

An abstract black line drawing on a red background. The drawing consists of several overlapping, curved lines that form a sense of movement and depth. A prominent horizontal line runs across the middle, with other lines curving above and below it. The overall effect is that of a gestural, expressive sketch.

VLADIMIR  
KAGAN

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, new opportunities greet Kagan, who concentrates on building his own brands—The Classic Collection and Kagan Couture. Kagan expands his design work into the realm of fine art, creating sculptures and limited edition art-furniture for Ralph Pucci in the United States, and the Carpenter Workshops in Paris and London. As an octogenarian, Kagan has no plans to retire.



## KAGAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As my production was never large, there are relatively few pieces of my vintage designs available in the marketplace. As a result, connoisseurs and museums have been eagerly collecting what is available. My designs are represented in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Pasadena Art Institutes, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Chicago Athenaeum, the Victoria and Albert Museum of Art in London, the Vitra Design Museum, and Die Neue Sammlung in Munich.

Today, my designs are becoming chic trappings in the homes of movie stars, fashion designers, writers, and Wall Street tycoons. I am in the private collections of Barbara Jakobson of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, film director David Lynch, actors and actresses Dan Aykroyd, Julianne Moore, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, as well as musicians Sir Elton John and David Bowie. Fashion designers Tom Ford, Donna Karan, Giorgio Armani, Elie Tahari, Roberto Cavalli, Anna Fendi, and Tommy Hilfiger—all also own my work. It is obviously very satisfying to be so well represented in the homes of the glitterati, but most important, my furniture is also in the homes of the thousands of people who have found pleasure and comfort in my interpretation of the modern idiom.

## THE DESIGN PROCESS

Inspiration often comes at the eleventh hour. I work in a succession of high-intensity spurts, followed by a prolonged lull. When will the next inspiration come? Miraculously, the challenge creates the opportunity. A new burst of adrenaline kicks in—and away I go.

My design process starts off loosely. Working on rolls of yellow onionskin tracing paper (which I affectionately call my “Dead Sea Scrolls”), I begin with a random idea, doodling whatever comes to mind—regardless of its applicability. I work in broad strokes toward a vortex, refining a thought as it evolves, followed by variations on the theme. These are my beginnings. I then fine-tune each concept. Once the design has been accepted, I try to make the end product come as close to the drawing as possible. My greatest satisfaction is when the sketch looks as though I had drawn it from the final piece, instead of the other way around.

As much of my furniture is amorphous, I often create miniature clay models of the design to examine their overall volume and proportions. Scale drawings and full-size patterns follow the modeling phase. Architects nowadays love to work with virtual reality and

computer-generated visual graphics. I enjoy working in touchable materials. By preference, I am a pen and paper designer and enjoy working on a drawing board. Nonetheless, I do not ignore the advantages of AutoCAD as an indispensable tool, and I intersperse it freely with pencil and paper in my studio. I have recently added a 3D printer to my repertoire of tools, which gives me the opportunity to study a design in infinite detail and fine-tune it before going into production.

I sometimes do my best work under duress, and in less than comfortable quarters. On one occasion I was flying from New York to the West Coast to meet with a manufacturer. I needed scale drawings for their production manager. Though elbow room in economy seats is limited, I managed to create all of the specifications for the upcoming meeting using my ever-ready portable drafting set. The pressure of time is often a stimulus for the creative juices. The airplane in particular is one of my favorite offices.

I am a disciplined person, but it is often difficult to get into a creative mood in an organized manner. Before I can even think of getting started, I compulsively clean my desk, answer letters that have gone unanswered for weeks, return phone calls, sort fabric samples, and basically deal with everything but the task at hand. This prep process can take days.

When it comes to developing new ideas, I tend to “shoot from the hip” by doodling on my Dead Sea Scrolls. Inspiration sometimes comes from a client’s expressed desires: Other times I wake up in the morning with an idea burning in my mind.

## A TEN-YEAR CYCLE

My life seems to have run in ten-year cycles, so it is fitting that the first *The Complete Kagan* sold out on the tenth anniversary of its publication. My creativity has blossomed since then, and my health is in fine fettle. I do admit that walking has become difficult due to spinal back problems—probably a byproduct of my years of jogging—but that has not slowed me down. I manage to hobble about on two ski poles, the only remnant of my favorite sport. Unfortunately, the lack of sporting activity and a passion for food, including martinis and chocolate, have made me a few pounds heavier than I would like to be. I realize that, although I may be disciplined in my work, I am less so in my eating. I still race my sailboat with my son Illya as crew and tactician, and my lovely agile granddaughters on board to tackle the spinnaker.

