



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 9, 2008

Contacts:

Hugh Grant, Director and Curator

Gerald Horner, Administrative Manager

ghorner@kirklandmuseum.org 303-832-8576 ext 211

Holly Victor, Marketing Director ext 210

Florence Knoll: Defining Modern

[May 9 through June 29, 2008]

Kirkland Museum has developed an entirely different approach to the national traveling exhibition *Florence Knoll: Defining Modern*. Her career—represented by her iconic furniture and photographs of some of her prestigious projects—is shown in context with that of her mentors, colleagues and later Knoll company designers.

Kirkland Museum is the first venue in the West. *Florence Knoll: Defining Modern* originated at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and was adapted for traveling by the Knoll Museum in East Greenville, PA. This exhibition has traveled to six national design schools prior to arriving in Denver—New York School of Interior Design, Purdue University (Indiana), Boston Architectural College, Ohio State University, the College for Creative Studies (Michigan), and the Kansas State University College of Architecture, Planning and Design (Manhattan). Our exhibit is made possible by the Knoll Museum in East Greenville, Pennsylvania and Knoll, Inc. We particularly want to thank **Lisa Henry**, Architecture and Design Manager of the Knoll regional office based in Denver, who helped coordinate this exhibition and endured countless calls from us. Also **Michael McCoy**, former co-chair with his wife Katherine, of the Design Department of Cranbrook Academy of Art (one of Florence's schools), has graciously agreed to do two gallery talks at Kirkland Museum, May 21 and June 4 (both filled). **Lisa Henry** will do a presentation on Florence Knoll, which will be co-hosted by **Hugh Grant**, Curator of the Kirkland version of this exhibition, on Thursday, May 22.

In its unique incarnation at Kirkland Museum, *Defining Modern* highlights the nine pieces of furniture designed by Florence Knoll, which are the core of the traveling exhibition. They are augmented by four pieces from Kirkland Museum so a total of 13 Florence Knoll designs are exhibited. Her furniture is positioned on the far wall from where one enters the room, tantalizingly at a distance, with a modern lucite sculpture (early 1970s) by Elizabeth Yanish Shwayder placed to divide the pieces into living room and office areas. Decorative art items from the Kirkland collection are dotted about to make the arrangements feel comfortable and livable—so that one would want to sit down and entertain or work.

In accordance with Knoll philosophy, wall to wall office carpeting and a living room area rug have been installed with modular carpet squares by FLOR (recommended by the Knoll Co.). A rare lamp (1950, loaned by Randy Roberts of z|modern, Denver) by Clay Michie and designed for Knoll, sits on Florence's desk. Hans and Florence Knoll particularly liked mobile sculptures of Alexander Calder and Harry Bertoia, as well as paintings by Joan Miró and Paul Klee. Accordingly, a Calder mobile (1953, *Four Above Ten Blacks*) is suspended over the living room, a Bertoia tonal (1960s, *Swinging Bars*, loaned by Randy Roberts of z|modern, Denver) is hung over the office, and as a bonus, in keeping with the Kirkland Museum credo to show top Colorado art, a stabile mobile (2004, *First Maquette for Silver Cloud*) is shown in the living room, sitting on a side table, by Robert Delaney. In lieu of a Klee, a 1922 Wassily Kandinsky work (*Kleine Welten VII*, signed lithograph) was placed over the *Wassily Chair* by Marcel Breuer (the combination was irresistible). A total of five Bertoia sculptures are placed in the room, since the Bertoia / Knoll connection was so strong and resulted in Bertoia producing furniture as a personal favor to them, and for which we can all be eternally gratefully. The large centerpiece painting (1959, *Nebula Near Jupiter*, oil and water on linen, 41" x 61") in the living room, which sets the historical mood for the abstract expressionism movement that was going on at the time, is by Colorado painter Vance Kirkland (1904-1981). Other works will be discussed subsequently, under a different theme.

The longer wall of Florence Knoll designs are flanked by the other walls with decorative arts related to her and the Knoll company. All furniture in the room was produced by the Knoll Company. Turning left, upon entering the room, one passes by her early influences with furniture by Marcel Breuer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; her other principal early influences

were Walter Gropius and Eliel Saarinen, who she came to know personally. Other modern furniture standards along this wall and the next are by designers who worked with her or whose works were carried by Knoll company including Jens Risom, Hans Bellman, Isamu Noguchi, Harry Bertoia and Eero Saarinen.

