

Design icons: what two young Brits  
brought to the party



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Books, Music and Musicians, Food, Drink and our guide to easy christmas shopping





Photographs by Robert Powell and Simon Norfolk



Knoll International, one of the world leaders in modern furniture design and production, traces its roots back to the Bauhaus of Walter Gropius and the giants of contemporary architecture and design including Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Marcel Breuer and Bertoia (right). Now an office desk system (left) called LPI, but more affectionately known as Homer, is being billed as a classic of the future. It was designed by two relatively unknown British talents (above), Luke Pearson, 29, and Tom Lloyd, 31

DESIGN

# Homer's Odyssey

Talk about the classics of modern furniture and you are talking about Knoll. Since the 1930s, the company has built a reputation by beating a path to the doors of the world's best architects and designers. Now they are pinning their faith on two young and unknown Britons and a desk trolley called Homer. Ann Treneman charts a journey that started in the Bauhaus



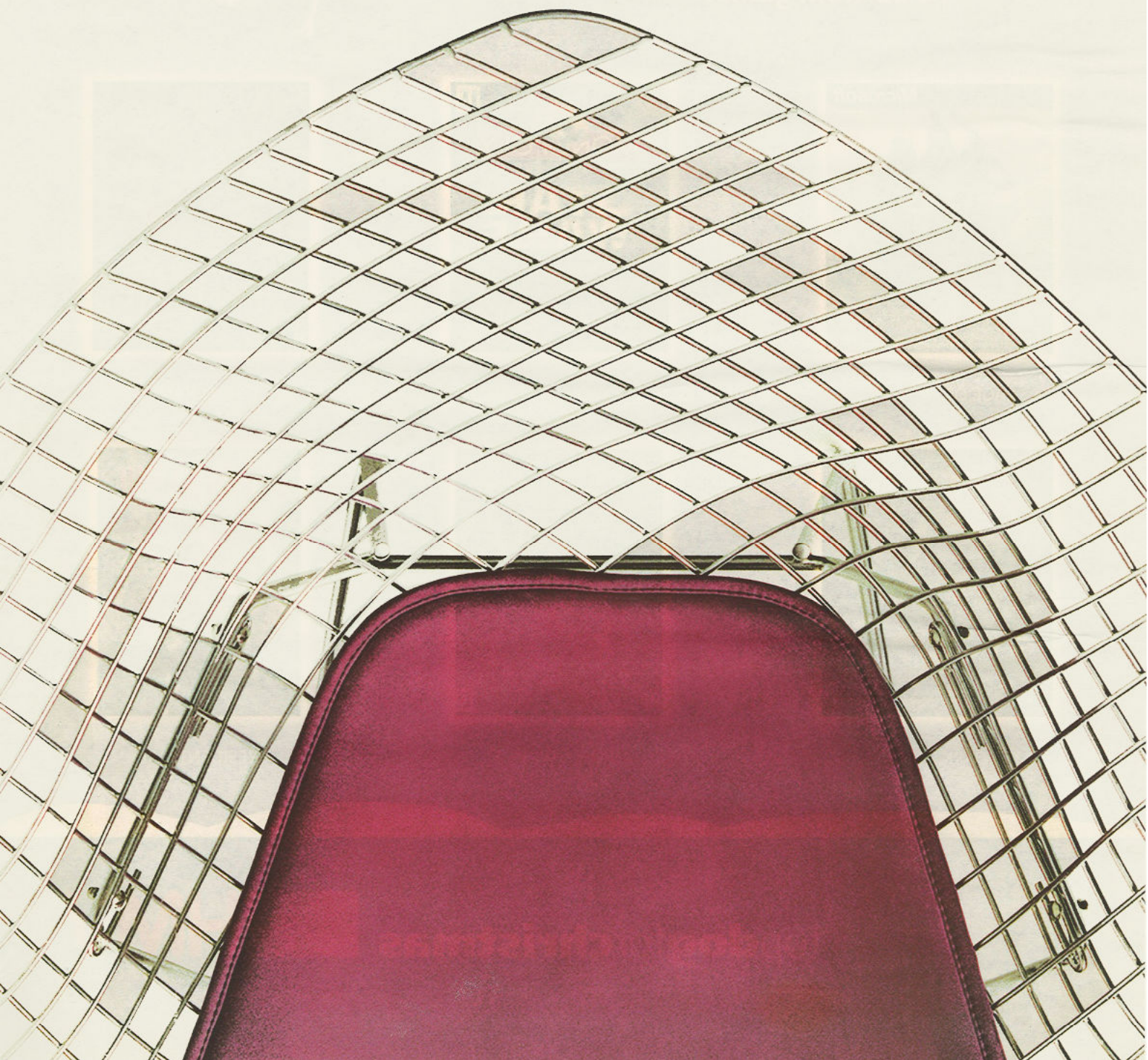


It is not often that a party is given for a piece of furniture and so I wasn't all that sure what to expect. Actually that is not true. I knew exactly what to expect: a canapé, a glass of industrial white and a lot of talk about design, darling. The first hint that things were not going to plan was the ridiculous white stretch limo in front of us as we pulled in to park in some god-forsaken bit of north London. Olympic-size torches blazed the way towards a cavernous room that was so full of people that there was a chance that we had missed the party entirely and stumbled instead into the crowd scene on a film set. There was not a canapé to be seen. Instead, a man offered me a hamburger from a basketful of the things. Another wanted to know if I'd like a vodka and cranberry. And, as a woman in red lipstick, white ballgown

and black elbow-length gloves glided past, I swear I saw the ghost of Federico Fellini slip in, too.

"Where are we going?" I shouted at the back of our guide as we headed into the crush. She waved to the right and we launched ourselves in that direction. It was not a quick journey and about 100 "I'm so sorries" later, we emerged into a room best described as a white womb. Evidently it is a photographic studio during the day and someone has replaced all the corners between floor and walls with curves. In the middle of it all stood the guest of honour – a desking system with rather fetching orange highlights.

Actually I didn't know it was called that until about a half hour later when I met the designers. "Desking?" I asked. "Desking," they confirmed. Luke Pearson is 29 and Tom Lloyd is 31 and I couldn't help