## THE KAGAN ARCHIVE MUSEUM

In the past ten years, I have moved my offices twice: first from Long Island City in New York, to Paterson, New Jersey, and then from Paterson



Erica and Vladimir enjoying an afternoon in a Swiss mountain cafe.

to a spacious loft in Clifton, New Jersey, a twenty-four thousand-square-foot loft on the top floor of a hundred-year-old silk mill building, drenched in sunlight, with 24-foot-high ceilings. The bare space was irresistible, and though I was reluctant to undertake a second move within five years, it was love at first sight and I instantly acquiesced to one more move.

The new space is home for our offices, factory, and my fledgling Archive Museum. The latter has been the fulfillment of a lifetime dream. I have been collecting my designs for many years—a piece here, another there—some through private purchases, others through auctions as they became available, and a few through donations by the grateful siblings of departed clients. Unfortunately, my collecting has not been as aggressive as I might have liked and I have stupidly missed some rare opportunities. Thanks to my many clients and fans, my reputation has blossomed over the past ten years, which explains why I can’t afford to buy back some of my own designs at auctions, having come into high demand on an international basis.

## VLADIMIR THE BLOGGER

In recent years, I have discovered a dormant gift. Writing! This should not be entirely surprising, as I had written this book some ten years earlier. Writing has filled the gap left by my lack of athletic endeavors. To my surprise, I actually enjoy writing, and find myself publishing a bi-monthly blog, which might effectively be called “Vladi’s Ramblings.” These “essays” cover diverse subjects: car shows, gun shows, controversial political issues, and the equally taboo topic of religion. I am irreverent and write on whatever amuses me. The next blog entry might cover an art show, or designers I have

met and liked. Occasionally, there will be a blog entry about my own work. Truthfully, I am amazed at the faithful following I have amassed.

## WORKING WITH CLIENTS AND DESIGNERS

From the beginning of my design career, I have always enjoyed the one-on-one interactions with my clients. Interpreting their needs has kept me on my toes and always moved my designs forward.

Angelina Jolie called me on my cell phone, while I was driving to Nantucket. I had no idea who she was! My children set me straight in short time. Brad and Angelina wanted me to come up with ideas of furniture as Christmas presents for their children, for their house in New Orleans. I suggested five “Baby Rock-star” rocking chairs. These were so successful that the following year Angelina asked, “What can you suggest for the kids in our Bel Air house?” I recommended a complete set of miniature classic Kagan furniture, which would not only serve their toddler years, but last into their adolescence.



Serpentine sofa and ottoman and a Sculptured table in Seattle, WA.

Encouraged by my favorite muse, interior designer Amy Lau, I have expanded a consultancy service designed to create one-of-a-kind furnishings for a selected clientele. I develop unique, often-complex solutions that become the focal point of a room. No longer constrained by the reality of cost vs. utility, my creativity has become boundless. Life is not boring as an octogenarian! Amy Lau brought me an intimidating project—create seating for an over-the-top Loft-Penthouse for Michael Hirtenstein. My furniture was to be reminiscent of a classic Kagan, but unique and commensurate with his breathtaking space. The sofas needed to seat guests facing in multiple directions, allowing views of the swimmers in the pool; serving as lounge seating for the bar; and focusing guests toward the center of the living room, toward a unique sculptured piano.

I have collaborated on a number of prestigious projects with Amy, including a new show-room in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and a duplex Park Avenue apartment for one of New York’s major art collectors featuring singular Kagan sofas.

Architect Edda Elias commissioned me to create a sofa perched in the middle of a living room, designed to serve three focal points. I envisioned a majestic volcano surrounded by a sea, similar to the Big Island of Hawaii. This piece of soft sculpture coincidentally became a playground for the family’s children.

A huge, open loft space needed a back-to-back sofa incorporating a fireplace setting with a pool table and a 3,000-bottle wine cellar. Architect David Howell and his wife, Steffani Aarons, came to me for a solution. The solution was the combination of a custom back-to-back Serpentine with a specially designed linear sofa featuring a bridge-bench in front of the fireplace. The second floor of this duplex loft was devoted to a giant seating area using a half-dozen colorful Omnibus sections—a fun gathering for family and friends.

