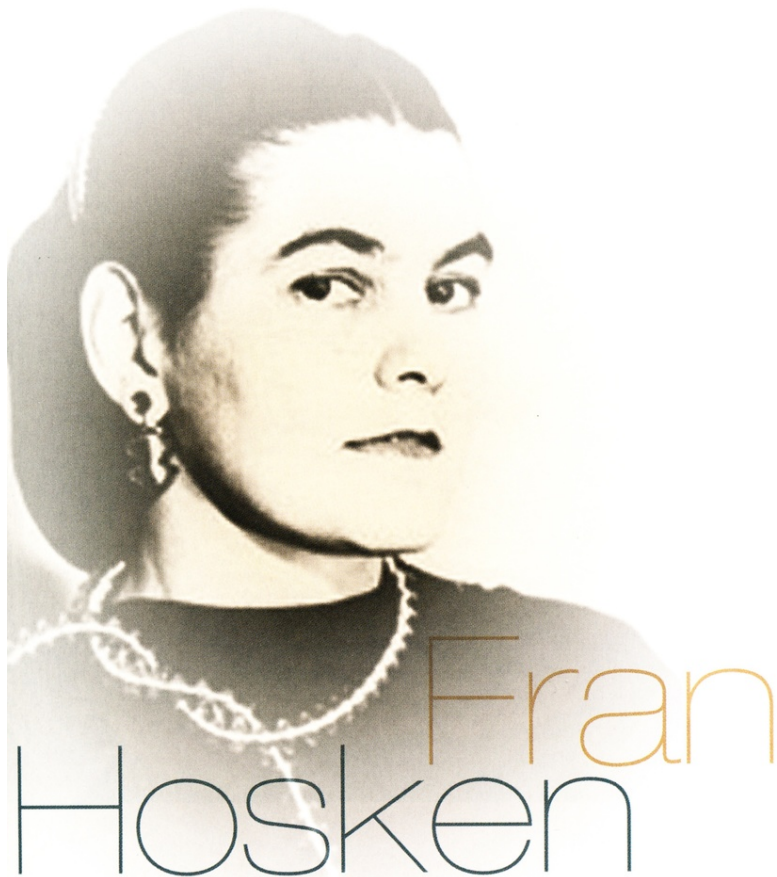


Recapturing a world of designers
who were almost lost to history

Women's work



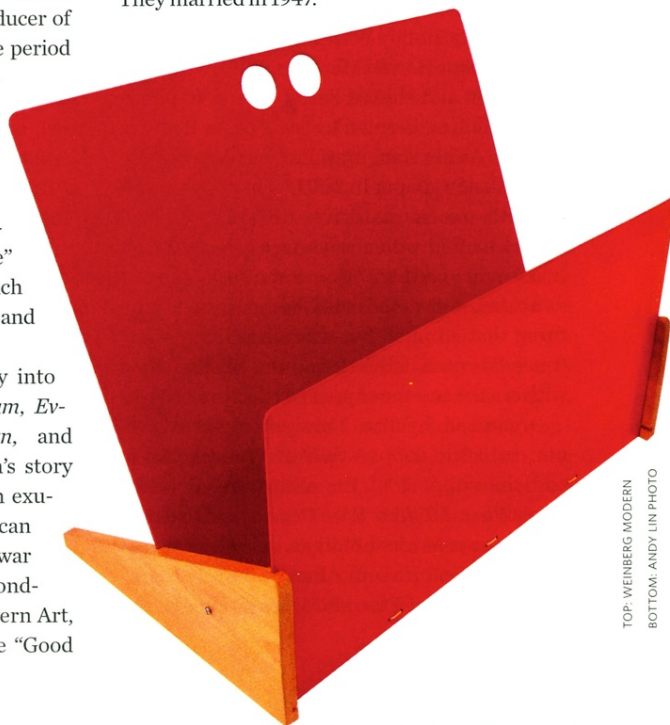
By Larry Weinberg

FRANZISKA PORGES HOSKEN was a woman of many parts, including designer and producer of modernist furniture and accessories in the period just after World War II. From her base outside of Boston, she and her engineer husband James operated Hosken Inc. from 1948 to 1951 (not 1953 as published elsewhere). It may seem like a mere blip on the radar screen, but in that short time her low-cost demountable designs and “spring-wire” jewelry reached a wide audience through such diverse outlets as Knoll, Raymor, Macy’s, and the Chicago Merchandise Mart.

