



## JENS RISOM – THE LAST SURVIVING “20TH CENTURY “DESIGN STAR””

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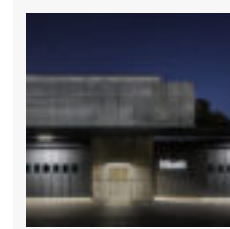


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“Many of my **designs** from 60 years ago are now categorized as Mid-Twentieth Century, which of course makes me feel rather old! People ask me if I think these designs will still be around in another 50 years. Well, I won’t be around then so I’m not too concerned about that” .... **Jens Risom**

KNOLL'S RISOM CHAIR

This Danish-born designer who was described by Wallpaper\* magazine as “America’s last surviving design star from the mid-century modernist movement”, is now 95 years old.



“1961 PLAYBOY PHOTO FEATURING LEFT TO RIGHT - GEORGE NELSON, EDWARD WORMLEY, EERO SAARINEN, HARRY BERTOIA, CHARLES EAMES AND JENS RISOM” ...ONLY RISOM IS STILL ALIVE

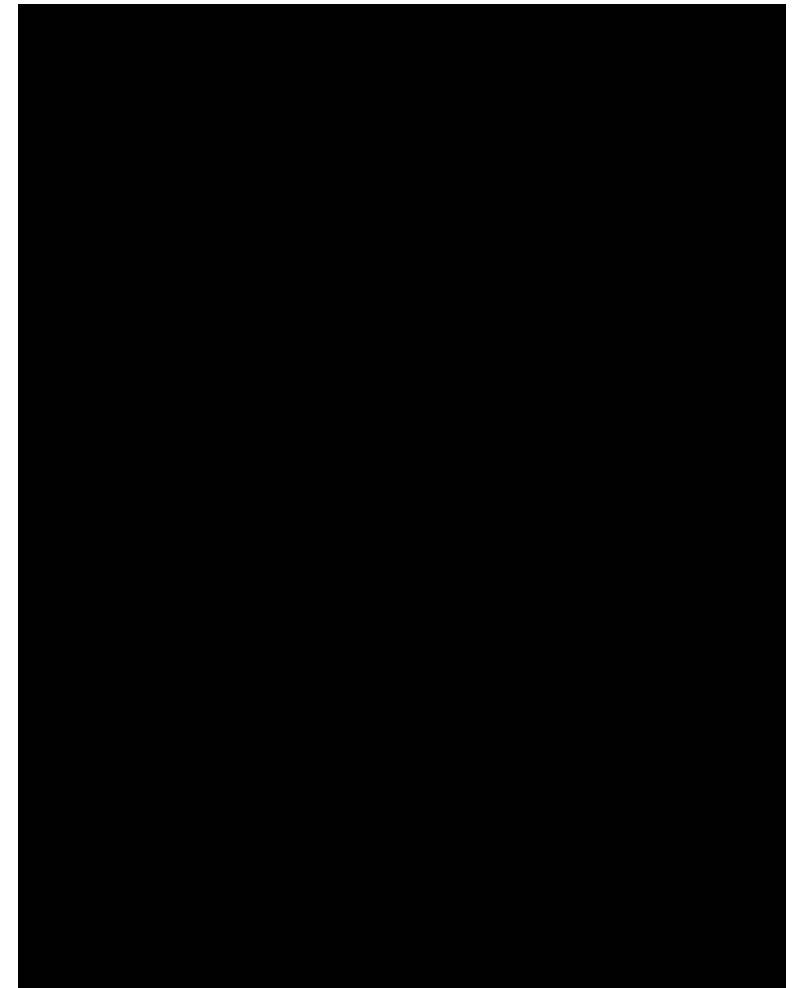
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**Risom**, who lives in New Canaan, Connecticut, is enjoying a renaissance of recognition by a new generation of design aficionados who respect the clean, elegant lines and cabinetry skills that characterise his designs. His work is increasingly sought after by collectors.



### Education

One of the first designers to bring the Traditional Scandinavian values of function and craftsmanship to the United States, Risom was part of a new vanguard that helped establish post-war America's leadership role in the world of modern furniture design and manufacturing.

Born in Copenhagen on May 8, 1916, Risom was highly influenced by his award-winning architect-father (Sven Risom) who encouraged Jens to pursue academic studies in business and contemporary design.

After completing two years at the Business College of Niels Brock in Copenhagen, Risom worked briefly for Danish architect Ernst Kuhn and he created several furniture designs for Gustav Weinreich of A/S Normina in Copenhagen. Risom's early designs for Normina were shown at the Cabinetmaker's Guild Exhibition in 1937.

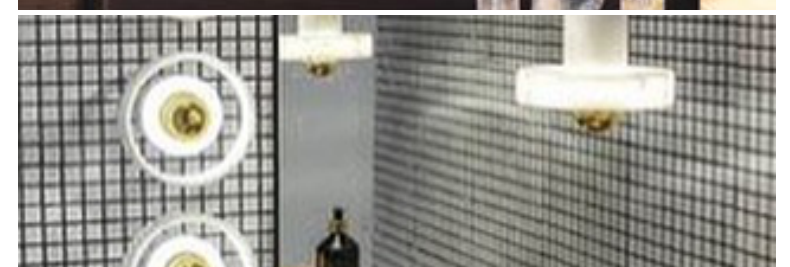
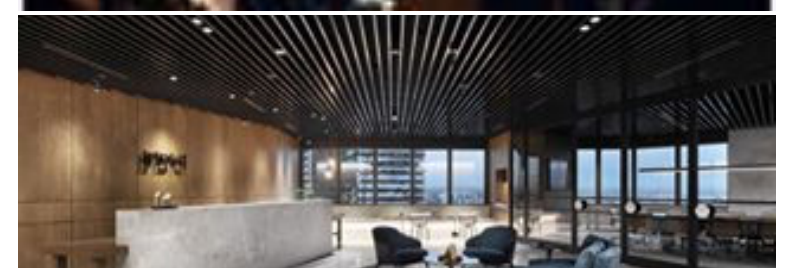
The young Risom also worked for a small design studio/shop in Stockholm that specialized in residential furniture. While in Sweden Risom also worked with Nordiska Kompaniet—NK, where he was further exposed to the designs of Bruno Mathsson and others including the Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto.

Risom began his formal studies in furniture design under the direction of Ole Wanscher at Kunståndvaerkerkolen, the School for Arts and Crafts in Copenhagen. From 1935–1938, along with classmates Hans Wegner and Borge Mogensen, Risom learned the value of simplicity and utility from master craftsmen like Kaare Klint who also headed up the furniture school at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.

