

THE CLASSY KNOLL

Benchmark 20th-century designs get a fresh start in Sydney, writes ANTONIA WILLIAMS.

WHAT is Knoll Studio? Says dedece's Tim Engelen, "it's the history of modern furniture. It's Bauhaus. It's what Eero Saarinen pulled out of the bin saying 'what about this?'"

After decades of haphazard local licensing, rip-offs and cowboys, Knoll International has chosen dedece to relaunch its product in Australasia, starting with the design pantheon and looking for credibility; the credibility of Florence Knoll, who said: "No compromise, ever." So everything Knoll can be new again.

They've vox-popped the professionals, whittling the ask-list to include Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair and stool of 1929, Saarinen's pedestal chairs and tables, his Womb chair, the Riccio chairs, the d'Urso table, the paperclip table, Florence Knoll's oval table and the Propeller training tables.

In company with architects Harry Seidler (worked with Gropius) and interior designer George Freedman (worked with Florence Knoll, arriving here in the early '70s to put Knoll into the Bank of NSW), dedece is standard bearer of modernism, of the International Style.

This was defined by the 1954 Connecticut General Life Insurance Building in Bloomfield, Massachusetts, "the first time the interior was as much a part of the architecture as the building", Freedman says.

"Skidmore (Owings & Merrill) and Knoll took Mies imagery and made it into the American corporate ideal. Florence Knoll used these offices, the interaction of colour in the showroom,

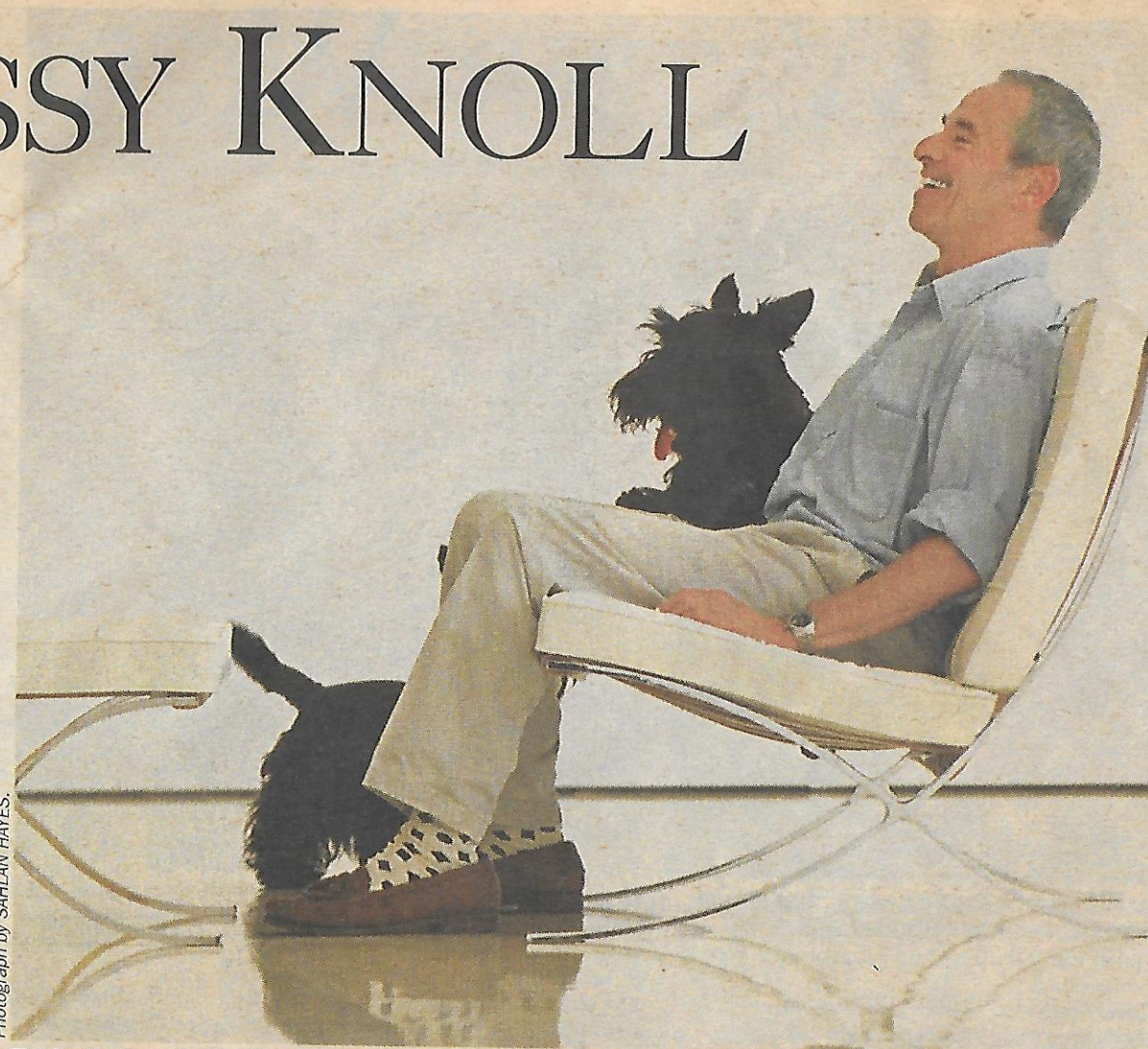
the white spaces, pale teak furniture and one black wall of Hans Knoll's office at 601 Madison Avenue to persuade the timid. Clients could peer in and see the reality."

