



Women Leaders are Critical to Development of This Industry



Happy Wednesday folks,

March is Women's History Month and it is fitting that we take a moment to recognize some of the women who made this industry what it is and those who are propelling it into the future.

Just a note before we get started: This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, so if your grandma helped pack furniture boxes as your family's business got off the ground and I don't mention her here, apologies in advance. There are so many women who help build this industry it is absolutely impossible to name them all.

That being said, there are some important leaders who deserve recognition for their contributions to what we all enjoy today. Let's start with two real giants.



Florence Knoll Bassett

Florence Knoll Bassett is one of the most important design icons of the 20th century. She worked closely with her friends, Eliel and Eero Saarinen, while studying at Cranbrook Academy

of Art. During her advanced schooling and extended travels, Knoll Bassett met many of the leading architects of the time, including Alvar Aalto, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Some of these early mentors would come to figure prominently in her future work at Knoll. But it was Mies who had perhaps the clearest influence on her signature approach to design: rigorous and methodical.

In 1941, aiming to pursue work in architecture, Knoll Bassett moved to New York City and met Hans Knoll. Hans Knoll was the third generation of a Stuttgart-based furniture manufacturing family who had come to the United States a few years earlier, and he was beginning to bring European Modernism to a new audience. Seeking to build business for a new chair, he called on the design firm where his future wife and partner happened to be working. Hans Knoll was, by all accounts, a natural born salesman: the pair began working together, and soon Knoll Bassett was taking an increasingly significant role in the company's aesthetic development, in addition to her official role designing office interiors. Before long, the two were business partners, and in 1946 the pair married — and renamed the company Knoll Associates.



Ray Eames

Ray Eames was a leading American designer who worked in a variety of media including furniture, textiles, architecture, film and toys. Ray and her partner, Charles Eames, are probably

best known for their plywood furniture pieces manufactured by MillerKnoll and Vitra and for the design of their own house, Case Study 8 (1949), made mainly with standardized, mass-produced parts from builders' catalogues (though with considerable hand-finishing). She felt design should be enjoyed and help the

masses, not just the affluent.

Unlike many women designers and architects who collaborated with their husbands, Ray Eames worked full-time and her name is as synonymous with design and the work the Eames Office created as her husband.

History is written in the present and there are many examples of women leaders who are making a difference in the industry today.

Just look at the impressive roster of CEOs leading several of the industry's largest companies. Andi Owen is in the process of completing the most important and largest merger in the industry's history. She led Herman Miller's acquisition of Knoll and is transforming the furniture maker into



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a design powerhouse. Sara Armbruster is the president and CEO of Steelcase, the first woman to hold that position. She is using the company's research and design and numerous strategic partnerships

to continue to push the office furniture giant into the future. Kimball CEO Kristie Juster has made several smart moves to modernize the company's products and has added several women to her leadership team. In 1989 the mother/daughter team of Jaye Congleton and Rebecca Congleton



Boenigk recognized an opportunity to manufacture and distribute Dr. Jerome Congleton's concept for the Neutral Posture chair. Rebecca

Boenigk has become one of the most important leaders in the industry.

Women are leaders in design and industry organizations as well. Cheryl Durst is executive vice president and CEO of IIDA. She is an innovator and visionary leader



who has worked tirelessly for the design industry and women of color in particular. And BIFMA appointed Deirdre Jimenez as its first woman president and CEO.



All of this leadership matters. It is impossible for the industry to serve the office furniture industry without these powerful women leaders. While they are the trailblazers, many more women are waiting for their turns. And that is very good news for all of us.

Rob Kirkbride and the Business of Furniture team