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Exhibition Plan

Edith Farnsworth’s Country House

Presenting the Farnsworth House as it was furnished by Dr. Edith Farnsworth c. 1955

See letters in lower-left corner of following pages
Stone Lions

C. 1800 • Northern China • limestone
(loaned by Pagoda Red)

Intricately carved stone lions or “foo dogs” (shizi) like this would have protected the entry of a grand courtyard home in 19th century China. The male with a cord in his mouth and a ball under his paw, faces the female with her paw protecting her pup. They sit on carved stone blocks with with additional lion protectors.

Dr. Farnsworth’s original stone lions (shown right) were donated to the Art Institute of Chicago and are on extended loan to the University of Chicago where they stand at the entrance to the Cochrane-Woods Gallery. Dr. Farnsworth’s pair were c. 1700 and carved in marble.
Upper Terrace Chairs

Four c. 2003, Four c. 2015 • Harry Bertoia, designer • steel (donated by Knoll, Inc.)

While Dr. Farnsworth never owned similar chairs, they are contemporaneous with the house, having been designed by metals artist and designer Harry Bertoia c. 1952 for Knoll.

The 420 Side Chair has had several slight variations over time. The heavier-gauge rods and the welded connection of seat to frame help to identify the 2015 chairs. The earlier version has thinner rods and a clipped connection, making shipping easier.

Dr. Farnsworth’s original upper terrace chairs were lightweight pieces from the house she would move outside during good weather.
Rug – entry area

Contemporary • Moroccan Wool (Turkish, designer unknown) (loaned by Oscar Isberian Rugs)

Similar deep-pile wool rugs were very popular in the 1950s, often originating from the Beni Ourain tribe in northwest Africa. This is a natural (undyed) wool of two colors.

Dr. Farnsworth’s entry area rug was a more traditional “diamond” pattern but of the same colors. It’s likely she selected the dark color here to hide dirt and dog fur. Her beloved poodle, Amy, would likely lay here keeping watch out of the front doors.
Chaise Lounge Chairs
Contemporary (originally designed 1933-36) • Bruno Mathsson, designer • birch wood frame, woven synthetic straps (donated by Bruno Mathsson SE)

Edith Farnsworth owned a Model 36 Chaise Lounge and a Vistol Easy Chair & Leg Rest (no longer manufactured). The chairs were designed, and are still made, in Sweden.

The original chairs were laminated beech wood with woven hemp straps, and provided a place to read, nap or listen to music. Dr. Farnsworth located them at the southwest corner of the house to move easily to the screened terrace during warm weather. (Farnsworth House had no air conditioning until 1997.)
Occasional Table/Stool

Contemporary (originally designed in 1933) • Alvar Aalto, designer
• laminated birch wood (available from numerous retailers)

The Model 60 stacking stool has been continuously manufactured in Finland by Artek since 1933 – and is widely copied today. Both 3-legged and 4-legged (Model E60) versions are available in a variety of finishes.

Stool 60 was designed to be used as either a seat or a table and is stackable. First exhibited in London in 1933, it was imported to the US soon thereafter and has become a cornerstone of Midcentury Scandinavian Modern furnishings.

Period photos don’t show this table in Farnsworth House but they were sold widely by Baldwin Kingrey, the Chicago showroom where Dr. Farnsworth likely purchased most of her furnishings.
Planters
Indoor/outdoor use • popular c. 1950-1980 • cedar or redwood
(available from Menards and other retailers)

Similar planters were widely available after WWII, made from California Redwood or Western Red Cedar – either roughsawn or smooth. Metal straps were black, brass or silver in color. They were used as planters or decorative containers (cachepots) – as they are here.

Dr. Farnsworth had galvanized metal plant caddies (saucers on wheels) under her planters – possibly to prevent the fertilized potting soil runoff from staining the travertine.

