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Greta Grossman's living room, shot here in April 1943 by photographer Maynard L. Parker, is an elegant example of the designer's unique way of pairing textures and styles to achieve aesthetic balance. OPPOSITE: This black laminate and walnut cabinet with three drawers was designed for Glenn of California, circa 1952.







# BECOMING A LEGEND

The Swedish-Born Designer, Greta Grossman, Resurfaces After Decades in Obscurity

text Damaris Colhoun

●● Evan Snyderman, of R 20th Century Design in New York City, found what every serious dealer and collector dreams of finding: buried treasure, in the form of a long forgotten talent. The fortuitous moment came in 1994 in a design store in Manhattan showcasing the work of rare California designers. Among the works of Hendrik Van Keppel, Luther Conover and Taylor Green, names known then only in small circles, Snyderman's eye was drawn to a desk with a pencil box: "There was a quirkiness, a simplicity to the design. The proportions were small and delicate but powerful. It was like nothing you've seen before." The name of the designer behind the piece was Greta Grossman, and at the time, he'd never heard of her.

Fifteen years later, Snyderman has brought the legacy of the Swedish-born Grossman to light. And, with her sale prices climbing and a major exhibition showing through May 16 at Stockholm's Museum of Architecture, Snyderman has positioned her — and the elusive story of her life — to take the design world by storm. For all intents and purposes, this is Grossman's comeback tour.

After discovering Grossman, Snyderman picked up her trail and traced it back to Los Angeles. There, from the 1940s to the late 1960s, she spent the

better part of her career as an architect and furniture designer whose cutting-edge designs were distinguished by playful details, like ball-handle accents, tapered angles and feminine but asymmetrical proportions.

In Los Angeles, Snyderman found plenty of pieces that were attributed to Grossman, but no one could tell him anything about her. Back in New York, Snyderman dove into his library. "She wasn't in any of the catalogues or books. Some people thought she might still be alive, but no one really knew," Snyderman recalls. Except for her designs, it was as if Grossman's history had been erased. Snyderman was drawn to "the mystery of it all."

In 1999, there was a series of breaks in the case, as it were. R 20th Century was in the process of publishing a catalogue on Grossman and planned to host a small exhibit of her work. Pierre Koenig, upon learning of Snyderman's interest in Grossman, gave him the number for Julius Shulman, one of the foremost architectural photographers of the 20th century. "I was in Julius's studio the very next day looking at photos of Greta's architecture, furniture and lighting for the first time," Snyderman says. "Julius said he had not looked at the images in 40 years."





The walnut and wrought-iron desk with pencil box (left) and the walnut coffee table (right), commonly referred to as the "Half Moon" table, were both designed for Glenn of California by Greta Grossman in 1952.

Schulman also gave Snyderman a back issue of *Arts & Architecture*, a leading magazine for arts and culture in Los Angeles during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. In the issue was an address for a house that Grossman had designed. "It was described as a 'simple brown house,'" Snyderman recalls.

Snyderman scoured the Internet and libraries for *Arts & Architecture*, only to find Grossman's furniture and interiors in almost every issue. "She was the darling of that magazine," Snyderman says. He located more houses in Los Angeles: "meticulously crafted boxes of wood and glass that were cantilevered off cliffs." Bit by bit, an impressive body of work was emerging, even as Grossman herself remained shrouded in mystery. Then, Snyderman learned her estate had been willed to her stepdaughter in Myrtle, Pennsylvania.

The stepdaughter was in her 80s and termed the archives her 'dad's second wife's stuff,'" Snyderman recalls. "We harassed her for six years until she let us have a look at it." When Snyderman and colleague Lily Kane, author of *R 20th Century's* first Grossman catalogue, began sifting through Greta's estate, they were astounded. "All the information was complete — the ephemera, drawings, photographs, library, correspondence, prototypes. Greta had saved every clipping. It was the stuff every curator dreams of finding. And we basically saved it from going in the garbage."

Born in Stockholm in 1906, Grossman was a rising star on the design scene in the 1930s. In Europe, she helped pioneer the field of interior architecture, then in its professional infancy, and in 1933 she became the first woman to

receive the Furniture Design award from the Swedish Society of Industrial Design. "She was the only woman to open her own studio, not for textiles and ceramics, which had been female-inscribed in Sweden for years, but for furniture," says author Andrea Codrington, Grossman's biographer whose book, *Greta Magnusson Grossman: A Car and Some Shorts*, was published in February. "Furniture was a man's game — and you can forget about architecture."

