

# Jens Risom

designed a famous chair for Knoll in 1941. Now it has been reissued, to the delight of the 83-year-old Dane. Fiona Rattray spoke to him

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# BLUEPRINT

Look closely at the original photographs of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and in the living room you will see a chair. Made of cypress wood with a back and seat of fabric webbing it is a simple lounge chair which looks perfectly at home in its ultra modern surroundings. But this is not a Mies chair. This chair is the work of a young Danish-born designer by the name of Jens Risom, who designed it in 1941 for Knoll.

Almost 60 years later and the 650 chair (pictured) has been put back into production by the American company. And fortunately its sprightly, white-haired, 83-year-old designer is still around to enjoy his place in history. "I have one of the new chairs at home," says Risom, "and I can tell you they have done a very nice job." This time around the chair is made in cherrywood and cotton with a choice of ten colours while the originals were made using army surplus parachute webbing which came, not surprisingly, in olive green only. The materials were chosen because, this being wartime, there were few others which were readily available and this helped to make the new range of furniture (which included two side chairs, a stool and a lounge chair with arms which will also be relaunched later this year) an affordable option in a pretty desperate market. In fact, Risom recalls, a side chair retailed originally at \$10.60 – which, even accounting for inflation, makes the revived version sound a little steep at £496.

The chairs were bought, according to Risom, by a lot of young couples who were rushing to marry because of the war. But the big break came when the US army specified the range for its network of USO (United Service Organisation) clubs across the country. And when Risom himself was drafted, he says, with touching honesty,

"the royalties were what kept my wife and child alive".

Risom's collaboration with Hans Knoll began when the two met in New York, where the Danish designer had moved following his education at the Copenhagen School of Industrial Arts and Design and a year in the offices of Danish architect Ernst Kuhn. Hans Knoll had already set up his first company but at that stage he was making furniture from designs he had brought with him from Germany, as well as what Risom once described as "nondescript, commercial Grand Rapids chairs". Risom was working as a textile designer but the two men, both in their early twenties, struck up a friendship and began a three month journey across America to discover what was going on in the exciting world of architecture and design and what a new generation of clients wanted. By 1942, when Hans Knoll produced his first catalogue, 15 out of the 25 pieces in it were designed by Risom and he had worked on several interiors projects – including the original Knoll showroom at 601 Madison Avenue.

