

# INNOVATION

dedicated to expanding the body of knowledge about industrial design.

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## content : design history



### design history / the story of american culture

By Susan King Roth, IDSA, Guest Editor

The history of American industrial design tells as much about the evolution of America as design. From the grand to the ordinary, artifacts of the past take on meanings that offer a sense of place.



### the rich american heritage of the jeep / the lineage from MA to TJ

By John Sgalia, IDSA

Born of necessity and cherished through the decades, the Jeep is a prime example of how a classic design can become an icon of a culture.



### a design that stuck / the 3m tape dispenser

By Bruce N. Wright

Rarely does a design have the staying power to last through decades, but the 3M tape dispenser has weathered Art Deco, Pop and Minimalist influences and still looks great.



### strength meets style / the samsonite classic

By Clair Samhammer, FIDSA

More than a million attaché cases later, the Classic is testament to the power of simple and inobtrusive design, created with an eye toward user needs.



### a 20th century master / eva zeisel

By Katherine Bennett, IDSA

At 90, Eva Ziesel still embodies what a designer should be. Her simple and evocative designs speak volumes about the past and provide a lesson for the future.

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a 20th century master

eva zeisel

To Eva, design is a conversation between the designer and the consumer, an act of generosity, a gift of love (Western Stoneware, c.1953).

no less than a modern master, Eva Zeisel embodies what a designer should be. It's no wonder that she is admired by people all over the world who have never even met her.

discovered Eva a few years ago while developing high-end designs for the table. As I ventured from the safe confines of functionalism into the no-man's land of expressive form, a friend suggested that her work might inspire me. Paging through the Brooklyn Museum's catalog of her designs, I was astonished. So many of the shapes I remembered, yet her name was unknown to me. Determined to learn all I could about her, I asked her to speak at Art Center, and in the process she became a friend and mentor. This is her story.

Eva Zeisel began as a journeyman potter in 1926—quite unusual for the daughter of well-to-do Hungarian intellectuals. She had apprenticed herself to a master of the craft and set up a studio on her parents' estate. A commission to create ceramics for production began her long career in industrial design.

In the early '30s, Berlin was the epicenter of the Modernist revolution and Eva was in the middle of it, moving to an apartment a few doors from the Romanisches cafe, a hub of progressive intellectual ferment. Visiting Russia to see the new Communist republic, she stayed and became artistic leader of the china and glass industry. There, she set up the largest china design workshop and factory in the world at the time. Her work crashed to a halt when she fell victim to one of the



Early on, Eva Zeisel devised a way of creating shapes, first using paper cutouts and then plaster models. Here, she designs a teapot for Kipester Granit in 1983.

purges: She was accused of plotting to kill Stalin and imprisoned by the KGB for 16 months. Once released, she made her way back to her family and narrowly escaped the Nazis on the last train out of Austria, the day Hitler invaded.

Arriving in New York in the late '30s, Eva made the rounds of ceramics manufacturers and was soon working for most of them. She taught at Pratt and RISD for many years. Jim Fulton, FIDSA, a student of hers in the 1940s, says that Eva was quite like Garbo in those days—glamorous, temperamental, with an international reputation.

Though her life read like an adventure novel, she arrived in this country an

established master of expressive form who nevertheless understood and designed for the rigors of mass production. When the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) approached Halcraft China to produce a set of tableware in its name, Eva was commissioned to design it. Moreover, she presented a one-person show at MoMA the same year as Charles and Ray Eames.