From her journals and period photos, we know she grew various tropical plants, flowering shrubs and a dwarf conifer. She also grew red geraniums – seen elsewhere on the terrace.
Violin & Music Stand

Contemporary • Hamilton Classic Folding Music Stand
(handmade violin loaned by Greg Meineke)

From photographs, we know that Dr. Farnsworth often played her violin in this location – perhaps to catch the summer breeze from the screened terrace. (The house had no air conditioning.) She owned a similar music stand and the sheet music is one of her favorite compositions, “Chaconne” by Tommaso Antonio Vitali (composed c. 1745) – which she would have played while a student in Rome.

The violin is inspired by the Guarneri violin owned by Dr. Farnsworth – which are widely copied today.
Floor Lamp

Originally designed c. 1947 (lamps in exhibition made c. 1970s)
• Angelo Lelli, designer • metal in various finishes (loaned by Pegboard Modern)

The 3-Arm “Triennale” floor lamp was designed c. 1947 and made in Italy by Angelo Lelli’s Arredoluce Co. 1- and 2-Arm versions were soon available. Over the years, these popular floor lamps were made in a wide variety of finishes and options.

Dr. Farnsworth’s 3-Arm lamp had a tripod base which made it prone to falling over. (Period photos show the arms on her lamp were indeed bent.) A quad base and later, a stone base, were offered to reduce tipping.

Dr. Farnsworth also owned a 1-Arm Arredoluce lamp that was used out on the screened terrace in summer. A version of this lamp is used in the sleeping area.
Daybed

Originally designed c. 1952 (designer unknown)
• white-painted steel, vinyl coated ropes, upholstered mattress (custom replicated for exhibition)

A similar daybed appeared in Farnsworth House photos c. 1952 and may have been sourced by Baldwin-Kingrey (and possibly designed by Harry Weese). Most likely this daybed was made to complement the white steel T-angle tables from Knoll.

For the exhibition, the drawings were made by CADtacular, using a period photo. Economy Iron fabricated the frame, Von Dreehle-Freerksen Co. added the ropes and Walter E. Smithe made the upholstered mattress. Throw pillows and lap blanket from Room & Board.
Rug – living area
Contemporary • Moroccan Wool (Turkish, designer unknown) (loaned by Oscar Isberian Rugs)

Dr. Farnsworth’s living area had a light-colored wool rug similar to this one – but with no pattern. This low-pile wool rug is chemically dyed to resist foot traffic and fading.

By selecting a rug of a color tone similar to the travertine floors, the narrow living area seems more open and less crowded. Another possible reason Dr. Farnsworth selected a light-colored rug for the living area is because the fireplace originally had no hearth and ashes would blow onto the carpet. (There was an iron log rack and a fire screen.)
Lounge Chairs
Contemporary (originally designed 1943) • Jens Risom, designer
• maple wood and woven cotton-blend straps
(donated by Knoll, Inc.)

Two similar chairs (Dr. Farnsworth’s were a slightly darker wood with leather straps) were among the first pieces of furniture in the newly-completed house. It’s likely Edith Farnsworth purchased the originals from Baldwin Kingrey in Chicago – a forerunner of today’s contemporary home stores.

The original Risom chairs were made with surplus parachute straps from WWII but today are made in a wide range of colors. The mauve-taupe color selected for this exhibition was extremely popular in the 1950s.
Cocktail Table

Contemporary (originally designed 1952) • Florence Knoll, designer • painted steels with white laminate top (donated by Knoll, Inc.)

In 1952, Dr. Farnsworth purchased a dining table and matching cocktail table in white-painted steel to complement the house. The dining table had a teak top and the cocktail table (technically, a “corner table”) had a glass top – which she soon covered with a piece of stone.

The accessories on the cocktail table are based on period photographs and include a flower arrangement and ashtray (both silvered Persian copper) and book titles mentioned specifically in her journals.
Slipper Chairs
Contemporary (originals c. 1951) • designer unknown • bamboo and rattan frame with woven cotton straps (custom replicated by Fong Brothers, Los Angeles)

Two low bamboo-frame “slipper chairs” were among the first pieces of furniture Dr. Farnsworth brought into her newly-completed country house. In photographs taken in summer of 1951, these chairs were located in front of the fireplace. Once the screens were installed on the upper terrace in 1953, these chairs were apparently used outside.

