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When contracted to design the Coconut Grove condo of a bachelor in his 50s, Lourdes Fernandez-Grattan decided that a clean and timeless look was the answer. "The first piece added to the mix was one of my favorite chairs, the Barcelona, designed by Mies van der Rohe. This pairing of an elegant metal frame warmed up by an inviting leather seat and back has stood the test of time," she explains.



Behind the Barcelona

A fresh look at Lilly Reich's contributions to modernism, the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the timeless Barcelona chair

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Sometimes, upon closer inspection, history relinquishes a previously unknown tidbit of information. Occasionally, these tidbits reveal that someone has been overlooked, despite having made a notable contribution to humanity's treasury of knowledge and achievement.

For example, James Watson and Francis Crick have gone down in history for discovering the structure of DNA, that biological building block. But have you ever heard of Rosalind Franklin? Perhaps not. She was a bright and accomplished molecular biologist whose work played a major role in the unravelling of the DNA mystery. A colleague of hers, Maurice Wilkins, is also much less well known than Watson and Crick; and yet, when all was said and

done, he joined them on the dais as the three were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962, four years after Franklin's death from ovarian cancer at age 37. Exactly what contributions did these four, and probably many others, make? And why are some names remembered by posterity more than others?

Such questions can be asked in every field, so let us jump from the sciences to the arts. The Barcelona chair, that mainstay of modernist decor, is credited, usually exclusively, to German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Mies looms large in any discussion of modern architecture, the German avant-garde or the Bauhaus School. Meanwhile, Lilly Reich has been relegated to barely footnote status, despite occupying exactly the same milieu as Mies and collaborating intimately with him for 13 years, including the key

Above: Early 19th-century French version of the ancient curule seat by Francois-Honore-Georges Jacob-Desmalter, from the Rhode Island School of Design Museum

period during which the Barcelona chair came into being.

Born in Berlin in 1885, nine months before Mies, Reich, was designing furniture and clothing by the age of 26. At that time, women with an architectural bent were more likely to encounter open doors in textile-related pursuits, which have long been associated with female expertise. In 1912, Reich joined the Deutscher Werkbund, a German association of craftsmen and industrialists founded in 1907 with a view to promoting high standards in the manufacture, and even mass-production, of German-designed products, thus increasing Germany's economic competitiveness. This goal took on a new dimension in the wake of that nation's bitter defeat in World War I.

The Werkbund would become a hub for architects and designers with modernist sensibilities. By the time Mies joined the organization and rose in its ranks, Reich had already become the first woman elected to its board of directors several years earlier, in 1920. She was making a name for herself as a designer and organizer of exhibitions and trade fairs, which provided opportunities to express her avant-garde yet pragmatic point of view. Her signature aesthetic included placing raw materials at the forefront of a display, instead of allowing them to be relegated to the background.

It was via the Werkbund, when Reich returned to Berlin in 1926, after two years working in Frankfurt, that she encountered Mies and launched more than a decade of professional and, by all accounts, personal, collaboration.

Their first major project together was the 1927 Werkbund exhibition in Stuttgart, titled "Die Wohnung" or "The Dwelling." While Mies joined more than a dozen other noted architects in creating an entire experimental village showcasing progressive building styles, Reich oversaw the assembly of the



Lilly Reich (1885–1947) served as director of the interior design workshop at the Bauhaus School.

The Barcelona chair represents the perfect marriage of form and function sought by the Bauhaus coterie of designers.

and many of his Bauhaus colleagues would later bring to the United States. Since furniture requirements in the pavilion were minimal, the indoor and outdoor areas flowed together and were hardly distinguishable. In fact, the furnishings consisted entirely of what were to become known as Barcelona chairs.