The enduring influence of good Danish design can be traced back to the efforts of dedicated craftsmen and designers who firmly believed in the value of sharing the techniques and aesthetics of their crafts to aspiring young students.

### Early Free-lance Years

*"I developed an American version of Scandinavian modern furniture" said Risom in 2000*



*"I came to this country to study contemporary American design, but when I got here I realized there was no such thing."*

In 1938, after a chance meeting with the American Ambassador to Denmark, Risom decided to go to New York to further his studies while familiarizing himself with contemporary American furniture design.

In 1939 Risom discovered (like many immigrants), that there was no real potential in his field.

Instead, Risom was set on the path of textile design through a meeting with Dan Cooper, the fabric and interior designer at the Museum of Modern Art. Perhaps eager to find a steady occupation or perhaps purely by inspiration, Risom created his own textile design solely for presentation to Cooper.

It is here that he found his first freelance work as a textile designer. Risom's original textile designs, created solely for his interview with Cooper, landed him his first free-lance project in America.

Eventually Risom split off from Cooper for financial reasons and began subcontracting work out to local cabinet shops throughout the city, selling his designs directly to the architects and designers he'd come to know.

More work followed, including original furniture designed and built for the Collier's House of Ideas, a model house built on a terrace at Rockefeller Center overlooking Fifth Avenue. Designed by Edward D. Stone, who personally chose Risom to design all the furniture, the Collier's House project created a wider interest in Risom's ability to design furniture that fit perfectly into the new homes being built by architects like Stone.

Little did he know that he was soon to become a member of a rising group of designers that would shape the principles of design that are still practiced today.

### **Knoll**

In 1939, he emigrated to the USA where he met Hans Knoll, the son of an innovative modern German furniture manufacturer who had moved to America in 1938 with the same aspirations.

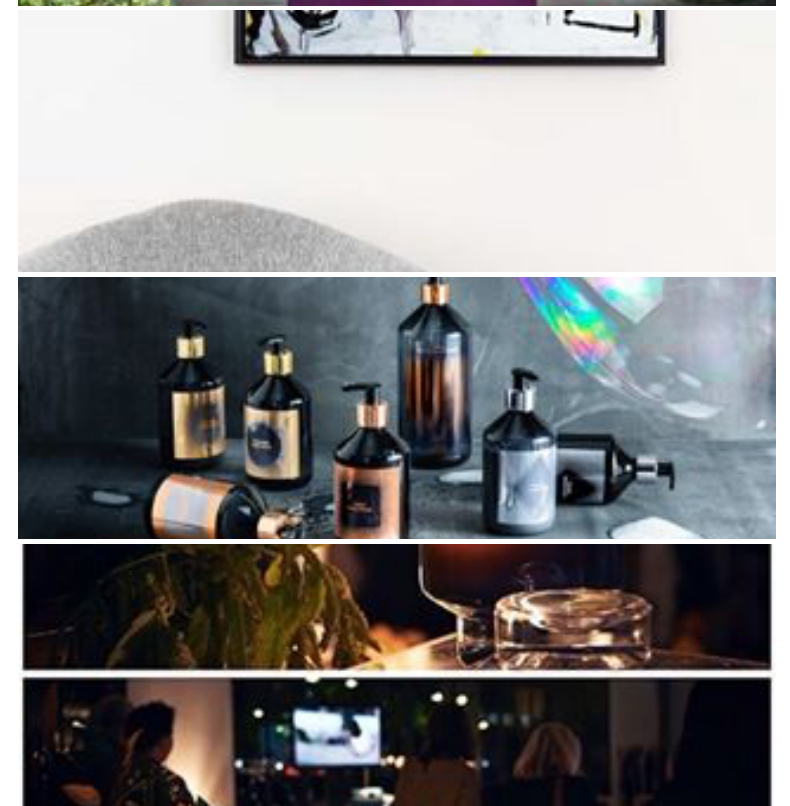


HANS KNOLL

Hans Knoll, a rising entrepreneur in the furniture business, founded **Knoll** in 1938 – working alongside his wife Florence Knoll Basset.

In 1941, having recently completed plans for a new furniture department for Georg Jensen in New York City, Risom joined forces with Hans Knoll, a young energetic entrepreneur who, though he understood the basics of the furniture business, was not a designer.

Finding they made a good team together, the two set out on a cross-country tour visiting modern architects while simultaneously gaining a better understanding of the potential market for a new line of modern furniture that Risom would design and Knoll would sell.



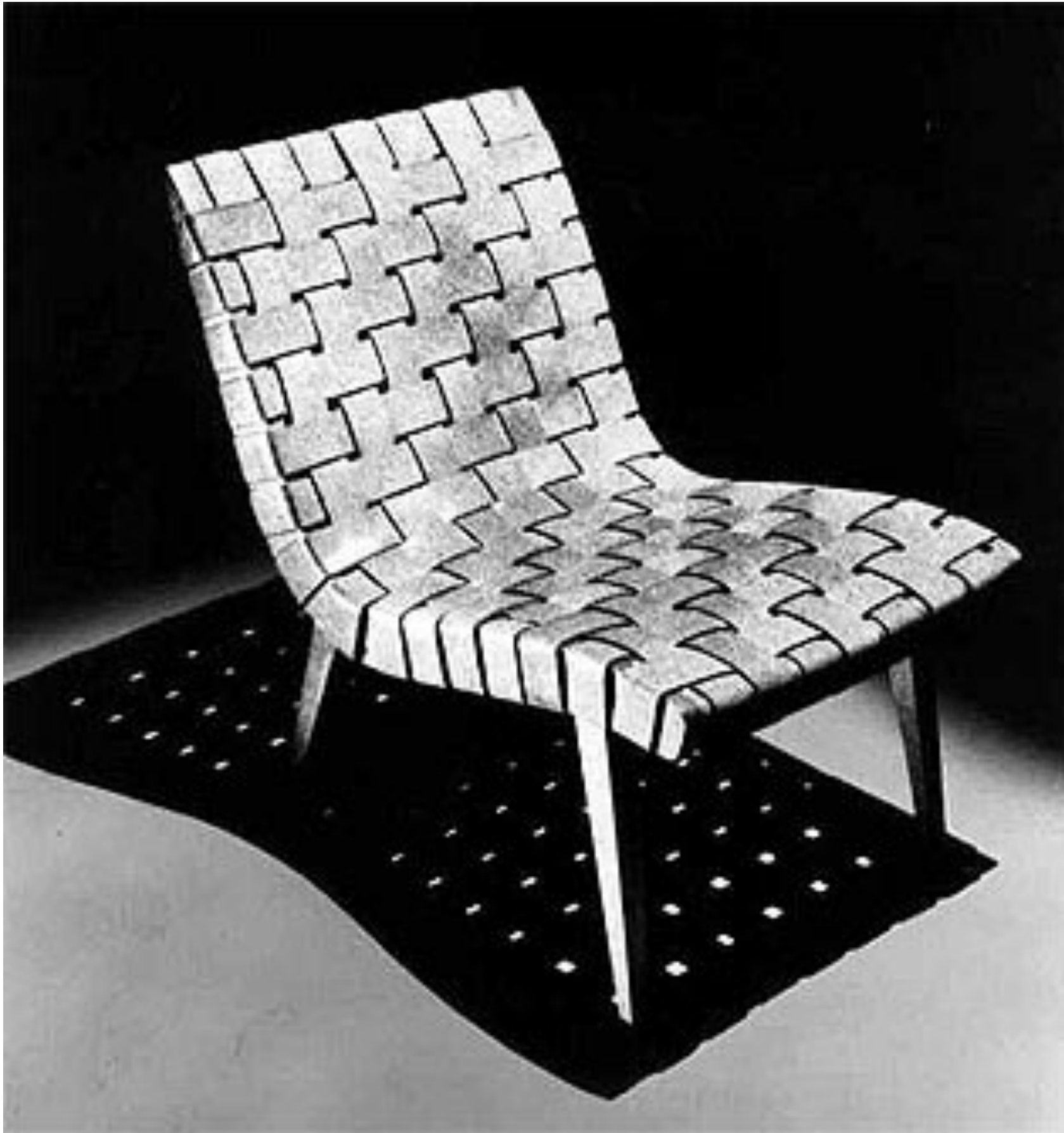
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SKYSCRAPERS

