



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Florence Knoll Bassett Papers, 1932-2000, in the Archives of American Art

Stephanie Ashley

Funding for the digitization of this collection was
provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

2001

Archives of American Art
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Florence Knoll Bassett papers
Date:	1932-2000
Identifier:	AAA.knoflor
Creator:	Knoll, Florence, 1917-2019
Extent:	2 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The papers of architect and designer Florence Knoll Bassett, measure approximately 2 linear feet dating from 1932 to 2000. Through correspondence, sketches, drawings, designs, subject files, photographs, and printed material, the collection selectively documents Knoll Bassett's education, her work with Knoll Associates from the 1940s until her resignation in 1965, and projects undertaken since her retirement. It is an important source of information on the development of interior architecture and design from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The collection was donated to the Archives of American Art by Florence Knoll Bassett in 2000.

Alternative Forms Available

The papers of **Florence Knoll Bassett** in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2008 and total 1,280 images.

Processing Information

Florence Knoll Bassett arranged the papers and designed their storage units before donating them to the Archives of American Art. Stephanie Ashley conducted minimal processing work on the collection in 2001, retaining the original order of the papers, the labels, and the containers provided by the donor. The collection was digitized in 2007 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

Florence Knoll Bassett papers, 1932-2000. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

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Biographical Note

Florence Knoll Bassett (1917-2019) was born Florence Schust and was affectionately known as Shu by her colleagues and friends. She was orphaned at age 12 and then cared for by Emile Tessin, a friend of the family whom her mother had appointed as Florence's legal guardian in the event of her death. When arrangements were being made for Florence to attend boarding school she was given the opportunity to make the selection. Kingswood School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, held a strong aesthetic appeal for her and she "made an immediate decision that it was the right place for me," beginning her architectural studies under the school's art director, Rachel de Wolfe Raseman.

At Kingswood Knoll Bassett met the Saarinen family, studying under Eiel Saarinen and developing her interest in texture and color through her friendship with Loja Saarinen who supervised the school's weaving studio. Following Florence's graduation from Kingswood in 1934, Eiel Saarinen encouraged her to spend some time at Cranbrook Academy of Art before attending an accredited architecture school. She spent the next two years at Cranbrook working closely with advanced students and artists such as the Saarinens and Carl Milles, and gaining experience in all aspects of design.

Knoll Bassett then studied for two years at the Architectural Association in London, spending summers with the Saarinens in Europe. She completed her formal training at the Illinois Institute of Technology where she studied under Mies van der Rohe, whom she credits with having "a profound effect on my design approach and the clarification of design."

After graduation Knoll Bassett worked for architecture firms in Boston and New York where she met Hans Knoll who was then in the process of establishing a furniture business. In 1943 she began working for him in her spare time as an interior space planner and designer. In 1946 the two were married and formed Knoll Associates, Inc.

As director of the Knoll Planning Unit, Knoll Bassett established herself as one of the most important and influential interior planners and designers of the second half of the twentieth century. Believing that intelligent design "strikes at the root of living requirements and changing habits," she established the practice of working closely with the corporate sector to determine the needs of the people who would actually use the spaces that her company designed. Her connections with leading contemporary architects and designers, and the company's commitment to crediting designers by name and paying them royalties, laid the foundations for the strong working relationships upon which the commercial success of Knoll Associates was built. Drawing on a pool of top architects and designers, many of whom were personal friends, Knoll Bassett directed the company's Bauhaus approach, incorporating design excellence, technological innovation, and mass production in a seamless package of "total design."

While Knoll Bassett oversaw the creative process of the Planning Unit's operations in its entirety, she was also directly responsible for many of the individual elements used in the Unit's projects. During the war years, she worked with her designers to overcome the scarcity of materials, establishing Knoll Textiles in response to the dearth of available fabrics and textile colors, and developing the company's hallmark style of spare clean lines and vibrant colors in a functional, comfortable, and aesthetically appealing space. Finding that much of the "fill-in" furniture, primarily cabinetry, that she envisaged in many of her plans was not available, Knoll Bassett designed the pieces herself. She used the Knoll showrooms as "experimental laboratories" to convince clients to use modern ideas and materials, showcasing and putting into production the classic designs of people such as Eero Saarinen, Mies van der Rohe, Jens Risom, Harry Bertioia, Isamu Noguchi, and Marcel Breuer.

After the war Knoll Associates expanded to Europe through a series of government contracts which resulted ultimately in the formation of Knoll International. When Hans Knoll died suddenly in an automobile accident in 1955 Florence became president of the company. She married Harry Hood Bassett in 1958 and began

to divide her time between New York and Florida. In 1959 she sold her interest in Knoll Associates to Art Metal and retired as President of the company the following year, while continuing to work as a consultant and serving as Design Director. In 1961 she became the first woman to be awarded the Gold Medal for Industrial Design by the American Institute of Architects, one of many awards received over the course of her career. In 1965 she resigned from Knoll Associates entirely after completing the interior design for the CBS headquarters in New York.

