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The Telegraph



BORN IN THE USA

DESIGN

TEXAN FURNITURE
MOGUL HOLLY HUNT IS
FINALLY BRINGING HER
BRAND TO LONDON,
COURTESY OF KNOLL

Words *Henrietta Thompson*



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is an artist and glassblower who trained as an architect, studied with sculptor Dale Chihuly and now also makes furniture. Other longstanding collaborators include Christian Astugueville, Tristan Auer, Solis Betancourt, John Hutton, Paul Mathieu, Christophe Pillet, Ralph Rucci, Stefan Gulassa and Jean-Michel Wilmotte.

With Holly Hunt Enterprises under its wing, parent company Knoll hopes to build its position as the go-to resource for workplace and residential design in the US and internationally. Hunt herself will continue to work with her team while simultaneously serving as advisor to Knoll on the company's high-end residential strategy. But she downplays the frequent comparisons made between herself and Florence Knoll with elegant humility. 'We are both good editors, and have an eye for design,' she says.

Hunt has a knack for knowing what her customers will want before they do. The showrooms seem consistently fresh, and the pieces are at the forefront of style. It's possibly, she says, thanks to her training in fashion way back when. Before moving to Chicago with her husband in 1976, she had already explored her interest in the industry with forays into fashion retail management, buying and jewellery design.

The London venture will comprise a single-storey showroom on the corner of Grafton Street and fashionable Dover Street, a few steps from the David Zwirner Gallery and Sprüth Magers London, positioned conveniently for those who might be browsing artworks and accessories. The building, one of the few contemporary spaces in Mayfair, has a beautiful Portland stone façade and picture windows, which flood the open-plan space with natural light.

Finally she feels the time is right to come to London. 'We've had a lot to do!' she says, describing hers as a business of 10,000 details. Are they all taken care of now? It's been a long journey but even after 30 years Holly Hunt is still striving for improvement and progress. 'I'm happy but I've learned something important: to never let the best get in the way of better.' That sounds like as good a strategy as any. ■

20 Grafton Street, London W1; hollyhunt.com

Lone star style, clockwise from top left: Lens tables by McCollin Bryan; Black Cat pendant lamp and Dublin chair, both by Holly Hunt Studio; portrait of Holly Hunt

'I didn't really have a big plan,' says Holly Hunt of founding her company 30 years ago, when she first bought a small showroom in Chicago's Merchandise Mart. 'I needed a job, I had three young sons.' The showroom was small and the existing designer collection was modern with a few traditional elements such as Old World Weavers and Yale Burge. Less than a year later she had changed the name, introduced fashionable, exclusive and contemporary styles, and was generating a storm of sales. The first Holly Hunt showroom was born.

Over the next three decades, the Texan-born accidental businesswoman would expand the company across the US and add a showroom in São Paulo. Earlier this year Knoll acquired Holly Hunt Enterprises for \$95 million. 'I guess at some point we grew up,' she laughs. 'But in the beginning we just had fun. I was working with people I was friends with - the best people that I could find. It was a wonderful team and we all loved each other. I believed that the purpose of the company was about the culture you want to keep - people kept talking about the importance of maximising shareholder value - but I just didn't feel that way. That would be to lose the energy we had.'

It's safe to say they never did lose that energy, and Hunt today retains more than a twinkle in her eye and a huge smile as she tells me in a Deep South singsong voice. 'Well if you're not having fun you're a drag...' Along the way she also learned how to build a hugely successful interior design business, and that was not - it's quite apparent - by being conventional.

This October Holly Hunt opens her first European showroom in Mayfair, and already the fabulous Texan is breaking all the rules. Who, after all, opens an interiors showroom on Dover Street when everyone else in the business is in Knightsbridge, Kensington and Clerkenwell? Holly Hunt isn't fussed about what everyone else does. And while she might be new to London, she sure as hell knows about showrooms.

For those unfamiliar with Holly Hunt, suffice to say her eponymous company is one of the premier design and distribution entities for high-end interior furnishings in America. Famous for its award-winningly chic showrooms, Holly Hunt displays an enormous range of luxury home furnishings, lighting, textiles, and leatherware, including both own-brand lines and those of prestigious international designers with whom Hunt has an affinity.

The first of these was Rose Tarlow, who back in 1984 was running an antiques shop on Melrose Place, Los Angeles. Hunt brought her into the fold within a year of starting her business, and Tarlow's more traditional style is a mainstay in many of the showrooms. Alison Berger Glassworks was introduced within Holly Hunt Lighting in 1999. Another Texan, Berger

