

mid-century mystery

Harvey Probber's
furniture is being
rediscovered



With a range of products that rivaled Edward Wormley's output for the Dunbar Furniture Corporation, Harvey Probber won recognition for his meticulously proportioned modular pieces in the decades after the Second World War. Still, despite current success at auction and online, relatively little is known about him. This is both unfortunate and unnecessary. *Unfortunate* because he was a multitasking and interesting fellow, with a combination of design skills and business acumen unique among Americans. *Unnecessary* because, when he passed away, he left behind an extensive archive, documenting his entire career, as well as four sons, one of whom is ready to tackle the related

challenges of burnishing his father's legacy and perpetuating the brand.

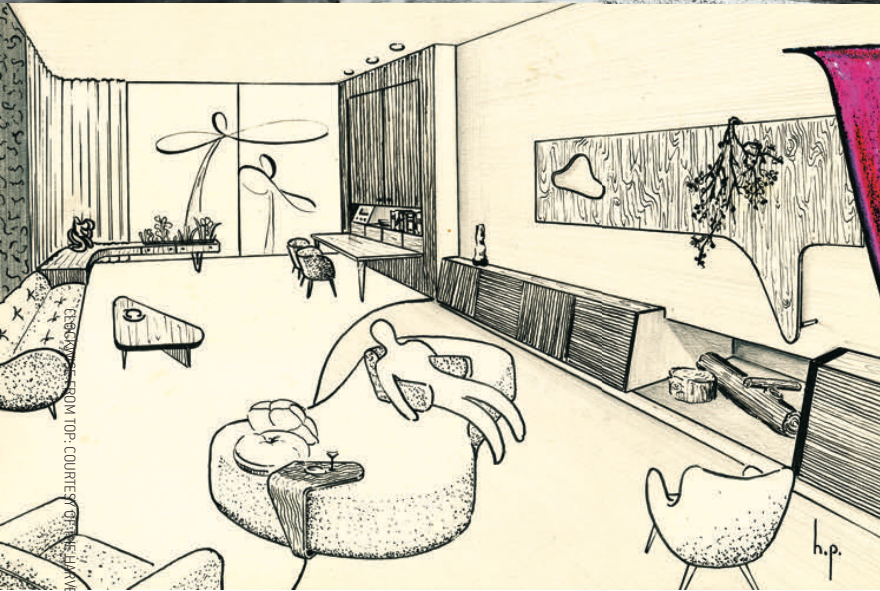
Sharing his father's interests and clearly proud of his achievements, Jory Probber is the New York territory manager for Affordable Interior Systems, a manufacturer of office furniture. He's articulate and design-literate, yet he's given to shaking his head at the amount of material under his stewardship and the weight of the responsibility. Nowhere is this more evident than at the suburban storage facility that houses the bulk of the Harvey Probber Design Archive. This trove of information, only partially organized, comprises thousands of documents: correspondence, renderings of furniture both realized and not, blueprints, catalogs, and photographs of products, projects, and showrooms. Pick almost any pile, and you will unearth treasures. Many have not seen the light of day in decades.

Particularly fascinating to me, as someone who sells vintage Harvey Probber furniture, are the unrealized projects bearing witness to the forward push in his visual imagination. A portfolio of sketches from the 1940's reveals dramatically rendered, rakishly streamlined chairs, desks, and chests, often in room settings. Pasted into a binder, a 1945 house-of-the-future magazine spread features his biomorphic scheme for a living room. A third portfolio, this one from the 1950's, shows futuristic chairs and sofas. All were deemed to be beyond market tastes or technical capabilities at