Hosken’s designs also found their way into leading journals such as *Furniture Forum*, *Everyday Art Quarterly*, *Current Design*, and *L’Arredamento Moderno*. Indeed, Hosken’s story and her archive give us a window into an exuberant and formative moment in American design history, those years right after the war when a new generation of designers, responding to prompts from the Museum of Modern Art, applied themselves to creating affordable “Good

Design” for returning GIs and their families.

Born into a wealthy Jewish family of textile manufacturers in what is today the Czech Republic and raised in Vienna, Hosken was imbued with a sense of noblesse oblige that accompanied her to the United States in 1938. After graduating from Smith College in 1940, she entered the Harvard design program via Smith’s architecture program in Boston—a wartime concession that opened Harvard’s Graduate School of Design to women. At Harvard she studied with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and in summer programs with Gyorgy Kepes. Hosken greatly admired Gropius, learning from him about Bauhaus methods and what she called “new design”—a term apprehending visual asperity and social usage. These were intense years at Harvard: willing students were immersed in the ideals that were newly transplanted from the Bauhaus, and impelled toward activism by wartime patriotism. Upon leaving Harvard, Fran went to Washington as a Coast Guard SPAR—a women’s volunteer reservist. It was there that she met James Hosken, a British officer assigned to an intelligence unit. They married in 1947.



TOP: WEINBERG MODERN
BOTTOM: ANDY LIN PHOTO

As a freshly minted Harvard School of Design graduate and a young housewife in a small apartment, Hosken was well positioned to translate European modernist ideas into contemporary American needs. Like many designers in modest circumstances, she started her career by designing for her own home. With the encouragement of friends who admired her simple but clever designs, Hosken began evaluating the needs of young couples in small GI Bill houses, and checking the results against an American market she deemed too expensive and out-of-scale. Hosken Inc. was born in the basement of her rental apartment in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, making use of a machine shop set up by James.

A 1949 article in the *Boston Traveler* chronicles her evolution from homemaker to manufacturer. A photo caption identifies her as “A Viennese with Yankee Ingenuity,” an interesting if tendentious portrayal. James was responsible for the systems—the hinges and brackets required for flat shipping, the technical details of the modular case pieces—and he was a formally trained engineer, and a Brit to boot. Still, the implied combination of cosmopolitan sophistication and bootstraps know-how exerted a powerful appeal, propagating a story similar to the one being written about Charles Eames, another young designer working with his spouse out of their home.

The range of pieces eventually produced by Hosken Inc., documented in a small self-published catalogue, includes a dining table, coffee table, nesting tables, a letter tray, telephone shelf, chest of drawers, magazine stand, stacking stool, dressing cabinet, and service cart. One of the earliest designs, the stacking



Facing page:
Magazine rack no. 677, designed by Fran Hosken for Hosken Inc. in 1948, is made of Masonite and birch held together with wire and string.

This page, from top:
Three versions of the Hosken service cart—two never produced—in a photograph of c. 1947.

Hosken's nesting tables no. 679-680, designed c. 1949.

Hosken in the Hosken Hammock, co-designed with her husband James, in a photograph of c. 1949.



stool, achieved the greatest commercial success. Made of lacquered plywood with screw-in dowel legs, the stools were offered by Raymor and Knoll and were pictured in *Furniture Forum* and on the cover of *House and Garden* in 1951—though Hosken Inc. was not credited, much to Hosken's chagrin. Several thousand units were shipped before the design was widely copied.