Following her retirement Knoll Bassett devoted more time to private commissions and other interests such as her campaign against billboards in Miami in the mid 1980s. She spent summers in Vermont and winters in Florida with her husband, until his death in 1991. In July 2001, *Metropolis* magazine published a rare interview with Knoll Bassett in which she reflects upon the life she so skillfully documented in the extraordinary gift of her archival papers to the Archives of American Art.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of architect, and interior designer and planner Florence Knoll Bassett, measure approximately 2 linear feet dating from 1932 to 2000. The collection selectively documents Knoll Bassett's education and her career at Knoll Associates, Inc. from the 1940s until her resignation in 1965, in addition to personal design projects and other activities after leaving the company. It is an important source of information on the development of interior architecture and design from the 1940s to the 1970s, chronicling the Knoll mission to synthesize space, furniture, and design by creating interiors based on practical use, comfort, and aesthetics.

The collection documents the growth of Knoll's international reputation for its modern furnishings and interiors and the impact of a business philosophy that encompassed design excellence, technological innovation, and mass production. The material includes a chronology of Knoll Bassett's career; a portfolio of sketches, drawings and designs; photographs of Knoll Bassett and others; subject files containing sketches and photographic material; letters from friends, colleagues, clients and others; awards received by Knoll Bassett throughout her career; and printed material.

Much of the material is annotated with historical and biographical notes written by Knoll Bassett which provide invaluable contextual information for the materials found therein. The notes are dated 1999 in the Container Listing, under the assumption that they were written by Florence Knoll Bassett as she was arranging her archival papers.

Arrangement

Before donating her papers to the Archives of American Art, Knoll Bassett organized the material in portfolios and color-coded files and designed four containers for them. Because the method of arrangement in itself provides insight into Knoll Bassett's style and creativity the collection has been minimally processed with the addition of acid-free materials for preservation reasons and the transcription of labels which may, over time, become detached. The original order of the collection has been retained throughout.

The collection was organized into what Bassett termed "storage units," the first container being divided into three units and the collection as a whole being divided into six units. Knoll Bassett supplied a detailed inventory of the contents of each container and the subjects represented in each portfolio or folder. Subject headings from this inventory have been used in the Series Description/Container Listing. Knoll Bassett also supplied a vita summarizing her career and copies of this, and her original container inventory are enclosed with the collection and can be consulted at AAA's research center in Washington D.C.

The collection is arranged as seven series. These series represent the categories into which Knoll Bassett organized the material, with the exception that Letters and Awards are presented as two series in the finding aid. Most of the items in Series 1 to 4 are presented as portfolios in spiral-bound notebooks and the remainder of the collection is organized in folders.

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1932-1999 (Box 1; 1 portfolio)
- Series 2: Selected Publications, 1946-1990, 1999 (Box 1; 1 portfolio)
- Series 3: Drawings, Sketches, and Designs, 1932-1984, 1999 (Boxes 1-2; 2 portfolios)
- Series 4: Photographs and Printed Material, 1956-1997, 1999 (Box 2; 1 portfolio)
- Series 5: Subject Files, circa 1930s-1999 (Box 3; 1.0 linear ft.)
- Series 6: Letters, circa 1930s-2000 (Box 4; 7 folders)
- Series 7: Awards, 1954-1999 (Box 4; 6 folders)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Industrial design
Interior decoration
Interior decoration firms
Women architects
Women artists
Women designers

Types of Materials:

Drawings
Photographs
Sketchbooks
Sketches

Names:

Cheek, Leslie, 1908-
Cranbrook Academy of Art
Cranbrook Kingswood School (Bloomfield Hills, Mich.)
Eames, Charles
Gandhi, Indira, 1917-1984
Graham, Katharine, 1917-
Hans G. Knoll Furniture Company
Helm, John
Johnson, Philip, 1906-2005
Knoll Associates, inc.
Knoll International, inc.
Knoll, Walter C.
Miller, R. Craig
Milles, Carl, 1875-1955
Raseman, Rachel de Wolfe
Reagan, Nancy, 1923-
Saarinen, Eero, 1910-1961
Saarinen, Eliel, 1873-1950
Slavin, Maeve

Occupations:

Architects -- New York (State) -- New York
Designers -- New York (State) -- New York

Furniture designers -- New York (State) -- New York

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1932-1999

(Box 1; 1 portfolio)

Scope and Contents: This series comprises a spiral-bound portfolio designed and compiled by Knoll Bassett to "briefly chart the direction of my life from 1932 onward." The portfolio documents her artistic development during her years at Kingswood School and Cranbrook Academy of Art; her work at Knoll Associates including the presentation of Knoll showrooms and work undertaken for a variety of corporate clients; and personal architecture projects in Vermont and Florida. Included are copies of designs from all periods of her career, and copies of letters and photographs of individuals and significant events throughout her life. Biographical text, written by Knoll Bassett, accompanies the material.