On the final small wall in the exhibition room, following the Florence Knoll designs, furniture examples by Richard Schultz (1960 *Petal Table*), Eero Saarinen (1955-6 *Pedestal Table and Tulip Chair*) and Warren Platner (1966 *Wire Table*) are shown. The Platner Collection was the last furniture Florence Knoll contracted for, before she left the company in 1965 and is a fitting end to the formal part of the Kirkland exhibition.

The complete Knoll group of artists to the present is so distinguished and large, that they cannot all be displayed in this temporary show. A number of these designers' works, mostly done after Florence left in 1965, are exhibited throughout the museum. These include Frank Gehry, Gae Aulenti, Matta, Michael McCoy and Ettore Sottsass. Additional works by Jens Risom, Harry Bertoia and Eero Saarinen can also be seen in Kirkland Museum's permanent display.

All art is displayed in the Kirkland's trademark salon style and study collection method of exhibition. Subdued music of modern jazz will set an appropriate historic mood.

History of Florence Knoll

As an architect, interior space planner and furniture designer, Florence Knoll profoundly influenced post-WW II design. Born in 1917 as Florence Schust, she was orphaned at 12. She determined to become an architect, studying at Kingswood School (the girl's school on the Cranbrook campus in Bloomfield Hills, MI) from 1932-1934. There she executed extensive plans for a home, gaining the attention of Eliel Saarinen, under whom she studied architecture at Cranbrook Academy of Art for a year. She briefly attended the Columbia University School of Architecture in 1935, but returned to Cranbrook. She subsequently pursued architectural studies at the Architectural Association, London, and the Armour Institute (subsequently the Illinois Institute of Technology) studying directly with Mies van der Rohe. Florence commented that she learned more from him than from anyone, and in fewer words (NY Times article Sept. 1, 1964).

Florence Knoll worked for architect Wallace Harrison, New York, then for Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and joined the H.G. Knoll furniture manufacturing company of Hans Knoll in 1943 after meeting him in 1941. She transformed his company into one of the most vital, modern design companies in the world. In 1944 Florence set up the Knoll Planning Unit, or PU as it was humorously called, through which she revolutionized the look of corporate design and the Knoll showrooms. She and Hans Knoll married in 1946, changing the company name to Knoll Associates, Inc. She inaugurated the use of paste-ups for interior design, still a standard practice today. She established the Knoll Textile Division. She designed interior spaces by relating to the architectural style of the building, using accents of color with textiles and paint. When available furniture was not appropriate, she would design something that was. **Florence Knoll once remarked, “I design the gap-fillers.” Her “gap-fillers” have now become iconic furniture which has influenced another generation.** She designed approximately 108 pieces of furniture from 1946 to 1960, including chairs, settees, tables, cabinets, chests, desks, letter trays, benches, stools, beds, headboards and vanities. As a result she designed nearly half the products in the Knoll line. **As laid out philosophically, an interior space could be dramatically dominated by one or two of the famous pieces of furniture by Mies or Saarinen, but then Florence Knoll’s sleek, minimal pieces would complement and not compete with the interior composition.** Of course, Florence Knoll’s furniture is as dramatic as theirs, but for the stunning simplicity of her designs which masterfully plays off from the flamboyant designs of other masters that she chose. In her own words, Florence Knoll stated, “I designed furniture because it was needed for a specific plan. It was really people like Saarinen and Bertola who created very sculptural pieces. Mine were architectural.” [interview by Paul Makovsky, pub. July 2001, Metropolis magazine] By 1960, the Knoll Company had show rooms in 28 countries; by 1964, they had 14 offices in America and 21 abroad.

Another particularly famous statement of hers is, “I am not a decorator. The only place I decorate is my own house.” Also, Florence does not think of herself as an architect (NY Times article Sept. 1, 1964). Nevertheless she has been one of the most successful woman architects in the world. When those working with Florence Knoll went on to other prestigious companies there

was a saying that they had graduated from “Shu U.” (her maiden name was Schust from which her nickname Shu is derived).

