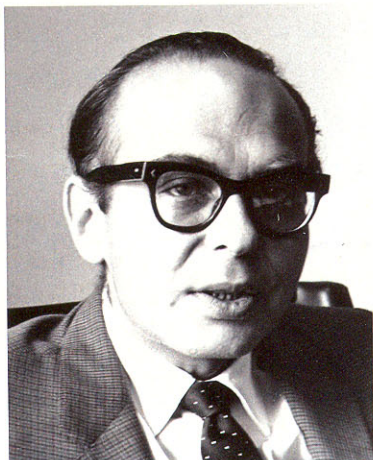


# BY GEORGE, KOVACS WAS ONE IN A MILLION!

The industry remembers one of its finest.



he lighting world lost a friend, mentor, and true legend on June 22 when George Kovacs, the jovial manufacturer, designer, and importer of modern lighting, succumbed to emphysema in his Manhattan home. He left behind a loving wife, Barbara, a son, Peter, a daughter Elizabeth, three grandchildren, and innumerable friends,

*"I can't imagine life without George. Even as a shadow, he is always present in my daily experience. I utter his sayings. I live with his wit and his admonishments in my alter ego. I recite all of the creative and original lines, metaphors, definitions, and declarations that became part of our language and of our Kovacs family culture. I know that so much of what I am is what came from him" — Robert Sonneman*

colleagues, and acquaintances whose lives he had touched. He was known not only for his contributions to the industry, such as introducing the halogen torchiere to the U.S., but for his constant wit as well, which was often evident in his innovative styles.

Designers flocked to work with him because of his unique perspective and amazing eye. His European view of both celebrating and promoting the designer was one of the reasons so many wanted to be associated with him. Design integrity was imperative to George.

It was the combination of his professional and personal qualities that made him an icon in the business for

more than 50 years. "Anyone who met George immediately noticed his quick wit and incredible sense of humor," says Alecia Wesner, his business partner and one of his lead designers. "There were so many incredible qualities that I loved about George. For one, he was a walking history of modern design."

Born on December 23, 1926 in Vienna, George had just turned 11 when Hitler invaded Austria. George was sent to a foster home in England, where his mother eventually joined him and re-married an interior architect Fred Rotter. It was Rotter who introduced George to lighting.

After the war, the family moved to America with a mere \$80 to their name. They made ends meet by cleaning furniture until his stepfather secured work as an interior designer.

George's lighting career began humbly when he found a job in a lamp store paying him \$50 a week. He met

his future wife, Barbara, who was a fine art major at Cooper Union. Their first year of marriage was spent in Austria, where Barbara

was studying on a Fulbright Scholarship. Meanwhile, George took design courses with associates of Josef Hoffmann, an Austrian architect, designer, and craftsman known for his passion for geometrical forms.

The couple returned to the U.S. in 1954, after George agreed to market lamps by J.T. Kalmar, a respected Austrian manufacturer. The products sold well, being that there were not many sources for contemporary portables. This success allowed George to open several stores in Manhattan and eventually a factory in Queens.

The business flourished and George began importing lamps from all over the world, representing well-

