

NAN SWID / SWID POWELL



In 1982, after a three-year stint at Knoll International, where she spearheaded a campaign to enlist contemporary architects to design furniture collections, Nan Swid left the venerable furniture manufacturer with her colleague Addie Powell and founded Swid-Powell Design in a glass-roofed penthouse, designed by Joe D'Urso, perched atop a brownstone on East 57th Street in Manhattan. Swid's idea was to invite a high-profile roster of architects to design small-scale "tabletop" objects—from porcelain place-settings to silver candlesticks, from drip coffee makers to formal tea services, from platters and pitchers to picture frames.

Over the next decade, Swid's star rose as she enlisted—through passion, persuasion, and persistence—some 45 architects for the cause, making accessible to the mass market the sometimes esoteric sensibilities of Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Steven Holl, Richard Meier, Gwathmey Siegel, Robert A.M. Stern, Michael Graves, Ettore Sottsass, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.... By the time Swid was finished in the mid-1990s, Rizzoli had published a monograph, *Swid Powell: Objects by Architects*, with an essay by Paul Goldberger, then the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, and Swid-Powell products were turning up on MTV in Madonna music videos. "It was perfect timing, with perfect products," according to John Stuart Gordon, decorative arts curator at Yale University Art Gallery, where the Swid-Powell archives are now housed. "These were aspirational products for an aspirational time."

The experiment that was Swid-Powell may have come to an end, but, according to Yale, it deserves its place in history: "Its blend of architecture, fashion, and decorative arts made it arguably the most important American design undertaking of the 1980s."

