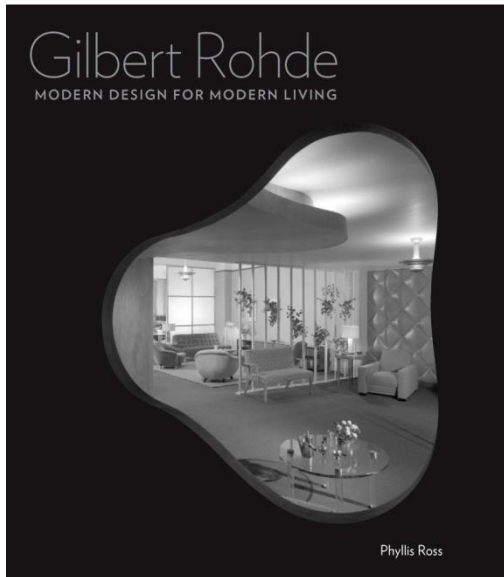


Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living / Phyllis Ross. –New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, April 2009. –288 p.: ill. –ISBN 978030012064 (cl., alk. Paper): \$60.00.



Numerous exhibition catalogs and books, beginning with Arthur Pulos's classic *The American Design Ethic* (1983), have surveyed the interwar period, examining how an enterprising group of industrial designers--focusing particularly on Russel Wright and Raymond Loewy--established their profession and popularized modern design in the U.S. Independent scholar Phyllis Ross presents a compelling case that Gilbert Rohde's (1894-1944) pioneering work for the Herman Miller Furniture Company made him the most significant figure to introduce modernism and expand the industrial designer's role. Rohde's premature death, Ross argues, obscured his accomplishments. She has written a masterful biography examining his development within the vibrant cultural context of 1920s-30s New York City, relating how his manual arts education, freelance commercial art work for department stores and ad agencies, and formative efforts building chairs and tables enabled him to view the furniture business from the perspectives of consumers, merchandisers and manufacturers.

Rohde developed a businessman's detailed grasp of furniture mass-production and marketing, a modern artist's love of precision and geometry, and a visionary's fervor for promoting technology to reshape and improve daily life. He toured European department stores, exhibitions and design schools (including the Bauhaus) in 1927 and 1931, becoming a critical conduit through which new trends in European modern furniture design emerged in the American marketplace. The Depression aided Rohde in presenting his case for modernism; over 1,000 American furniture makers went out of business in 1932 alone, making the surviving companies desperate for new, marketable products. That year, he designed his first, radically new 2185 bedroom line for Herman Miller, a small manufacturer of revival style furniture. Rohde's first group sold well and helped to differentiate Herman Miller in the marketplace. Subsequent collections garnered wide attention and included tubular metal pieces reflecting the influence of Marcel Breuer. Rohde adapted the German idea of *typenmöbel* to American mass-production in which a case piece of standard dimensions could be modified to serve various needs at low production cost.

Following a 1937 trip to Paris where Rohde encountered Surrealism, he emerged as the first American furniture designer to introduce the highly influential concept of biomorphism. By 1940, Rohde became Herman Miller's comprehensive consultant, directing its marketing and merchandising, economizing its production schedule, and limiting distribution to approved dealers. He produced an operational blueprint that reshaped the company into the U.S. leader in modern furniture production and propelled it to tremendous success after the war. Ross has created an important contextual study, one of very great value to academic libraries serving graduate and undergraduate majors in design, architecture and art.

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