Partner’s desks, revolving bedrooms, multi-level and serpentine sofas, have all become a part of my vocabulary. The creative mind doesn’t stop. Unlike architecture that has longevity, much of my interior and furniture design work has become installation art—here today and gone tomorrow.

## THE PASSING OF ERICA

Life is not always a bed of roses. I lost my darling wife, Erica, of 54 years just before Christmas 2011. With typical Erica bravado, we were partying one night and she was gone the next. Not easy for me to digest, but wonderful for her.

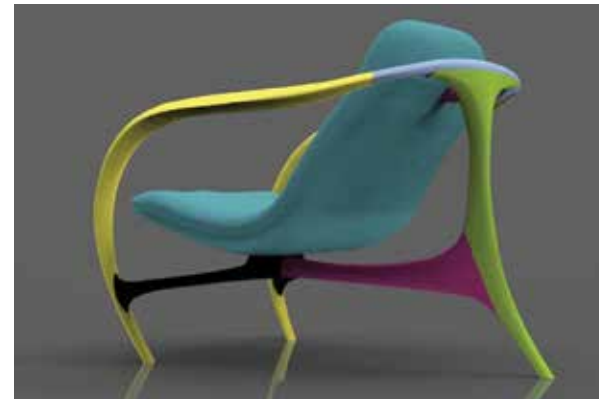
We were inseparable. We worked together—played together—she was my best muse, always encouraging in my work. I was her sounding board. I loved her work, and helped her in any way I could. She was tireless in her pursuit of beauty in her field of needlework. Fifty years ago she created correspondence courses for crewel embroidery. These became the foundation for her needlework empire. Her first book, *Crewel Embroidery*, was a national best seller and sold over one million copies. She gave classes and lectures throughout the United States. Erica was a dynamo. She never stopped working. She wrote twenty books and had her own television series for WGBH and BBC worldwide. She had a syndicated newspaper column called “Ask Erica.” She designed kits that were sold in every department store in America. She had four needlework stores and Erica Wilson Needle Works in Nantucket is still flourishing today. For her salubrious private clientele she created hundreds of needlework projects. She designed kneelers and vestments for churches

including the National Cathedral in Washington, and even designed yarmulkes and matzo covers for the Jewish Museum in New York.

Since her death I have had a team of museum archivists document over 2000 examples of her work. The plan is to make contributions to several institutions, including the American Archives of the Smithsonian’s Museum of National History, the Winterthur Museum of Art, the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Nantucket Historical Association. Her legacy will live long past her untimely death.

