

Ms. Baltensweiler, how did you start designing lamps?

Indirectly actually, via a detour. I attended Wilhelm Kienzle's class in interior architecture and industrial design at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts from 1945 to 1948. Our training involved making plans for interiors and designing furniture. We had a wood shop and I was supposed to start working on wooden furniture. But I was a bit stubborn. I preferred to experiment with metal pipes instead, using them to design a chair, and I had a workshop outside of school make the chair. My brother, who was ten years older than I was, was working as an architect and had been commissioned to do the interior of a lobby. When he saw my chair, he wanted to use it right away. After completing my studies, I first worked for Amman Architects in Lucerne and in 1949 I joined Max Bill's architecture firm. That was a very exciting time. Among other things, I started working on a chair in wood again. I also had the opportunity to help out at the 4th triennial in Milan. The people I met, international exhibitors and artists, and my conversations with them had a great influence on my professional future. I also met my future husband Rico around the same time. We knew pretty quickly that we wanted to get married and spend our lives together. Rico was an electrical engineer and had begun to work as a civil servant for the federal railways. However, the conservative career of a civil servant didn't really appeal to him. There I was in Milan, in the midst of big city life, and there he was, a civil servant in little Switzerland. We wanted to find something we could do together. He carefully studied Max Bill's writings on the notion of "gute Form" [good design]. And after he saw the lamps Bill had designed, Rico said, "We can do a better job." And so we joined forces and designed a lamp.

CG: Can you tell me something about this process and your first lamp?

Originally we had created it for ourselves. We were living in Lucerne in a building that once housed public baths. It was on an island in the middle of the Reuss River. We had the whole back portion of the elongated building's upper floor to ourselves. Since we worked and lived there, I refurbished and furnished the interior accordingly. It was a really big room, which is why we designed a lamp with a wide range of movement. Rico came up with the idea of a construction with six joints. I brought my knowledge of proportions to the project, for example, concerning the design of the lampshade. The lamp's heavy metal base ensures stability and the counterweight on one of the slender metal rods always maintains the balance. The lampshade can

be turned in all directions. It's an extremely flexible lamp that can actually do everything. It can be very flat with the shade turned to the side and it can be stretched straight up to illuminate the ceiling. Or you can aim the shade down at a slant for direct light. It covers an area of about 73 inches in diameter. Later we named it Type 600 because it has six axes of movement.

How did your Type 600 manage to attract attention outside of your own home?

We soon realized that the lamp was pretty unusual at the time and a lot of my friends—architects, designers, and interior architects—showed an interest in it. So we produced our first small series. It was soon pictured in magazines, for example in *Bauen + Wohnen*, and on the cover page of the *Schweizer Warenkatalog* of the Werkbund [Swiss Association of Designers]. At some point Rudolf Graber, co-founder of the Zurich furniture store Wohnbedarf, got in touch and placed an order for a series of Type 600 lamps, because he had all kinds of furniture in stock but not enough lamps. Then Knoll International saw the lamp at Wohnbedarf and ordered it as well. In those days, Knoll International had high-end furniture stores in Stuttgart, Paris, Milan, and, of course, in the United States. The success of Type 600 gave us the impetus to continue designing lamps. At the same time, we wanted to start a family. With two children, we needed to find a balance between work life and starting a family.

So how did your family and business develop?

It had become too dangerous for the children to live in a building in the middle of the Reuss. We had the opportunity to buy a chalet in Ebikon. Once again, I changed everything around. We set up a workshop and our production in the cellar. For us, living and working were always closely linked. This had the advantage that I was able to keep working in our business while looking after the four children we had by then. At first, Rico was still working for the railway. We didn't have the courage to do without the security of his income yet. He spent time in the workshop on the side, when he was off work. And I took care of distributing the lamps and the correspondence, and of the children. So we were both doing two or even three jobs at once. There were lots of times when we worked through the night. Later we were able to buy another small chalet next door and expand the workshop. We added extensions to it on all sides. And like before, I did all the planning. We lived in the first chalet and worked in the second one, which meant I could always keep an eye on the children. Then in the early 1960s, Rico was able to work only half days. More and more of our architect friends were commissioning us to plan the lighting for them. This combination of producing lamps and planning gave us the courage to take the leap and become independent.

How would you describe the collaboration with your husband?

I was his instructor, he was my instructor. We learned a great deal from each other. Rico learned about form and design from me; I learned about technical creativity from him. After a while, the two aspects fused completely. It was such a pleasure to work together and having a co-designer was always very important to me. I wanted to have a partner I could talk to and discuss decisions with. We made all the prototypes together; ideas and solutions emerged in the course of our conversations. We determined whose idea was better and then pursued it. The fact that we kept at it and that it all worked out might have been my doing, though. Rico was so creative and had a lot of interests. So many other things were important to him. For example, we had a sailboat in the garden because Rico wanted to invent an extremely efficient sail, and he repaired old cars that he bought at a junkyard in our front yard. He also had some crazy ideas like inventing a cream to grow back hair, a machine to make chocolate bars for a friend, or a machine to polish telescope mirrors.

What kind of lamps came after the first floor lamp?