I just want to rock 'n' roll a little bit, says the man behind the £100,000 party to launch an office system. The vodka and wine are flowing as we wait for Jools Holland and his band. Then I see part of the desk crashing against the walls. It's being tested to destruction, says one reveller



noticing as we walked into yet another womb-like room that Luke was wearing a pony-skin jacket. "Fake?" I asked. He didn't take it the wrong way. By now we had stopped in front of the desking (this one in sea green). I asked them what they had actually done. "Do you want to get technical?" they asked. At the time, surrounded by 900 people buzzing away on white wine and vodka, it seemed a fine idea. "We've converted a panel system to a beam system," they said. "Now you'll need to squat to see this." We squatted. Desking looks different from below. As we got up I saw men sweeping up broken wineglasses with dustpans and brushes in what would have been a corner of the room, if it had had corners. It was only 8pm. Jools Holland and his Rhythm and Blues Orchestra were due to play in two hours. Would the desking hold out? I decided to stay and find out.

All of this was courtesy of Knoll International. The company is legendary in the world of furniture design, but if you aren't in the know you might just wonder if it has something to do with Parker-Knoll and lazy-boy recliners. It doesn't. The chairs that this Knoll produces are design classics by the likes of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Harry Bertoia and Eero Saarinen. The company seems to have everything – a tradition that goes back to the Bauhaus, romance and friendship and a history that is rich in much besides money.

The founder, Hans Knoll, fled Nazi Germany and came to America in the late 1930s. He was a superlative salesman who married a superlative interior designer named Florence Schust and it was she who had the brilliant idea of asking designers to create pieces for modern offices and of making sure they were credited by name and were paid royalties, too. And although Hans's furniture-maker father had known Mies van der Rohe in Germany it was Florence who studied with him for a year in Chicago and became his friend. In 1948, the Knolls would ask Mies for the rights to produce his Barcelona chair which was so successful that, Florence says, it "almost became a cliché of every new entrance lobby".

The Knoll catalogue is full of such iconic clichés and although the company fell on hard times in the early Nineties it has the kind of credibility that you cannot beg, borrow or steal. Thus the idea to celebrate its rebirth here – and the PL1 desking system which, in typical Knoll fashion, is named after the designers – with a walk on the wild side. "Knoll is without a doubt the sexiest thing in our industry. I just want to rock and roll a little bit," says 36-year-old Nigel Symonds, managing director and chief party planner. "It's always been sexy. It's not like

I'm trying to create this from nothing. It's there and I'm just shoving it out front. It only needed a marketer. I'm a salesman at heart and it seems like pretty obvious stuff to me."

