

NICE – NOVEMBER 20, 2024



# LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE & LILLY REICH

Rediscovery of a historical furniture set

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# HÔTEL DES VENTES NICE RIVIÉRA

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*Commissaires-Priseurs Associés*  
Agrément n°2001-004





*Das Haus auf dem Küssel, Potsdam, Germany. Source : Die Form, Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit – Volume VIII, N° 1 of January 1933.*

EXHIBITION  
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THE AUCTION



PUBLIC AUCTION  
IN NICE  
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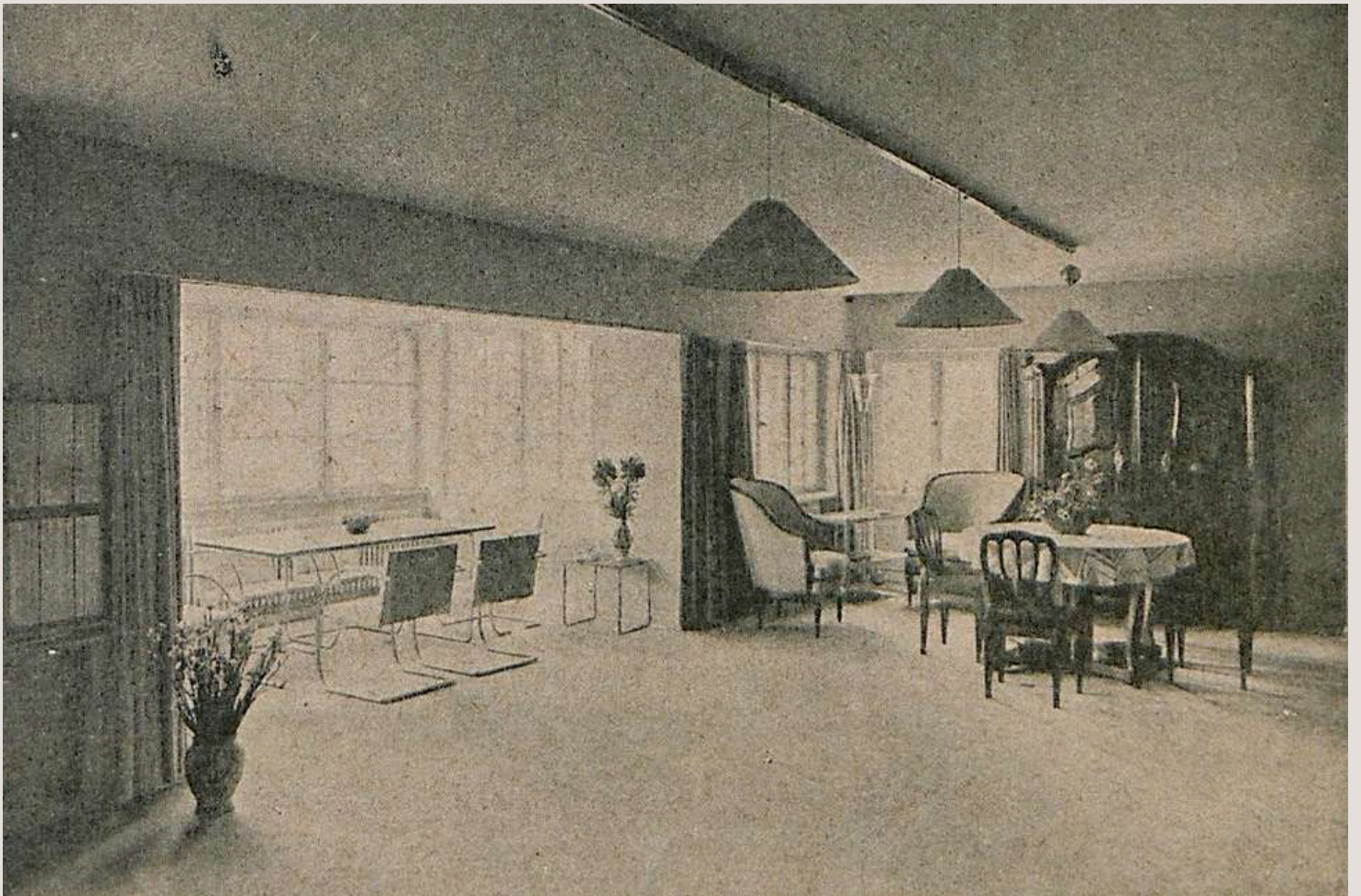
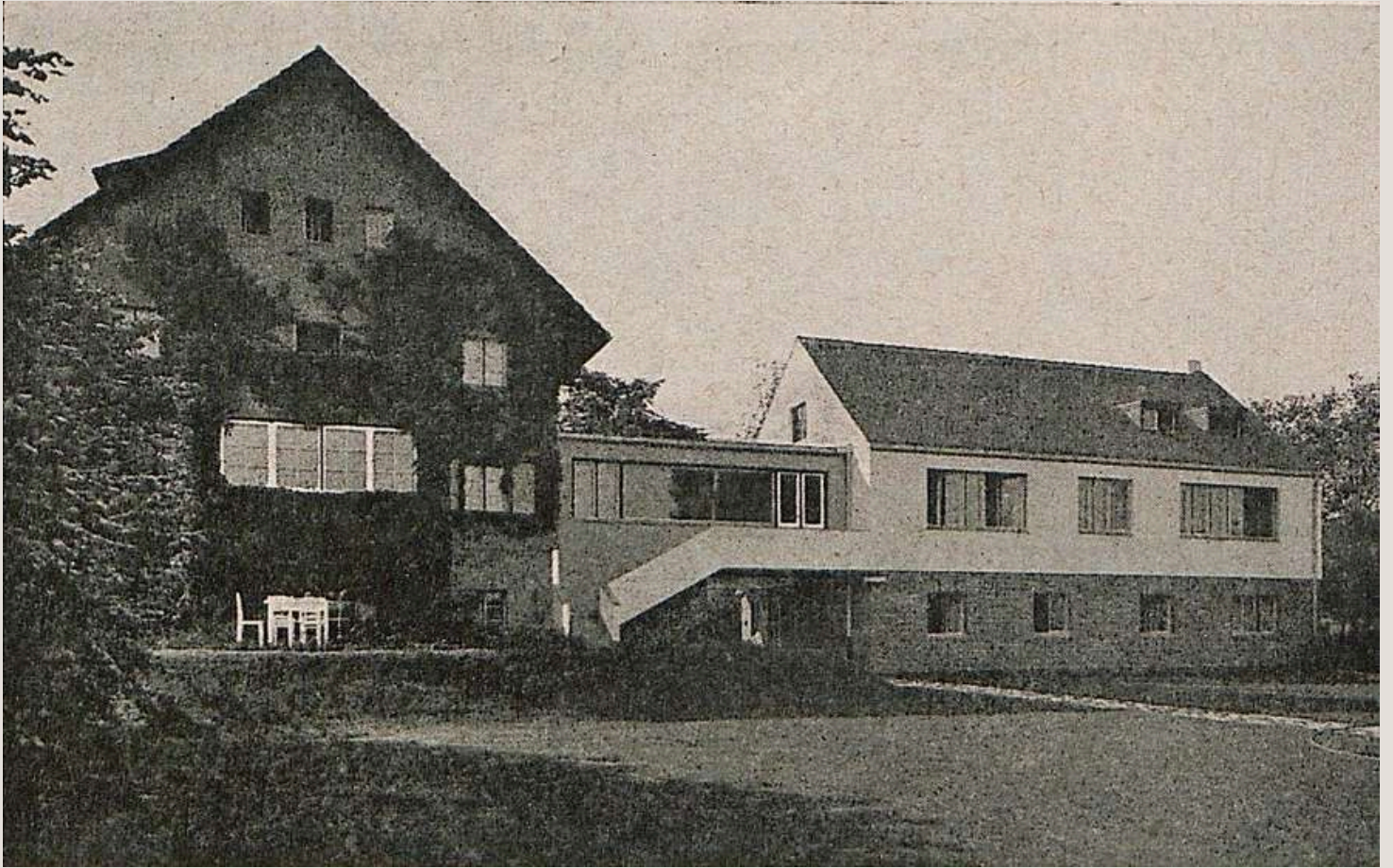