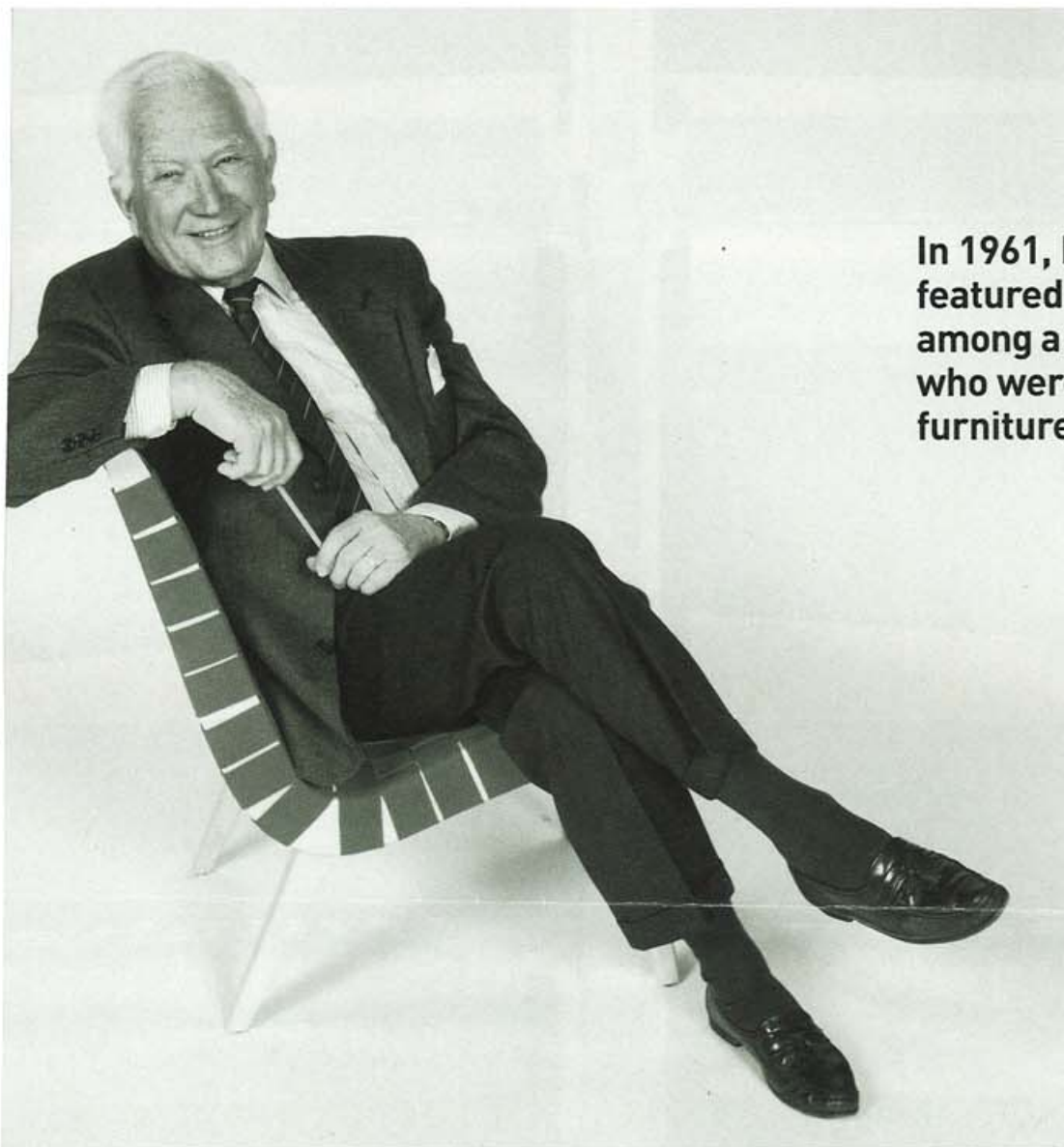
But in 1943 Risom went to war. Drafted into the US army he served in the HQ of General Patton's Third Army – travelling through France and ending up outside Munich in 1945. Returning to the States he found that Hans Knoll's soon-to-be wife Florence Schust was ensconced as design director and, despite Hans's enjoiners to him to return, Risom decided to branch out on his own. His work for Knoll had always been on a freelance basis and Risom says that it was clear to him that it would not have worked if he'd stayed.

He has no regrets. In 1946 Risom founded Jens Risom Design Incorporated and continued to design furniture, with a factory in Connecticut and showrooms in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Overseas he had outlets in Argentina, Australia and London (his designs were produced here under license by Gordon Russell), as well as, at one time, Copenhagen – "coals to Newcastle" says Risom wryly. In 1971 he sold the company and later started a design consultancy called Design Control. Now living in semi-retirement with homes in

Connecticut and Surrey, Risom is enjoying the revival of interest in mid-century design. If the amount of attention paid to the relatively brief Knoll period compared with the remainder of his career grates at all, Risom is far too charming to say so (though he does confess to thinking of himself as having had "two lives"). In fact his career has been recognised by lifetime achievement awards from the Metropolitan, Brooklyn and V&A museums and a Danish "knight-hood". And, in 1961, he was famously featured in *Playboy* magazine ("it was trying to be *The New Yorker*", says Risom amusedly) among a group of six furniture designers who were "revolutionising furniture in America" (the others being Charles Eames, Harry Bertoia, George Nelson, Edward Wormley and Eero Saarinen).

Nowadays Risom is encouraged by the contemporary design scene. "People are getting back to practical function," he says, though he confesses he is unimpressed by many contemporary manufacturers who "all copy each other". "Go to a furniture fair anywhere and most of the time you won't be able to tell

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who makes what." He is also frustrated by the conservative market in the US, saying that, "It is unusual in the UK for people not to start out by buying contemporary furniture while in the States it is still very rare." He partly blames this on a lack of education – "It's like abstract art, the first time you see it you don't know what it means" – but also on poor distribution – "You have to buy it through showrooms or architects – the most interesting work is not sold in retail shops" and the lack of willingness on the part of consumers to invest in quality.