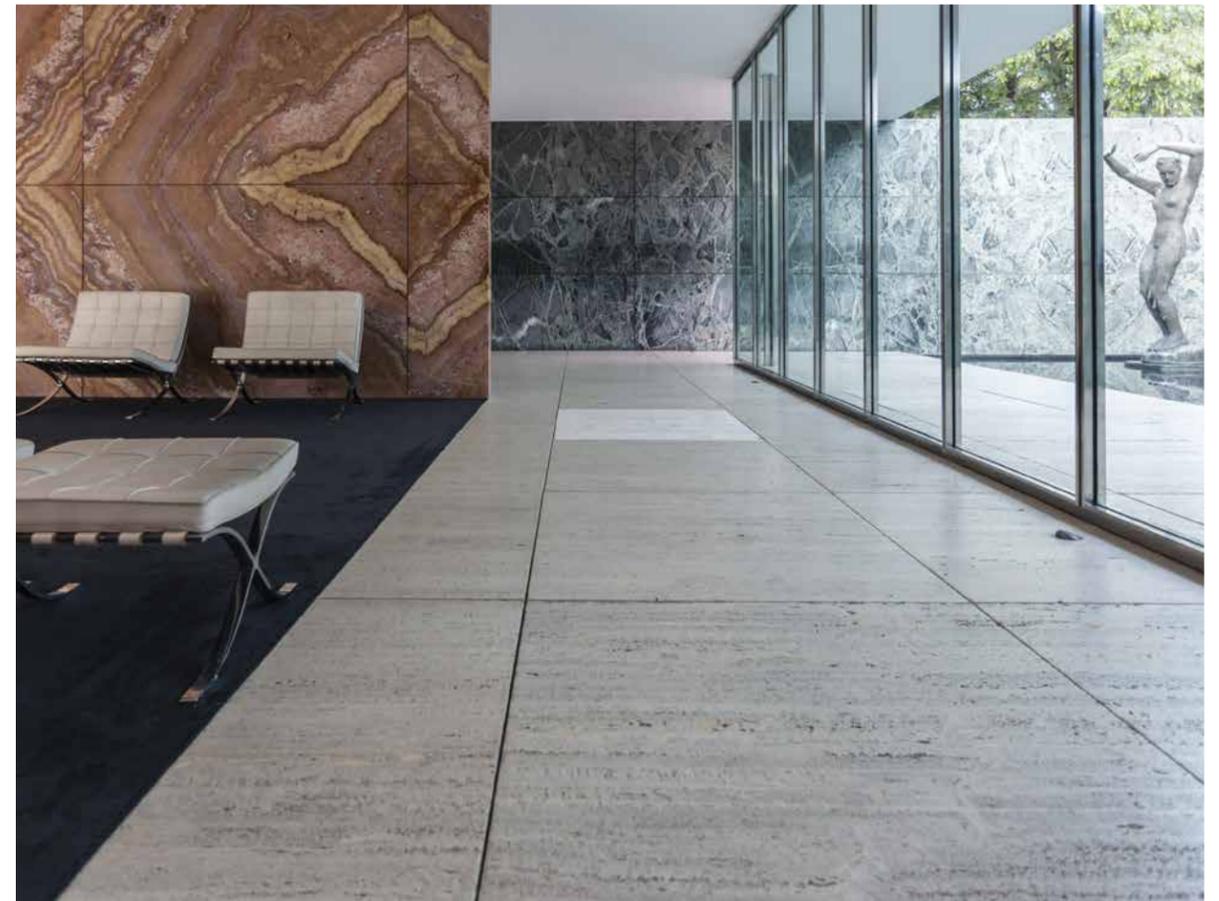
Intended originally to seat the king and queen of Spain during exposition ceremonies, the Barcelona chair was based loosely on the ancient curule seat used by magistrates and others with political and legal authority in Rome and other cultures since at least the fifth century B.C. The curved, crossed legs of the Barcelona chair bear a striking resemblance to those of the curule chair.

Though the Barcelona collection grew to include

central exhibition hall, designed several interiors and worked with Mies on the "glass room" – a large, flowing space characterized by movable panes of glass that formed a visual interplay with the metal in the furniture pieces selected for the room. The use of glass and metal, as well as an emphasis on flexibility of spaces, would become hallmarks of much of Mies' work, from furniture to skyscrapers.

The following year, Reich and Mies would step even farther out onto the world stage; they would take their work to Barcelona, where the eponymous chair that was to become a signature piece for Mies, at least, would make its debut.