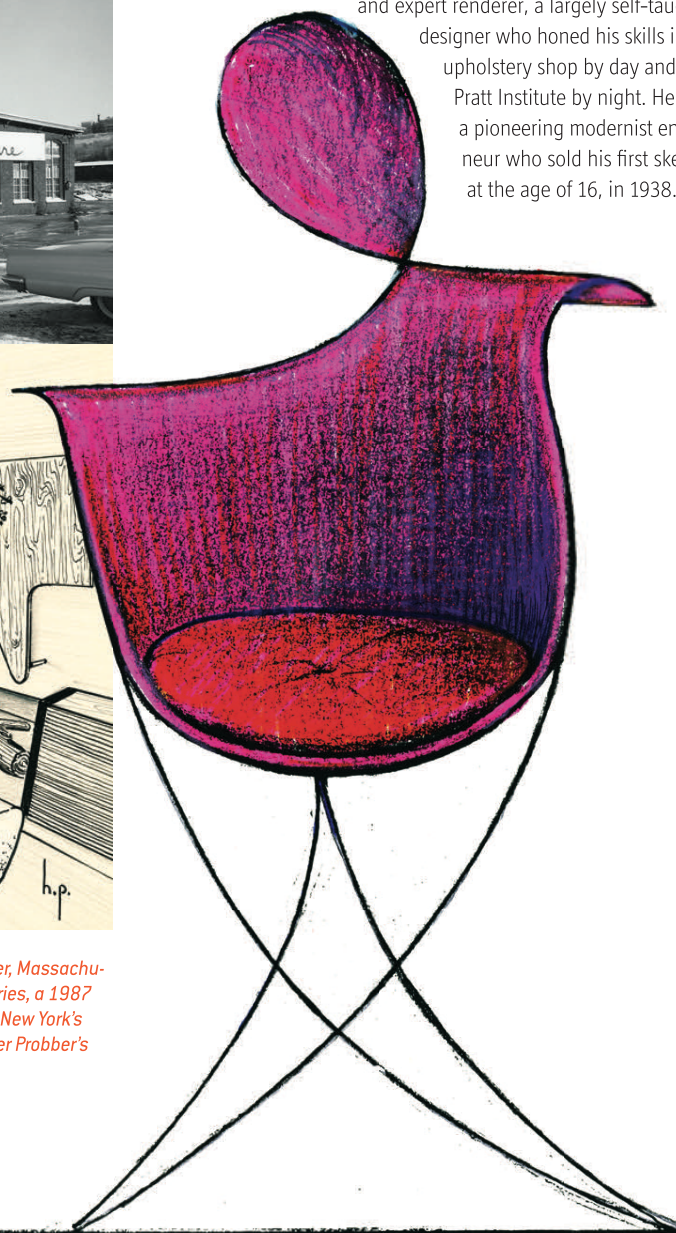
FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE HARVEY PROBBER DESIGN ARCHIVE (2); KAL WEWNER

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the time, but all look fresh today—if produced, these pieces would surely make for an interesting booth at the Design Miami fair. Relevant, too, are the showroom settings visible in catalogs, ads, and loose photographs. As with Dunbar and Knoll, Harvey Prober showrooms were part of a progressive marketing strategy, promoting modern design by associating it with modern art and offering a fully realized vision of how to *live modern*.

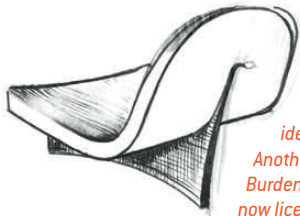
If the archive is his old-school encyclopedia, his interactive Wikipedia is his son. One readily gleans the basic entry: Dad was an accomplished singer who considered a career in theater, an abstract artist and expert renderer, a largely self-taught designer who honed his skills in an upholstery shop by day and at Pratt Institute by night. He was a pioneering modernist entrepreneur who sold his first sketch at the age of 16, in 1938. ➤



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE HARVEY PROBER DESIGN ARCHIVE (3); MARTIN HELFER

Clockwise from top left: At his desk in New York, circa 1960. The factory in Fall River, Massachusetts. A 1971 chair that was a favorite of its designer. From the Prober's People series, a 1987 pencil drawing. His contribution to "Interiors To Come" in *Interiors* magazine, 1945. New York's Harvey Prober showroom in the 1950's with a Fernand Léger oil on canvas. Another Prober's People drawing.

