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Living with Nature *at Russel Wright's*

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“I believe with religious intensity that good design is for everyone.”

Above Russel Wright working on a pottery line in his New York studio, c. 1946.

Right Wright’s home blends seamlessly into his Hudson Valley property, Manitoga, once decimated by logging, copper mining and granite quarries. In early summer, Tiger Lilies cascade down the craggy stone wall, once part of a quarry that Wright dammed to form an enticing pond visible from throughout the home and studio.





Living with Nature *at Russel Wright's*

By Jim Winnerman
Photography by Tara Wing

Perhaps the most astonishing – and most unknown – creation of American designer Russel Wright is his home and studio in the Hudson River Valley. Wright's revolutionary innovations for the modern American way of life – most notably his American Modern dinnerware – made him a household name from the late 1930s through the early 1960s. Today, however, he is virtually unknown to anyone under the age of 60.

Wright, who lived from 1904 to 1976, was at the forefront of a movement that began in the early 20th century, when artists

and architects started applying modern design concepts not only to buildings, but to everyday objects like appliances and furniture. This approach developed into the occupation of industrial designer, and Wright, who had worked as a set designer and sculptor, quickly became a leader in design for mass-market production. In the United States, this movement had the added focus of seeking a new national style, no longer borrowed from Europe. For the first time, good design would be totally American and available to the general public.

