



Objects

# of *A*ffection

A Story

by *Katherine Bennett*

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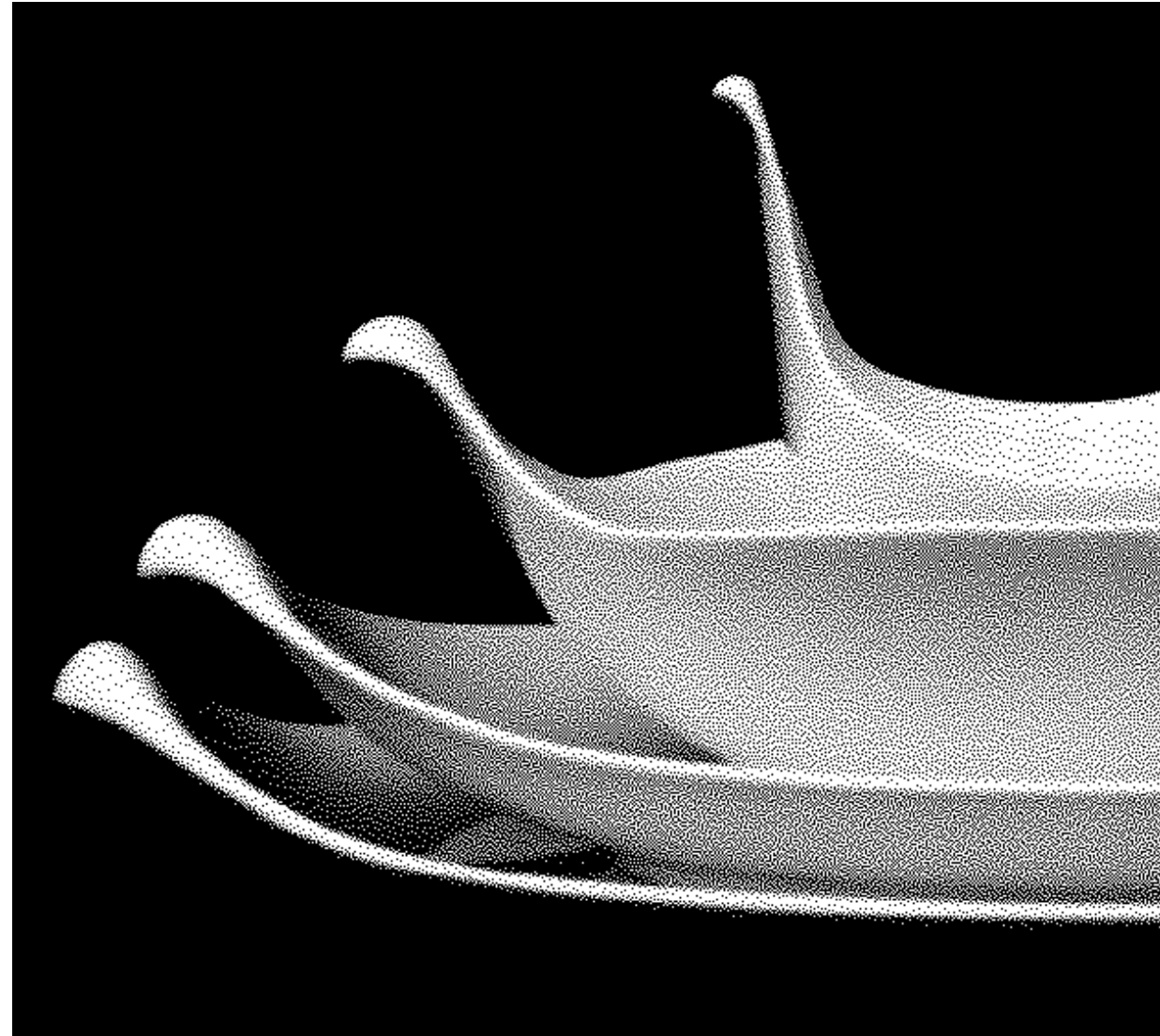
A transcript of the story told to the Educator's Conference of the Industrial  
Designers Society of America, October, 1996.