Arrangement: Included are copies of designs from all periods of her career, and copies of letters and photographs of individuals and significant events throughout her life. Biographical text, written by Knoll Bassett, accompanies the material.

Box 1, Folder 1 [Portfolio: A Chronology of Florence Knoll Bassett from 1932 Onward, compiled, 1999](#)

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Series 2: Selected Publications, 1946-1990, 1999

(Box 1; 1 portfolio)

Scope and Contents: This series comprises a spiral-bound portfolio of copies of articles documenting Knoll Bassett's career in various art and design publications, newspapers, and encyclopedias. See Series 4 for additional printed material.

Box 1, Folder 2 [Portfolio: Selected Publications from 1946 until 1990, compiled, 1999](#)

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Series 3: Drawings, Sketches, and Designs, 1932-1984, 1999

(Boxes 1-2; 2 portfolios)

Scope and Contents: The first item in this series is a portfolio of original, and copies of, drawings, sketches, plans, and miscellany, such as two greeting cards designed by Hans and Florence Knoll, in addition to copies of printed matter and photographs of projects undertaken by Knoll Associates. The majority of the designs were executed by Knoll Bassett for her own use or as more formal presentations for clients, but there are also copies of sketches by others including Hans Knoll and Andy Warhol. The material includes the original drawing for Knoll Bassett's first house design at Kingswood School, executed in 1932. Material relating to Knoll projects illustrate Knoll Bassett's practice of using three-dimensional models with fabric swatches applied to furniture layout plans for client presentations, a technique which later became a standard in the profession. The portfolio is annotated by Knoll Bassett.

A spiral-bound portfolio containing sketches by Knoll Bassett of a cruise of the Greek Islands in 1967 can also be found here.

Box 1, Folder 3 [Portfolio: Drawings and Sketches, 1932-1984, compiled 1999](#)

Box 2, Folder 1 [Portfolio: Greek Islands, 1967](#)

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Series 4: Photographs and Printed Material, 1956-1997, 1999

(Box 2; 1 portfolio, 1 book)

Scope and Contents: This series contains a spiral-bound portfolio of six photographic prints of Knoll Bassett with clients and colleagues, including Eero Saarinen, from the 1950s and 1960s, followed by printed material from 1959 to 1997 documenting her career. A copy of the book, *Knoll Design*, can also be found here. See Series 2 for additional printed material.

Box 2, Folder 2

[Portfolio: Photographs of Florence Knoll and Others and Articles in Newspapers and Magazines, 1956-1997, compiled 1999](#)

Box 2, Folder 3

[Book: Knoll Design, by Eric Larrabee and Massimo Vignelli, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1985](#)
(not scanned)

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Series 5: Subject Files, circa 1930s-1999

(Box 3; 1.0 linear ft.)

Scope and Contents: The series contains original, and copies of notes, letters, drawings, sketches, plans, photographic material, and printed matter, as well as historical notes written by Knoll Bassett. Originals of some of the material in Series 1 can be found here.

Folders 1 and 2 contain material relating to Knoll Bassett's education and her relationship with the Saarinen family, including original illustrated letters from Eero Saarinen. The majority of the material relates to projects undertaken by the Knoll Planning Unit, including showroom designs and some of the company's most important and innovative projects for corporate clients. The files typically contain annotated plans and sketches in addition to photographs, transparencies, and negatives of each project. Specific aspects of the Planning Unit's operations, such as the development of textiles and graphics, are also documented here, as are the individual contributions of early Knoll designers. Material relating to personal projects undertaken by Knoll Bassett in Vermont and Florida is also included here.

This series was arranged by Knoll Bassett in numbered folders, some of which contain two or more related sub folders which are indicated by an indent in the Container Listing.