The impetus for developing new lamps came from the needs of our customers. Mr. Graber of Wohnbedarf told us he urgently needed table lamps, so in 1958 we designed a smaller version of our first floor lamp and just dropped a zero, naming it Type 60. About five years later the department store Globus approached us and said they wanted to renew their product line and integrate "gute Form" into their department store. We thought that was very interesting, because the first lamp had quickly become a kind of prestige object, a status symbol for a certain social class, which was something that didn't appeal to us. Later it was often sold together with Le Corbusier furniture. Practically every time you saw the lamp, you could be sure that a Le Corbusier couch was not far away. We never had a Le Corbusier couch ourselves. It was too expensive. It was our political conviction, to make "gute Form" that was affordable for everybody. So when Globus launched a competition in 1961, called "Form 61," I created the table lamp, Pentarkus. And it actually won. After this, orders for lamps and lighting projects started coming in from all over. These projects generally required custom-made production, which didn't always cover the costs but were a driving force for the development of new lamps. For example, in 1977 we were commissioned to design the lighting for the lobby of the theater in Zurich, the Schauspielhaus. Since we couldn't find anything suitable, we designed the lamps ourselves.

What was it like for you in those days?

All these experiments and the production were a pleasure; it was great fun. From 1970 onwards, with the eight employees that we had in the meantime, we produced all of the lamps ourselves, and also handled sales and distribution. That was a lot of

work. We really wanted to make affordable lamps, but we were a small company. The growing demand for small, inexpensive table lamps, sold at a price that barely covered production costs, took its toll. And our lighting projects didn't cover expenses either. As a result, we were on the brink of financial ruin.

How did you react to this situation?

We were faced with a choice. Either Rico would work as an electrical engineer again and I would take a job in interior architecture or we would try producing large floor lamps, simplifying their mechanics, and improving on our calculations. Customers are generally prepared to spend more money on larger lamps although it doesn't necessarily cost less to make a small lamp. From then on, our finances started recovering. New materials like PVC gave us novel ideas for development and design. For example, the Guggerli, an extremely simplified series based on PVC pipes that are commercially available in specific lengths. Kovacs on Madison Avenue in New York even put it on display and sold it along with Type 600. We started selling large quantities right away. But then with the oil crisis in 1973, plastic and the PVC pipes that we were using became so expensive that we had to abandon the Guggerli series. The same applied to other lamps that we designed largely with PVC. So you're always having to adapt to a changing economy.

You mentioned the oil crisis in 1973. Did that make you start thinking about energy efficiency?

That was an issue for us even before the crisis and before the Club of Rome published their memorable report, *The Limits to Growth*, in 1972. When the lighting industry introduced the more efficient halogen rod in 1970, we took up the challenge and created the new Halo series, for instance, the floor lamp Halo 250. At the time, halogen was the most effective incandescent light source. Our design was adapted to the shape of the halogen rod. But since there was no prefabricated socket that we could have used, we designed our own to match the elongated shape of the rod. The reflector consists of two wings permanently integrated into the socket. The slits on top were not decorative but inserted to prevent burning your fingers when you touched it. So they became part of the design. The lamp could revolve on its own axis and be raised or lowered on the stand. You could rotate it to face the wall or the ceiling for direct or indirect light. The light source was sufficient enough to illuminate an entire room, which made Halo an extremely powerful reading lamp as well. We even had customers with impaired vision who really appreciated the lamp. It was a turning point for us.

In 1984 you introduced your first fluorescent lamp, the Manhattan. How did you come up with this design?

When Rico was working as an electrician for the railways, he already had to use the most efficient

light sources and in those days, that was the fluorescent tube. But it was out of the question for domestic applications until flicker-free ballasts and new, more pleasant colors came on the market. That's when we developed the Manhattan. We were aware of the disadvantages of fluorescent lighting because it produces diffuse light all around which is not suitable for living areas. We are used to direct rays of sunlight. So the challenge was to use fluorescent tubes to generate highly focused light as well as efficient overall light. We upended the tube and had the light shine through a perforated sheet. The use of the lamp was more limited because of its reduced functionality. You could put it on the floor and have the light shine on the wall.

Your husband died unexpectedly in 1987 and the Manhattan was the last lamp you designed together. How did your operations change after that?

I didn't want to run the company alone and I didn't want to disappoint the thirteen employees we had by that time either. They had become my friends. So I was relieved when my daughter Karin and my son Gabriel decided to join me in continuing the business. Karin taught arts and crafts and Gabriel was an art teacher, so they both had an education in art, and they knew our operations inside out. They had always helped ever since they were children and later earned their allowance that way. So it was a new kind of partnership that I really appreciated. Karin modernized the administration of the business by digitalizing the orders and introducing CAD. Gabriel helped primarily in the development and design of new lamps. Later designers joined us, in particular Lukas Niederberger. I have ten grandchildren in total and four of them are working in the company today. Ilario and Ria are in the process of taking over the management of the business, Colin and Fabian are working in the CNC workshop. When the company moved from Ebikon to Lucerne, I retired from the day-to-day operations. Since 2013, my involvement has been limited to consulting in matters of design.