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*Das Haus auf dem Küßel, Potsdam, Germany. Source : Die Form, Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit – Volume VIII, N° 1 of January 1933.*

# Das Haus auf dem Küssel

## The story of Claire and Günther Loewenfeld and an avant-garde German interior in 1931-1932

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich collaborated, between 1927 and 1937, on numerous projects that contributed to the influence of modern architecture. Approaching their creations by following the idea of the total work of art, they planned and imagined together each of their technical and aesthetic aspects. Mies van der Rohe's interest in furniture design was born from his exchanges with Lilly Reich. Many models, designed by the two architects, then saw the light of day according to their commissions, public or private, and soon populated the new modern habitats, whether or not they were designed in their entirety by the duo. In the early 1930s, a young couple, Claire and Günther Loewenfeld, purchased a set of six tubular metal armchairs of the MR 50 model, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), and a rectangular dining table with a tubular metal base, designed by his collaborator Lilly Reich (1885-1947) – to furnish the dining room of their house in Potsdam, located on the Küssel peninsula, in Germany.

Between 1923 and 1925, the Loewenfelds used to spend the summer with their friends Fritz and Lily Pincus in a house they rented in Glienicke, near Potsdam. In May 1925, the two couples decided to leave Berlin for good and to move into the same house, located at Küsselstrasse 40-41, in Hermannswerder, on Lake Templin, where the two families lived independently.

In 1931, seeking to increase and merge their living spaces, the Loewenfelds and the Pincuses decided, with the agreement of its owner Cläre Horn, to add a modern building to this old house. It was built on the neighboring land (which they owned) and was attached to the already rented part by means of a "connector" building with a flat roof, equipped with bay windows, which soon housed their common living room and library.<sup>1</sup> Thus was born this rather astonishing construction, resulting from the necessary legal distinction of the two plots. The new building had to respect a defined distance from the old house and permission was obtained to fill it with an intermediate structure.

The project was designed by the architects Alfred Lucas and Stephan Hirzel, who described it in the magazine *Die Form* in January 1933 (No. 1), in an article entitled *Das Haus auf dem Küssel* – a title that soon gave its name to the house. The report is illustrated with photographs of the interior of the house, and testifies to the presence within it of many pieces of modern furniture, at the time selected "from the current range of high-quality series products".<sup>2</sup> Designs by Marcel Breuer are identifiable, in particular the models B 5 and B 35 (from the Thonet catalogue of 1931), as well as the famous MR 10 and MR 20 chairs by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe – copies all lost today. In this project, "the living room and dining room of the old building represent an attempt to reconcile the typical household items of [the] period with the furniture [of the past]",<sup>3</sup> presenting, next to pieces of antique furniture, our six MR 50 armchairs around the rectangular table designed by Lilly Reich – which have come down to us.

