Knoll Museum in East Greenville, Pennsylvania.

The Holy Grail of early Knoll, Alexander Girard's free-form coffee table from 1948, surfaced at the Wright auction house in Chicago in 2005, and that particular example is still the only one known to have survived. Produced in small numbers, the design appeared in a single catalog and was abruptly discontinued in 1953 after Girard signed with Herman Miller. I was luckily able to procure the table at Wright for clients who were furnishing several modernist houses.

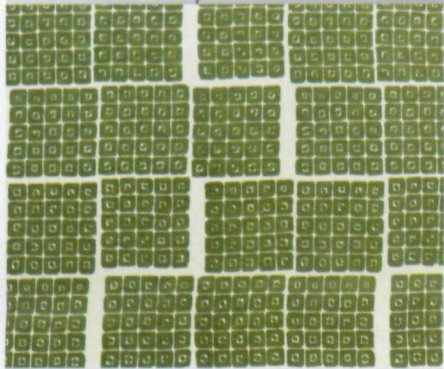
Flush with excitement when the Girard table arrived, I immediately called Magnusson to show him my find. He demurred because, he said, it wasn't produced by Knoll. A few days later, he called back. He had located a photo-

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To dear Emanuel from Stu



graph of Florence Knoll sitting on her own sofa, her dog on one side, an Alexander Calder stabile on the other. . . and the table in front. Arriving at Lin-Weinberg to take a look, Magnusson was clearly disappointed that the table wasn't for sale, but I could see the wheels turning. It was reissued the next year.

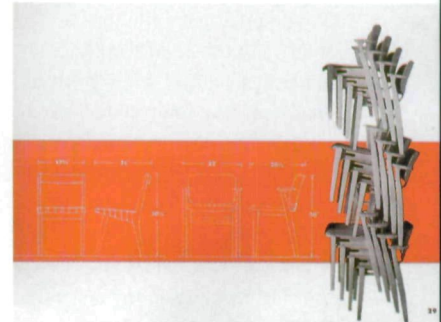
I was rooting around in a closet at a suburban tag sale when I found a roll of 10 yards of printed fabric still in a brown paper wrapper. It turned out to be Knoll's Fibra, a linear pattern that Esther Haraszty, the head of KnollTextiles from 1950 to 1955, had based on the heddles of a loom. Under her aegis, fabrics bloomed with colors and graphics, and Fibra was one of the most popular mid-century prints. It earned the Museum of Modern Art's Good Design award in 1953, remained in production until 1972, and was reissued in 2007. My roll of Fibra, displayed in 2009 at the Museum of the City of New

York, caught the eye of curators planning the Bard Graduate Center's "KnollTextiles" show—and went directly from one exhibition to the other, not even stopping at my current gallery, Weinberg Modern.

The Bard show focuses on the period from 1947, when the KnollTextiles division was formed, to 1965, Florence Knoll's retirement date. Documented and assessed are early contributions from Noémi Raymond, whose patterned textiles for MoMA's 1941 competition Organic Design laid the groundwork ➤

Opposite, from top: Swatches and an archival card for Cato, Paul Maute's 1961 woven wool appearing in "KnollTextiles: 1945-2010." Screen-printed linen-cotton Pythagoras by Sven Markelius, 1953. Versions of Scotch linen, a 1950 weave by Franz Lorenz.