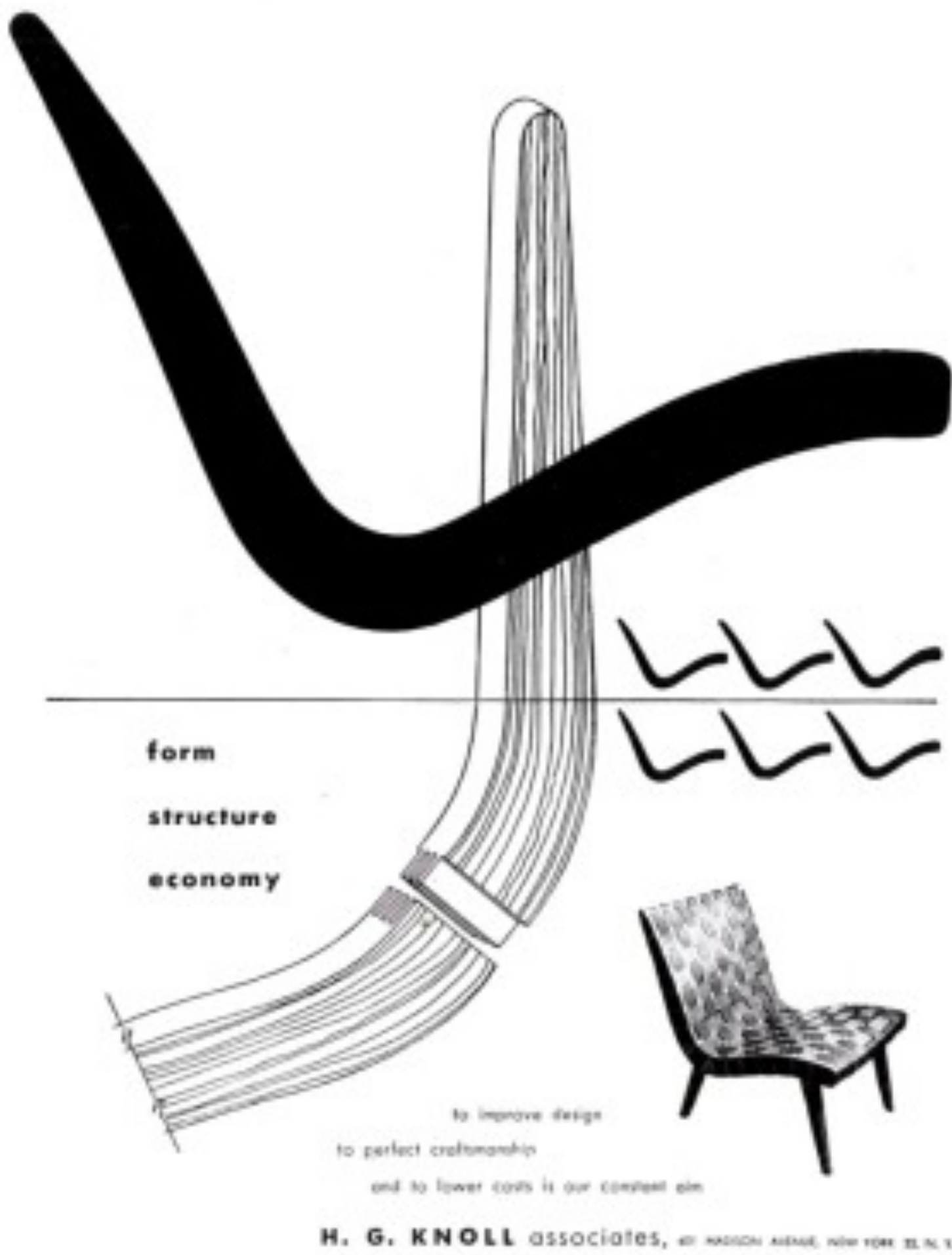
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When Risom and Knoll met, Risom says, “He was secretly looking for me, and I was secretly looking for him; you need to have someone to promote the work and to take care of the company, and then someone to take care of design and manufacturing and to find out what you want and should be doing.”



KNOLL RISOM CHAIR 1943

This chair, of simple wood construction using surplus military webbing, was designed by Jens Risom for Hans Knoll, before Risom entered the Army during World War II. It was the basis for Knoll’s first line of products introduced in 1942, virtually the only modern furniture available during the war in the US, and was patented in 1945



In 1942 when the Hans Knoll Furniture Company was launched, 15 of the first 20 pieces—the “600” line—were pure Risom in design and construction with a subtle Scandinavian sense of modernity that created even more interest in the young designer’s abilities.

