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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Niels Diffrient

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Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Niels Diffrient
Identifier:	AAA.diffri10
Date:	2010 July 28-August 31
Creator:	Diffrient, Niels (Interviewee) McQuaid, Matilda, 1958- (Interviewer) Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Extent:	55 Pages (Transcript) 4 Items (Sound recording: 4 sound files (2 hr., 58 min.); digital, wav)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Niels Diffrient, 2010 July 28-August 31, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Niels Diffrient, 2010 July 28-August 31, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Biographical / Historical

Niels Diffrient (1928-2013) is an industrial designer in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Matilda McQuaid (1958-) is deputy curatorial director, Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York, New York.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Niels Diffrient conducted 2010 July 28 and August 31, by Matilda McQuaid, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, at Diffrient's home and studio, in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

Scope and Contents

Diffrient speaks of growing up in Detroit while spending his summers with his mother's family in Mississippi; the value of growing up on a farm; attending Cass Technical High School in Detroit; realizing that he did not

want to work in a factory; learning about crafts at Cranbrook Academy; travelling to Italy on a Fulbright Grant; working with Italian versus American designers; designing office chairs; the state of education in America. Diffrient's wife, Helena Hernmarck, contributes to the discussion of craft, weaving, and textiles. Diffrient also recalls Hans and Florence Knoll, Eero Saarinen, Eliel Saarinen, Chuck Bassett, David Rowland, Henry Dreyfuss, Bob King, Carl Magnusson, Raymond Loewy, Henry Wolf, Elizabeth Whelan, and others.

General

Originally recorded on 2 memory cards. Reformatted in 2010 as 4 digital wav files. Duration is 2 hr., 58 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Types of Materials:

- Interviews
- Sound recordings

Names:

- Bassett, Chuck
- Cranbrook Academy of Art
- Dreyfuss, Henry, 1904-1972
- Hernmarck, Helena, 1941-
- King, Bob
- Knoll, Florence, 1917-
- Knoll, Hans
- Loewy, Raymond
- Magnusson, Carl G., 1940-
- Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
- Rowland, David Lincoln, 1924-2010
- Saarinen, Eero, 1910-1961
- Saarinen, Eliel, 1873-1950
- Whelan, Elizabeth
- Wolf, Henry, 1852-1916

Occupations:

- Industrial designers -- New York (State) -- New York

Places:

- Italy -- description and travel
- Michigan -- Detroit -- Description and Travel
- Mississippi -- Description and Travel