The exposed woven straps are unusual for bamboo furniture but complement the Jens Risom-designed chairs purchased around the same time.
Draperies

Floor-to-ceiling draperies were integral to the Farnsworth House design and as late as 1949, Mies considered two internal drapery tracks that would bisect the house, creating privacy around the sleeping areas. (The dining area having been envisioned as guest quarters at that time.) While the drapery tracks and rollers are the originals, the current draperies are the third set, fabricated by InDecor in 1997, and replacing the 1972 draperies also by InDecor.

The original draperies (see right) were fabricated by Watson and Boaler in 1951 of a loosely-woven Chinese shantung silk (see right) – which complemented the honey tone of the wood core and the striations of the travertine floor. A devastating flood three years later prompted Dr. Farnsworth to replace them with rollup blinds of white-painted basswood, fabricated by The Aeroshade Co.
Writing Desk

Contemporary (original c. 1952) • Franco Albini, designer (1928) – introduced to U.S. by Knoll (1949) • white painted steel frame with glass top and white painted drawer unit; “Superleggera” chair – see Z (desk donated by Knoll, Inc.; chair donated by Haworth Cassina; lamp loaned by Matthew Rachman Gallery; books loaned by Nora Wendl)

For the exhibition, a Gio Ponti-designed “Superleggera” chair faces a vintage Olivetti “Lettera 22” typewriter (designed by Marcello Nizzoli c. 1949); a Lightolier “Cricket” desk lamp (designed by Gerald Thurston c. 1955); and a selection of Edith’s poems, hand-typed by Nora Wendl.

Although Dr. Farnsworth’s writing desk appears in this location in photos from the 1950s, it appears on the screened upper terrace in photos from the 1960s.
Wardrobe/Hi-Fi Cabinet

Contemporary (original c. 1952) • Office of Mies van der Rohe, completed by architect William Dunlap • hardwood veneered plywood (donated by Imperial Woodworking)

The wardrobe design began in the Office of Mies van der Rohe but was postponed until after the house was completed. The detailed design was later implemented by architect William Dunlap, a former employee of Mies van der Rohe. The first wardrobe (c. 1952) was fabricated by Karl Freund, with a blond finish to match the home’s wood core structure.

All wood surfaces were stained brown under the home’s second owner, Peter Palumbo. After the devastating 1996-97 floods, the wardrobe was entirely reconstructed by Parenti & Raffaelli Ltd: this is the wardrobe currently on display in Farnsworth’s gallery building. The center section contained a High-Fidelity (Hi-Fi) stereo system, with clothes closets on the opposite side.
Carved Wood Object

c. 1870 • China • architectural element/fragment, carved from camphor wood (loaned by Pagoda Red)

Dr. Farnsworth collected Asian antiquities, many of which were later donated to the Art Institute of Chicago. From a mid-1960s photograph, we know that she displayed an architectural fragment on a pedestal located at the end of the wardrobe – and another sculptural element here in the sleeping area, located between the wardrobe doors.

This Qing-dynasty decorative woodwork element has long been separated from its original context but the deer eating fruit trees is an appropriate theme given that Dr. Farnsworth’s home orchard was located east of the sleeping area.
Rug – sleeping area
Contemporary • Moroccan Wool (Turkish, designer unknown) 
(loaned by Oscar Isberian Rugs)

Similar deep-pile wool rugs were very popular in the 1950s, often originating from the Beni Ourain tribe in northwest Africa. The main field of this rug is likely natural (undyed) but the darker accent color is likely dyed.

Dr. Farnsworth’s sleeping area rug had a diamond pattern but was lighter in color.
Bed
Contemporary • (linen sheets and matelassé coverlet from Lands End; throw pillows and lap blanket from Room & Board)

There are very few known photographs of Dr. Farnsworth’s private sleeping area but it appears that her bed had no footboard or headboard – and was located in this position.