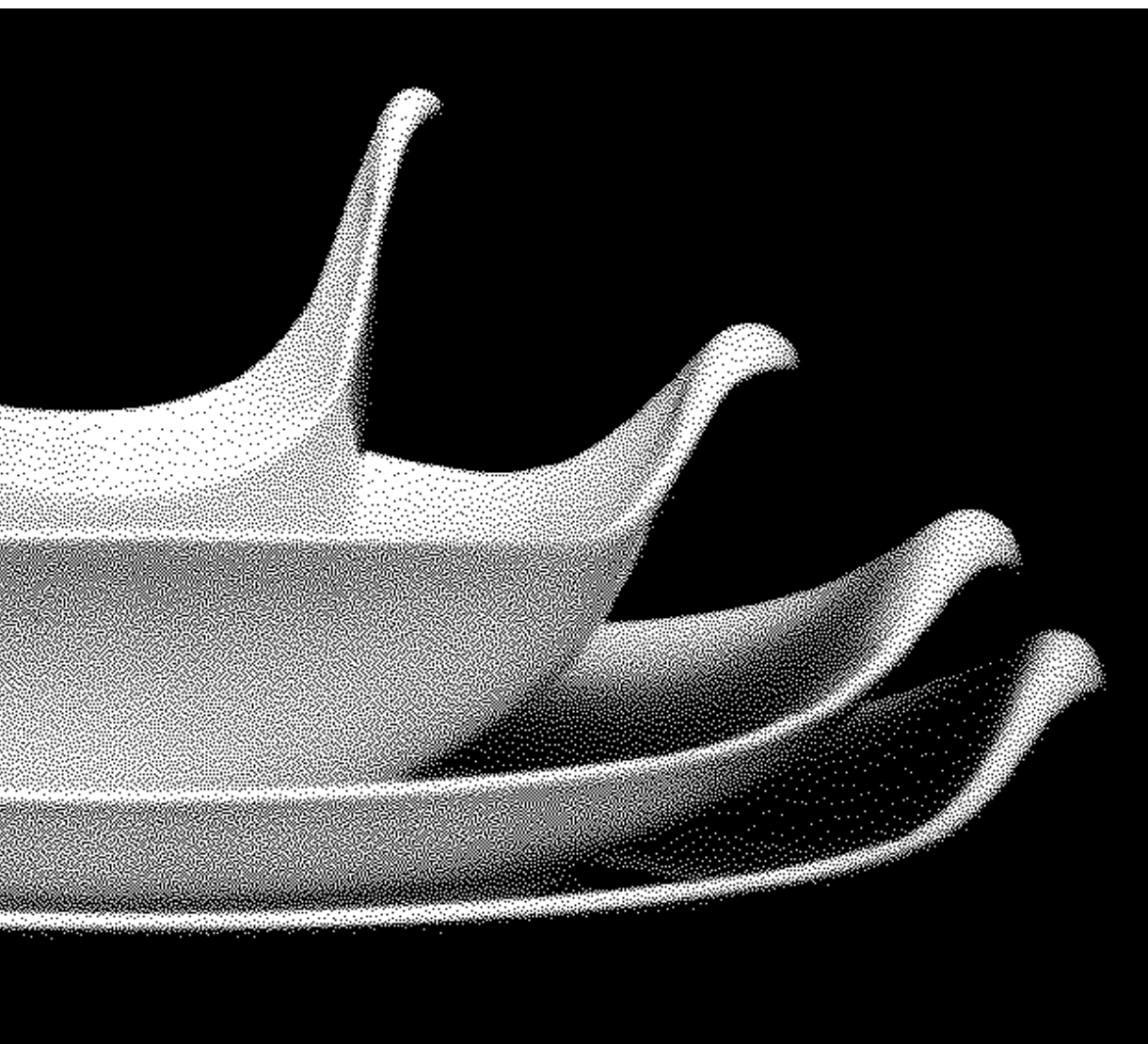
*To* Steve Diskin

Jean Richards

and most of all...

to Eva on her  
ninetieth birthday.





Once upon a time in a library, I found a book which changed my life. It is called *Eva Zeisel: Designer for Industry*. I like the sound of that. Inside, there's a photo of Eva, suitcase in hand, just arrived at a small midwestern train stop, setting off across a field towards a factory in the distance. The Designer for Industry, come to do her job.

The front cover shows a nested group of serving dishes, the shapes splashing outward in a corona of liquid white. The curving edges of the platters unfold upward, tapering and thinning as they stretch toward the gripping-places, inviting the touch of a hand.

I paged through the book to find shapes I had known all my life: the salt and pepper shakers nestling together like mother and child; glassware remembered from a thousand neighborhood dinner tables. Table furnishings from my childhood, looked at with my designer's eyes. I had no idea shapes could be like this.

Eva Zeisel worked and lived through the flash points of

the modern movement. A journeyman-potter with a studio in her parent's garden in 1925 Vienna, when young women from well-to-do families didn't do such things.

A studio in Berlin in the 30's, when the design world was being set afire, and Berlin was the place to be.