What was the next important lamp after Halo 250?

That was Aladin. In the 1980s fluorescent lighting went a step further with the introduction of compact fluorescent light bulbs, for which we also created a new lamp. I think we were the first to order them in quantity from Osram. Like the Manhattan, we worked with perforated sheet-metal again, but this time the metal was finely perforated. Through the holes, Aladin produces very beautiful, indirect, upward lighting as well as soft downward light. Like the Manhattan, Aladin was not very successful for use in the home but this floor lamp became a trendsetter in office lighting. We did very well by it for a whole decade and had wonderful planning commissions in this connection as well. But then at some point others started making similar lamps and we realized we couldn't be competitive in the field of office lighting. It's a sector that works primarily through bidding and, of course, the lowest bidder wins. We knew we couldn't compete. Thanks

to the success of Aladin and Halo, we were able to finance a new building in 1996. But to stay competitive we had to create more lamps for domestic applications again where the lowest price isn't the highest priority.

When did you switch to LED?

The first white LEDs for lamps came out in the year 2000. Our transition to LED technology is thanks to my son Gabriel. He is very interested in new technologies and he always keeps an eye on what the industry has to offer. We developed our first LED lamp in 2003, the Zett. In 2010, we converted another one of our lamps to LED, the Topolino from 2003, which had been fitted with the new, smaller, and more efficient low-voltage halogen bulbs. Now we call it the Topoled. That was the last lamp where I was still fully involved in the design. I'm very proud of it because it's minimal, handy, and lightweight. The stand can be telescoped and you can roll up the cable. We also converted the Halo 250 to LED. At first LED was just slightly more efficient than a halogen bulb; now it's already almost ten times better. Practically all of our lamps have LED now. You can now even screw a retrofit LED light bulb into our current Type 600 model.

You have always kept abreast of technical innovations. Did they keep coming faster?

Not only faster but more and more. That can be a problem. And, of course, it's related to what's fashionable as well. The Bauhaus philosophy—on which the idea of "gute Form" was based—was not about being fashionable: it was about creating objects that would last, not least because of their functional design. But now even Bauhaus has become a matter of fashion. Or rather degraded to one. Basically, you can never be unfashionable. Fashion and the economy always play off of each other. If we want to survive as a design business, we are prisoners, as it were, of our economic system. And our economic system demands constant change. These new light sources offered the industry new, lucrative sources of income. Just look at the price of an old-fashioned light bulb and a halogen bulb; there's a huge difference. Not only in the light bulb itself but also as regards the components required for it to work. The lightbulb works by itself but the halogen lamp with a regulator requires an electronic component. This gave electronic suppliers a new market presence. In the case of LED it's even more extreme, because it requires new and even more complex electronics. And the electronics are constantly improving, the LEDs are becoming more efficient, the color of the light has changed from cold and unpleasant to the incandescent lighting that we are used to. That's a wonderful development but things are changing so fast that, for example, the little Zett lamp has had to be modified five times since 2003 with new generations of drivers and LEDs. That's a huge challenge for the development team and unfortunately there is less and less time for creative investment in new products.

You are describing the entanglement of design in the increasingly accelerated developments of a consumer economy. Does that affect how you look back on your life and work as a designer?

I've experienced so much. I saw the Zeppelin flying over my hometown of Bremgarten and then the first airplanes. That was a big sensation. Today these objects are museum pieces at most. A technological revolution has taken place in the course of my life—practically unnoticed. There were more and more, bigger and bigger, faster and faster airplanes and then faster and faster, bigger and bigger, more and more beautiful cars, bigger and bigger monitors, more sophisticated computers, not to mention all the generations of cell phones. And the garbage dumps are getting bigger and bigger, too. Did it have to be like that, economic growth at all costs? Too much waste, given the fact that the world population has doubled in the same period of time. Naturally, my generation, and that means me as well, has to ask: how could we allow this to happen? In any case, it's perfectly clear that we, as hard-working and at best committed perpetrators, stumbled into this economic boom. Specifically in reference to our team, looking at the models from our archives did make me feel a little pensive. Only a very few of them have stood the test of time and are still on the market. The others are on sale at high prices in secondhand stores or online design portals. As a reaction to our consumer society, we offer a reasonable repair service for all of our "old-timers." The upcoming generation of designers and makers now has the opportunity, but also the obligation, to continue focusing more on quality and less on quantity with respect to consumer goods. And as far as design is concerned, we can certainly still benefit from the legacy of the German Bauhaus and its Swiss offshoot "gute Form."

What was it like for you to receive this award?

I was somewhat startled. I had already stopped being part of the production process long ago. But it was also exciting for me to look back at my work and to unearth old designs from the archives. There's a story behind every lamp. I lined up all the lamps by the year in which they were designed. Now, with our staff, we're going to assess the new prototypes in the light of their successful predecessors. To be honest, I initially considered turning down the award, because actually it's not my work. Everything has always been a shared undertaking. First with Rico and our motivated, hard-working employees, then with Karin, Gabriel, and the designers. It's working together on development that I always enjoyed so much. And that's what made it hard for me to accept this award. It is the collaborative process of design that has enriched my life.