During the second half of the 1930s, the Loewenfelds were forced to flee their country, then in the grip of the rise of Nazism, due to their Jewish heritage. In 1938, they went into exile in England and settled in Buckinghamshire – having been able to take some of their belongings with them, including the set of six MR 50 chairs and the modernist dining room table. Crossing the generations, they were subsequently transmitted to their descendants and followed them through their moves through England, then to the South of France, in Vence, where their son settled when he retired in 2008. Restorations had been made in the 1970s; to the leather fittings and upholstery, at Gomme, an upholsterer from High Wycombe in England, as well as a new chrome plating made necessary because of the oxidation on the metal due to time.

Rediscovered today, this furniture set is an essential witness to the emergence of a modern, even avant-garde, habitat in the early 1930s in Germany – the principles of which were largely supported and initiated by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, their creators.

<sup>1</sup> See: Jörg Limberg, « Potsdam, Moderne und Tradition, Zur Baukunst von 1919 bis 1933 » in *Brandenburgische Denkmalpflege* – Volume 20, N° 2 of 2011, p. 55-57.

<sup>2</sup> Stephan Hirzel and Alfred Lucas in *Die Form, Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit* – Volume VIII, N° 1 of January 1933, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*





LUDWIG  
MIES  
VAN DER  
ROHE

(1886-1969)



**LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE (1886-1969) DESIGNER & BAMBERG METALLWERKSTÄTTEN EDITOR**

**MR 50, also known as *Brno*, the model designed in [1930], our armchairs produced between the end of 1931 and the summer of 1932 for the Loewenfeld family, 6 of the 9 known and certified examples from the period to date, the other 3 preserved in institutions**

Series of six modernist armchairs.

The structures in chromed tubular metal; each formed of two curved tubes joined, at the back of the backrest and the cantilevered base, by internal sleeves fixed by screws.

The seats and backrests forming, for each seat, an L assembled by internal metal brackets on the wooden frames, (re)upholstered in white leather.

Our series of seats acquired from the Estler-Regale house in Berlin-Charlottenburg, in charge of marketing the works produced by Bamberg Metallwerkstätten.

H. 78 cm – D. 60 cm – W. 55.5 cm

Condition of use; non-original upholstery and tapestries (replaced in the 1970s by the Gomme house, upholsterer in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire in England), the metal parts entirely re-chromed in the 1970s by a company in High Wycombe; wear to the re-upholstered seats and backs; wear and pitting corrosion to the chrome parts; fixing screws for the inner sleeves oxidized and not original.

**50 000 / 80 000 €**

**Important :**

Our works will be included in the catalogue raisonné of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's furniture – *Mies Furniture Project* – currently written under the direction of Prof. Wolf Tegethoff.

**Provenance :**

- Claire et Günther Loewenfeld Collection, Das Haus auf dem Küssel, Potsdam, Germany.
- Lowell Collection, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom – by descent.
- Lowell Collection, Vence, France – by descent (see our introduction: *Das haus auf dem Küssel – The story of Claire and Günther Loewenfeld and an avant-garde German interior in 1931-1932*).

**Acknowledgments :**

We extend our warmest thanks to Professor Wolf Tegethoff, expert on the work of Mies van der Rohe and head of the *Mies Furniture Project*, for confirming the authenticity of our works.

### **Bibliography of our works:**

*Die Form, Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit* – Volume VIII, N° 1 of January 1933. Our six armchairs reproduced on page 9 in the article entitled *Das Haus auf dem Küssel*, written by architects Alfred Lucas and Stephan Hirzel.

### **Archives:**

- *Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York* – Our armchairs to be compared with the drawings of the model preserved in the collections of this institution, in the *Mies van der Rohe Archive*, under accession numbers 599.1974, 658.1974, 659.1974, 735.1974, 736.1974 and 968.1974; the architectural drawing of the MR 50 Brno armchair, dated September 11, 1931, preserved under accession number 1.466.

- *Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois* – The architectural drawing of the MR 50 Brno chair, dated September 11, 1931, is preserved in the collections of this institution, in the *Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archive*, under accession number 1984.2.

### **Public collections and related works:**

- *Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, probably from a Bamberg edition, possibly restored, with screw connectors on the base, is preserved in the collections of this institution under inventory number AM 1993-1-609.

- *Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, exemplar bequeathed to the museum by Philip Johnson, probably from a Berliner Metallgewerbe Joseph Müller edition, possibly restored, with screw connectors on the base and leather armrests, is preserved in the collections of this institution under inventory number 411.1976; another MR 50 Brno armchair, from an unidentified edition, with screw connector on the base and leather armrests, is preserved under inventory number 478.1978.2.

- *Die Neue Sammlung, Museum of Applied Arts, Munich* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, probably from a Bamberg edition, with screw connectors on the base and exposed angle irons fixing on the sides of the seat and backrest, is preserved in the collections of this institution.

- *Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, from an unidentified edition, without screw connectors on the base, is preserved in the collections of this institution under inventory number MST-1149.

- *Grassi Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Leipzig* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, from an unidentified edition, is preserved in the collections of this institution under inventory number 1998.90.

- *The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), New York* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, from an unidentified edition, with screw connectors on the base and leather armrests, is preserved in the collections of this institution under inventory number 1987.19.

- *Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam* – An MR 50 Brno armchair, from a Knoll International edition, without screw connectors on the base, is preserved in the collections of this institution under inventory number V 287 a (KN&V).

### **Historical and selective bibliography of the MR 50 model:**

- *Die Form, Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit* – Volume VI, N° 9 of September 1931. Our armchairs to be compared with the models reproduced on pages 329 and 330, in an article by Walter Riezler entitled *Das Haus Tugendhat in Brünn*, dedicated to the Tugendhat villa.

