

Furniture companies love birthdays. Just recently, some have celebrated their 70th or even 80th anniversary. But few can look back such a long way as Walter Knoll. The high-end manufacturer based in Herrenberg, a town 30 kilometres southwest of Stuttgart, is revelling in reaching the significant age of 150 years. Its long life reflects the story of design in all its stages, from the late 19th century to the achievements of early modernity, and from postwar peculiarities to the global network of an international brand that today operates in more than 60 countries.

"The history of every company is affected by its founders", states Markus Benz, CEO. "In 1865, Wilhelm Knoll opened a leather shop in Stuttgart. This early competency in stitching leather is still a hallmark nowadays, having been developed and

expanded over the years." When the Benz family bought Walter Knoll 22 years ago, Markus Benz had gained his father's confidence and enough financial backing to advance the company, forming a synergy between two family experiences in the furniture market. Today, his vision is focused on Walter Knoll as a global brand. "It is only through the brand that we can truly convey the values encapsulated in the products."

## WAY BACK WHEN

Back in the 1920s, two revolutionary systems, Antimott and Prodomo, were invented by Walter Knoll for upholstering furniture. These techniques replaced the traditional use of spiral springs, seaweed, and horsehair, and banished carpet moths from their ancestral habitat. The new, lightweight armchairs and sofas that employed the new technology were used in airships like the Hindenburg and the world's first wide-bodied DoX aircraft, creating a new understanding of the whole typology. The Prodomo models are now considered the first modern upholstered furniture. This technical approach, utilising elastic steel band suspension, opened the way to the inexpensive mass production of upholstered furniture.

Markus Benz, CEO of Walter Knoll (1)

Walter Knoll (1876–1971), one of Wilhelm Knoll's two sons / The company story began with Wilhelm Knoll's leather shop. (2)

DoX, 1929, the world's first wide-bodied aircraft, was entirely furnished with models employing the Prodomo upholstery system. (3)

The arrow-drilled moth became the trademark of the Antimott programme that replaced springs and plush upholstery with elastic straps, boasting fine suspension

Leather stitching is still a main feature of Walter Knoll products. (5)

The 1936 LZ 129 Hindenburg airship was furnished with lightweight tubular aluminium chairs designed by Professor Fritz August Breuhaus and upholstered using the Antimott system. (6)

The company headquarters in Herrenburg, near Stuttgart (7)

Walter Knoll is without a doubt a relic among furniture companies. The history of the German manufacturer dates back to 1865, when Wilhelm Knoll founded a leather shop in Stuttgart. In celebrating its 150th anniversary, the brand looks to the future as well as to the classic pieces it has produced. With an astute knack for choosing key collaborators in the form of architects, designers, and artisans, Walter Knoll is responsible for many an iconic piece during its existence, all the while managing to steer design forward during the various historical periods. DAMN° reviews the substantial timeline.

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Student hall of residence, Hamburg, 1953, with Vostra chairs and tables designed by Jens Risom

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Inspired by his visits to the U.S., Walter Knoll decided to leave his father's company in the hands of his brother Willy and to found his own business. His ambition was to bring modernity from architecture into furniture. In 1927, Mies van der Rohe unveiled the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart, a famous series of dwelling units built by himself, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and others. This served as the international showcase of what later became known as the International style of modern architecture. Walter Knoll furnished nine of the model flats. As from then, the company's future route was clearly defined.

## **NEVER STAND ALONE**

"Knoll set a course in every era", Markus Benz says, summarising the long history of Walter Knoll. In the post-war area, when Germany was still full of rust-belt baroque furniture, the manufacturer promoted the modern way of living, with sharp-lined designs like the Vostra chair. In the 1970s, the contract division of the company was established, which furnished Berlin Tegel Airport. The Berlin Chair, designed by architect Meinhard von Gerkan, was specially created for its VIP lounge.

The company's tradition of working closely with architects has continued until today, with a network that links its headquarters in Germany to many countries worldwide. In notable architectural projects like the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, the Hearst Building in New York City, and the recently opened European Central Bank tower in Frankfurt, one can find the

brand's furniture. "It is exciting that furniture never stands alone", Markus Benz reflects. "It always has a relationship with spaces and with people, with light, and many other aspects. This is what makes its use so complex." In order to find optimum solutions, Walter Knoll often collaborates with international architects such as Norman Foster, Kengo Kuma, and For its 150th anniversary, Walter Knoll has had a Claudio Bellini.

## CRAFTSMANSHIP AT ITS FINEST

The list of those who have designed for Walter Knoll almost sounds like a who's who of international design. All of them developed their projects together with the company's craftsmen in Herrenberg. Since the founding of Wilhelm Knoll's leather shop 150 years ago, the knowhow in handling leather has been a core characteristic of the manufacturer. "You can read from a skin just like from a book", proclaims Uwe Steinman, leather expert at the company, emphasising the artisans' strong collaboration with the

tanners. To respect the natural material is also the intention of PearsonLloyd, the London-based designers who recently launched the Healey Lounge chair, combining softness and thickness, details and volume in their furniture concept.

look back and rediscovered some of the icons that formed part of its history. The classic edition resulting from this research is a compilation of upholstered chairs from the 1940s to the 70s. Each has a different background concerning its design, but even though some of them seem retrospective from today's viewpoint, they are all relevant in the history of Walter Knoll, as well as in the general history of design. ‹

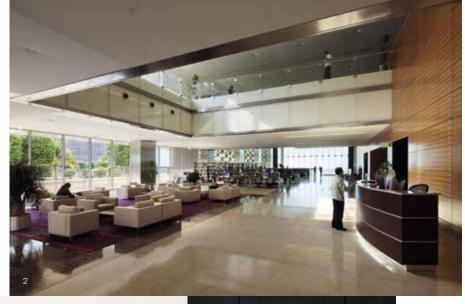
Vostra easy chair at the Neues Wohnen (New Living) exhibition in Cologne in 1949, relaunched as a Classic Edition for Walter Knoll's anniversary in 2015 (1)

Foster 503 armchair, designed by Norman Foster, at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia (2)

Berlin Chair, designed by Meinhard von Gerkan in 1975 for the VIP lounge in Berlin's Tegel Airport, relaunched this year as a Classic Edition (3)

Walter Knoll furniture at the Reichstag in Berlin (4)







Healey Lounge, designed by PearsonLloyd (1)

Haussmann 310 club armchair designed by Trix & Robert Haussmann in 1962 recently reissued by Walter Knoll (2)

Votteler lounge chair, celebrating the essence of lightness, designed by Arno Votteler in 1956 (3/4)

369 armchair, designed in 1950 and relaunched as a Classic Edition (5)