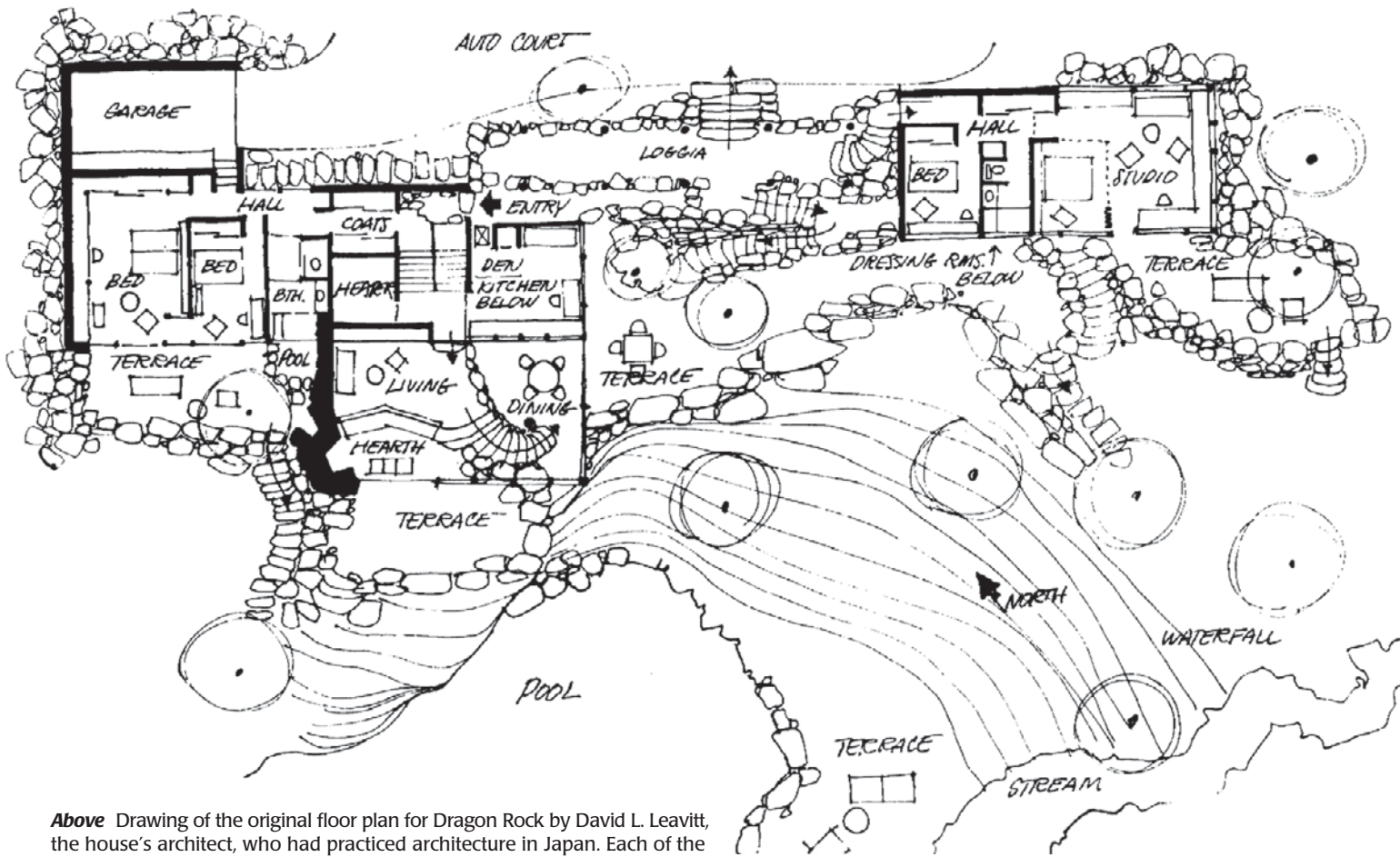


Living in harmony
with nature more
than a half century
before the idea
came into vogue.

Above Wright slept and worked in the studio, the smaller of Manitoga's two structures, which has a planted roof and windows that start just above the forest floor, providing him with an intimate view of the surrounding flora and fauna.

Below Wright designed built-in Formica furniture for his studio, which is lit by recessed lighting concealed by burlap fabric. Open wooden shelving divides the bedroom from the studio; on the bedroom side, a curtain could be drawn for additional privacy. The dark green ceiling is made of epoxy embedded with sprigs and clusters of hemlock needles, while a guest bedroom door (not shown) is covered in birch bark. The studio has been restored to its 1962 appearance.





Above Drawing of the original floor plan for Dragon Rock by David L. Leavitt, the house's architect, who had practiced architecture in Japan. Each of the main living spaces has a stone terrace with views to the quarry pond and the surrounding forest. Collaborating closely with Russel Wright, whose official role was that of interior designer, Leavitt found that Wright vetoed his many practical suggestions in favor of more poetic solutions, such as building the house into the ground, in spite of potential problems with moisture, and allowing rainwater to drip directly off the eaves, instead of installing water spouts.

"I believe with religious intensity that good design is for everyone," Wright said. His designs proved that he was correct. Wright's line of colorful and casually elegant American Modern dinnerware, produced and sold by Steubenville Pottery, enjoyed astonishing sales — in excess of 250 million pieces — and the line remains the most popular china ever marketed. Designed without sharp angles and in strong, solid colors to highlight food on the plate, it was followed by Wright-designed table linens, glassware and spun-aluminum serving and cocktail accessories. Wright also designed sleek blonde wood furniture with minimal upholstery that was produced by the Conant-Ball Company.

The success of Wright's products made him America's first celebrity designer. His trademark signature, the first to be identified with lifestyle-marketed products, was recognized as widely as that of Martha Stewart today. The copyrighted products were so popular that stores advertised when depleted inventories of newly introduced items were again in stock. Today his work is displayed in museums, and collectors pay a premium for rare pieces.

Russel Wright's designs were even admired by Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom there was no known family relationship. According to Kitty McCullough, Executive Director of the Russel Wright Design Center, the two men are known to have met once,

and Russel asked if Frank Lloyd knew who he was. "Sure I do," Frank Lloyd is reported to have replied, "people compliment me all the time on my dinnerware."

In recognition of his influence on American life, Russel Wright's home was honored with National Historic Landmark status in 2006. Landmark recognition is a select category above listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and has been bestowed on fewer than 2,500 sites in the United States, among them Mount Vernon, Pearl Harbor and the Empire State Building.

This is the story behind the "dream" residence designed and built by the man who ushered modernism into the homes of ordinary Americans.

"PLACE OF GREAT SPIRIT"

Wright, who was living in New York City, began to plan his country house in the 1940s while his designs of consumer products were at the height of their popularity. Initially conceived as a weekend retreat, it later became his year-round residence. However, unlike his commercial products, it was not meant as a prototype for everyone to follow. Wright wrote: "My own experimental and personal country home is intended as an experiment and demonstration that contemporary design can create from old and new materials a home highly

individual, capable of the variety of moods that can be found in traditional homes, a home that can join the emotional, sentimental and esthetic characteristics with the practicality and comfort that we have created in the 20th century.”