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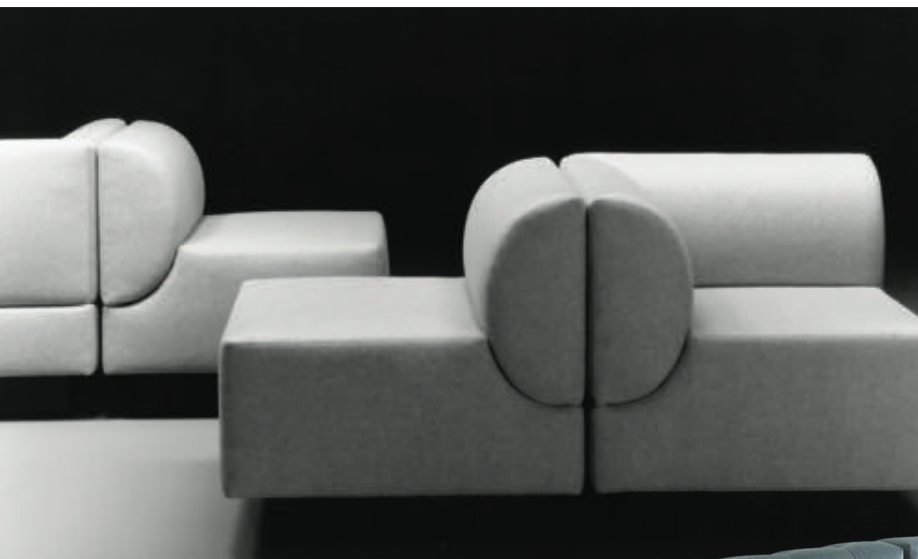


Clockwise from top left: An ink drawing, circa 1952, of a chair never realized. In the showroom, an Elie Nadelman bronze identical to one now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Another unrealized chair, in a 1940's gouache. The dealer Jonathan Burden's current example of Tufoto, a 1970 sectional similar to the sofa now licensed to M2L. Oval Arm Seating, a 1981 modular design.



He established his own factory in Brooklyn in 1946, then moved production to Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1954. That same year, he opened a showroom in New York's Fuller Building, amid such art-world legends as the Leo Castelli Gallery—anticipating the current marketing synergy between art and design. As early as the 1970's, he represented steel furniture by Maria Pergay, then obscure. He was also an avid art collector, trading furniture for paintings by his friend Adolph Gottlieb. Dad was furthermore fascinated by the creative process and prized it in all forms. For clues about invention, he'd go as far as to watch another friend, Leonard Bernstein, compose.

Harvey Prober delighted in wiping out boundaries, whether those separating designer and composer or designer and manufacturer. And he always sought to give his work timelessness, achieved through durable construction and that subtle but all-important component, proportion. The litmus test, a mantra almost, was: "Will it hold up in 10, 20, 30 years?" Tellingly, he considered his designs like children, the oedipal implications of which are not lost on his son. This tendency to assign human characteristics and personality to inanimate furniture culminated in the 1980's with Prober's People, a series of colored pencil drawings that merged faces and torsos with chairs.



A decade after his father's death, Jory Prober still has questions he wishes he had asked about the business. Whatever strategy currently exists for the estate must start with finding a repository for the archive. He hopes it goes to a university or a museum, where the material would be accessible to the public, to future scholarship. Beyond that, he has rudimentary plans for a Web site to help with authentication and to forge new connections for the family. And, of course, there is the matter of reissuing the canon—Harvey Prober sold his factory in 1986 but held onto the intellectual property. The process has begun with the licensing of 10 designs to M2L, among them an iconic deep-tufted modular sofa of the 1970's. Production has already commenced.

What is certain is that the estate is in good hands. Whatever Jory Prober does, it will be done to last. He is unquestionably his father's son. —*Larry Weinberg*



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF CLARE MALLISON ASSOCIATES; COURTESY OF THE HARVEY PROBER DESIGN ARCHIVE (2) ARCHIVE; COURTESY OF 1STIDIBS; COURTESY OF THE HARVEY PROBER DESIGN ARCHIVE (2)