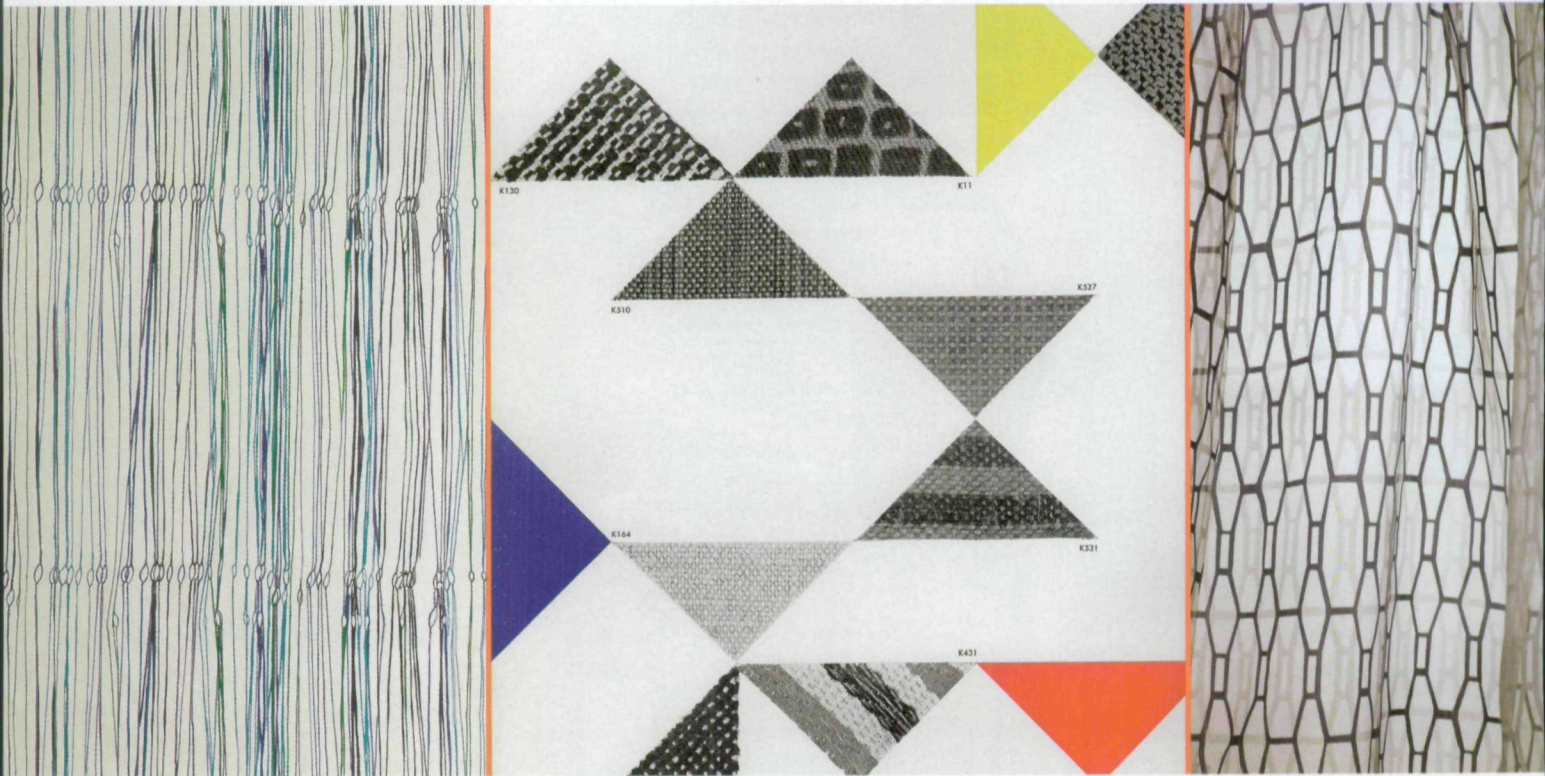
Clockwise from top left: Florence Knoll on her own sofa, with Alexander Girard's 1948 coffee table. Chairs by Ilmari Tapiovaara offered in the Herbert Matter—designed 1950 catalog. Cato upholstering Eero Saarinen's side chair from 1948. The surviving Girard table, on which current reissues are based. Inca, a Sheila Hicks wool from 1966, on Bill Stephens's 1301 chair, circa 1970. Ross Littell's Mira, a 1958 screen-printed linen. Digitally printed ramie-polyester Auden, part of 2010's Rodarte for Knoll Luxe collection. Marga Hielle Vatter's Dynamic woven wool, circa 1973, on Max Pearson's 46S secretarial chair, 1961. Mosaic, a 1950 screen-printed rayon by Noémi Raymond.



for Knoll's printed fabrics, and from weaver-designer Marianne Stregell, whose hand-work informed her machine-loomed designs. Bard presents the textiles as crucial and integral to Knoll's creative and business strategies: as upholstery on Knoll furniture and as part of architecturally cohesive interiors, mostly corporate. KnollTextiles creative director Dorothy Cosonas considers the show a "once-in-a-lifetime event for people who are interested in color, texture, and pattern."

On the contemporary end, the show includes eco-friendly and scientifically based fabrics by Suzanne Tick. A studio artist on the loom, Tick pushes the boundaries in production. Another recent arrival is Knoll Luxe, an award-winning line intended for both residential and boutique commercial use. Cosonas designs most of the fabrics but has also commissioned fashion-based collections by Proenza Schouler and Rodarte. If there's an echo here of Florence Knoll's use of men's suit fabric for upholstery in the 1940's, that's not coincidental. Knoll's culture of experimentation and innovation continues.

—Larry Weinberg



Clockwise from top: A fabric wheel, circa 1965. Suzanne Tick's *Air Rights* screen-printed polyester, 2009. Textiles in Matter's catalog. *Fibra*, a 1953 screen-printed linen by Esther Haraszty.

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