

GUBI

Greta Magnusson Grossman

DESIGNER PORTRAIT



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Greta Magnusson Grossman (1906–1999) was an early pioneer in the male dominated worlds of mid-century industrial and interior design and architecture, gaining international recognition for her work. She was born in Helsingborg, Sweden into a family of cabinetmakers. Following in their footsteps, she became the first woman in the workshop when she undertook a woodworking apprenticeship at a young age. She went on to win a scholarship to study furniture design at the renowned Stockholm arts institution, Konstfack, and was among the first women to graduate from its School of Industrial Design. In 1933, she opened Studio, a combined store and workshop in Stockholm, with a former classmate. In the same year she married jazz musician Billy Grossman – sometimes described as the ‘Benny Goodman of Sweden’ – and they lived happily together in Sweden until the onset of the Second World War.

In 1940, the couple decided to emigrate to the United States and embarked on a harrowing journey across the Atlantic aboard the Japanese liner *Nakura Maru*, never reaching their intended destination of New York, but eventually arriving in San Francisco. Never losing her sense of humor, Grossman reportedly claimed that all she needed to start her new life in the USA was to ‘buy a car and some shorts’. Her quick read on the culture served her well. Upon arrival in California in 1940, she opened a well-publicized store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, where she was among the first to bring the

Scandinavian modern aesthetic to southern California’s burgeoning modernist scene. In a 1951 interview, Grossman described the combined Swedish and Californian influence on her work as: ‘one of mellow, golden surfaces, of lightness and airiness and informal comfort.’ The postwar creative climate was highly receptive to new ideas in architecture and design, and Grossman’s unique approach to Swedish modernism was a hit in Los Angeles. For her, good design was fundamentally humanistic; its role was to support people’s daily lives in a relevant and engaging way, and personal and social wellbeing were key considerations. The resulting designs quickly attracted celebrity clients, including Greta Garbo, Ingrid Bergman, Joan Fontaine, Gracie Allen and Frank Sinatra, many of whom became friends. It was not long before her name started appearing in the same contexts as the likes of Charles and Ray Eames and Isamu Noguchi.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, Grossman was the only female architect in Los Angeles to own an independent practice. She designed 14 homes in the city and the surrounding area between 1949 and 1959 and was clearly influenced by the principles of the Case Study Houses – the series of postwar experiments in American residential architecture commissioned by *Arts & Architecture* magazine – with their open floor plans, clean lines, and floor-to-ceiling glass walls and cantilevered decks to take advantage of their expansive views. She would often complete her builds with custom

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textiles, ceramics, furniture and lighting fixtures, and it is her furniture – such as the Modern Line Sofa and 62 Series Desk – and her lighting designs, including the Gräshoppa Lamp and Cobra Lamp, for which she is best known today.

Her work often appeared in Arts & Architecture magazine and was exhibited at museums such as Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the National Museum in Stockholm throughout the 1940s and '50s – her Cobra Lamp was even recognized with a Good Design Award in 1950. However, after Grossman retired from the limelight to the beach city

of Encinitas in Southern California to focus on painting in 1966, she was all but forgotten – one of the unsung heroes of modernism. In 2011, after a retrospective of her work was exhibited in Stockholm, GUBI relaunched a number of her designs, including the iconic Gräshoppa and Cobra Lamps, triggering an international rediscovery of her work and a reassessment of her legacy. Grossman's original works are now highly sought after by design collectors around the world and, today, Grossman is justly recognized as one of most influential figures in bringing the Scandinavian aesthetic to the forefront of modern furniture design.