STATEMENT FOR  
 Jens Risom  
 115 E. 60th Street  
 New York City  
 November 1, 1941

<u>ACCOUNT</u>	<u>DATE</u>	<u>ORDER</u>	<u>COMM.</u>
Johnson & Johnson (Furniture)	7/5	2937.35	220.35
Johnson & Johnson (Carpets)	1/2 of Pro.	1085.00	54.00
Gleason (Lobby)	5/5	452.10	22.60
General Motors (Passage)	5/5	330.25	16.50
Berle & Schulse			10.00
Marion Flatly			10.00
Monsignor Sheen	10/5	5362.60	<u>536.26</u>
			\$ 869.71

PAYMENTS

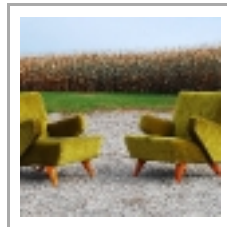
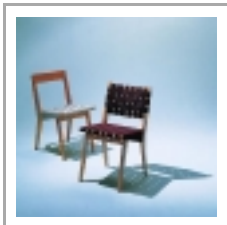
Gloves /	5.00 /		
Shin /	10.00 /		
Typewriter /	45.15 /		
Hamam /	11.67 /		
Cards /	2.30 /		
Prayer Rug /	4.50 /		
Studio Couch /	27.00 /		
Chest of drawers /	-27.00 /		
Dinner Bill (Mrs. Blair) /	5.00 /		
	\$ 138.22		
		Commissions Due	\$ 869.71
		Payments made	<u>138.22</u>
			\$ 731.49
			<u>9.00</u>
			740.49

*Hans Knoll*  
*Frank Owsen*  
**HANS KNOLL**  
**FURNITURE**  
 444 MADISON AVENUE  
 NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK  
 TELEPHONE PLAZA 3-8838

KNOLL INC'S - JENS RISOM 1941 ROYALTIES STATEMENT

Risom recalls that the original Knoll chair, one from his classic 600 line, retailed at \$21 when it first went on the market in 1941; it now retails for almost \$600.

Hans Knoll's 1942 first formal catalogue = 26 of 9 x 10 inch cards loosely grouped in a hardcover folder - incl the first designs by Jens Risom. Risom's best known designs were to appear in the next catalogue.





KNOLL'S RISOM 650 LINE 2

The 650 line was intended for commercial project use during the war time years. Only non critical materials could be sourced eg rejected parachute straps by the military .. and production had to be made by small factories which had not qualified for war production.

*This range qualified Knoll as the first US manufacturer of modernist designs.*

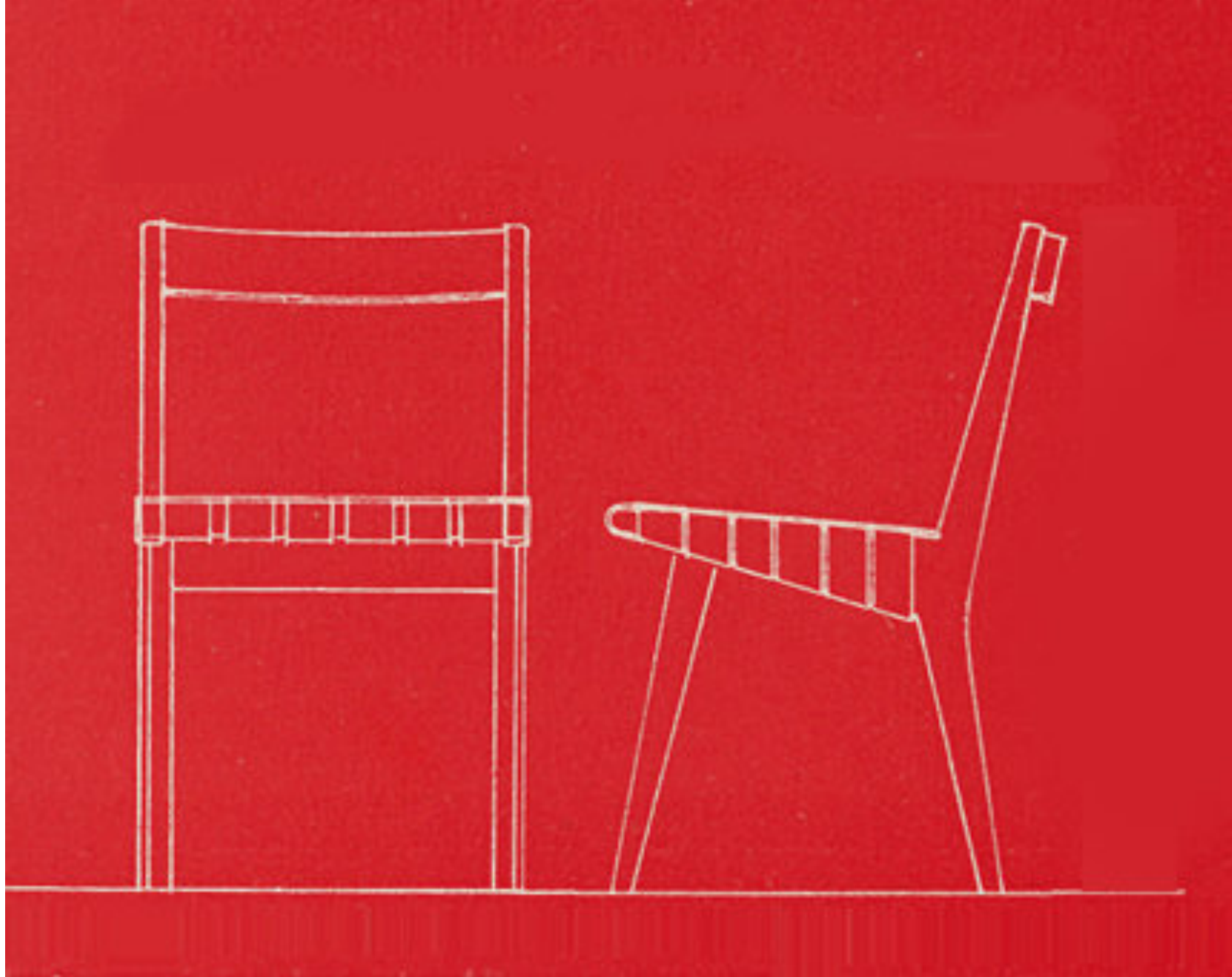
Many of the upholstered products featured in the first catalogues could not be manufactured for client orders due to the inability to source the raw materials required.



***These were the first and last pieces Risom would design for Knoll.***

Even then the idea of green design was prevalent. Jens Risom is well known for the sustainable design implemented in the line created for Knoll. This design includes a seat and backing constructed of woven reclaimed parachute straps. The weave proves to be sustainable as well as aesthetically pleasing on a number of different pieces of furniture. The line is still being manufactured and can be found on Knoll's website





The streamlined maple-hardwood frame is joined with mortise-and-tenon construction. Each piece is stamped with the KnollStudio logo and the designer's signature.