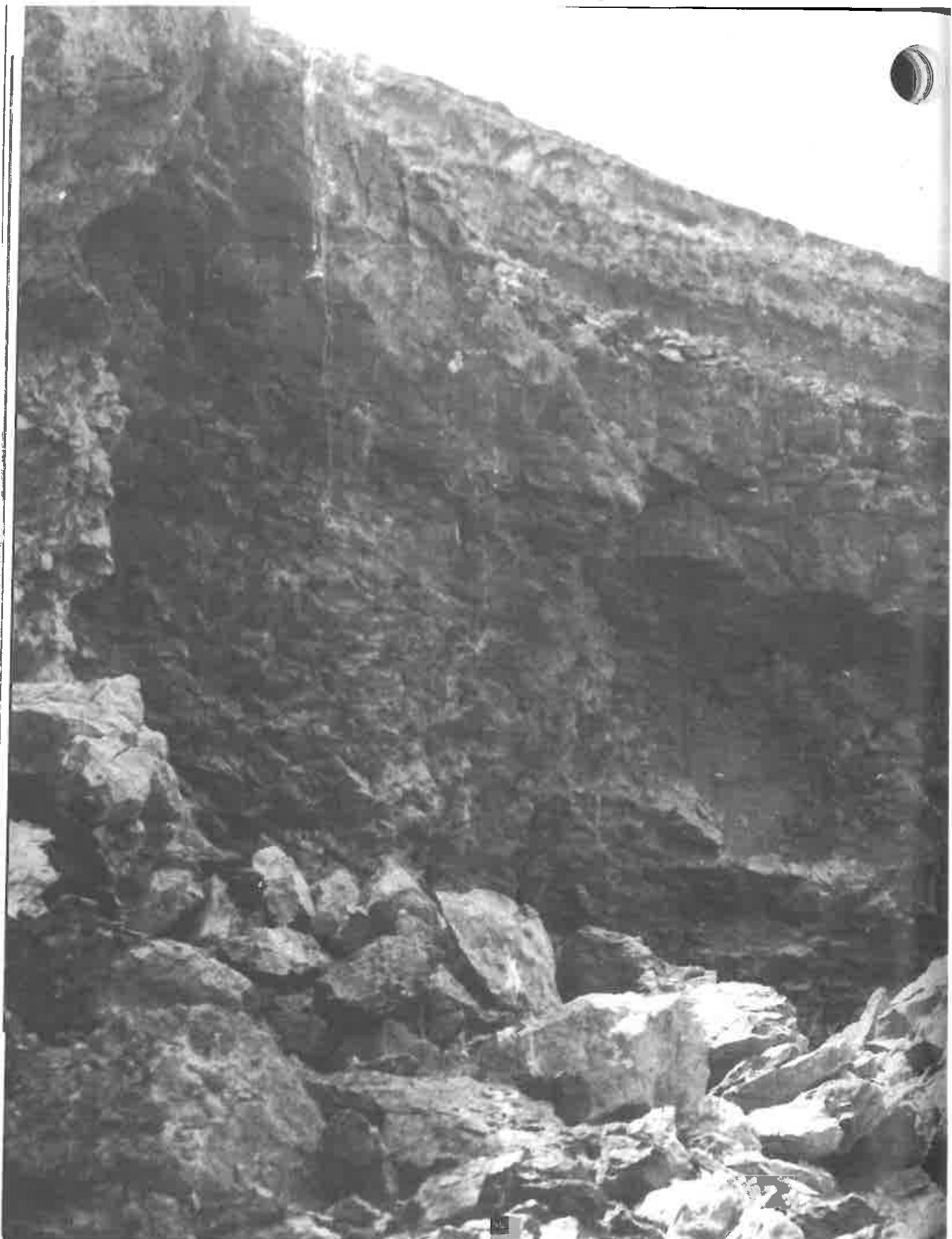
By the 1960s, thousands of objects she had designed were selling successfully all over the world. She had a rare gift: she could produce objects that appealed to both the elite and the hoi polloi. She would encounter her glassware or tableware sitting happily on tabletops across

By Katherine Bennett, IDSA



Katherine Bennett teaches graduate- and undergraduate-level product design at Art Center College of Design. She also maintains a consulting practice in Santa Monica, CA, and chairs IDSA's LA Chapter. The left side of her brain is engaged in vision-setting and product development strategy for Avery Dennison, while the right side explores design beyond functionalism at the brink of the new millennium.





the world, as she put it, "like so many well-behaved children."

Time and again, people discover her work in flea markets with exclamations of "Look! Our dishes!" and fond memories of childhood table settings. Her daughter Jean says of the mail Eva receives, "95 percent of the fan letters include the word

'love.' Recently a lady called and said, 'I love Eva and I love her work.' Of course, she'd never met Eva! I thought it was amazing: it's only a dish! But these dishes engender love." Jean considers a letter from a former student, Budd Steinhilber, FIDSA, something of an explanation: "It said, 'The love you have for your craft somehow becomes imbued in the object itself.' I thought, that must be the answer."

And, that may be what is missing from designs today, as Zeisel sees it. To her, industrial design encompasses a much wider field than what she saw in the Industrial Design Excellence Awards exhibit at the conference last June.

"All of the lovely things that surround us—all the comfortable things, the things which are not mechanical," she said, indicating with a sweep of her arm the furnishings in the room, "are also designed and produced industrially.

But the field itself is narrowed down to technological things. Where are all the things that are mass produced, and which were rejected, for instance, as decorative arts at the beginning of this century? All of the decorative arts which make us happy are not included in the definition of industrial design." She pointed out that only two of the winners—a baby crib and a bud vase that attaches to the side of a computer monitor—fit this last category, though the bud vase relied on its attachment to the computer, "so that it does not seem frivolous and outside the field of industrial design." ■

Eva Zeisel selecting clay from the clay pit; Western Stoneware Company, Monmouth, Illinois, 1952.



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The more decorative, playful objects never make it into the galleries of industrial design, and Eva maintains they should. "We need to enlarge the definition of industrial design: the Industrial Designers Society of America has to include all things done for beauty and for glory."

This playfulness is showing itself in the marketplace. Expressive form, color and texture are enjoying a rebirth in consumer product design in answer to a growing boredom with the cold confines of Functionalism. **The masses rejected Modernism long ago, we designers seem to be the last to let it go.** We are rediscovering the joyful practice of what Katherine McCoy, IDSA, calls "the new lyricism."

It is interesting, however, that the last taboo—applied decoration—remains off limits. This, in an age where we prolifically decorate our bodies, Zeisel observed. As she shook hands at the confer-

ence, many of the younger designers, she noticed, were richly embellished with tattoos and body piercings. "Why is it," she asked, "while they decorate their bodies in this way, that it is forbidden to place these beautiful ornaments on their designs?"

