The Michigan Modernist: Ruth Adler Schnee

Description

Ruth Adler Schnee Showroom in front of her fabric

Innovation was at the heart of Ruth Adler Schneeâ??s design practice, which encompassed radical, modernist building interiors and woven textiles throughout the mid-century modernist era. After fleeing to the United States in 1938 to escape the Nazi regime, she went on to forge a monumentally successful career at a time when opportunities for women and Jews were few and far between. Her design ethos centred around playful experimentation with abstract pattern, colour, and form, merging European Bauhaus design with American mid-century modernism.

Ruth Adler Schnee was born as Ruth Alder in 1923, to a German-Jewish family of creative intellectuals in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. They fled Nazi Germany in 1938, shortly following Kristalnacht, settling in Detroit, Michigan, where Adler Schnee remained for the rest of her career. Nonetheless, her family, and particularly her mother, had a connection to European design that stayed with Schnee, as she recalled in an interview: â??I grew up in Frankfurt and at age five, my family moved to Dusseldorf. My mother was a student of the Bauhausâ??her picture is in the book Bauhaus Women; sheâ??s the one with the cigar. We never agreed on anything, but she was an incredible influence, so I feel I owe her a lot.â• She adds, â??I met Paul Klee through my parents and he was also a great influence; we used to play in his studio with stabiles and mobiles.â•

Construction, 1950, printed on bleached linen

Following their move to the US, Ruth went on to study costume design at Cass Technical High School, followed by a scholarship to study at the Rhode Island School of Design (RSID) in 1942. There, Adler Schnee chose to study interior architecture and design, at a time when architectural firms seldom hired women or Jews. Following graduation Adler Schnee found work as the only female designer with American design firm Raymond Loewy. It was a formative period, as she remembered, â??â?¦ [at Raymond Loewy,] we designed the Coca-Cola script, and I had Warren Platner with his drawing board on my left and Minoru Yamasaki with his drawing board on my right. We also designed the Shell Oil logo, and those yellow and red colours you see on every gas station, theyâ??re my colours!â?•

In 1945, Adler Schnee received a scholarship to study a master of fine art at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where she was taught how to discover her own unique voice through experimentation with shape, colour and form in abstract ways, an experience she called, â??so very difficult, but very rewarding.â?• Two years after graduating, Adler Schnee struck gold when she entered a competition that would change the course of her life. She recalled, â??The Chicago Tribune had a competition to design a house featuring all the gadgets that had been developed during the war that were now coming on the market. And I won that competition, but I couldnâ??t find fabrics for the house, so I designed my own fabrics in abstract shapes, in bold colours.â?•

Seedy Weeds, 1953, was inspired by Ms. Adler Schneeâ??s garden. Edward S

Her vivid and experimental fabric designs, which echoed the Bauhaus sensibility with angular and biomorphic forms in playful, eccentric arrangements, caught the attention of the design firm Shaw, Ness & Murphy in Chicago, who subsequently commissioned her to produce a series of airy window coverings for their company. She said, â??they saw the textile designs and said thatâ??s exactly what they were looking for, because blinds and verticals hadnâ??t been on the market. They were designing automotive showrooms and needed a screening material that would not fade like a carâ??s. They set me up in the textile design business, and thatâ??s where it all started.â?• Adler Schnee learned the screenprinting process to create her earliest fabrics, including *Slits and Slats*, and *Slinky Shadows*, which revealed her penchant towards playful, Klee-like, linear repeat patterns.

Following her marriage to economics graduate Edward Schnee in 1948, Adler Schneeâ??s textiles grew in strength, leading to a steady flow of work, so much so, in 1949, she and her husband opened the Adler Schnee retail store to showcase her vivid and playful design work to the wider public. While the store closed in 1977, the couple continued to run a design consultancy until 2000.

Adler Schnee Showroom, 12th Street, Detroit, Michigan

In 2012, Adler Schnee established a partnership with Anzea Textiles, which involved reissuing her archival designs, as well as producing new ones. In the same year, Adler Schnee joined forces with Knoll Textiles, which proved instrumental in bringing her work to light for new audiences. The following years were pivotal for Adler Schnee, when she received widespread acknowledgment from curators, and fellow designers, for her pivotal and inspirational role in shaping the look and feel of the mid-century modern interior through the transformative power of patterned textiles.

CATEGORY

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Date Created
March 13, 2025
Author
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