In 1942, after a more than three-year search, Wright and his wife, Mary, found what they considered the perfect location, although acquaintances thought the site an odd, unpromising bit of land. Located about 50 miles north of New York City, in the highlands of the historic and scenic Hudson River Valley, it did have picturesque views to the river. But the steeply sloping 75-acre parcel had been left decimated by a century of copper mining and logging that had removed old-growth forests. An abandoned granite quarry was the predominant landmark.

Yet Wright considered the acreage beautiful and named it Manitoga, from the Algonquin term for “place of great spirit.” Years later Wright would be delighted when visitors would inquire how he happened to find such a dramatic and beautiful setting. But it would take him almost two decades to get to that point.

From the start, Wright’s objective was to design a house in harmony with nature, one that would not dominate the landscape. Almost immediately he began to study the land and the rock formations to find a suitable spot to locate the home. Imagining different floor plans, he tentatively staked out rooms. Then he would sit on the rocks envisioning the view from an imaginary window while calculating the effect daylight would have throughout the year. Eventually he decided to cantilever the house out over the quarry space, incorporating the craggy granite cliff into the foundation and some of the living spaces, which step down in a complex multi-level floor plan. His vision, according to David Leavitt, the architect who helped design the house, was influenced by the houses and gardens he saw on a visit after World War II to Japan, where he went to help develop modern Asian crafts for export in support of American government aid efforts.

Leavitt’s firm prepared the final blueprints, but Wright and his own staff did the drawings for the interior. (He had sent the plans to Frank Lloyd Wright who is reported to have simply replied “interesting.”) After sixteen years of planning, construction commenced in 1957 and the home was completed in 1960, eighteen years after acquisition of the land.

LIFE AND STYLE

“The theme of the house is to minimize the distinction between the inside and the outside,” wrote Carlton B. Lees in 1981 when he was Senior Vice President of the New York Botanical Garden. “To be in it is to be in the landscape...the ever-changing vitality of the seasons.” The larger of the two low-slung and primarily glass-walled buildings at Manitoga is the residence, which consists of a central family area and a two-bedroom wing. (As a result of Mary Wright’s death in 1952, the bedroom wing was designed for Russel’s daughter, Annie, and her governess.) The smaller building, containing Wright’s studio and bedroom, is linked to the main house by a vine-covered pergola. Wright arranged his home around the daily routine and informal lifestyle he envisioned a family might follow. Together with his wife, he had even written and published a best-selling book, *Guide to Easy Living* (1950), on how Americans might increase the enjoyment of home life by reducing housework and increasing leisure time through efficient design.

Incorporating his philosophy that man should live in harmony with nature, all rooms in both structures enjoy a view of the quarry pond and the forest beyond. Wright improved the view by diverting a nearby stream to create a 30-foot waterfall visible from the home. Designed to change directions several times, the cascade flows over a series of ledges before splashing into the pond.

While Wright named the property Manitoga, Annie named the house Dragon Rock when she was about ten. She thought a prominent granite outcropping of a cliff visible from inside the house resembled a dragon drinking from the pond.



Looking up from the quarry pond to the studio and the pergola that links the smaller structure to the house. The heart-shaped Dutchman’s Pipe vines that Wright planted to drape the pergola are being reintroduced.



NATURE ENHANCED

Wright labored for 35 years to transform the land surrounding his home into a museum of nature, intended to be experienced on foot. He designed four miles of carefully planned woodland corridors to sustain a visitor's interest by highlighting different natural elements. Paths lead to a series of "garden rooms" created through selective clearing, pruning, planting and leveling. Hemlocks were incorporated to create walls and ceilings and even to frame "natural" window views of the Hudson River. The sound of water and the different smells of vegetation were mustered for added interest and variety.

Wright gave the forest rooms and paths names that reflected their particular character or the time, place or season for which they were created. The Moss Room is a narrow corridor with a thick mossy carpet along the edge of the quarry, while the Morning Path was laid out for walking west to east, when the early sun would highlight rocks and plants.



