

Twentieth Century Design Icons
no. 6

"wire bar stool"

by

Harry Bertoia

(1915-1978)



HARRY BERTOIA was born on 10 March 1915 in San Lorenzo, Pordenone, Italy. At the age of 15 he traveled to Detroit to visit his older brother, but chose to stay and enrolled in Cass Technical High School, where he studied art and design and learned the art of jewelry making. In 1938 he attended the Art School of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts. The following year he received a scholarship to study at the Cranbrook Academy of Art where he encountered Walter Gropius and Ray and Charles Eames.

Opening his own metal workshop in 1939, Bertoia taught jewelry design and metalwork. Later, as the war effort made metal a rare and expensive commodity, he began to focus his efforts on jewelry making, even designing and creating wedding rings for Charles and Ray Eames. Later in 1943, he moved to California to work with Charles and Ray. At this point they began to experiment with molded plywood under the auspices of their Plyformed Products Company, and developed a method for making molded plywood splints that would later evolve into processes for designing furniture. Bertoia remained as part of their staff, working on a variety of projects. Three years later he split with the Eames, concerned that his work was not receiving due credit, and preferring to work with metal rather than wood. In the same year he became a US citizen.



In 1950, Bertoia moved to Pennsylvania, to establish a studio, and to work with Hans and Florence Knoll. (Florence was also a Cranbrook Graduate). During this period he designed five wire pieces that became known as the Bertoia Collection for Knoll. Among them was the famous 'Diamond chair' a fluid, sculptural form made from a molded lattice-work of welded steel. In Bertoia's own words, "If you look at these chairs, they are mainly made of air, like sculpture. Space passes right through them."

They were produced with varying degrees of upholstery over their light grid-work, and they were handmade because a suitable mass production process could not be found. Unfortunately, the chair resembled an Eames chair so closely that Herman Miller, Eames' distributor, took Knoll to court on the grounds that they were taking wrongful credit for a bent-wire technique owned by the Eames.

The commercial success enjoyed by Bertoia's diamond chair was immediate and in the mid-50's the chairs, produced by Knoll, sold so well that the royalties he received for them allowed him to devote himself exclusively to sculpture. In 1957 he was a fellow at the Graham Foundation in Chicago. The sculptural work that he produced on his own explored the ways in which metal could be manipulated to produce sound. By stretching and bending the metal, he made it respond to wind or to touch, creating different tones.

Bertoia died on 6 November 1978 in Pennsylvania.