

MODERNIST 20TH CENTURY



Auction

06 June 2004
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HARRY BERTOIA

important prototype lounge chair

USA, c. 1952 | welded steel wire

35¾ h × 58 w × 44 d in (91 × 147 × 112 cm)

The lounge chair presented on the following pages is a prototype made by Harry Bertoia as part of his wire furniture developed for Knoll in the early 1950s. This chair is a unique example and was exhibited at Knoll Associates at 720 Park Avenue in New York City in 1953 during the launch of the Bertoia furniture line. This rare and extraordinary lounge chair is a masterpiece of experimental American chair design. In the 1940s, Bertoia was residing with his family in Venice, California and working at the office of Charles Eames on chair designs. Bertoia was utilized by the Eames office to engineer and troubleshoot the metal frames of the DCM and LCM, and is credited by some for developing the Eames wire chair forms. Harry Bertoia's design method for the wire furniture is summed up by the following, "how long are you going to sit in a chair? If it is only for an hour, you can have a small surface, possibly an erect posture . . . if you stay two hours, a larger surface because you must allow for movement." This method explains the shape of the wire chairs as they progress from the dining chairs into the small and large Diamond chairs, and to the Bird lounge chair. It is natural to see how the lounge chair offered here would be the final step in this progress. Harry's design process has been described by Val Bertoia as "intuitive engineering." The complex surface form of this chair is extraordinary for its refinement and complexity, decades before CAD programs

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simplified the process. Although loosely guided by principles in ergonomics he developed for the military during World War II, the prototype lounge was created simply from an inherent ability to visualize and produce functional and sculptural forms. The wire material perfectly suited Bertioia's skill as a metal smith and he found it intriguing that air and light surrounding the ethereal material actually completes the form. This concept was revolutionary at the time, and the materials used were a radical departure from heavy-handed furniture design at the beginning of the century. Ultimately, Knoll abandoned the idea of producing this chair design because of its complexity. The cost of producing such a design would have placed the chair beyond the reach of most consumers, which ran counter to the prevailing notion of design for the masses that was common in the 1950s. This Bertioia lounge chair prototype has remained in the possession of the Bertioia family since its creation. Brigitta used the chair in the yard of their Barto, Pennsylvania home. Harry and Brigitta Bertioia gave the chair to their daughter, Lesta, at the time of her wedding. Literature: World of Bertioia, Schiffer, ppg. 32-48, pg. 44 illustrated.

Provenance: Harry Bertioia, Barto, Pennsylvania Lesta Bertioia, Pennsylvania Private Collection

Estimate: \$100,000–150,000

Result: \$118,000

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