*(photo below right was taken after the 1954 flood when curtains were removed but blinds had not yet been installed: bed may have been pulled away from the wall to allow the veneer to dry out)*
Floor Lamp

Originally designed c. 1947 (lamps in exhibition made c. 1970s)
• Gino Sarfatti, designer • metal in various finishes (loaned by Pegboard Modern)

This 1-Arm floor lamp was designed c. 1947 and made in Italy by Angelo Lelli’s Arredoluce Co. Over the years, these popular floor lamps were made in a wide variety of finishes and options.

Dr. Fansworth’s floor lamp had a white shade and white pole – which was a unique combination and may indicate it was custom-ordered.

Her floor lamps – like all of her furnishings – were used in different locations over the years. Photos from the 1960s show her 1-Arm Arredoluce lamp was used out on the screened terrace in summer.
Bedside Table
Contemporary • designer unknown • cast aluminum with chromed finish (available from Safavieh Furniture)

Dr. Farnsworth owned a simple pedestal-form occasional table in polished metal that was used in various places around the house.

Her pedestal table had a tripod base but the flared form of this table was also popular at the time – a variation was used by architect Eero Saarinen in his famous “Tulip” tables.

The Western Electric model 500 telephone (manufactured from 1950-1984) is original to the house and may be Dr. Farnsworth’s or Lord Palumbo’s. The book is a title mentioned specifically in Edith Farnsworth’s journals.
Folding Chair

Contemporary • Gae Aulenti, designer • aluminum and cast metal with removable cover in Vip. (loaned by Zanotta)

Dr. Farnsworth owned a pair of similar metal folding chairs (origin unknown) – which were occasionally used on the screened terrace but most often appear in photographs of the sleeping area.

This chair, the “April 2200” was designed in 1964 by Italian furniture designer Gae Aulenti for Zanotta – and is still sold by the same company today.
Kitchen Counter

Various Accessories

From her unpublished journals, we know that Dr. Farnsworth often enjoyed a glass of sweet vermouth in the afternoons – possibly a habit she developed living in Italy during her 20s. Here, an Italian Sweet Vermouth and three rocks glasses are set on a vintage tray for an afternoon aperitif with her luncheon guests.

Dr. Farnsworth owned a Revere Ware chromed stainless steel with copper bottom “Whistling Tea Kettle” that appears on her stove in the earliest photos – so may have been a housewarming gift.

The kitchen counter originally included a second oven and a dishwasher – both of which were removed during the 1970-72 renovation by Lord Peter Palumbo.
Dining Table
Contemporary (originally designed 1952) • Florence Knoll, designer • painted steel with teak veneer top (donated by Knoll, Inc.) • China and flatware loaned by Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center; salad servers loaned by William Zbaren; bowl from Room & Board.

In 1952, Dr. Farnsworth purchased a dining table and matching cocktail table in white-painted steel to complement the house. From period photos, we can identify simple white dishes of a modern design, an oval chrome tray and coffee server (a Cory Nicro Model 1512 vacuum pot, and a large bowl.

Our exhibition imagines a Saturday lunch with two guests. The table is set with a wood salad bowl with vintage servers, the chrome tray and coffee server, three place settings of Russel Wright’s “Casual” line for Iroquois China Co. (c. 1951) and his “Pinch” flatware for Hull (c. 1952).
End Chairs

Originally designed in 1949 (chairs in exhibition made c. 1960s)
• teak with woven rattan seat (loaned by Pegboard Modern)

The end chairs that originally anchored Edith Farnsworth’s dining table were two Hans J. Wegner-designed Model JH 501 Round Chair (“The Chair”), made by Johannes Hansen in Denmark – and four side chairs of unknown origin.

Wegner’s “The Chair” has become an icon of Midcentury Modern furniture – and has been copied widely with slight variations. The originals remain extremely collectible.
Side Chairs

Contemporary (originally designed by Gio Ponti c. 1957) • ash with woven rattan seat (donated by Haworth Cassina)

The side chairs flanking Edith Farnsworth’s dining table were similarly lightweight and open – but had a woven back, as well. After careful study by several midcentury furniture experts in the US, Denmark and Italy, no one could identify the original designer or maker!

Gio Ponti’s “Superleggera” (Italian for “Superlight”) has been manufactured by Cassina since 1957 and is still sold widely today.