**Jens Risom** designed the first Knoll chair in 1941 and is credited with blending traditional Scandinavian values and flair post-war America's furniture design. With beautiful curves and strikingly well-defined angles, Risom set the standard for the Knoll chair we all know today as a classic example of beauty and utility.

### **Military Service**

He was finally starting to make a name for himself, but Risom's trajectory was thrown off course in 1943, when he was drafted and served in General Patton's Third Army.

Married and with a young daughter, Risom, like many others, was soon drafted into the U.S. Army. Initially planning to work within the Army's Industrial Design Unit at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland, Risom eventually joined the Army's

Civil Affairs Department.

Arriving in Great Britain, he was then assigned to the Headquarters of Third Army under General George Patton where he began training for the upcoming European invasions.

“I served for two and a half years— that’s a long time,” says Risom. “Fortunately, I stayed alive. Because I spoke German and had grown up in Europe, I could be used for a lot of translation. I could also design maps and do layout.”

During his tour, Risom fell ill with meningitis and was sick in the hospital for months. When he was discharged, he’d been separated from his outfit, which had crossed the channel into Normandy.

“I came out of the hospital as a nobody—I didn’t even have a name or a number—that’s the most degrading thing a person can experience. I got over the channel on my own and got into Normandy, and stayed there for a long time—we had some bad fights there.”

Risom stayed with the Third Army as it made its way through France and Germany until the end of the war in 1945

### ***Jens Risom Design inc***

When Risom returned to the United States, he found that the world had continued on without him.

#### HANS AND FLORENCE KNOLL

Hans Knoll had avoided the draft due to a history of tuberculosis and had married Florence Schust, who, according to Risom, “was a brilliant designer but was not as impressed with the Scandinavian wood furniture as she was the metal furniture from Mies and Saarinen.”

Feeling that, perhaps, it was best for the two collaborators to go their separate ways, Risom started his own company, **Jens Risom Design** Inc. (JRD), on 1st May, 1946, which he ran for 25 years.



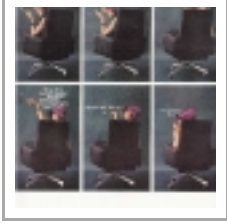
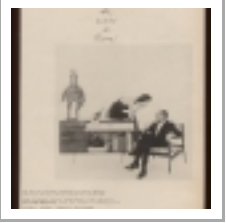
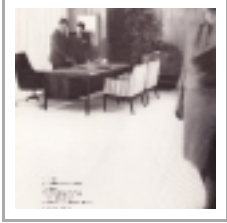
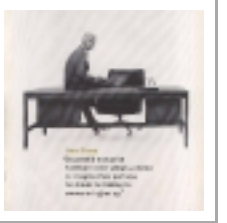
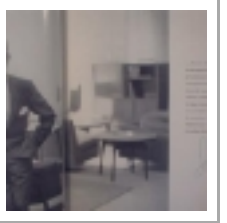
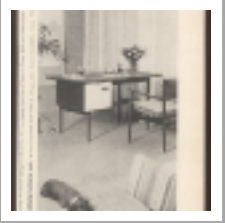
“I had to decide whether I wanted to continue on with Knoll, and, ultimately, I didn’t. He was a little too overwhelming a salesman for me. I don’t think he and Schu [Florence] ever ate a meal alone. It was just overwhelming business, and I wasn’t really up for it.

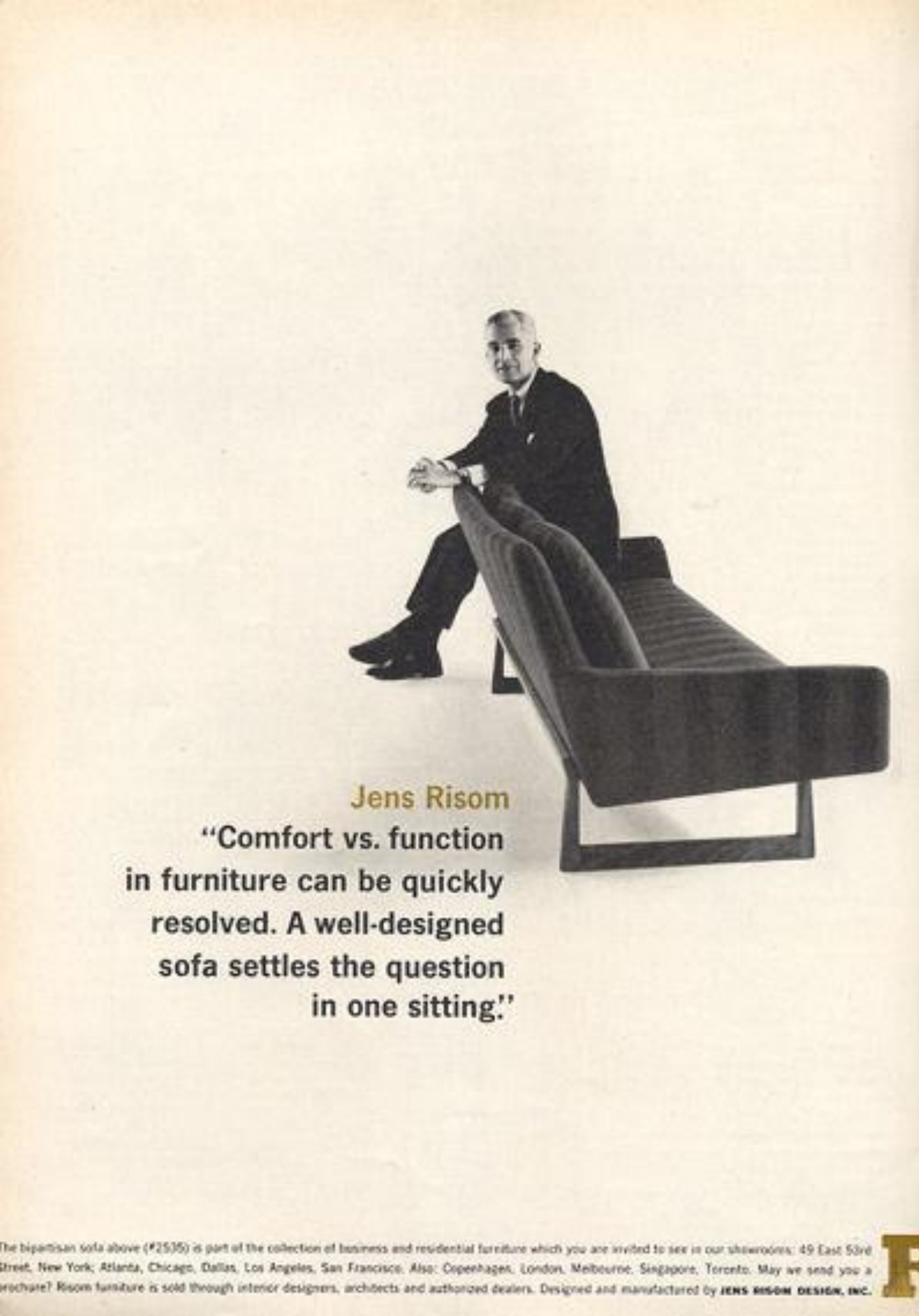
So they went on with their company and we never really talked or saw each other, which was sad. After Knoll died in 1955, I met Florence once or twice, and she wrote a couple of nice letters, but nothing much more than that.”