Zeisel touched on the same theme in accepting the IDSA Personal Recognition Award, the top honor an industrial designer can receive from the Society, on the conference's opening night. "Design in the 20th century has been about the extermination of the curlicue. I hope design in the next century will be about desire and delight."

When I interviewed Eva for this article, she related a story from years ago when she was helping a student who was having trouble inspiring himself. He was too serious, she told him. He needed to loosen up, to have fun. She advised, "Go buy a

bottle of Chianti and drink it!" When asked about the challenges facing designers in the next millennium—what, for instance, will be shown in the year 2050, in the industrial design exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art—she considered for a moment and replied, "You are going to have to drink a lot of Chianti!"

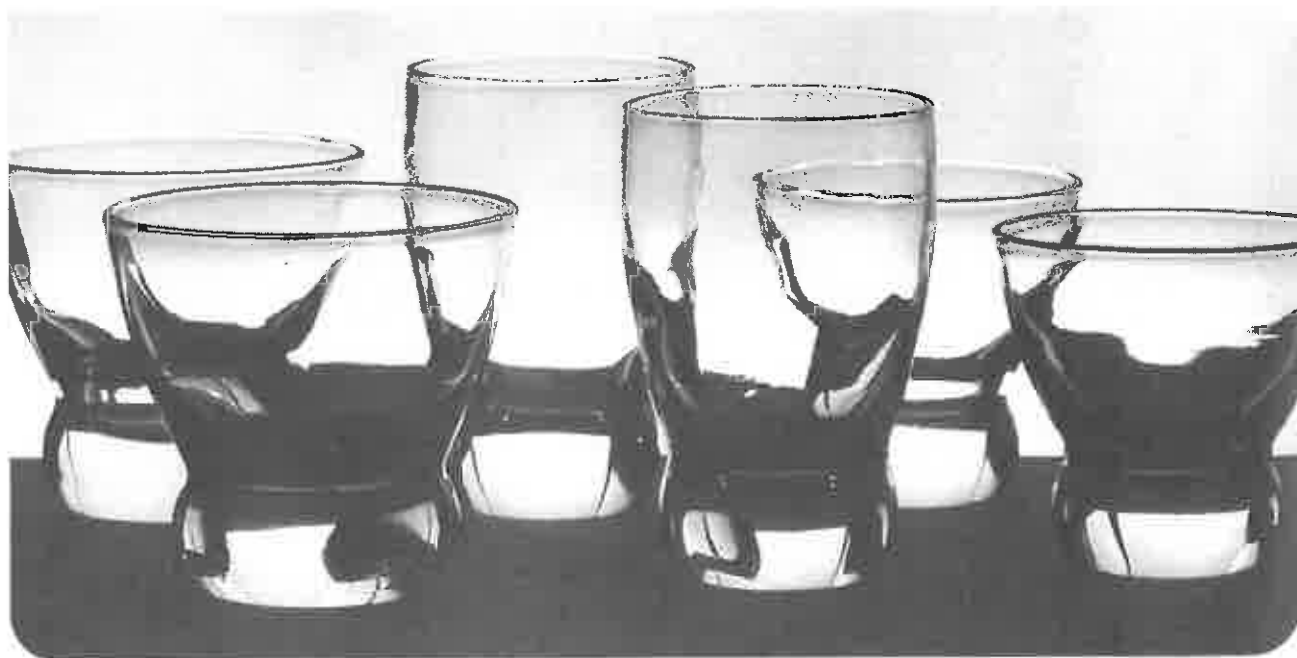
In a toast to Eva at her 90th birthday celebration last November at Pratt Institute, Jim Fulton noted: "This is a century which began with the decoration of construction and one which is ending with the construction of decoration. I remember the center of this century, when architecture became anorexic, Eva was one of the few who could still breathe life into those forms, and she was the first one to change. She has lived through all of the movements, and has not been moved by any of them."

Today, we struggle in territory beyond functionalism.

It is assumed we will meet the requirements of usability, technology and manufacture. Designers are now asked to go further—to wield the unquantifiable, unscientific tools of sculpted form, color and texture—to reach out to consumers, to express emotion to them.

Weaned as we have been on Modernist theory, we seem ill prepared for this venture. **So many generations of designers have come and gone, schooled in cold utilitarianism and spurning the communicative arts of form, color, texture and pattern, that now when we need this knowledge, it's a dim memory at best.**

There are a few keepers of the lost art working along side us today, and Eva Zeisel is one of them. May we sit at her knee forever while she fascinates us with lessons from long ago, when expressive emotion was one of design's primary strategic tools. ■





Top: In seventy years of designing, Eva Zeisel has traveled the world via workshops from Russia to Europe, Japan and the American Midwest. Here, she consults with Mr. Hasenstab, model maker for the Western Stoneware Company, Monmouth, Illinois, in 1952.

Left: In the '40s, '50s and '60s, thousands of Eva Zeisel's designs were selling successfully all over the world. She encountered this glassware (Federal, c. 1954) on tabletops in far-flung countries, she says, "like so many well-behaved children."

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