Recently, Risom sold his New Canaan house and was appalled when buyers looking at his eclectic collection of contemporary and antique furniture kept saying "that would never go with our things". "Good design means that anything which is good by itself will go with other things," he says, "if you don't believe me, just go out into the garden and look."

An exhibition of Jens Risom's designs for Knoll will be at Coexistence, 288 Upper Street, London N1 from 22 September to 25 October. Tel 0171 354 8817



# ELLE

THE REINVENT  
ISSUE

# DECORATION

## CULT DIAMOND CHAIR

A one-of-a-kind classic for all types of interior



**Harry Bertoia's** iconic 'Diamond' chair, scattered through the chicest lofts and lobbies (Oxo Tower, Gucci etc), is the product of a man who regarded making furniture as nothing more than a way to pay the bills. He shunned the tag 'designer' and thought of himself more as a sculptor. The 'Diamond' chair, designed for Knoll, 1950-52, was less a 'chair' than transparent two-dimensional shape suspended in space – a diamond-shaped grid of even smaller diamonds, made using technology he learned when manufacturing glider parts during the war. Unusually for such a high-minded, concept-oriented designer, he didn't mind adding a cushion. There's little gossip about Bertoia, apart from the rumoured animosity felt when he split from the studio of Charles and Ray Eames. An Italian immigrant married to an American, Bertoia worked with the Eames for three years from 1943. It seems he felt his contribution to their work went unrecognised. In fact, he collaborated on several of their famous plywood chair series. And it's probably no coincidence that his wire chairs and the Eames' were produced within a year of each other. But by this time Bertoia had taken off to Pennsylvania and been snapped up by Knoll, who kept him on for 26 years. Although he designed several versions of his wire chair, Bertoia's true interests lay elsewhere. His foray into furniture design was short-lived. **Polly Clayden**

**Where to buy your chair:** Buy new or vintage. For new call Knoll (0171 236 6655); for old try twentytwentyone (0171 288 1996). As for the cushion, it's up to you!



PHOTOGRAPHER: BILL KINGSTON



**"I'm going to do spring painting, instead of spring cleaning! There's nothing like a coat of white gloss to make our house feel clean and light"** Gitta Gschwendtner, furniture designer



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE.

# WEEKEND JOURNAL.

FRIDAY - SATURDAY, AUGUST 17 - 18, 2001

## Object of the Week

### A Round Table: Sculpted Wire and Glass

Once referred to as a "sheaf of wheat," the frame of architect Warren Platner's dining table looks almost organic from afar. Take a couple of steps closer and you realize the sculptural base is made from hundreds of curved vertical steel wire rods welded to a circular frame. The table is among the objects featured in "Full

Circle," an exhibition of rounded furniture at Mission, a design gallery in Notting Hill, London. The exhibition, which runs until Sept. 22, examines the circle as an iconic form in design. The glass-topped table is part of a collection of sculpted wire furniture designed by the American architect for Knoll in 1966. The collection includes a low table, dining chairs and stools whose forms, like the low table, recall the shape and curved outline of African drums. Mr. Platner was inspired by the gracefulness

of Louis XV furniture, but aimed to create modernist objects that were rational rather than merely decorative. Born in 1919, Mr. Platner in the early 1960s



Warren Platner's tables

worked in the offices of Eero Saarinen and I.M. Pei, among others, before establishing his own practice in New Haven, Connecticut. The dining table is available for £1200 (£1,896) from Mission. The low table is priced at £675.

—TRUDI OLIVEIRO

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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

## Wire Brigade

Solve your decoration emergencies with furniture, sculptures and accessories

made from thin strands of metal. Follow the wire drill, says Faye Toogood. Photography: Sivan Lewin

### SHORTLIST



Clockwise from bottom left: Wire cube, by Barry Griffiths, £900, Applied Arts Agency. Side chair, by Warren Platner for Knoll International, £375, Mazon. Wire sculpture, by Harry Bertoia, £750, Twentytwentyone. Silver-plated bread bowl, £1950, £110. Coffee table, by Warren Platner for Knoll International, £625, both Mazon. All prices include VAT. For suppliers' details see Address Book D.