There was a high demand for quality manufactured and designed furniture and Risom took full advantage of this demand even creating bold advertisements for his furniture including a tagline of: “The Answer is Risom.”

At its height, in the mid 1950s, Risom had showrooms worldwide, and a famous ad campaign shot by photographer Richard Avedon.

RISOM DESIGN ADVERT 1966





**Jens Risom**  
 "Comfort vs. function  
 in furniture can be quickly  
 resolved. A well-designed  
 sofa settles the question  
 in one sitting!"

The bipartisan sofa above (#2535) is part of the collection of business and residential furniture which you are invited to see in our showrooms: 49 East 53rd Street, New York; Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco. Also: Copenhagen, London, Melbourne, Singapore, Toronto. May we send you a brochure? Risom furniture is sold through interior designers, architects and authorized dealers. Designed and manufactured by **JENS RISOM DESIGN, INC.**

JRD quickly became a well-known name in furniture, relying solely on its reputation and branding. Not only was his furniture modern and bold, but his advertising efforts and the quality of his furnishings were well-known and drove expansion for his furniture line. JRD quickly began to sell overseas with trusted manufacturers. As the demand for Risom's furniture grew, so did his business.

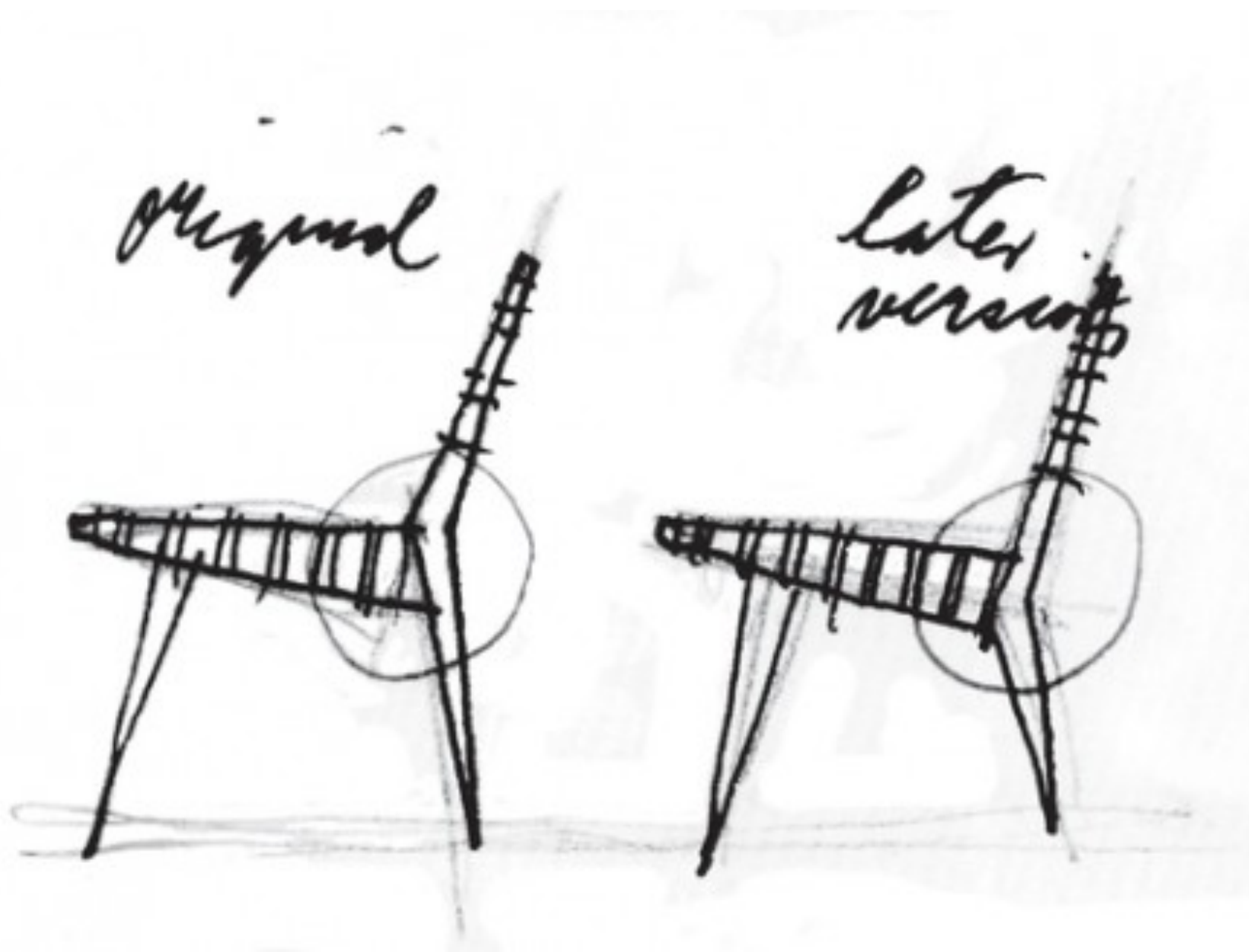


[nggalleryid=278]

Knoll continued to produce the 600 series after Risom went off on his own—though, starting in 1952, without his name

attached so he wouldn't be competing against himself. (Knoll reintroduced the chairs under Risom's name in the late 1990s.)

But Risom continued to mine the same aesthetic vein; like the 600, his designs have a stout, earthbound quality to them, with the horizontal lines dominating the vertical ones and a telltale Danish tapered leg. Modifications to an earlier design show that he's not one to believe his work is beyond improvement: this sketch shows a lower axis point for a leg joint in the latest version of his classic 600 line chair.



JRD positioned itself as one of the few manufacturers in the United States producing well-crafted furniture, but unlike Knoll and **Herman Miller**, which employed a rotating coterie of design talent, Risom served as JRD's sole creative director.