Knoll Studio is based on the furniture produced at the new Knoll factory at Pennsylvania in the '40s, where Hans, son of Stuttgart Knoll, set up business far from the Third Reich with the architects and designers of the Bauhaus, by then in America, as well as Saarinen, Charles Eames, Harry Bertoia, George Nelson and Florence Schust, the designer who spent invaluable time studying at ITT in Chicago with van der Rohe, bonded with everyone, married Hans Knoll and became the company's creative driving force.

From 1968, Freedman worked for Florence's sidekick, Peter Andes. Florence, semi-retired, would make appearances from Miami. There had been the fateful day when the usual Florence-led philosophical debate with the architects at Skidmore on the direction of a veneer on the edge of a table brought stalemate. Again. This time they invoked the trade practices act and the planning unit was no more.

"From the '50s to the '70s, when you thought about contemporary design, all the best sellers were Knoll," Freedman says. It was a vast range, but it got duller. Even Florence felt that the Barcelona had become a cliché. But these things are timeless. Knoll still appears the essence of contemporaneity.

Freedman lives and works in east Sydney with several Barcelona pieces plus van der Rohe tables, Florence Knoll credenzas and Harry Bertoia



Photograph by SAHLIAN HAYES

The knoll-edge: George Freedman, who launched Knoll's relaunch at dedece on Tuesday night, with white upholstered Barcelona chair and stool, and constant companions, Scottish terriers Duffy McFala and Peejay.

chairs. In recent domestic interiors he's used the Saarinen Womb chair, the Bertoia high-back chair, a small and a large Saarinen dining table, Brno chairs, the Fratini low timber Kyoto table and Florence Knoll sofas in bright-red Cato, a handwoven wool designed by Sheila Hicks in the '60s.

Freedman also notes Knoll's definition of form. "There are four or five other versions of Barcelona furniture,

but they go from OK to dross." Certain small sectors of Sydney are very precisely aware of why it can be worth paying for the real thing.

And, according to designer and stickler Iain Halliday, Knoll does seem to have looked keenly at its price structure.

"The range has an incredible level of quality and precision. There was some huge embarrassment when we speci-

fied Bertoia's Diamond chairs ... The client wanted local copies, they arrived and fell apart. In the end it's the quality, and ordering the original was only \$75 more per chair."

Next, the endless textile range, mind-boggling subtleties, a thousand degrees of modern.

So, like Isadora Duncan on seeing the Parthenon, many of us will be able to cry *my colour*.