Obvious is not the word that springs to mind, as I survey the scene at the party that I would later learn cost almost £100,000. Sexy, though, I can see, especially as I listen to two women who are sitting on the desking and chatting while their eyes scan the room. "I really have got to shag him," says one with a plunge neckline, "but first I have to meet him!" Her voice drops and her friend leans forward. Over in what would be the corner (if a womb had them) a large joint is being handed round. I go into another room and meet the people from *Blueprint* magazine. What do they think of it all? They think it is hot. They like the desking and they particularly like the mobile extra called Homer that fits under the desk and has a handle so you can tow it round. It is a curvy sort of

"personal mobile office" with a pop-up top for your laptop. "With Knoll, it really is a case of watch this space," says deputy publisher Gill Hicks.

It is almost time for Jools now but out of the corner of my eye I see a Homer crashing and burning against one of the walls. "This is the kind of thing that happens in real life. It is dodge 'em cars. They crash," says a man with a bright red face as he pulls a battered Homer upright. "This has now been crash tested and found to be good fun." He snorts and then he leans forward and gestures towards the desking. "Let me tell you that in terms of cable management this is the dog's bollocks. Yes, that means it is good. In practical terms, it is the best cable management you can buy." Across the room, I can see that someone has popped open the top of another Homer and placed a baby inside of it. It is surreal and, as Jools and the band start to play, it becomes obvious that the desking is far more durable than the humans will ever be.



Hard night at the office (above, left to right): a baby takes a ride; experts check out a classic in the making; and revellers do some load-testing. Then it's time for Jools (left) and, er, more vodka. Bottom: Homer shapes up to Bertoia



At the entrance to the party, there is a display of some of the finest chairs in the world which are made (and still sold) by Knoll. There are two mustard-coloured Mies Barcelonas. There is a cluster of wired Bertoias. There is a Mies recliner. When I leave, I notice that people have actually started to sit in them and I fear that they might – well – start to look used. Two days later, the worst was confirmed when I see them again, this time in the Knoll London showroom and offices in Smithfield. The woman who greets me shows me a Becks beer sticker on the tubular steel arm of a recliner. "The Barcelonas are covered in red wine. I saw a girl eating a hamburger wiping her hand on one," she says. "I felt like saying, 'You silly sausage, that chair is worth £4,000, why



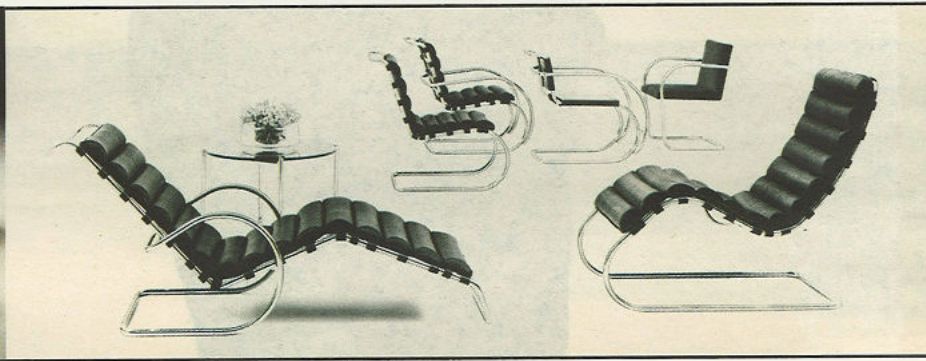
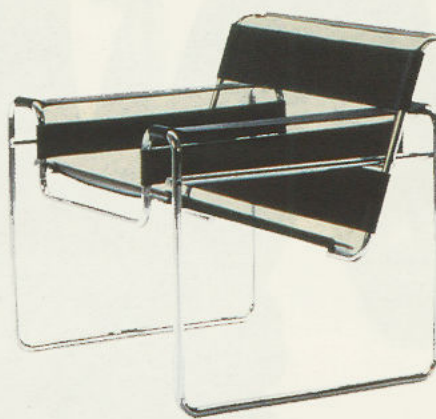


don't I get you a napkin?" She shakes her head. Later that day, however, the stained covers are due to be replaced with black leather.