Browsing through a 1955 company catalog shot by the fashion photographer Richard Avedon, one gets a sense of Risom's prolificacy. The collection ranges from basic pieces for the home to executive office furniture. The number of "R" cabinet units alone is staggering. As the marketing material states, "Everything is designed and manufactured by us. Having the planning, engineering, and production all under one roof is very important, we think. It guarantees uniformity and continuity of style."



Late in the 1950s, JRD shifted from residential furniture to office management, hospital and library furniture.

In the 1960's, JRD was big; and Risom was no longer interested in overseeing the operations, intending on returning back to working and guiding design and collaborating with architects.

One of Risom's executive office chairs gained notoriety when Lyndon B Johnson chose to use it in the Oval Office

When Risom was ready to sell his company in 1970, he had about 300 workers and a showroom in every major American city as well as offices in Argentina, Australia, and England. By then it was the third largest furniture company in America.

He sold JRD to the Dictaphone Corporation, which was interested in pushing their executive furniture line. However, the president of the company died shortly after the acquisition, and the subsequent management did not share the former's interest in expanding its furniture division. Risom had stayed on to try to help guide the design process, but he eventually left. "I didn't want to be in manufacturing anymore. I really wanted to design only."

Dictaphone, ended up discontinuing production shortly after.

Fortunately, he continued working as a freelance designer, working for Howe Furniture Company, Do-More, Ralph Pucci, and Gaylord.

Risom's biggest regret about opening his own design and manufacturing company was that "I was getting outside the architecture/designer groups, and more into the manufacturing group, which was not so bad in the U.S., but in Europe they consider design and architecture to be art and the rest to be trade. So I didn't get to know as many of the good architects and designers as I'd have liked."

### ***Ralph Pucci International***

In March, 2005 **Ralph Pucci International** introduced a new line of Risom-designed furniture – some of which include new designs as well as those inspired by older designs. The line is designed so that each piece of furniture appears to be a seat or table top simply set atop the wooden base.

Risom describes furniture as needing to be comfortable and able to support one's body as well as looking attractive and expressing the designer's ideas and taste. He has continually practiced contemporary designing, meaning he has always designed for the people, environment, habits and activities of today.

Risom's drive to create unique and quality furniture is apparent in each piece he designs and is showcased by Ralph Pucci elegantly. Pucci is committed to giving the artist the freedom of expression while producing designs that are simple, timeless and beautifully crafted.



Ralph Pucci International released a collection of 30 or so re-editions originally issued in the 1950s and '60s, and recently it brought out a few more, including a tufted club sofa and classic Danish Modernist armchairs in pastel colors.

Since the original drawings have long since been lost, Risom had to reconstruct the designs from catalogs, existing chairs, and his own memory. Remarkably, only one, a fat white armchair with a U-shaped headrest, fell short: too broad at the bottom, too deep in the seat.

“I’m not totally happy with it,” Risom says. “But there was nothing we could do. We were just guessing at it.” He turns a skeptical eye toward the chair. “It’s all right,” he says. “Considering that nobody has seen the original, it’ll do. We’ll correct it a little bit, but most people won’t know the difference.”

“Jens is still very involved,” explains Pucci. “He cannot wait to get to the factory—to follow the production all the way through to the end.”

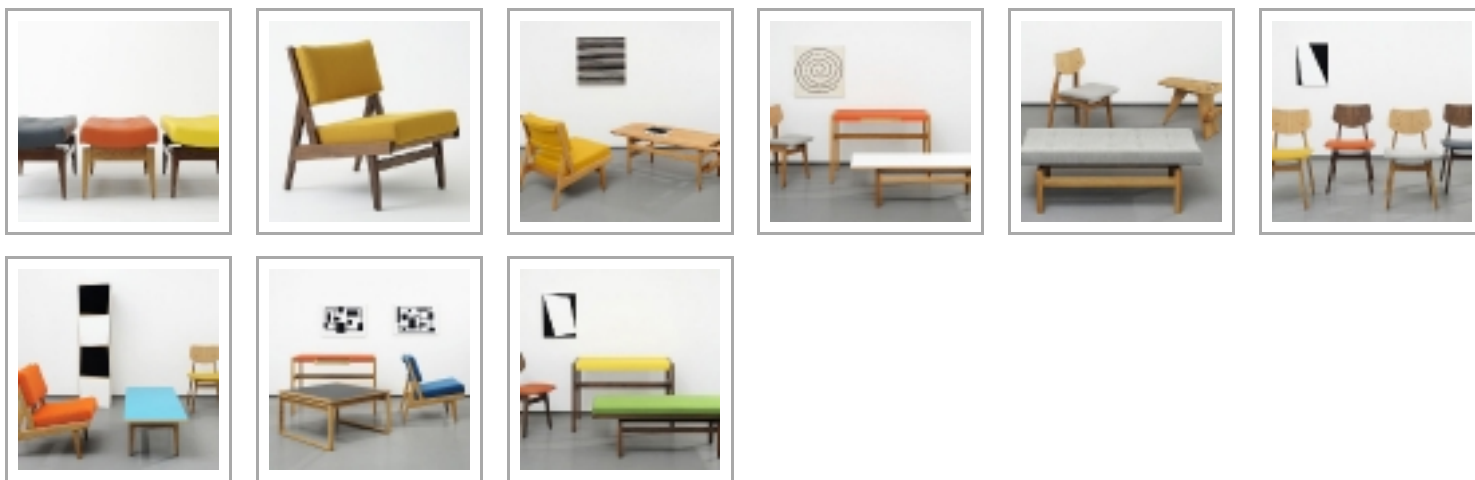
### **Rocket UK**

An exhibition of furniture by the Danish-born American designer Jens Risom is to be launched in London shortly.

At ninety-four years of age, Jens collaborated with **Rocket** Gallery and **Benchmark**, who have jointly secured the European rights to re-issue his 1950s and 1960s furniture designs. See [here](#)

#### RISOM & STEPHENSON PLANNING THEIR VENTURE IN 2005

This first collection of nine pieces has been creatively directed by Jonathan Stephenson of Rocket and made by Benchmark in their Dorset and Berkshire workshops – with the close supervision of Risom himself.



The group of furniture released by Rocket includes an easy chair, a side chair, a desk, various coffee tables, two magazine tables and Risom’s famous upholstered bench. These will be exhibited in a mixture of oak and walnut versions and upholstered in a variety of Kvadrat fabrics and Elmo leathers

### **Career Recognised**

Honouring tradition in modern design, Risom used both old and new methods and materials in a career that spanned over sixty years.