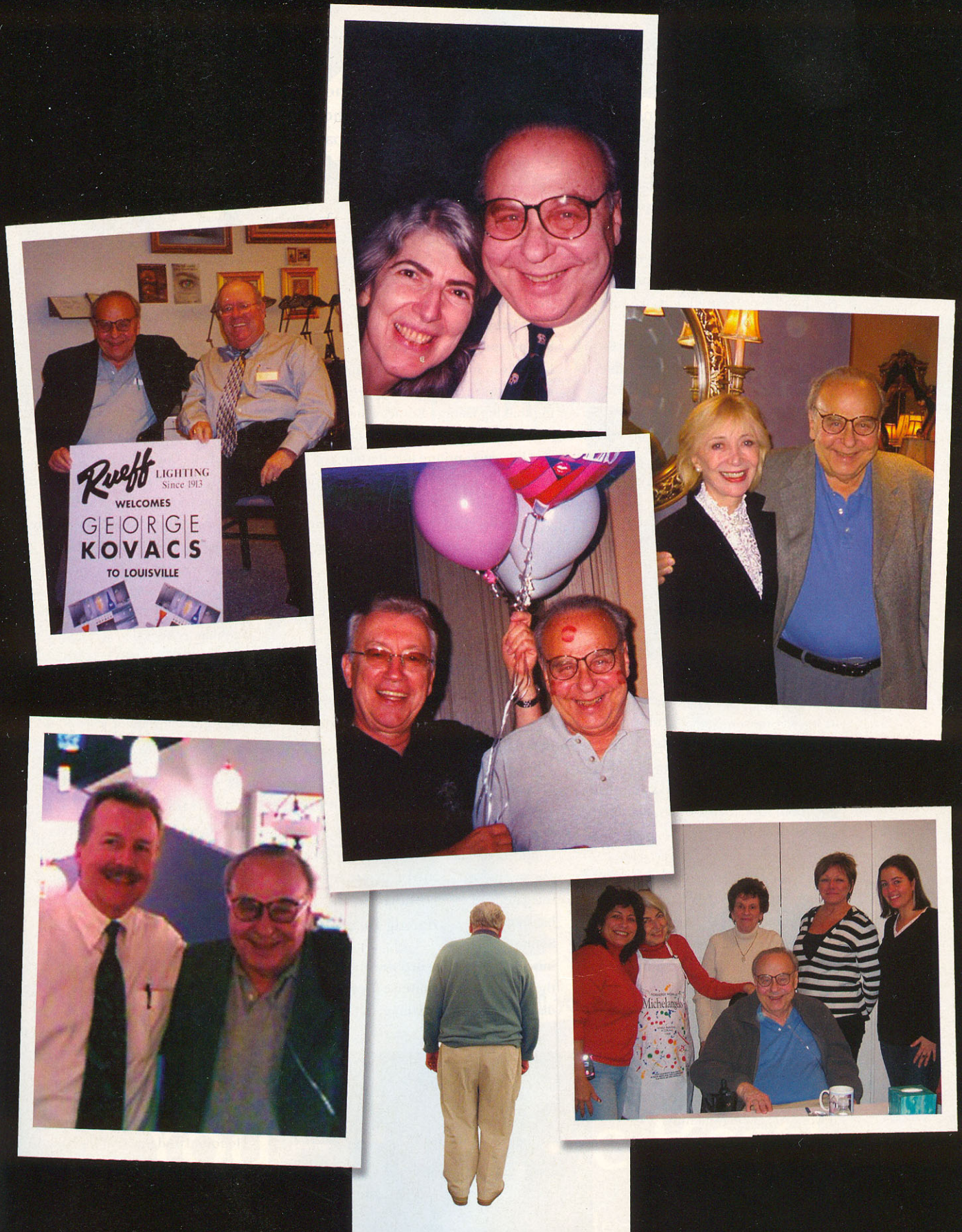
known artists like Ingo Maurer and Isamu Noguchi. Later, he also collaborated with designers including architect Robert Sonneman and artisans Harry Allen and Karim Rashid. When it became uneconomical to manufacture in Queens, the factory was closed. He formed a design partnership with Wesner and licensed the company name to The Minka Group.

"He was one of the last American manufacturers, the last of the breed. You don't find much production in the States anymore and American design is suffering for the loss," Harry Allen notes. Location wasn't the only aspect of George's business that made it stand out from the rest. "The dialogue has gone out of the design process and much of the fun," Allen continues. "Meetings with George were always fun. He believed in design and knew what it took to sell it. He knew his business inside and out and a meeting with him would span every aspect of the relationship from design to financial reports."

