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Paul T. Frankl Autobiography

CHRISTOPHER LONG AND AURORA MCCLAIN, EDITORS
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REVIEWED BY BENNETT JOHNSON

This is a page turner! Anyone who has read Christopher Long's essential book *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design* (Yale, 2007) may ask, why this one? Just wait until you have an opportunity to read this easy flowing account, which captures this leading Modernist in his own words. Few changes have been made in Frankl's original text, generously shared by his daughter Paulette Frankl, but previously unpublished photographs, a brief preface and foreword by Long, memories of her father by his daughter, and an extensive bibliography and index have been added. Paul Frankl's candid reflections capture his time, with its challenges and flaws. From Vienna, New York, and Los Angeles, Frankl looks back on his experiences, his colleagues and collaborators, and his clients with fresh insights. He preached Modernism to a reluctant American public.

The wars and the Depression posed setbacks, but in retrospect, nothing kept this pragmatic designer from finding new ways to survive and flourish. One critic said Frankl "made junk sing!" An example was his redesign of a pushcart to sell hotdogs in New York City at the height of the Depression. The idea was born at a modest party for professionals where hotdogs were served from a cart and designer Donald Deskey played bartender, dispensing bathtub gin. Frankl had refashioned a decrepit cart he managed to obtain into something more functional than those available for rent. Placed in his office window, Frankl's redesigned cart attracted amused crowds. He offered his version for sale until others copied it.

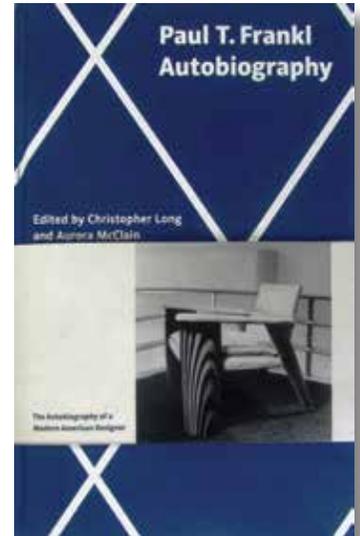
lone Robinson, an employee in the Frankl Galleries at 4 East 8th Street just off 5th Avenue in New York City, remarked, "He has the most amazing way of making everything look chic and of making people buy things that frighten them." Frankl lectured across the country admitting he "never missed an opportunity to present my ideas [on Modernism] to a placidly interested public," a reminder of how conservative America was at the time. When Americans returned from Europe after visiting the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, he saw the opportunity to design furnishings appropriate to the modern buildings under construction. He brought in fabrics and ideas from Europe and designed vignettes demonstrating their use in combination with his own furniture.

Interior design became Frankl's specialty and his output included remarkable examples that were copied by followers and his own students. In describing his approach, he stated: "Decorating... is the process of eliminating."

As Frankl stated in his lectures, "My real aim, with my architectural background, lay in designing furniture, a highly specialized field. From the very outset I had the field completely to myself." Although his claims may be exaggerated, his accomplishments were many. Known for his "Skyscraper Furniture," Frankl describes how it evolved and became a success. Despite his efforts, knockoffs of his designs denied him copyright protection.

Although he complained of a lack of money, Frankl traveled

widely in Asia and Europe. And he owned a humble retreat in the Catskills, where he entertained professional colleagues. After many years in New York, he moved to Los Angeles in 1934 where he opened a shop near Rodeo Drive. He collaborated with many leading architects and retained a remarkable friendship with Frank Lloyd Wright. He knew everyone from Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and the United States. This "fussy little man with a Viennese accent" charmed many, sold more, and never stopped promoting Modernism.



This book is a must read for anyone interested in the modern design era. ■

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