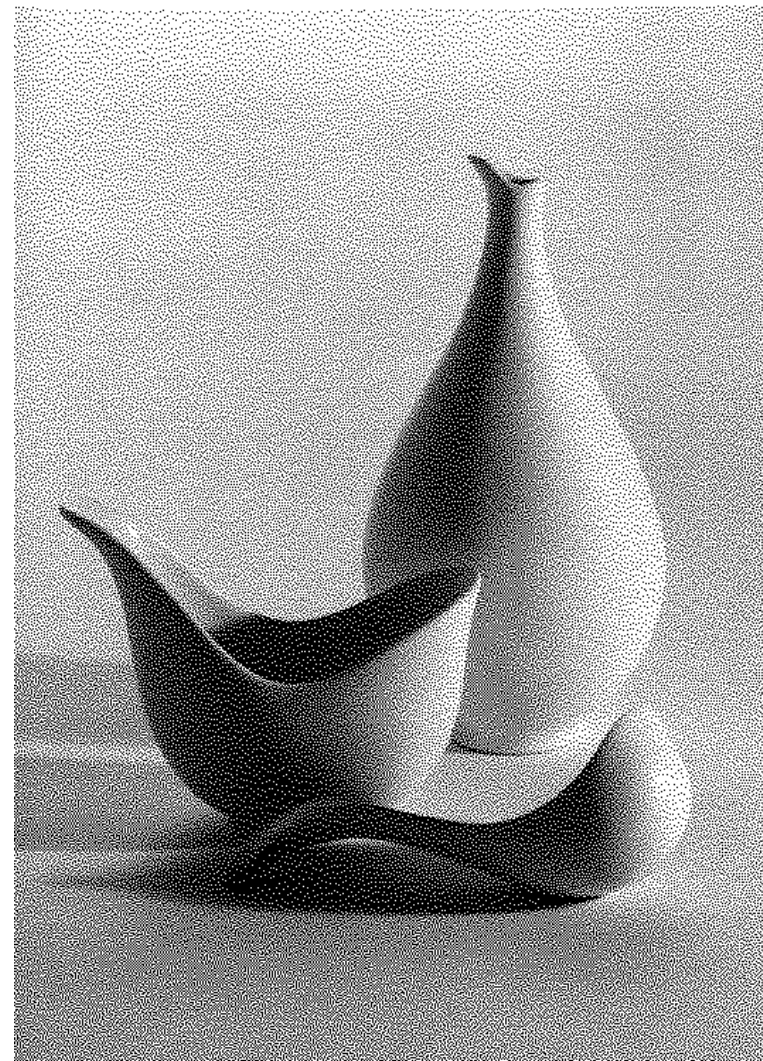
Art Director of the china and glass industry for the Russian Republic in 1935, when Russia was an exciting but dangerous place to be. Falsely accused of plotting to kill Stalin, imprisoned and interrogated for months and then miraculously released. She escaped from Austria the day Hitler invaded. She eventually settled in New York, set up a studio and taught at Pratt for many years.

Throughout this explosion of living, Eva created many, many designs of tableware for manufacturers here, in Europe and Japan. At the height of her popularity from the 40's to the 60's, thousands of her designs were selling successfully all over the world. I studied the photographs in the catalogue. The shapes full of life, expressive. Astonishing. The curves seemed to extend beyond expectation in a multi-lingual vocabulary of expression from one pattern to the next – here friendly and informal, there sophisticated and crisp, elegant and fluid. I was looking at the work of a master.

I came away changed to the core. Would it be possible to have this designer come and talk to my students? How do you get in touch with a guru? I dialed Manhattan directory assistance.

The voice on the answering machine was right - the right age, the right accent. The tone was genteel, encouraging. I offered a message to the electronic ear: would Eva Zeisel like to come to Los Angeles to talk to some design students? Two weeks later she called me back. The genteel voice with the European accent said yes, she would come.

Eva Zeisel spoke to me across the timelines of the Twentieth Century, across the boundaries of inhibition, across the limitations of the ego. Designer to designer, speaking the same language. Teacher to student. I wanted my students to have the experience I was having, to learn at the knee of the master. There were many months of preparation. Schedules to be coordinated. Everything must be perfect. A date was set; travel arrangements were made.