Her notable projects include the interior design of the offices of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) designed by Eero Saarinen in 1952-1954 and again as her last Knoll project in 1964; the Seagram and *Look Magazine* offices in New York City; the 1948 and 1957 Rockefeller family installations; the 1958 H.J. Heinz Company headquarters in Pittsburgh; the Connecticut General Life Insurance Building offices (Broomfield, CT), the 1962 Cowles Publications Building as well as Knoll showrooms worldwide. Photographs are shown of some of these projects in the Kirkland Museum installation.

Hans Knoll died in a car accident in November 1955. Florence continued to run the company until 1965. In 1958 she married Florida banker Harry Bassett, who died in 1991. Florence continues to live in Florida and is involved in civic projects.

Florence Knoll’s work is represented in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and many others including Kirkland Museum. For her extraordinary contributions to architecture and design, she was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2002.

Kirkland Museum Displays Many Women in the Florence Knoll Exhibition

A theme related to the abilities of Florence Knoll to brilliantly succeed in what were men’s work domains at the time, run through this exhibit. She was instinctively drawn to architecture from an early age and actually persevered and applied this discipline to everything she did. After her education, Florence worked in several architectural offices in New York where she remembered “being the only female”, and was therefore assigned to interiors. This ironically fortunate turn of events, combined with her architectural training and her innate talents, led her to become the powerhouse of “defining modern.” One of the best of the many examples of Florence’s fresh approach was to lighten up the corporate office and specifically the desk. Executives sat behind a mighty mahogany fortress, usually placed cater-corner in the room, with the inevitable cater-cornered table behind the desk. Florence Knoll said she still considers the

straightening of the cater-corner desk her “single biggest struggle” [NY Times article, Sept. 1, 1964]. Therefore fourteen women artists have been positioned in this Kirkland Museum version as a tribute to the artistic achievements of women—alphabetically they are:

1. Gae Aulenti (b. 1927, Italian architect and designer)
2. Marianne Brandt (1893-1983, German, head of the Bauhaus metal working department)
3. Dorothea Dunlop (1913-2004, Colorado sculptor)
4. Martha Epp (1907-1995, Colorado painter)
5. Florence Knoll (b. 1917, American; architect; designer of interiors, furniture and textiles; entrepreneur; mentor and example to many)
6. Virginia Maitland (b. 1947, Colorado painter)
7. Donna Marecak (1922-1998, Colorado ceramist and painter)
8. Greta Heymann-Löbenstein Marks (1899-1990, German-English; Bauhaus ceramist)
9. Amy Metier (b. 1953, Colorado painter; **Metier’s painting in this exhibition, *Still Life with Candlestick and Iron*, symbolizes the challenge many women faced as they juggled career and personal life in a traditional modern world.**)
10. Irene Rice-Pereira (1902-1971, American; **Rice-Pereira’s galleries required her to sign her name “I. Rice-Pereira” so clients would not know she was a women**; she, Vance Kirkland and the actor Vincent Price juried several shows together)
11. Elizabeth Yanish Shwayder (b. 1922, Colorado sculptor and painter)
12. Ruth Thomas Todd (1909-2006, Colorado painter; exhibited by Morris Gallery, NYC 1958; Bodley Gallery, NYC 1962; most recently Sandra Phillips Gallery, Denver, 2006 and Kirkland Museum 2006-8; did experimental works in saw dust, rags and other found object art.)
13. Lou Wynne (b. 1930 as Louise Doughty, Colorado ceramist)
14. Eva Zeisel (b. 1906, Hungarian-American; ceramic, tableware, glassware and furniture designer)

Afterword

Modernistic decorative art is one of the two strongest areas of the Kirkland, along with Colorado art, with over 3,300 objects on view, mainly from 1880 to 1980 of Arts & Crafts, Art Nouveau, Glasgow Style, Wiener Werkstätte, De Stijl, Bauhaus, Art Deco, Modern, and Pop

Art. **The decorative art designs of over sixty architects are displayed at Kirkland Museum, further complementing Florence Knoll as a fellow architect.** Kirkland Museum is excited to portray the story of Florence Knoll's role in defining modern.

Addendum

Media Partners:

Art + Auction
z|modern,
Modernism Magazine
Treadway Gallery

Exhibition Lenders:

Knoll Museum, East Greenville, PA
Denver, CO
Kirkland Museum of Fine &
Decorative Art, Denver, CO

##