His chairs are now in the permanent collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the Yale Museum of Art and Design, and the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum among others.

A remarkable designer whose work is now an icon, Jens Risom officially became Sir Jens Risom, in 1996, when he was knighted by Queen Margrethe of Denmark



During their 120th Commencement Ceremonies, The Rhode Island School of Design conferred an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts degree on Risom, noting he was “one of the most influential furniture designers of the 20th century.”

Risom has received a variety of awards. His chairs are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Yale Museum of Art & Design, the Brooklyn Museum, the R.I.S.D. Museum in Providence and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

Risom once summed up his philosophy this way: “Good design means that anything good will go well with other equally good things—contemporary or traditional. Furniture is not sculpture, nor is a particular design created only for visual appearance. Furniture should clearly satisfy all requirements: it should be used, enjoyed and respected”

### ***Playboy feature***

In 1961, Risom was one of six furniture designers featured in a profile in *Playboy* magazine.



Of the men shown—(L-R)—George Nelson, Edward Wormley, Eero Saarinen, Harry Bertoia, Charles Eames, and Jens Risom—only Risom is still around.

Risom recalled “Playboy wanted to become highbrow, you know. It never really worked, but they started out with a big series on architects, and then there was one on furniture designers. The center-fold, which normally pictured a lovely, yummy girl, was instead replaced by a picture of six male furniture designers!”

Indeed, this iconic image seems to re-inforce today’s conception of mid-century cool, our collective false nostalgia for a time when great design infiltrated the mass market and America was soaking up a glut of talented European émigrés, a handful of whom were pictured in the Playboy photo.





Risom's legacy as the last of the great mid-century American furniture designers should not be overshadowed by the fact that he was one of the first. In our haste to understand him as simply a member of an intimate and elite collective, his biography reminds us of his dogged individuality and singular vision.

In reality, the Playboy photo from 1961 says more about our perception of that time. "People always say, 'This must have been a wonderful opportunity for you designers to get together.' The trouble was, it wasn't! .....We spent an entire day in a studio in New York being photographed," exclaims Risom. "I didn't know many of them too well. I knew Eames and I knew Saarinen, but it would've been good to have sat around and had a drink, but we never really did get to know each other."

In my opinion, Eames, Saarinen and Bertioia were the most interesting, and we could have learned a lot from them

Around the time the Playboy article was published, my wife and I visited Ray and Charlie in California. They had expanded beyond furniture design into filmmaking. Charlie routinely photographed during the design process, so it was a natural progression that they move into film. They had been filming quite a lot in Mexico, working with a wonderful collection of miniatures.

Later on we met up again at the 1964 New York World's Fair, located on the same grounds as the 1939 World's Fair. I recalled being a fascinated visitor in '39, having landed in the States only six months earlier. At the 1964 fair, Saarinen designed the IBM Pavilion, a marvelous egg-shaped structure that rested on metal trees with Plexiglas leaves that canopied the main building. It was really something to see. Unfortunately, Saarinen, who died in 1961, didn't live to see the final product.

Once inside the pavilion, you were hoisted up inside the egg, which turned out to be a large theatre. After the lights were down, cameras began rolling Charlie and Ray's films. In every direction there were flashing images. I don't remember what the films were about, but it was very exciting and made you think. Beautifully done. The Eameses were an outstanding couple, enormously important for the development of creative design. I have such fond memories of them.

As he humbly puts it, "There's been a good deal of talk about my work these last couple of years only because I'm the only one left of that early bunch."

#### **Risom Pre-Fab Weekender**





Photos by John Zimmerman

“People need wood,” says Risom – the only top Danish designer to make his reputation on American soil – though he is the first to defer to two of his native countrymen, Hans Wegner and Finn Juhl, as the greatest artists in the Danish school.

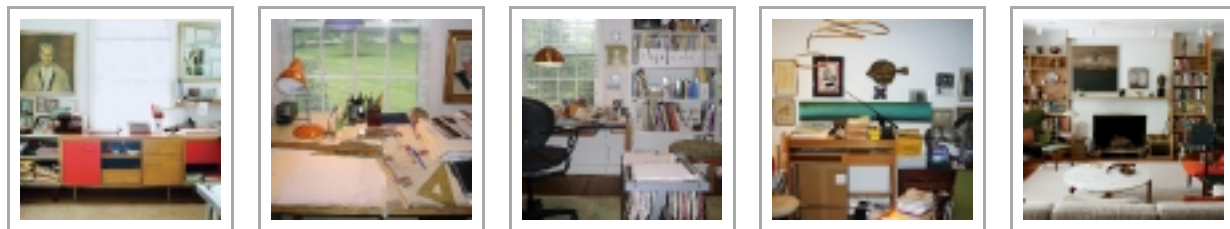
“In these days,” Risom elaborates, “when a building is made of glass and steel, people need the live texture, the depth texture that only a piece of wood can give.” Risom thinks of a chair as an emotional bridge between architecture and the human occupant, a concept clearly demonstrated by one of his chair designs – its rectilinear wood frame continuing the geometry of the room, its contoured seat and back reflecting the ins and outs of the human form.



Risom’s approach to furniture as a craft – as a finished product that is not dreamed up beforehand on paper but that slowly arrives at its character in the actual making – leaves his sense of propriety little choice but to manufacture the furniture himself.

Unlike the imperious, scene-stealing forms of many designers, a Risom chair is a silent partner in an interior, an object for human use that is meaningless until it participates in a pattern of day-to-day living. In this modesty of attitude Risom of course has never been alone. *Hans Wegner said, “A chair is not complete until someone sits in it.”*

### Risom at Home



Like many of his generation, Risom still sketches by hand. A workstation in Risom’s office shows evidence that the designer is still very much active; a pile of sketches sits in the basket to the left of the table, and ephemera from early Jens Risom Design marketing material decorate the wall.

***Jens Risom is enjoying his place in the canon of midcentury furniture designers while also distinguishing himself as a great contemporary designer.***

“I set out to design contemporary furniture that was comfortable and practical to use.. I developed an American version of Scandinavian modern furniture.”

Risom’s furniture from the 1950s and 1960s is very down to earth and functional, but still has enormous elegance. It is a fusion of the craft tradition he learned in Denmark with American modernism and the hi-tech of American production methods. It is significant that he always wants to be known as a Danish-born American designer, not a Danish designer.

***At 95, he shows no sign of putting down the pencil.***



JOHN ENGELEN

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Andrew - December 9, 2011

Well It's the efforts of the old designers that now we have the modern furniture. Every designer show his work but Risom is my favorite. His furniture designs really make the things alive and make them attractive.

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