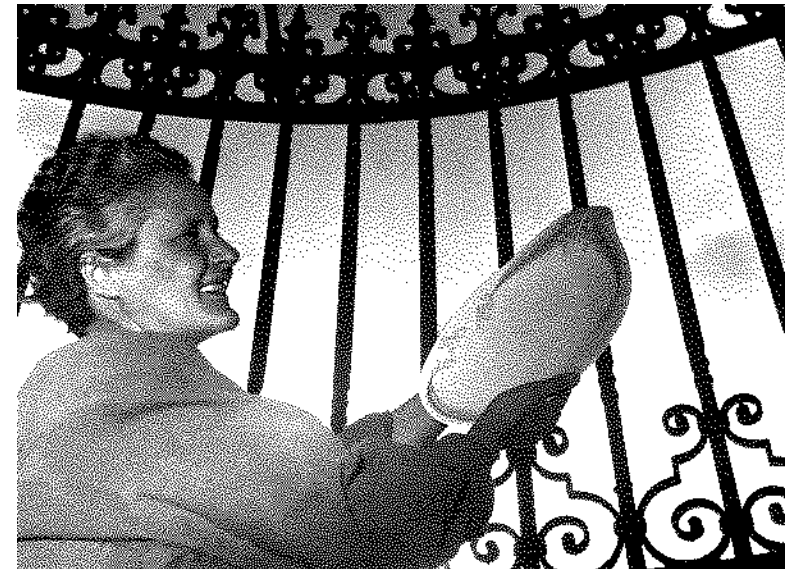
A few months later, I was at a conference in New York. I tried to get in touch with Eva, who lived nearby. I finally got through, but it was late on the last day – and I was leaving the next morning. We agreed that I must come over right then and have tea. I told her I had met a friend of hers, Sara Little Turnbull, the Director of the Process of Change Laboratory at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business. Eva said, “Bring her along.” She ended the conversation with, “You know, I think that our meeting like this, it has God’s finger in it.”

Sara is another luminary. She had a line of people waiting to talk to her at all times during the conference. But an invitation like this is not an everyday thing. I interrupted her at dinner. I apologized to her companion and whispered in Sara’s ear, “Do you want to go to Eva Zeisel’s house for tea?” She looked up with wide eyes and said, “Now?” I said yes. She rose from the table, saying to her dinner partner, “I hope you understand, but something has come up which I *must* do.” She walked out of the restaurant, down the corridor and to the front portico of the conference center, and stood poised on the curb like a figure on the foredeck of a seagoing ship. She stood there like that until the car came to take us away.

There are people who stand, killing time. Sara stood,

running through the camera of her mind: what she felt when she thought of Eva’s work. Her magnificent ability to question the rules of the world. The designer who refused to use the term “Good Design.” When questioned about the subject at a Museum of Modern Art symposium, she replied, “Love is a very personal matter.” The next day it was headline news in the New York Times: “Eva Zeisel Says Love Is a Personal Matter.” A designer who challenged convention.

Albert Swan, owner and sole driver of Albert Swan’s Limousine Service, owns a spotlessly kept, gold-colored car. He





was the carriage driver on our magical journey through the wooded drives of Rockland County. Off we rode into the dark countryside, as Sara talked about Eva Zeisel's impact on the design world.

We found the address in the darkness of a winding road, turned into a short drive and pulled up behind a stable of Volvo station wagons. Eva came out of the house to meet us, standing on the flagstones paving the tree-shadowed entry. Gurus eventually become human, this one a woman with white hair and kindness in her eyes, waiting to greet us. We asked Mr. Swan to wait, and we went to meet her.

She has the grace and manner of an earlier time, another continent. Old world. I remind myself that the Europeans defined Western hospitality.

The house is one of those old, northeastern country houses. Originally very small, and added to over the years, an assembly of rooms following rooms. Settling with great age, the furniture settling with it, standing in place longer than several lifetimes. We pass through the hallway into a sitting room. There are two very small upholstered chairs, armless with heart-shaped backs and flowered covers. Little Miss Muffet chairs. There are two larger wingbacked chairs. I choose one of those;

Sara puts her tiny form on one of the tuffets. Each has a chair that fits perfectly.

There are low bookcases along one wall. A lamp stands on one and reminds me that Eva is a designer who is not afraid of ornament. The lamp base swells into a curving volume, white porcelain covered with a repeating design of small gold medallions. In front of us is a low round table filled with teapot, cups, saucers, plates and bowls. All her designs. I can not pull my eyes away from it.

Eva will not let us help. She carries in a table to hold a tray of food. Tomatoes, a couple of cheeses, boats of French endive, mayonnaise. A late-night feast. The light from the lamp shines through the translucent yellow-green of the lettuce. Everything put in place. When she is ready to sit down, Eva stops at my side and says with a quick sigh of accomplishment, "Now. Let me look at you." She holds my eyes for a long moment. I let her. I am in safe company. I have never seen eyes like hers – completely brown, but with a narrow border of blue at the outside of the iris. Her daughter Jeannie joins us. She has the same eyes.