A window into an exuberant and formative moment in design history



Several other Hosken designs gained national recognition. A service cart from 1948 was composed of tubular satin chrome, perforated steel, and Masonite and melds the linearity and color of the Bauhaus with the shape of an American shopping cart. It became familiar to readers of *Furniture Forum* and *Everyday Art Quarterly*, though fewer than a hundred were produced. The magazine rack, a composition in combinations of red, black, and blonde, might appear to be the product of a Bauhaus or De Stijl workshop. However, what in Europe would require artisanal joinery is instead an inexpensive construction of Masonite and birch held together with wire and string in America. In the magazine rack Hosken created a design that is at once decorative and austere, optimistic and naïve—a bold design intended for everyday use in modest-income households. Distributed by Raymor, it shipped flat with assembly instructions.

At the opposite end of the price scale from the magazine rack, which sold for \$8.50, was the plywood and canvas hammock, a handmade object with a list price of around \$90. James Hosken was the lead designer here, as his engineering skill was required to balance forces in tension to create a no-sag, no-tilt hammock. Fran contributed the expressively biomorphic end braces. The result is a well-engineered and handsome design that evokes both a suspension bridge and a butterfly in flight. The hammock was shown at the New Design shop in New York City, run by Dorothy Noyes, a Harvard classmate of Fran's, but with the high price only a handful sold.

Hosken's spring-wire jewelry was perhaps her most constructivist work—and her closest near-miss in the market. Inspired by a visit to a spring manufacturer, and owing some visual debt to Alexander



the failure on a landlord who rescinded a valid lease on their factory space, and, fairly or not, on the demands of impending motherhood. Her own assessment misses a few additional issues: fissures in her working relationship with James (the marriage would end in divorce in the early 1960s); some shoddy construction of working models—a Raymor representative noted that a sample was already warped and cracked in a rejection letter; and most of all, a changing market in 1950s America. Sticking to her austere principles, Fran became out-of-step with an increasingly affluent consumer society, a situation she rued. Ironically, she may simply have been ahead of her time: witness the success of IKEA and Design Within Reach—

either of which might be interested in some of Fran's sketches—and the current ascendancy of flat-pack furniture design.

After the mid-1950s Hosken's considerable creative energies were devoted to architectural photography, teaching and writing about urban issues, painting, and feminist organizing and publishing. Her activism was summed up in a eulogy by her daughter-in-

Calder, whom Fran knew, the ropes, earrings, and bracelets of copper, nickel, or gold-plated wire were produced by an industrial method, with only hand finishing. They represented an innovation in jewelry design, with potential for inexpensive mass production. And they were enthusiastically received around the country, including a notice in the *New York Times* in late 1949. Fran even signed an exclusive contract with Lord and Taylor, but the stock apparently became tangled in the display, with predictable short-term results.

The four-year run of Hosken Inc. was an exciting time for the designer. Production requirements soon outgrew the basement workshop, so fabrication was first outsourced and then moved to a hangar-like facility in nearby Hingham—though the packaging still took place at home. Fran crisscrossed the country, visiting potential outlets like Baldwin-Kingrey in Chicago (unsuccessfully) and the New Design shop in New York City (successfully, as noted). She and James brought a prototype chest of drawers to the Milan Triennale in 1948, and in 1951 the Hosken stacking tables were named a MoMA Good Design selection.

That award could have presaged a long and illustrious design career but instead marked a coda—Hosken Inc. folded by the end of 1951. In retrospect, Hosken observed, “Hosken Inc. was a good idea; the time was right, but we had no capital; and no investors to back us up and too little business experience.” Beyond this, she blamed

law: “she felt that unless you were doing something for the world, you were useless.” Her fierce commitment to issues that mattered to her and the disposition of a human steamroller meant that Fran Hosken was anything but useless. Her work shows us what a motivated designer can do, and reminds us that the legacy of the Bauhaus has as much to do with conscience as construction. **M**

Larry Weinberg, formerly a partner in Manhattan's Lin-Weinberg Gallery, owns and runs Weinberg Modern out of his showroom in the New York Design Center and also blogs and writes about design topics.

Facing page: **Prototype of a two-tiered cabinet designed by Hosken in solid birch and perforated Masonite, c. 1948.**

This page, from top: **Hosken wearing her spring-wire jewelry in a photo of c. 1950.**

Hosken's spring-wire earrings in copper.

Detail of Hosken's spring-wire rope in copper.