The German government appointed Mies and Reich as artistic directors of the delegation representing Germany at the 1929–30 International Exhibition in Barcelona. The "German Pavilion" at this world's fair distilled the Bauhaus modernist philosophy, which, as faculty members of the school, Mies and Reich both represented, into a classic structure of glass, metal and polished stone. The fluid spaces, floating walls and hovering ceiling foreshadowed the "international style" that Mies



The interior of the German Pavilion designed by Mies and Reich for the 1929–1930 International Exposition in Barcelona. The chairs and stools that were to take the city's name were the only furniture in the pavilion, which was disassembled after the Exposition and rebuilt in the 1980s on the original site, according to the exact specifications, using identical materials sourced from the same locales.

several matching items, the quintessential Barcelona chair is defined by certain distinctive design and construction components: a minimal steel frame consisting of two crossbars connecting two curved "X" shapes, the bottoms of which form natural feet; a series of leather straps attached to the crossbars – 17 straps, to be precise, placed close together to maximize support; and two deeply upholstered, leather-covered cushions with 20 tufted, buttoned panels each. The chair represents the perfect marriage of form and function sought by the Bauhaus coterie of designers. But perhaps the most astonishing characteristic of the Barcelona chair is that, though it was conceptualized according to modernist sensibilities in 1929, its sleek lines and minimal yet luxurious design still make it appear fresh and modern nearly a century later.

Knoll, the company authorized since the 1940s to manufacture the Barcelona chair, first by Mies himself and subsequently by legal decisions, engraves Mies' signature into each piece alongside

the Knoll logo. A lengthy and detailed timeline of the company, its designers and merchandise pays ample homage to Mies, but fails to mention Lilly Reich, who was, at the very least, a co-designer of several items touted by Knoll.

The name of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is sure to be found in the index of just about any architecture book one might pick up; Lilly Reich's conspicuous absence is curious, if for no other reason than, as one scholar puts it, she and Mies "exchanged artistic ideas constantly."

In 1996, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City launched the first exhibition of Reich's work, using items from its own collection. Thanks to the bequest of Mies, who died in 1969, MoMA is in possession of more than 800 furniture designs, working drawings and sketches by Reich, and some 100 photographs of her completed works and installations. An architectural model and two furniture prototypes were also featured.

The New York Times, in an article released the



The South Miami home of designer Lourdes Fernandez-Grattan is, she says, “a compilation of furniture collected throughout my design career. The pieces I have owned the longest are two Barcelona chairs with dark brown leather upholstery. They have been with me for over 15 years and have fit perfectly in three different homes.”

day after the exhibition’s opening, praises the show for offering viewers the opportunity to “see with fresh eyes the ideas developed by Reich and Mies when modernism was new,” but criticizes the organizer of the exhibition, MoMA curator Matilda McQuaid, for presenting a somewhat underwhelming body of Reich’s work, while failing to examine sufficiently the burning question of the degree of Reich’s influence on Mies. And ultimately, it seems, this very question is the elephant in the room of Reich’s legacy.

Some may jump to the conclusion that the magnitude of Reich’s contribution has been downplayed because she was a woman, and it is certainly reasonable to surmise that this is a piece of the puzzle. But another piece may lie in Reich’s choice to remain in Germany, where her career was



stifled by Nazi tyranny and the war, while Mies emigrated to the U.S. in 1937. Also, Reich predeceased Mies by 22 years, dying only two years after the end of World War II. Once he was in America, the sky was literally the limit for Mies, who went on to design such notable skyscrapers as the Promontory and Lakeshore Drive apartment buildings in Chicago and the 38-story Seagram Building in New York City.

So how can we measure a person’s contribution to the arts, sciences or any other field? How can we disentangle one person’s influence from another’s?

In the case of the 200 or so songs attributed to the Lennon and McCartney songwriting team, most diehard Beatles fans have little trouble distinguishing Paul McCartney’s work from John Lennon’s. But things are not usually so clear-cut; intellectual property of all kinds travels in both space and time, and no one exists in a vacuum. After all, Mies was influenced by both the ancient Romans and the German woman by his side. There can be an almost infinite number of reasons that one person is remembered by posterity and another forgotten. In most cases, we may never