## LIFE IS NOT BORING AS AN OCTOGENARIAN!

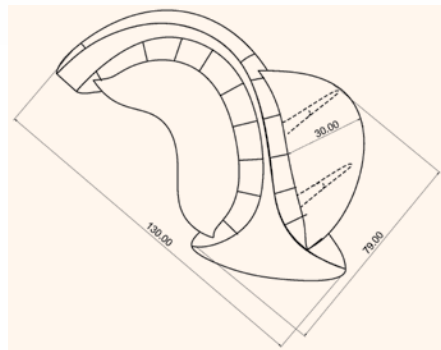
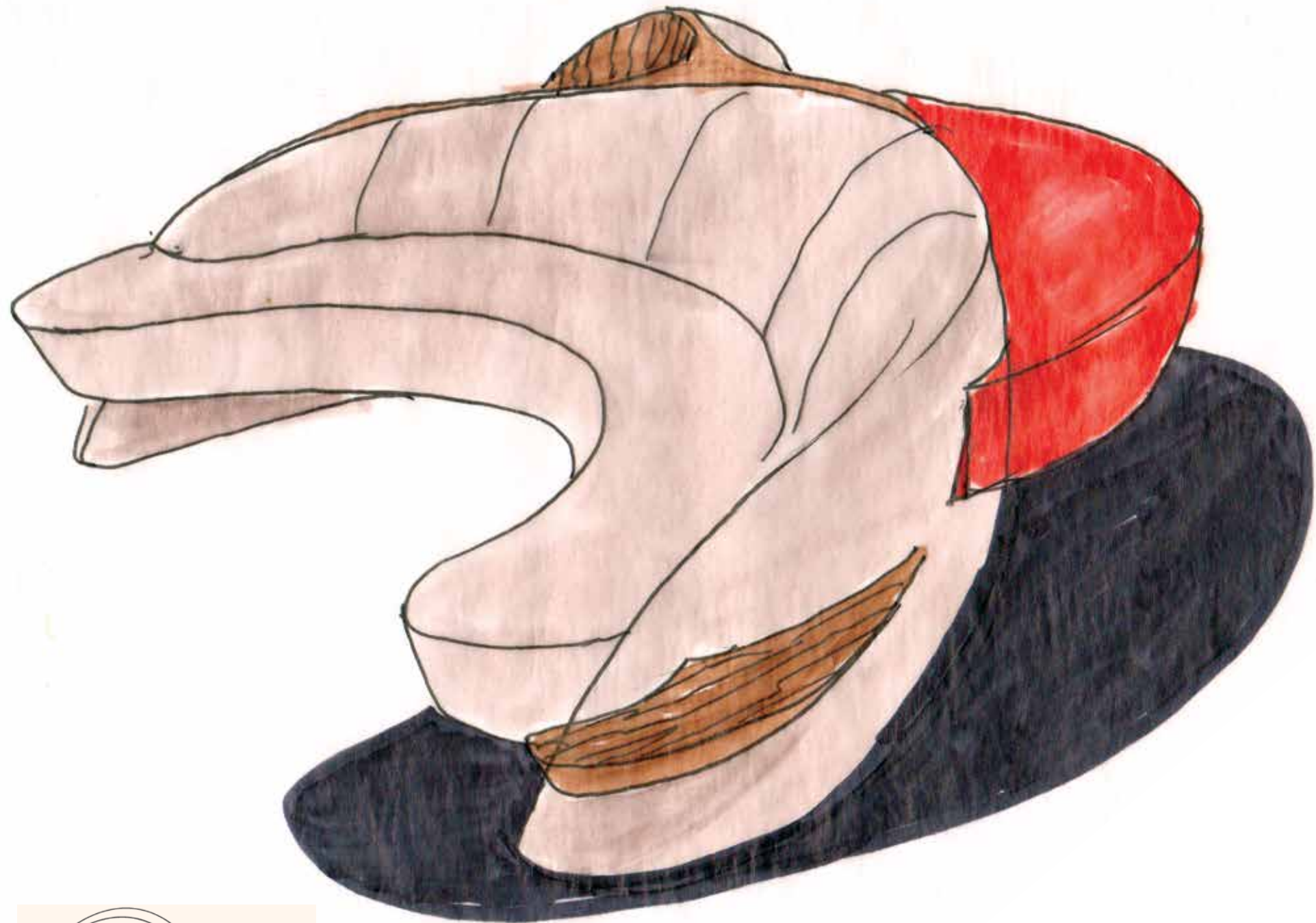
Reinventing oneself is difficult as architects Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry have surely found out. Clients come to you for what you have done and your recognizable signature. Deviate too far from that and you are toast—repeating previous successes, and you become one-dimensional—finding the path in-between is the challenge.



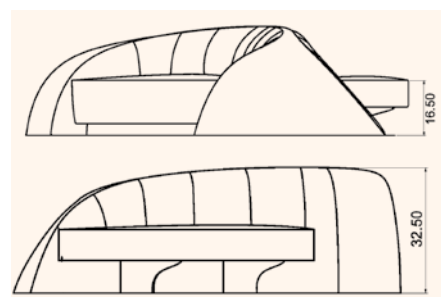
Computer rendering of the Gabriella chair, available in walnut in 2015.



Kagan with a clay model of the Gabriella chair, also to be cast in bronze.



ABOVE A sketch illustrates the design solution for the back-to-back sofas that New York interior designer Amy Lau commissioned for Michael Hirtenstein, one of her clients.



LEFT Computer-generated mechanical drawings were the next step for the back-to-back sofas.

RIGHT One of the sofas was photographed while under construction in the factory.

OPPOSITE Hirtenstein joined Kagan in the factory during the first phase of the construction of the sofas.





PREVIOUS PAGES A palatial living room with a 20-foot high ceiling is the focus of the Hirtenstein New York triplex, designed by Amy Lau, who commissioned the spectacular sofas.

RIGHT The dining area, with its grey travertine walls, in the Hirtenstein loft is furnished with a 14-foot long dining table with a two-inch-thick glass top on bronze pedestal bases by Silas Seandel. The Kagan T-back dining chairs date from about 1970. The hanging lighting fixture is a 1960s FontanaArte.