Through it all, George's sense of humor never wavered. That wit is frequently found in the naming of his lamps. "Many years ago I did a series of lamps titled 'Holy' because they were [made with] perforated metal







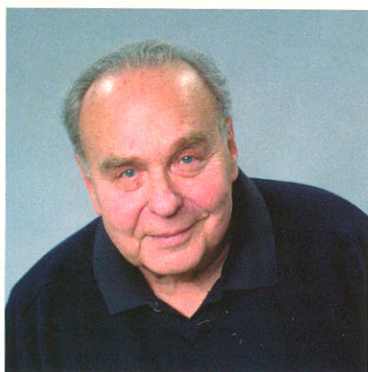
*Thanks for the Memories...George*  
*The Minka Group®*



"I was fortunate enough to travel with George. I really loved that we had to get to every flight hours before everyone else. George wanted to be the first one on the plane even though we were not flying first class. We devised a scheme where he would act more decrepit than usual and I would carry all of our bags together. He would tell the attendant that he needed my assistance to board and we'd be whisked right onto the plane. As soon as we were seated, we'd giggle like two little kids" — Alecia Wesner

holes. George agreed to have himself photographed in an angel costume and loved every second of it," Wesner recounts.

His quirkiness was also evident in the unique "half-toy half-lamp" called the Wobble that he designed in 1971.



Its bulb-shaped base was mirrored by a bare bulb and George boasted that its unsteadiness was what made it fun, according to the obituary printed in *The New York Times*. That one-of-a-kind drollness was legendary and something that those who knew George have always remembered.

Robert Sonneman, the acclaimed lighting designer of Sonneman Design Group, whose work has been displayed in museums and featured in movies, also was greatly influenced by George and remembers his good nature. "In 1961, at 19 years old and just one day out of the Navy, I answered an ad in *The New York Times*. A day later, as the only employee for his contemporary lamp store, George handed me a broom on my first morning at work. Years later, he hung a sign in the window: 'Robert Sonneman swept here.'"

Jason Feldman, director of style, innovation, and design for The Home Depot, shares his own tale about his initial meeting with George. "There were so many funny stories about George that I could tell," he relates. "One of my favorite memories was the first

time I walked into his office in Queens as a young buyer. His first words to me were, 'You're the new guy? But you're just a baby...they're going to let you buy my stuff? You know it's not cheap, I hope you have taste.' From that moment forward, he never stopped smiling that big George Kovacs grin at me."

Memories of George, his talent, and hilarity continue to entertain and elicit smiles. "I was just telling someone here in the office that I really need to get a Blackberry this weekend, and then started laughing because George kept telling me to get a *Blueberry*," Wesner recalls. "The first time he ever saw a Blackberry, it was blue. He kept saying they should have called it a Blueberry instead. He was such a character."

Respected and well-liked, George inspired those who knew him, whether or not they always saw eye-to-eye.

"Over the last 45 years, our relationship ran from creative euphoria to the 'enemy at the gate' and back again," Sonneman rem-

inisces. "George opened the door to the contemporary universe for me. We disagreed about everything, but some-



how found a connection that resonated with its own truth. George hated the mechanical and the technical; I was fascinated by it. I adored elegance and formality; George loathed it as pretense. Nevertheless, we admired or at least learned to tolerate the qualities of the other."

Feldman echoes that sentiment and affection. "I genuinely loved George. He built a life that he loved and surrounded himself with the most diverse and creative people he could find. He forged a business and while

**"George had a great sense of humor, but I don't really have any funny stories to tell about him. All I feel is admiration, which he would have found boring. I fondly remember him for being himself, and for running a company from his gut. If he saw something he liked, he put it into production – a daring formula. He will be missed" – Harry Allen**

he loved keeping track of his pennies as a scorecard, money didn't matter nearly as much as the relationships he cultivated and the energy absorbed from them. George understood and accepted his mortality because he was one of the few who did everything he set out to do in life. He found and married his beautiful and creative wife Barbara and built a family with the same vigor he built his business and his life-long friendships. George gave back a lot, but most of all, his sense of humor, his passion and love for life, and a smile that always betrayed his heart."

—Dorothy Creamer