- Jean Badovici (dir.) – *L'Architecture vivante, documents sur l'activité constructive dans tous les pays* – Albert Morancé Editions, Winter 1931. Our armchairs to be compared with the models reproduced on pages 30 (interior by Karl Otto and Jan Runtenberg) and 37 (Tugendhat villa).

- *Der Baumeister* – Volume XXIX, N° 11 of November 1931. Our armchairs to be compared with the models reproduced on pages 428 and 430, in an article by L. Hilberseimer, entitled *Die "neue Linie" im alleinstehenden Einfamilienhaus*, dedicated to the Tugendhat villa.

- *Die Bau und Werkkunst* – Volume VIII, N° 1 of January 1932. Our armchairs to be compared with the models on page 28, from the article entitled *Mies van der Rohe / Eine Villa in Brünn*, dedicated to the Tugendhat villa.

- *Das Werk, Architektur und Kunst* – Volume XX, N° 2 of February 1933. Our armchairs to be compared with the models reproduced on pages 44, 46 and 47, in an article by P. Meyer entitled *Haus Tugendhat, Brünn, Tschechoslowakei*, dedicated to the Tugendhat villa.

- Phillip C. Johnson – *Mies van der Rohe* – Catalog of the exhibition organised at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (September 16, 1947 – January 25, 1948), Museum of Modern Art Editions, New York, 1947. Our armchairs comparable to the models reproduced on pages 82 and 83, in photographs of the Tugendhat villa.

# The MR 50 Brno chair

## A legendary model



The iconic *MR 50* model, also known as *Brno*, was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the villa of Grete and Fritz Tugendhat in Brno (Czech Republic) in the second half of the 1930s – a project from which the model would take its name. This house was designed by Mies van der Rohe and Reich. Following the idea of an open plan, which he had already experimented with in previous projects, Mies van der Rohe used Lilly Reich's ideas in the interior design of the house, particularly in the use of colors and textiles to delimit spaces. Then, two Barcelona armchairs in emerald green leather were placed in the living room, "in front of the large wall was a chaise longue covered in ruby velvet", while a "white velvet curtain hung between the entrance and the library [allowing] to completely close off this part of the living room, thus making it more intimate".<sup>1</sup>

To complete this arrangement, Mies van der Rohe had originally thought of equipping the dining room with *MR 10* and *MR 20* chairs, created a little earlier for the Stuttgart exhibition of 1927. However, these models with their prominent curves seemed unsuitable for use as seating around a dining room table. He then decided to develop his models to conform to this very specific situation by imagining the *MR 50* chair, known as *Brno*, which was quickly offered in two versions, one in tubular metal and the other in flat steel.



Several manufacturers are usually cited for the production of these chairs – especially because Mies van der Rohe signed contracts with various editors and distributors over the years for the production of his models. Originally, the Berliner Metallgewerbe Joseph Müller was responsible for the production of the models created by Mies van der Rohe and produced both versions of the MR 50 model. A single example in flat steel was created for Grete Tugendhat's bedroom, while twelve examples of the tubular metal version were produced – and distributed – in three rooms of the house. In addition to these, the examples of the MR 50 model were produced, almost simultaneously, for Philip Johnson's New York apartment – namely four flat steel dining room chairs and a single MR 50 chair in tubular metal.

However, subject to numerous financial difficulties, the Berliner Metallgewerbe Joseph Müller would cease producing Mies van der Rohe's models. Its "furniture" branch was then taken over by the company's former managing director, Adolf Bamberg, shortly after the closing of the Berlin Building Exhibition, at the beginning of the summer of 1931. The Bamberg catalog thus presented the models of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, respectively labeled MR and LR. The MR 50 model was offered with lacquered, nickel-plated, or chrome-plated structures, and in several types of coverings for the seat and backrest – fabric (MR 50/5), leather (MR 50/6) or parchment (MR 50/7). The Bamberg company subsequently entered into a marketing agreement with Estler-Regale, a firm based in Berlin-Charlottenburg, for further distribution of its MR line.

It should be noted that, at the same time, Mies van der Rohe had signed a licensing contract with the company Bigler, Spichiger & Cie (Bigla) which was strictly limited to the Swiss market. Then, a contract was drawn up between the architect and the Thonet-Mundus manufacture on 6 November 1931. It included all types of metal furniture designed up to that point by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich. However, Thonet only "produced" a very limited range of Mies van der Rohe's furniture from 1932 onwards and none of Reich's. Furthermore, the Thonet company did not actually manufacture any of Mies van der Rohe's furniture, but only distributed, until the end of the 1930s, the commercial stock from the Mücke-Melder Werke in Frystat, which had until then been a manufacturer for Czechoslovakia; a company which was an integral part of the transaction. Nevertheless, the MR 50 model was never manufactured, nor distributed by the famous Viennese manufacturer. Furthermore, having lost its marketing rights, Bamberg would then sell its company to Anton Lorenz's Desta Stahlmobel in Berlin in mid-summer 1932.

The MR 50 model would reappear a few decades later, when Knoll International resumed production – starting with the flat steel version, produced from 1960, then the tubular steel version from 1977.

Few MR 50 models in tubular metal produced before the war are therefore identified; even fewer have been preserved. The twelve examples created for the Tugendhat villa are lost or at least unlocated – the Tugendhats took them with them when they went into exile in Switzerland and then to Venezuela, where they emigrated in 1939, but all have since disappeared (the examples currently exhibited in the Czech villa are copies made as faithfully as possible by the Amosdesign company, based in Brno). Philip Johnson bequeathed his copy to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Also surviving are the examples preserved at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Neue Sammlung in Munich, probably from Bamberg editions. Thus remains our series of six armchairs, which are among the last pre-war examples of this legendary model. From a Bamberg edition, distributed by Estler-Regale, they bear witness to a rare evolution of the model in relation to its construction design<sup>2</sup> – by their unique curvature and the position of their seat, probably resulting from an improvement in their stability.

