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Sotheby's to Offer Property from the Collection of Robert Isabell Legendary Event Planner's Collection of 20th Century Design Will be sold in New York on December 17, 2009

On December 17, 2009, Sotheby's will offer property from the collection of noted event planner, Robert Isabell



(1952-2009). For more than twenty years, Mr. Isabell was at the helm of nearly every major event hosted by the upper echelon of society; lending his spectacular taste and creativity to charity galas, club openings, magazine launches, White House Christmases and society weddings, birthdays and funerals. His imaginative style always struck the right chord, whether the event was lavish or understated, and it was with that same level of refinement and care that he created a unique retreat for himself in Greenwich Village. In it, he meticulously juxtaposed important pieces by American studio designers Harry Bertoia, Paul Evans and Phil Powell, with prime examples by the French masters of the mid-century: Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand and Serge Mouille. He punctuated the space with lush greenery and playful Pop and Contemporary lighting from Vernor Panton to Tokunjin Yoshioda. Together, the offering of approximately 130 lots

is estimated to sell for \$1.5 million and proceeds will benefit the Gerald B. Lambert Memorial Foundation, Inc. for the sole purpose of maintaining and preserving the Oak Spring Garden Library and Greenhouses in Upperville, VA. Prior to the auction, the collection will be exhibited in Sotheby's 10th floor galleries from December 12-16, 2009.

Robert Isabell's career began in a Minneapolis, Minnesota flower shop. By the 1970s he was in New York working for famed event planner and florist Renny Reynolds, whose clients included Studio 54, before going out on his own in the mid-1980s. Since that time, he designed birthday celebrations for Bette Midler and Saul Steinberg, holiday celebrations at the White House for the Clintons, weddings for Caroline Kennedy and the Miller sisters, charitable

galas for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York City Ballet, and events of all type and size for friends



and clients such as Ian Schrager, Bunny Mellon, Lally Weymouth, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Katherine Graham, Sarah Jessica Parker, Whitney Houston and Calvin Klein, among others.

Behind this persona was a thoughtful and private person who created a dazzling retreat in lower Manhattan that reflected his love of nature and design. He combined a modern, six-unit building with a 19th century blacksmith's shop, ingeniously bringing the outdoors in by enclosing an existing courtyard. The resulting structure was a unique series of both intimate and soaring spaces conceived in stone, concrete, steel and glass. Mr. Isabell's collection of 20th Century Design was an extension of this fascination with nature and light, iron and steel. Nearly all of Mr. Isabell's collection dates to the post-war period, and it was his unique approach to curating the intermixing American studio movement and

French mid-century industrial design that helped defined his aesthetic.

Among the highlights of his collection are comprehensive offerings of the work of Paul Evans and Harry Bertoia, as well as many of their contemporaries. Evans, the New Hope contemporary of George Nakashima, is known for the intricate and sculpted metal facades of his furniture. Mr. Isabell's collection includes a diverse group of significant works from Evans' most noted series including one of his masterworks, a **Sideboard** from the *Sculpted Front series*, circa 1970s (est. \$60/80,000). Other highlights include a monumental **Bar** in welded and enameled steel, gold foil and slate, circa 1960s (est. \$40/60,000), and a



Hanging Cabinet from the *Vertigris Loop Copper series* (est. \$25/40,000). The December auction will also include works by Phil Powell who, for a time, worked closely with Evans, even sharing a New Hope studio and executing a number of collaborative works. Other regional American craftsman such as Warren Esherick, Wendell Castle and Smokey Tunis are also represented.

Like Evans, Harry Bertoia studied at the renowned Cranbrook Academy of Art and used different metals as his medium of choice. Following a successful career designing furniture for Knoll and others, Bertoia was able to turn

his efforts to sculpture. Mr. Isabell's collection features an encyclopedic survey by Bertoia including examples from all of his most important series – from outdoor sculpture to free-form bronze works to sound pieces.



Sound Sculpture, circa 1970 (est. \$50/70,000), is an example of a series Bertoia executed in different sizes and shapes to achieve a range of sounds when moved. A patinated bronze **Bush Sculpture** from circa 1965 and measuring 15 inches in diameter (est. \$40/60,000), will also be included. In all, fifteen lots by the artist, with estimates ranging from a few thousand dollars up to \$50,000 will be offered. Mr. Isabell's collection also includes the definitive collection of floral sculptures by Bertoia's protégé, Klaus Ihlenfeld.

Mr. Isabell's first collecting passion in the 1990s was French mid-century modernism and he assembled a small collection of superb strong examples by the biggest names in the category – Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand and Serge Mouille. One of Prouvé and Perriand's most well-known collaborative works is among the highlights of the December sale – a **Bookcase from the Maison**

du Mexique, Cité Universitaire, Paris, circa 1952 (est. \$60/80,000). Jean Prouvé's own **Bibliothèque** bookcase, circa 1950 (est. \$30/50,000) will also be offered, in addition to a number of other forms. Mr. Isabell's collection of works by Serge Mouille boasts prime examples by the designer. Where Bertoia's work can be seen as an echo of Mr. Isabell's love of plants and flowers, Mouille's pieces were akin to his penchant for industrial design. Among the top pieces by Mouille to be offered are his **Grand Signal Floor Lamp**, circa 1962 (est. \$70/90,000) and his **Five Arm Wall Sconce**, circa 1950 (est. \$40/60,000).



“Robert Isabell's collection includes the most vibrant garden of organic design by the New Hope School ever assembled,” commented James Zemaitis, Senior Vice President and Head of Sotheby's 20th Century Design Department. “Long before most collectors had even heard of Evans and Powell, Isabell was putting together an environment of works by these craftsmen, with more famous artists such as Bertoia and Nakashima, which resulted in one of the most remarkable interiors in New York. He was also a pioneering American collector of Prouvé and Mouille, and his legendary eye made it possible to unify French industrial modernism and American studio sculpture in a single seminal experience.”



Mr. Isabell's fascination with the play of light and color was particularly evident through his collection of contemporary lighting. Highlights range from Pop examples from the 1960s and 70s, by Vernor Panton and Joe Colombo to 21st century works by designers such as Johanna Grawunder and Tokunjin Yoshioda, whose "ToFU" Table Lamp was executed in 2001 (est. \$1,000/1,500).

Mr. Isabell was constantly refining his collection and among his more recent purchases is a spectacular "Nickel Couch" (est. \$15/20,000) by Johnny Swing. Conceived of patinated metal and nickels and executed circa 2006, Isabell purchased the piece directly from the artist. Swing first debuted at the opening of the *Museum of Arts & Design* and the *Nickel Couch* is his first piece to appear at auction.



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*Estimates do not include buyer's premium