



This vintage advertisement for the Tupperware company presented the modern convenience and beauty of its products by linking them to Eero Saarinen's Pedestal line, formally introduced by Knoll Associates in 1958.

Facing page: Knoll Associates emphasized the still vibrant futurism of the Pedestal chair in this ad from the early 1970s.

Graphic designer Herbert Matter's memorable advertisement for Knoll showing a contented chimney sweep in Saarinen's Womb chair ran year after year in such publications as *The New Yorker*.

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ON A PEDESTAL

By Brian Lutz



A NEW BOOK, *EERO SAARINEN: FURNITURE FOR EVERYMAN*, BY BRIAN LUTZ FOR POINTED LEAF PRESS LOOKS AT THE ARCHITECT'S FURNITURE. WHAT FOLLOWS IS A BRIEF EXCERPT FROM THIS INNOVATIVE STUDY OF THE PATH TO THESE MEMORABLE AND ICONIC DESIGNS.

Eero Saarinen's career as a modern furniture designer began when he was a teenager and spanned the remainder of his short life. His earliest furniture designs preceded his earliest architecture by almost a decade, and his later furniture designs were received with widespread public and professional acclaim. In the period immediately following his death in 1961, the influence of innovations in technique and form that he introduced in his architecture quickly receded, whereas the influence of his furniture innovations has continued uninterrupted to this day.



In the late 1950s Saarinen's Model 72 chairs were featured in Knoll Associates' showroom in Milan, along with a sculpture by Harry Bertola.

If there was a distinction between his architecture and his furniture designs it was one of invention, not inspiration. "I believe very strongly that the whole field of design is all one thing," he said, "hence my interest in furniture." In Saarinen's view, furniture and interiors evolved in organic unity with the building, "the way chromosomes multiply out of the original sperm and the thinking of the total concept is carried down to the smallest detail."

Such a view is not unique to Saarinen. Architects quite often design solutions for interiors, including the furniture, for the buildings they create. Alvar Aalto, the celebrated Finnish modernist architect, frequently made reference to his furniture designs as being a part of what he called "the architectonic wholeness" of the built environment.

Saarinen had a theoretical view of the unity of design, nevertheless his furniture was almost always the product of a creative exercise separate from his architecture, but not derivative of specific project-related needs. Saarinen approached the design of his furniture with an intensity and focus equal to his most monumental architectural projects, although it was almost always a more private creative matter. Saarinen did the designs and built scale models and prototypes alone or with the assistance of only one or two individuals, in contrast to the large teams working on his buildings.

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Saarinen's buildings were each specific to a particular set of project requirements, deserving of focused, point specific analysis and response, but he considered his furniture to be a different type of solution: It was "for Everyman," he said. It is tempting to interpret this comment as an indication of the designer's intent to rationalize the mass consumption of his furniture. Rather, it was his strongly held belief that mass production should never compromise the strict impersonal nature of furniture. "As with the architectural shells," he said, "it is essential, in fact, that a mass-produced item must have [an] impersonal character. It must not be romantic; it must be classic, in the sense of responding to an oft-recurring need, both practical and visual." Furniture, Eero Saarinen thought, should make no individual dramatic statement, and above all else, it should never pander to consumer trends. It should "be to the interior as structure is to architecture," that is, purpose-built, dependable and unselfconscious.

As unspectacular as Saarinen's furniture designs might have been intended, the brilliance of their final realization was frequently overwhelming. In 1941, the young architect, designing with his colleague at Cranbrook and life-long friend, Charles Eames, eclipsed all the other entries in New York's Museum of Modern Art's Organic Design in Home Furnishings competition with their furniture designs. A new era was dawning, "a new way of living," as the competition announcement noted, and with it, a new set of standards for life in this new era. The modern home was to be more efficient, using space and materials in a more practical, functional way, and the furnishings for it were to follow suit. In the view of the competition jury, the winning chair designs by Saarinen and Eames were nothing less than a complete change of style, using construction and fabrication methods so innovative that they changed everything about ideas

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on seating design. The chairs were a breakthrough, and those watching the early evolution of modernist design could not help but take notice of Saarinen and Eames, of what they had done, and what their new furniture meant to this new movement.

Soon after the Organic Design exhibition closed, World War II turned all attention away from furniture design and furniture production. After the war, when Saarinen and Eames were once again able to devote their full attention to their careers. Eames, with his wife Ray, and a considerably talented staff in California, concentrated on creating a design organization centered on furniture. The groundbreaking discoveries of the new uses of materials and the resultant styles that the workers made in their furniture designs, along with the masterful direction and promotion by the Eameses, made the Eames name the one that most often came to mind in the popular imagination of modernist design in America.

Saarinen took a different path after the war, concentrating on his work in his father's—Eliel Saarinen's—architecture firm, where he was a

partner. Together they built a very successful practice, and in the next ten years Eero Saarinen came to be considered by many to be America's foremost architect. He did not promote himself, privately or publicly, as a furniture designer. Instead, he relied on his close friend and professional collaborator, Florence Knoll, and her and her husband Hans Knoll's company, Knoll Associates, to bring industry and public attention to his furniture. The Knoll Planning Unit, and an ever-increasing number of interior designers and customers, found many practical and aesthetic reasons for using Eero Saarinen's furniture in their interiors. The commercial significance of the Saarinen furniture has always been supported by robust sales. Its cultural significance and the position of the pieces in the vanguard of American modernism, however, awaits validation. Eero Saarinen's decision to make the practice of architecture his central life ambition was never in doubt. "Except for a rather brief excursion into sculpture," he said in 1953, "it never occurred to me to do anything but to follow in my father's footsteps and become an architect." ■

Eero Saarinen: Furniture for Everyman is available from Pointed Leaf Press, www.pointedleafpress.com, for \$85.



From top: An illustrated brochure from Knoll Associates presented a colorful and playful treatment of the Womb chair in use.

This 1950s Knoll Associates brochure featured the full Model 70 line of office seating designed by Saarinen.

Saarinen's 1946 Grasshopper chair, known as the Model 61, was the architect's first design for Knoll.