<sup>1</sup> Sonja Gunther – Lilly Reich, 1885-1947, *Innenarchitektin, Designerin, Ausstellungsgestalterin* – Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1988, p. 25 : comments of Grete Tugendhat at a conference in 1969.

<sup>2</sup> See construction design of the MR 50 Brno chair, dated September 11, 1931, preserved in the *Mies Van der Rohe Archives* of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, under accession number 1.466.





LILLY  
REICH

(1885-1947)



**LILLY REICH (1885-1947) DESIGNER & BAMBERG METALLWERKSTÄTTEN EDITOR**

**Modernist table, the model designed around [1931], our table produced between the beginning of summer 1931 and the end of 1932, for the Loewenfeld family, most likely a unique piece**

Rectangular dining table.

The base in chromed tubular metal; composed of four sections of tube joined by internal sleeves under the table top, two of which are curved.

The table top in beech veneer; its edges in black stained wood.

H. 75 cm – L. 161 cm – W. 76.3 cm

Used condition; the metal parts entirely rechromed in the 1970s by a company in High Wycombe, the base refixed and moved, revealing the original fixings under the table top; wear and corrosion pitting on the chrome parts; scattered chips around the edge of the table top; scattered wear, dirt and scratches on the table top.

**10 000 / 20 000 €**

**Provenance:**

- Claire et Günther Loewenfeld Collection, Das Haus auf dem Küssel, Potsdam, Germany.

- Lowell Collection, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom – by descent.

- Lowell Collection, Vence, France – by descent (see our introduction: *Das haus auf dem Küssel – The story of Claire and Günther Loewenfeld and an avant-garde German interior in 1931-1932*).

**Acknowledgments:**

We extend our warmest thanks to Professor Wolf Tegethoff, expert on the work of Mies van der Rohe and head of the *Mies Furniture Project*, for confirming the authenticity of our works.

**History:**

Our dining table, with its tubular steel frame, immediately evokes the typical Bauhaus furniture designs. It is true that this characteristic structure was widely used by architects and manufacturers of the time, and was used in various types of furniture, from coffee tables to simple stools. Tubular frames were common and, because they were not protected by licenses, were subject to numerous adaptations. The table presented here is a model designed by the architect and designer Lilly Reich, a close collaborator of Mies van der Rohe between 1927 and 1937, as shown in a drawing held at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil-am-Rhein, Germany. The model, shown with a transparent glass top in this drawing, was intended to adapt to the taste and requests of the client, and could therefore be manufactured according to the dimensions and finishes desired by the client – which is why our version has a different type of table top.

**Bibliography of our work:**

*Die Form, Zeitschrift für Gestaltende Arbeit* – Volume VIII, N° 1 of January 1933. Our table reproduced on page 9 in the article entitled *Das Haus auf dem Küssel*, written by architects Alfred Lucas and Stephan Hirzel.

**Archive:**

*Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein* – Our table comparable with the model appearing in a drawing by Lilly Reich showing four studies of tables preserved in the collections of this institution (Anton Lorenz bequest).

**Bibliography and related work :**

*DESTA* – Commercial catalog of 1931. Our table comparable to the model reproduced in the editor's commercial catalog.

# In the shadow of Mies van der Rohe

## Lilly Reich, a pioneer of modernity

Interior designer, textile artist, exhibition designer, Lilly Reich (1885-1947) is a major figure of the modern movement. Interested in the reform of art and crafts at the turn of the century, like pioneers throughout Europe, she initially devoted herself to textiles before extending her modern vision to other fields, such as scenography and furniture design. Evolving as a female artist during the Weimar years, Lilly Reich was unsurprisingly confronted with gender stereotypes – which did not prevent her from becoming a recognized, independent architect and an important member of the Deutscher Werkbund. A true avant-garde spirit, she was at the origin of projects and creations that shaped the history of architecture and decorative arts in the 20th century. Her meeting with the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) marked the beginning of a prolific professional – and private – relationship in 1927, from which masterpieces and innovations were born. Rarely cited by historians for many years, she is now regaining her place as a pioneer of modernity.

Born in Berlin in 1885, into a wealthy family, Lilly Reich followed a fairly traditional education as a young girl, training in embroidery. In 1908, she attended the Wiener Werkstätte workshop, before becoming a student of Else Oppler-Legband (1875-1965), herself trained by Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957), at the Höhere Fachschule für Dekorationskunst. It was the latter who would help her find her calling in textile creation and design. In 1911, Lilly Reich opened her own studio and fulfilled her first commission – the design of interiors for a youth home in Charlottenburg. At the time, this type of mission, called decorative, was often entrusted to women. Female artists had the opportunity to present their creations at events, most often linked to the feminine or childhood world. Creating a worker's apartment for the exhibition *Die Frau in Haus und Beruf (Woman at Home and at Work)*, Lilly Reich was nevertheless able to provide her response to contemporary debates on the problems of modern housing, and directly compete with the male designers of her time.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that in 1912 Lilly Reich was invited to join the Deutscher Werkbund – an association of artists and craftsmen aimed at promoting the renewal of applied arts and architecture, founded in 1907 by Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927). Within this association, women were directed towards decorative arts, textiles and sewing – the field of architecture, considered too complex and demanding, being “reserved” for men.<sup>2</sup> It was in this context that Reich's work would focus on exhibition design, where her art would fully flourish. Beginning with the creation of window displays for department stores, she would end up imagining the scenography of the Werkbund's largest events. The war would, however, constrain the development of her career; her studio became a sewing workshop, before she was able to resume her profession as a scenographer after the conflict.

