

# Sally Walsh

1926–1992

INTERIOR designer Sally Walsh died 12 January 1992 after years of battling a blood disorder so rare that, as she acknowledged wryly, doctors at M. D. Anderson Hospital sometimes exhibited her to out-of-town colleagues. It is hard to overestimate Walsh's stature among her peers. Her brilliance, integrity, and devotion to modernity struck everyone who knew her with awe and respect.

Born in Inspiration, Arizona, Walsh attended a series of far-flung elementary schools set up by her father's employer, Anaconda Mining Camps; she completed high school in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. At 19 she was recruited by Hans Knoll to work in the Chicago headquarters of Knoll Associates. "I'm going to hire you because you have a perfectly blank mind," Knoll declared with typical hauteur. During six years as Knoll's assistant, Walsh remembered, she "typed, walked the sheep dog, waited on customers in the showroom, . . . called on architectural firms in five states, cut thousands of perfect rectangles out of fabrics and pasted them on plans, flew to Manila to find out why Knoll furniture was arriving in Japan with spool legs, designed spaces, . . . decorated the Christmas tree with cookies flown in from Germany, and cried when [she] displeased . . . Hans."

In the mid-1950s Walsh moved to Houston with her husband, Bill, a defense lawyer who became a protégé of Percy Foreman. Her first Houston job was at Suniland. After 18 months she started Evans-Walsh, a pioneer "good design" shop, with architect Jack Evans. Four years afterward she went to Wilson Stationery & Printing. During her tenure there she designed an innovative installation for an exhibition of Rodin's sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts. In 1972 she joined S. I. Morris Associates as partner in charge of interior design, where she remained until 1978. When her health began to worsen, she took an office by herself atop the Gulf Building and accepted only a few projects that especially appealed to her. In 1986 *Interior Design* magazine elected Walsh to its Hall of Fame – the first Texan so honored.

Walsh estimated the big commercial installations she directed at "100 plus."

Among these: Schlumberger's Manhattan offices, the Houston Athletic Club, Lehman Brothers' offices in Allen Center, First City Bank, the new main building of the Houston Public Library, offices for Transco, and the University of Houston College of Architecture. She loved, and specified tirelessly, Marcel Breuer's "Cesca" chair, Hans Eichenberger's T-legged library table, and Mies van der Rohe's leather-and-chromed-steel icons. She also experimented with designs of her own, including a variation of Breuer's 1927 Standard Möbel Thonet desk for Braniff International; chairs adapted from Citroën bucket seats for the Lehman Brothers brokerage; and an armless sofa of exceptional simplicity and comfort.

Despite Walsh's zeal for modern furniture, she always required comfort and practicality from it. In the early seventies, for the Transco offices, she approached Breuer to see if he'd sanction a new edition of "Cesca" with a seat cushion instead of stiff caning, and he assented. She often expressed dismay at the skyrocketing prices of her Knoll favorites, because she believed handsome, well-crafted pieces should lie within everybody's reach. Once, she recalled, "I went to Sears [in Chicago] . . . and told an executive that . . . middle-class America and young America must have good design made accessible to them on the time-payment plan. I asked him to put [a] small selection of original designs on a plan of this type." The man informed Walsh that Sears profited from bulk fertilizers, not Miesian aesthetics. Then he showed her the door.

Having heard of Walsh's visit to Sears, I phoned her late in 1979 and inquired if she would be willing to recommend to the readers of *Houston Home & Garden* a group of low-priced, sturdily built, well-designed contemporary living-room furniture, and she said yes. Within the month she had picked, among other pieces, Charles Eames's compact sofa, Stendig's molded Italian "Handkerchief" coffee table, and Walter von Nessen's swing-arm floor lamp, in production since 1927. The total retail cost of Walsh's living-room group was an impressively moderate \$3,250. Rob Muir photographed Walsh's "Affordable Classics," as they were headlined, for our May 1980 issue, and she herself convinced Wilson



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## Walsh House.

Stationery & Printing to market them from their showroom floor for a full year.

Almost single-handedly Walsh persuaded influential, conservative Houstonians that 20th-century design was valid and important, and she was justifiably proud of this feat. At the end of her last résumé she wrote: "When I walk through Houston buildings today and find good contemporary design, whether or not I had a hand in it, I find myself taking credit . . . because on this specific turf it flourished with my help." She added, "When I came to Houston, the Bank of the Southwest and M. D. Anderson Hospital were the only Knoll Planning Unit projects extant – and between them there was a sea of 'Esperson Building green' – today that sea is clear, and to me, wonderful white."

Gary McKay

*Sally was guileless. With her, truth was truth. She didn't tolerate lies, excuses, or dodges, and she always let you know that, too. If she caught you doing something she believed was shoddy, all of a sudden you wished to God you'd never met her. She was opinionated and stubborn – but she understood that about herself, and every now and then she'd back down from a position she'd taken. Gulf asked her to design traditional rooms for their offices in 2 Houston Center. First she said flatly, "I don't do traditional." Then she gave in. "But if we do traditional," she told me, "we do it right." So she got permission for us to go to Monticello and take measurements and profiles of architectural details that we then painstakingly reproduced. That's the kind of designer she was.*

Raymond Brochstein



"Affordable Classics," 1980.



Rodin installation, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1968.



Braniff offices, DFW Airport.