Box 3, Folder 1	Kingswood; Cranbrook Academy of Art, circa 1930s, 1983-1994, undated Notes: (Kingswood includes photographs of Rachel de Wolfe Raseman, taken 1936; Cranbrook includes photos of Eliel and Eero Saarinen and Carl Milles)
Box 3, Folder 2	Eero Saarinen, Letters and "Architecture History Lesson" Drawings; Loja Saarinen, Original Model and Photographs of Model of Dress, 1935-1936, 1999
Box 3, Folder 3	Coral Gables, Florida; New York City, circa 1950s, undated Notes: (includes photographs of Sutton Place and Manhattan house residences)
Box 3, Folder 4	Vermont House: Main House, Guest House, Farm Buildings and View, Tennis Barn and Studio, circa 1980s-circa 1990s
Box 3, Folder 5	Florence Knoll Furniture Designs: Article by Craig Miller, Seating and Tables, Storage Units, Office Furniture and Dormitory Design, circa 1940s-1999
Box 3, Folder 6	Early Knoll Designers, Furniture, circa 1930s-circa 1940s, 1999
Box 3, Folder 7	Knoll Graphics, Herbert Matter, circa 1950s-circa 1960s, 1999
Box 3, Folder 8	Knoll Textiles, circa 1950s-circa 1960s, 1988, 1999
Box 3, Folder 9	Knoll Exhibitions: Mies van der Rohe; Knoll au Louvre; Dow Chemical and Detroit Institute of Arts; Textilien aus U.S.A., circa 1940s-1999, undated
Box 3, Folder 10	Knoll Showroom, 601 Madison Avenue, New York, 1948, 1999

Box 3, Folder 11	Knoll Showrooms, Dallas, Paris, and Miami, 1947-1959
Box 3, Folder 12	Knoll Showroom, 575 Madison Avenue, New York, 1951, 1999
Box 3, Folder 13	Knoll Showroom, Chicago, 1953, 1999
Box 3, Folder 14	Knoll Showroom, San Francisco, 1954
Box 3, Folder 15	Knoll Showroom, Milan, 1956
Box 3, Folder 16	Knoll Showroom, Los Angeles, 1960
Box 3, Folder 17	Columbia Broadcasting Systems, Inc. (CBS), Madison Avenue, 1952-1954, 1999
Box 3, Folder 18	Look Publications, circa 1962
Box 3, Folder 19	Connecticut General Building, circa 1950s, 1984
Box 3, Folder 20	H. J. Heinz Company, 1999, undated
Box 3, Folder 21	First National Bank of Miami and Southeast Bank, 1957, 1982, 1999
Box 3, Folder 22	Columbia Broadcasting Systems, Inc. (CBS): General, 35th Floor, Frank Stanton's Office Suite, 1964
Box 3, Folder 23	Knoll Bassett's Inventory of Box 3, 1999

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Series 6: Letters, circa 1930s-2000

(Box 4; 7 folders)

Scope and Contents: This series contains letters selected by Knoll Bassett to document significant events throughout her life and career. As in Series 5, the originals for some of the material in Series 1 can be found here. Correspondents include Carl Milles, Eero and Loja Saarinen, David Rockefeller, Katharine Graham, Nancy Reagan, Indira Gandhi, Frank Stanton, and Isamu Noguchi. In addition to letters the series also contains printed matter and other material of interest, such as an original invitation with a guest list and photographs from a 1947 party given by Howard Meyers, Editor-in-Chief of *Architectural Forum* a wedding card made by Charles and Ray Eames on the occasion of Florence Knoll's marriage to Harry Hood Bassett in 1958; and an invitation from the White House from 1976.

The letters are arranged by decade.

Box 4, Folder 1	Knoll Bassett's Inventory of Box 4, Letters, 1999
Box 4, Folder 2	Letters (1930s-1940s), 1936-1947, 1999
Box 4, Folder 3	Letters (1950s), 1953-1959
Box 4, Folder 4	Letters (1960s), 1961-1968
Box 4, Folder 5	Letters (1970s), 1972-1978
Box 4, Folder 6	Letters (1980s), 1980-2000
Box 4, Folder 7	Letters (1990s), 1984, 1991-1999

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Series 7: Awards, 1954-1999

(Box 4; 6 folders)

Scope and Contents: This series documents some of the awards and honorary degrees presented to Knoll Bassett over the course of her career, including the Gold Medal for Industrial Design awarded by the American Institute of Architects in 1961 and the Total Design Award given by the American Society of Interior Designers in 1977. Materials include award certificates with related correspondence and printed material. In some cases there are also notes for, or the text of, remarks given by Knoll Bassett upon acceptance of an award.

The material is arranged by decade.

Box 4, Folder 8 [Knoll Bassett's Inventory of Box 4, Awards, 1999](#)

Box 4, Folder 9 [Awards \(1950s\), 1954-1956](#)

Box 4, Folder 10 [Awards \(1960s\), 1961-1965](#)

Box 4, Folder 11 [Awards \(1970s\), 1976-1979](#)

Box 4, Folder 12 [Awards \(1980s\), 1982-1989](#)

Box 4, Folder 13 [Awards \(1990s\), 1990-1999](#)

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