From 1920 onwards, Reich's work gained in importance. Due to her many successes, she managed to break away from the field of women's arts in which she had been active since the very beginning, and established herself as a key figure in the modern movement. The Werkbund entrusted her with increasingly important missions, and appointed her to its management committee in 1920 – she was the first woman elected to this position within the association. One of her major commissions was the exhibition *Von der Faser zum Gewebe* (*From Fiber to Textile*) at the Frankfurt International Fair in 1926, where she presented a very modern scenography around the wool and cotton industry – which was particularly noted.

It was indeed this exhibition that led Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to have her included in the Werkbund's Weissenhofsiedlung project in 1927 in Stuttgart – a project for which he was artistic and technical director.<sup>3</sup> This notable event brought together many modernist architects – such as Peter Behrens (1868-1940), Walter Gropius (1883-1969), and Le Corbusier (1887-1965) – whose achievements served to present innovations in housing and equipment. Lilly Reich was responsible for the design and organization of the exhibition halls (in partnership with Mies van der Rohe) and for creating the interior of a model apartment – she was the only woman to have had this opportunity.

The 1927 exhibition thus marked the beginning of the fruitful collaboration between Lilly Reich and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, which would soon continue at two major events – the Barcelona International Exhibition in 1929 and *Die Wohnung unserer Zeit* (*The Dwelling of Our Time*) at the Berlin Exhibition in 1931. It was from this date that Reich was able to devote herself fully to interior design and furniture design – she would be the first woman to create a complete series of tubular steel furniture. Thus, some relate above all the great influence she had on Mies van der Rohe. As Ludwig Glaeser recalls, “Reich seemed to have her ideas firmly in her head” and Mies van der Rohe was always eager to know them – although he did not ask for anyone's opinion – and so it is “certainly more than a coincidence that his involvement in furniture and exhibition design began the same year as his personal relationship with [her]”.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of Lilly Reich should therefore not be underestimated or overlooked. Driven by research into forms, colors and textiles, she provided an essential complement to Mies van der Rohe's projects. And it was in this sense that their collaboration was most prolific. Each retained its own identity and its own theories – then they exchanged, and developed their designs according to the idea of a “whole”. In many of the projects whose architecture is attributed to Mies van der Rohe, it is interesting to note the use of textiles to give structure and intimacy to spaces – an idea that clearly refers to Reich's research. This is the case for the Café at the 1927 exhibition *Die Mode der Dame* (*Women's Fashion*), where high silk and velvet panels alone create an intimate space. The same is true for the Tugendhat villa, where, in addition to the fabric panels, the use of bright colors in the textiles and furniture refers to the particularities of her work. The furniture created by Mies van der Rohe during their period of collaboration also raises questions – so obvious is the proximity to Reich's own models. The fusion of their ideas almost leads to ambiguity as to the authorship of their designs. Some publications, for example, present the famous *Barcelona* or *Brno* models under the design of the two architects.

It is therefore likely that their respective visions of modernity brought these two pioneers together and that, more than influence, we should consider their partnership through the prism of emulation and exchange. Reich and Mies van der Rohe understood and complemented each other. And, although she never took on the august role of architect when she collaborated with him, her contributions can be seen in each of their joint projects.

The collaboration between Reich and Mies van der Rohe would last about ten years. Becoming director of the Bauhaus in 1930, it is not surprising that Mies van der Rohe appointed her as a professor at the school – she would take over the direction of the textile workshop and the interior design department in 1932. However, the school, and their partnership, would end due to the political climate in Germany in the 1930s. Mies van der Rohe would go into exile in the United States in 1937, while Reich would remain in the country and experience difficult years. After the conflict, she was part of the ones who tried to revive the Werkbund. She would resume her role as a teacher, before disappearing following a long illness in 1947.

<sup>1</sup> Mathilda McQuaid – *Lilly Reich, Designer and Architect* – Catalog of the eponymous exhibition organized at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (February 7 – May 7, 1996), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Editions, New York, 1996, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49 : see quote « [...] they are unequal to the demanding design tasks of architecture ».

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Glaeser – *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Furniture and Furniture drawings from the Design Collection and the Mies van der Rohe Archive* – Exh. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (March 3rd – May, 3rd 1977), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Editions, New York, 1977, p. 10.

# Women-architects

## Modernity, sensibility

The absence of female artists in the important fields of art, until the beginning of the 20th century, is quite notable. Following a gendered conception of access to artistic training, they were deprived for a long time of fine arts and architecture, and confined to lesser sections such as decoration, fashion and textile design. Since their feminine *nature* “predisposed” them to interior spaces (i.e., the home), they were naturally directed towards the decorative arts!<sup>1</sup>

However, reality shows that, even more, only the fields considered minor in the decorative arts were truly entrusted to them; the great architects embodying the true *architectes-ensemblers* (interior designers) who would compete in ideas for the creation of new habitats from the beginning of the century.<sup>2</sup> In *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) acknowledged this gendered hierarchy by emphasizing the need for “male faculties” for the creation of furniture sets.<sup>3</sup> This expressed imbalance in itself leads to a discrediting of women's decorative arts, the revocation of women in subsidiary sections, and inevitably absolute opposition to their access to the profession of architect.