In 1940, the Nazis invaded Denmark and Norway. Grossman fled with her husband Billy, an accomplished jazz musician who was Jewish. Unable to gain Atlantic passage because of German U-boats, they went East, crossing Russia and China before they settled in Los Angeles. Grossman turned up at the annual furniture exhibition with some drawings and was promptly hired as head designer by Barker Brothers, a department store that specialized in custom interiors. Soon, Grossman opened her own store on Rodeo Drive, and called it Magnusson-Grossman Studio; she was 34 years old.

Having trained in construction and carpentry in Sweden in the 1920s — unusual experiences for a woman's résumé — she designed every piece of furniture for her interiors. "She worked with a very human touch," notes curator Karin Aberg Waern of the Swedish Museum of Architecture. Idiosyncratic combinations of materials including wood, metal and plastic were signature, and Grossman used Formica and black laminate strategically; that they required little maintenance, she believed, was suited to contemporary women who had no time to fuss over cleaning.



Another look at Grossman's California living room illustrates her understated yet highly stylized manner of bringing comfort to living spaces.







Much like we do in South Florida, Grossman brought indoor style to outdoor spaces as demonstrated in this vintage Maynard L. Parker photograph of her front porch in California.





FROM LEFT: The sidetable in walnut and black laminate was designed by Grossman for Glenn of California in 1952. The dining chair, one of a set of six exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art's *Good Design* show in the 1950s, was made of solid walnut in 1952 for Glenn of California.

Grossman's best pieces were made only a dozen at a time, a quality that heightens her appeal to collectors today. Some of the stand-outs include the conical brass and aluminum light fixtures Grossman designed in the 1940s, which were widely reproduced. "You can find lots made in the '50s, but only Greta was doing them in the '40s," Snyderman says.

Greta's post at Barker Brothers was a pipeline to the city's elite, and she promoted her work with aplomb. While Billy established himself on the jazz scene with the Billy Grossman Orchestra, Greta designed interiors for Paulette Goddard, Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman. "They were this power couple," Snyderman says. "And nine out of 10 of Greta's clients were professional women. None of her houses were built for families. She became linked to this world of powerful women doctors and entertainment industry types, who must have felt as ostracized as she did."

Over the course of her career, Grossman designed pieces for more than a dozen firms besides Barker Brothers, including Frank Brothers, Cal-Mode Furniture Manufacturing Company and Martin Bratrud. She was published in *Domus*, the influential Italian magazine started by Gio Ponti, and her work appeared in ads (which she later clipped) that showcased her designs among a matrix of superstars, including Eero Saarinen, George Nelson and Charles Eames. According to Codrington, Greta's work even turned up in the popular comic strip *Mary Worth*. "[Her work] became so iconic and ubiquitous," Codrington says, "that it trickled into the imagination of a cartoonist."

And then, in 1967, Greta disappeared from the scene. She headed to Encinitas, California, with Billy and retired into obscurity, always intensely private about her personal life. The one hole in her nearly intact estate, with its impeccable collection of press clippings, is personal letters and diaries.

"I don't know if something happened, but it feels that way. I mean, she was mentioned in the same breath as Eames and Nelson!" Codrington says. Aberg Waern thinks she disappeared in part because she was a woman: "I have a feeling that if she were a male and had made this journey and had been published and succeeded as much as she had, we would have heard more about her." The other fact is, quite simply, there was no one to carry Grossman's torch. "Charlotte Perriand and Eva Zeisel are championed by their daughters. Charles Eames had Ray; Florence Knoll had Hans Knoll," Codrington says.

To date, Snyderman has located 27 houses designed by Grossman in and around Los Angeles. The current exhibition in Stockholm (put together by Snyderman and Aberg Waern) features some 50 pieces along with a selection of drawings and photographs, and it will make the circuit to Paris, New York and California over the next two years.

In Snyderman, Grossman finally has someone to carry her torch. "Greta helped bring Swedish modernism to America. In fact, Greta may be that link," Snyderman says. "It's rare for something this important to be discovered so late." Just like modernism, Grossman is back, and this time it looks like she's here to stay. ●