Sara and Eva talked about people they have known over the years. Their friends were, to me, the protagonists of Art

History. I had moments of desperation that I wasn't grasping what was being said. That things of utter monumental importance were sliding by without sticking, and then I remembered. Relax. I absorbed the conversation through my pores. My soul has heard and has remembered. The message is in my bones, and will speak when I sit down at my work table to create my next humble offering to the universe.

I drink in the things on the tea table. I had poured over the pictures, but the pieces themselves are alive. I had no idea that a shape could be so *vocal*. Teapot, pitchers, cups, bowls, saucers - nothing out of tune, no line that is not absolutely of the master's hand.

"There is no way to hold this that is not graceful," Sara remarks, holding the bowl of cherry tomatoes towards us with a smile. There is a moment that I can not pass without picking up the pitcher of milk, holding it at eye level, burning the image into my retina, and putting it back. Eva watches me do this. We are designers. She understands.

We climb to Eva's "treehouse," her studio at the top of the stairs. We pass through the workshop, trade opinions on power saws. She shows us photos of current projects. Climb another flight to the top. To the room of affectionate objects.

The treehouse is a sanctuary that displays all the pieces that Eva has designed on lighted shelves. I spot the refrigerator pitcher she did for Hall kitchenware in 1954. My good sense leaves me and I blurt out, "I would kill for one of those!" She smiles at me like an indulgent grandmother and says with kindness, "You may touch it."

When you see a painting in an art book and then see it on the gallery wall, it is transformed. It comes alive. Time falls away, and you see the canvas fresh from the hand of the painter. The image bypasses the intellect and shoots straight to the instinct, speaking from the painter's heart to the viewer's, a one-on-one conversation in the wordless language of the soul.

A great work has the power to stop me in my tracks. But nothing prepared me for the electricity of holding that form in my hands. You can't tell in the photograph that it starts out a rounded square at the base and tapers into a trapezoid, squeezed not by geometry but by the shape of the hands which hold it. The fluid curves are made to be held. The sides give inward to form a place to grip and pour. The spout pulls slightly downward in a petulant lip. The lid sits softly on top, following the undulating



line of the pitcher's upper edge like a well-rehearsed tango partner. You don't see these things in a photograph.

We sit, encircled by a life's work. Sara against a backdrop of iridescent glazes, Eva with a vase beyond, glowing dull and luminous in the darkness. The quiet voices of the master-women...and the quiet voices of the objects shaped by the gesture of dancing hands. Created as gifts to the world. I sit, absorbing a steady radiation of love.

I had described in a letter to Eva my idea of "objects of affection." She talks about these now, referring to them as "affectionate objects." I try to correct her until I realize the meaning revealed by the transposition of those words. My objects of affection are things that I take pleasure in. Passive things. Eva's affectionate objects speak actively. As I sit in that room listening to Eva and Sara talk, I am struck with an overwhelming, palpable affection from every thing surrounding us. That forms can be created which speak so eloquently – I never knew. The experience of it sinks home to me the active power that an object can project, if it is from the hand of a master of expression. We sit, surrounded by the quiet, lively chatter.

*J*eannie came up the stairs. “Mr. Swan is lonely.” She reminded us that the driver is still waiting in the kitchen. We had reached the limit of his patience. When we came down to leave, he knew that something of great importance had happened. He asked us for our names, so that he could tell his wife where he’d been and who he’d met. We each wrote down who we were, each protesting that the other was more of a luminary. I put an end to the gentle contest. When Eva wrote down her name, I said to Mr. Swan, “Do you see this tableware?” taking in the overloaded shelves of the kitchen with a sweep of my hand, “This woman designed all of these things.” He looked more closely at Eva, and looked at the stacks of dishes. That settled it, in his eyes. He put the paper with our names on it in his pocket.

Sara was my tour guide to Twentieth Century culture on the ride back to the conference. She interpreted the significance of everything we had seen. Turning to me in the darkness of Mr. Swan’s immaculate car, she said, “I suppose you know that this means we are meant to become friends, you and I. This sort of experience does not just happen.” God’s finger.

Coming back to the conference where just hours ago, things of utmost importance were being discussed, nothing seemed as crucial as before. In the treehouse, Eva Zeisel had

leaned forward and said, “We are makers of things, not thinkers of thoughts.” Making things, talking with wise people, using the tools my father used, surrounding myself with affectionate objects - these are of life-shaping importance.

*T*he designed object is a vessel of communication, from the one making it to the one holding it. The message can be thoughtless, or it can be infused with meaning that speaks across time. This is my first lesson from a master of the wordless, magic language of design.