Nevertheless, in parallel with societal revolutions, some women did succeed in asserting themselves as interior designers. Their presence in the Salons increased from year to year. Eileen Gray (1878-1976) became a pioneer by her participation in 1913 at the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs* – exhibiting that year several lacquered panels that would immediately attract the attention of the collector Jacques Doucet (1853-1929). Simultaneously, Lilly Reich presented her textile and furniture creations in the women's sections of various exhibitions throughout Germany, before moving towards scenography – a field in which she thrived by her modernity and which would allow her to become one of the most important members of the Deutscher Werkbund. But the presence of women in exhibitions remained conditioned; first by the financial means necessary for their training and the realization of their creations, but second, mainly by the need for male patronage. Thus, it was with the support of Henri Rapin (1873-1939) and Maurice Dufrené (1876-1955), that Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999) made her entrance into the decorative arts at the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs* in 1926.



Many supported the women interior designers, such as René Herbst (1891-1982), Djo-Bourgeois (1898-1937) and Louis Sognot (1892-1970) – the *Union des Artistes Modernes (U.A.M.)* undoubtedly played a role in promoting their work. Thus, collaborations and partnerships – and in some cases personal relationships – were born. They allowed these women to access larger projects and benefit from the teachings of these architects. Lilly Reich collaborated for the first time with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1927, for the illustrious Stuttgart exhibition; they worked together for ten years – years during which she was able to devote herself to furniture design and architecture through her textile experiments around the notion of space. The year 1927 also marked the beginning of the collaboration between Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier, who appointed her head of equipment, meaning furniture, in his studio – she was simultaneously his architectural student. Eileen Gray also came to architecture through her meeting with Jean Badovici (1893-1956) – with whose help she opened her boutique Jean Désert in 1922; also co-signatory of the legendary *Villa E-1027* in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin.

These collaborations therefore marked the first step in their access to the coveted profession of architect, but, paradoxically, would promote their invisibility by attributing their ideas to the male figure of the creative duo. However, it is often overlooked that, even if their male counterparts facilitated their architectural experiments, these women architects had very specific goals and could have worked alone if the times had not forced them to collaborate in order to evolve. Indeed, Eileen Gray's early lacquered panels show “a heightened concern for the design of spaces in their relationships with the objects they contain”<sup>4</sup> – and already indicate her interest in and future orientation towards architecture. Made famous by the presentation of her *Bar sous le toit* at the *Salon d'Automne* in 1927, Charlotte Perriand could have practiced her profession independently of Le Corbusier; the press was already talking about her. Her knowledge of furniture design and creation was well established, having trained, as she had been, at the *Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs*. She was appointed head of equipment (furniture) in Le Corbusier's studio to compensate for the failure of Stuttgart in 1927, where the architect had failed to present housing equipment that matched the standards of the German modernists. Let us add that it was she who originally asked him for a job – pursuing her real objective, namely training in architecture. Finally, let us recall that Lilly Reich always had her own studio, where she carried out projects independently or in collaboration with Mies van der Rohe. She had a career of almost 20 years before starting to work with him; and it was thanks to her, and her extensive knowledge of decorative arts, that the famous architect became interested in the creation of furniture, as well as in research between space, textiles, color and form.

The contributions of these women to the development of 20th century architecture and design are significant, and seem to be part of their own unique aspect, which intimately contributed to shaping modernity. It is true that, generally trained (or confined) to the decorative arts, particularly furniture design and textiles, they all consider their projects through the same prism, which is opposed to a strictly theoretical vision of the design of new modern habitats. They think of their projects from the inside out, with the Human being at the heart of their questions.

Eileen Gray thus imagines habitats and furniture with systems – mobile, unique, and of very high quality – which adapt to the body and life of their owners. Charlotte Perriand also focuses her work on these two rules, making her pieces of furniture, such as the *Chaise Longue LC4* or the *Fauteuil Grand Confort LC2*, masterpieces of the modern movement designed for the Human being and adapted to its environment. Lilly Reich, through her textile experiments – both in her work on texture, on form and on color – brings to Mies van der Rohe's spaces the tactile element, the life, the presence, which makes their projects real dwellings – and not life-size demonstrations of a new theory of architecture.

Their designs take into account everyday use, ergonomics and the symbolic part of furniture, thus complementing the theories of rationality intended for modern man – as supported by the great architects of the 20th century such as Le Corbusier or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It is precisely this factor of use and practicality that gives rigorous modernism that extra ‘soul’ – allowing these new modern habitats to be *inhabited*. More than collaborators, these creators must then be recognized as true avant-garde figures of 20th century architecture and design.

<sup>1</sup> Élise Koering, « Décoratrice-ensemblière : une étape vers la profession d'architecte dans les années 20 ? » in *Livraisons d'histoire de l'architecture* – N° 35 of 2018, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118-119 : see Le Corbusier, « L'heure de l'architecture » in *L'Esprit Nouveau* – N° 28 of 1925.

<sup>4</sup> Cloé Pitiot (dir.) – *Eileen Gray* – Catalog of the exhibition organized at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (February 20 – May 20, 2013) ; at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (October 11, 2013 – January 19, 2014), Centre Pompidou Editions, Paris, 2013, p. 73.





# The outreach of the Bauhaus spirit

## Modernity, géopolitics, posterity

The geopolitical and economic context of Germany in the 1930s, in which the actors of modernity evolved, particularly those linked to the Bauhaus school, had consequences on the transmission of their ideas and their achievements. Contested from its very creation, the Bauhaus was always linked to the political issues of its time. A symbol of modernity and avant-garde, the movement set itself up as an enemy of the traditionalists in the new Weimar Republic, before being confronted with the rise to power of the Nazi party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party –which would lead to its closure, but would ultimately not succeed in eradicating its innovative spirit, nor its creations – still celebrated nowadays.