Symonds is late. He arrives flustered, saying that he is never late. I say that I was late, too, so not to worry. "Late! Why were you late?" he asks. I get up from one incredible expensive chair and, passing a few desking systems on the way, go to the boardroom and sit in another incredible expensive chair. I see Homer in the other room and give it a wave. "It looks a bit like a pet, doesn't it?" says Symonds. "At one point, I was very tempted to call it Snoopy." Homer, as it turns out, is going to be a star and is already booked to go on display at the Design Museum.

Pretty heady stuff but it is pay back time. Symonds only came to Knoll in January and he's been taking risks ever since. "In Formula One speak, Nigel brakes late in the corners," says one designer. Not that he had much to lose: the company in the UK had pretty much hit rock bottom. It had lost its Savile Row showroom and sales were £7m a year compared to a peak of £25m during the Eighties. But internationally things were getting better: a disastrous takeover by the huge Westinghouse company had ended in a management buy-out. Nigel Symonds took one look at

They started out as good design for everyman but became classics because they were so well designed.



the Smithfield offices and its 13 staff and set to work. "I banged out a list of priorities. Showroom was key. More muscle was key. The people here were stretched beyond belief. Product was key. Without those three things – space, people and product – you are not going to win. I mean that's simple. That's obvious."

But perhaps it is not so obvious to place the future of that product in the hands of two unknown designers. At first he only asked them to spruce up an existing desking system but Luke Pearson and Tom Lloyd are no fools. "Basically, we saw our chance and grabbed it," they say. Symonds got a buzz out of that: "We have got incredible value here. They came on board to enhance something that existed and we ended up with a brand new programme. And to do that in seven months flat is unheard of. That is something that just doesn't happen."

Nigel likes to party – he says Knoll has an international reputation for knowing how to have a good time – and so he started planning a big one to mark the occasion. "Personally, I'm proud that I seem to have been fated to fall across Tom and Luke. They are unknown guys but I put money on it that in a couple of years they won't be. They are incredibly talented and they have that thing, that bit of rock 'n' roll in them. Do you know what I mean? They are the sort of people I want to do business with."

The thing about Knoll that doesn't make sense – at first – is that its heritage is all about design classics now seen as works of art and yet its future seems to lie in something as relatively mundane as desking. "Our whole design philosophy hails back to the Bauhaus and to produce the best possible and simplest designs that are there but marrying that with the ability of mass production. So it really is bringing in beautiful

things at an affordable price," says Symonds.

I still don't get it until I am looking through the huge coffee-table book called *Knoll Design* and spot an advert from June 1945 featuring drawings of stacking chairs: "Through mass production and standardization, our furniture provides economic, flexible usefulness for home... housing... and institution." And therein, I realise, lies the key. The classics started out as good design for everyman but became classics, sometimes instantly, because they were so well designed. That's why I think Symonds is smart: he puts the works of art on show but is willing to take some risks to find some new magic for today's mass-produced product.

"We can't live in our past. In global terms, Knoll is an \$800 million entity and studio sales are just a

fraction of that. I adore the studio pieces – they are works of art – but I get a buzz out of the big numbers and the big projects. That's where the rush is," he says.

Tom Lloyd and Luke Pearson's office is a short hop – and a light year or two – away in a narrow, claustrophobic road near Liverpool Street station. I pick my way through the street rubbish, up some industrial stairs and wait outside a door held together with a giant padlock. Inside they serve coffee – "it's instant or nothing" – in veined mugs. The only object linking this office with Knoll's is Homer which I now greet as a long-lost friend. Lloyd nods towards it: "That is the core of a whole new system. People at the launch really seemed to really enjoy it." This is true, but then people at the launch seemed to be enjoying most things later on, especially the vodka being poured directly into their mouths or through the ice statue. I wasn't surprised when one architect, who has just started "hot desking", suggested that he really liked Homer but that he'd like his to have a fridge.

I look at Homer and wonder if I am looking at a design classic. Lloyd and Pearson dislike the "colour supplement view" that design is about lifestyle. They see design as a fundamental part of industrial culture and aspire to mass production. "The only way to innovate is to produce," insists Lloyd. Now they are designing a new line of products based around Homer. It may be called Odyssey (which certainly beats Peanuts). "As I said, we are grabbing our chance. Homer is a reflection of that," says Lloyd. "It's as avant garde as anything else around." And to think that one day not too long ago I hadn't even realised that desking could be sexy, too ●



Knoll classics (clockwise from top left): by Harry Bertola, Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe and Florence Knoll