Founded in 1919 in Weimar by Walter Gropius (1883-1969), the Staatliches Bauhaus was born from the merger of the School of Decorative Arts and the Academy of Fine Arts in Weimar. Gropius pursued the goal of merging art and craftsmanship within his new school – extending the principles advocated by the pioneers from the end of the 19th century. Based in Weimar, the school was quickly confronted with political reality by the victory of the conservatives who, demanding its closure, caused its dissolution on December 26, 1924. In response, other German cities offered to host the school. Dessau was finally chosen; the legendary Bauhaus building was built there in 1925. In 1928, Walter Gropius gave up his position as director to Hannes Meyer (1889-1954), whose political positions strongly oriented towards Marxism led to his dismissal, then his replacement by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1930. The latter reorganized the school, attempting to “depoliticize” it and to focus learning on architecture. But in 1932 already, the Nazi party was elected in the municipality of Dessau and demanded its closure. Mies van der Rohe then relocated the Bauhaus school to a disused factory near Berlin – it became a private school; most of the students and teachers followed him. But this situation was short-lived; as its closure was ordered in April 1933. Obtaining a conditional reopening, Mies van der Rohe nevertheless decided with the [masters] to pronounce its definitive dissolution in July of the same year.<sup>1</sup>

The pre-war situation in Germany therefore seems to prove that modernity stands as a true counterpoint to totalitarianism. However, the reality is a little more nebulous. Not all members of the Bauhaus were persecuted by the regime. Many participated in national exhibitions, organized by the Nazis, during the years preceding the military conflict of 1940-45. The *Deutsches Volk – Deutsch Arbeit (German People – German Work)* exhibition of 1934 thus saw the participation of Gropius, but equally of Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich. Also, having persecuted the Bauhaus school and disseminated the idea that modern art would be a degenerate art, it is necessary to understand how the Nazis actually tried to take advantage of the ins and outs of modernity – meaning that the history of the Bauhaus did not end as neatly as one might think.<sup>2</sup> Industrial design, with its popularity, was used by the Nazis for economic and political reasons – unlike the fields of painting and architecture, which were widely persecuted and destroyed. They seized the Bauhaus designs, especially tubular steel furniture, in order to spread a modern image of Germany at international exhibitions and to take advantage from the profits of their sales by widely exporting these coveted models.<sup>3</sup>

This confusion ended, however, by the end of the 1930s. Many artists then sought to flee Germany. Most of the Bauhaus masters and teachers went to the United States and settled in various American universities where they continued to teach the principles of the Bauhaus: Josef and Anni Albers (1888-1976 & 1899-1994) at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, then at Yale University; Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and the *New Bauhaus* in Chicago; Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer (1902-1981) at the Harvard Graduate School of Design; to name but a few. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe would head the architecture department at the  *Armour Institute of Technology*, the future  *Illinois Institute of Technology*, in Chicago – while his partner, Lilly Reich, would remain in Germany. The spirit of the Bauhaus and its theories were thus disseminated in many American universities, and many modern buildings appeared across the country. At the same time, Walter Gropius organized an exhibition dedicated to the Bauhaus at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1938. This event was not intended to be a retrospective – even if it only covered the Gropius years and therefore by definition presented a bygone period – but rather “*a tribute to the very much alive spirit of the Bauhaus*”.<sup>4</sup> Far from being extinguished, the Bauhaus thus found a new channel of transmission in the United States, and an international influence, which amplified its recognition as a founding movement of modern architecture and the international style.

Finally, let us recall that, in the same way, the followers (and patrons) of modernity were just as impacted by the geopolitical situation in Germany in the 1930s. The Loewenfelds, who had acquired pieces of furniture by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich at the beginning of the same decade, were forced, because of their Jewish descent, to leave the country to avoid arrest. In 1938, after making arrangements for the transport of their belongings, they went into exile in England, in Buckinghamshire. Their children joined them by the *Kindertransport* in September 1938. The Pincuses, unable to remain in Germany for the same reason – also emigrated to England in 1939.<sup>5</sup> The set of six *MR 50* chairs by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and the table by Lilly Reich thus followed the family through moves and generations, to reach us today – restorations were made in the 1970s; to the leather upholstery and upholstery, at Gomme, an upholsterer in High Wycombe, England, as well as a new chrome plating made necessary by the oxidation on the metal due to time. After moving across England, the six chairs and the table finally followed the son of Claire and Günther Lowenfeld, when he chose to settle in Vence, in the Alpes-Maritimes, for his retirement in 2008. Rediscovered today in the South of France, it is undeniable that this furniture set contributes to the continued influence and transmission of the Bauhaus spirit through the ages.

<sup>1</sup> See Anne Monier, « Mort et renaissance du Bauhaus » in *L'esprit du Bauhaus – Catalog of the exhibition organized at the Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris (October 19, 2016 – February 26, 2017)*, Arts Décoratifs / Fondation d'entreprise Hermès Editions, Paris, 2016, p. 222-237.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Betts, « The Bauhaus and National Socialism – A Dark Chapter of Modernism » in Jeanine Fiedler et Peter Feierabend (éds.) – *Bauhaus – Könemann Editions, Cologne, 2000*, p. 34-41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Anne Monier, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>5</sup> Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg, « From Berlin to London, Autobiography of Lily Pincus » in *AJR Information – Volume XXXV, N° 9 of September 1980*, p. 6.



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