Left The stone floor of the living room conversation pit flows out to the stone terrace. To the left, the cedar tree trunk, harvested from the property, that serves as the central supporting column continues down to the dining area below, beyond the boulders. The sliding glass doors of the living room meet those of the dining area, with no solid wall to mar the connection with nature outside.

Below The rough boulders from the property contrast with the sleek lines of the Wright-designed chairs in the background. Stone steps lead up to a mezzanine seating area that overlooks the dining area below, to the right.

Opposite In an example of Wright's practical approach to interior design, the kitchen is open to the dining area, with cabinets opening into both rooms. The table is set with Wright-designed American Modern dinnerware. The wrought-iron chandelier was once used only in winter and replaced by a white globe during the summer. The white Formica cabinet doors were replaced with red in winter.





A Child's Place

Russel Wright's daughter, Annie, grew up at Manitoga from the age of ten, then returned there for ten years as an adult. Integrated intimately with the natural landscape, the house was like a giant playground; to get to meals, Annie would clamber down the sheer rock wall that divides the living room from the dining room below. "I never took the stairs," she says. Her young life revolved around the pond, building rafts and diving off the cliff into the water in summer and skating on its ice in the winter. Although it was somewhat lonely and isolated – the property was off by itself in the woods, with few other children around to play with – "everyone, especially kids, who came to visit would just get into the swing of things and love it there."



Annie Wright in the dining room of Dragon Rock in 1963.

year into its summer and winter modes. "It would take two and a half of us [Annie was the "half"] three days to change the house all around." Partly out of necessity – the house was budgeted at \$75,000 and was finally completed by scraping together another \$75,000 – the three of them made many of the furnishings and accessories themselves. The governess, who liked to sew, made the slipcovers and pillows, and they all worked on projects like the winter curtains of red and orange ribbons stapled to a piece of fabric at the top. Wright even did most of the interior woodworking and finishes, painting and plastering himself. Her own bedroom started off in Victorian style, with enormous panels of painted birds, but when she was teenager, she and her father switched them for epoxy screens embedded with grasses from the quarry pond that they created together. "My father's joy was experimenting in new materials," she says. "His sister worked for Dow Chemical in Canada, so we got a lot of experimental plastic panels." She adds, surprisingly, considering Wright's success, "A lot came about because we were broke."

While the American Modern dinnerware was fabulously successful, Wright soon relinquished his interest in it to his collaborator, design entrepreneur Irving Richards, so he never reaped the substantial financial rewards he might have from that product. "An artist has a particular interest, then he moves onto something else," explains Annie. "I'm sure if my father was alive, the house would be completely different now."

By 2001, the house was in need of much more repair and maintenance than Annie could handle. "The bathroom had all handmade parts behind the wall," she says. "We would get up in the morning and wonder whether we would be able to take a shower." Today, the restoration, budgeted at \$6 million, is well underway, ensuring that Annie's childhood "playground" will survive to provide future generations with an intimate and astonishing glimpse into her father's creativity.

What she misses most is the "indoor/outdoor" feeling that her father so successfully orchestrated. "For every indoor room there was a corresponding outdoor room," she says, including the little private patio and garden outside her bedroom, where, she recalls, "you had a sense you were the only person in the world."

She did more than inhabit the house, however. She was actively involved in its creation and upkeep. "It was a lot of work. [My father] had a list: weed on Monday... I used to take books under my shirt." Along with her English governess, she helped her father transform the house twice a



Annie with her father, Russel Wright, around 1955.

The quarry was brought inside in the form of an oversized hearth on the lowest level, constructed to resemble the natural stones visible through the windows. The irregular flagstone floors of the living and dining areas extend outside to pave pond-side terraces, further bringing the outside scene indoors. So do interior walls of green plaster embedded with hemlock needles and branches and resin panels incorporating flowers, grasses or butterflies. The organic treatment of natural materials is countered by the "machine-made" – as Wright called them – aesthetic of man-made materials, such as Formica, Styrofoam, Fiberglass and metal foil.

The main portion of the home is arranged into a number of rooms on five levels. Just inside the entry, on the cliff top above the quarry pond, wooden steps lead up to the bedroom wing and down to a mezzanine den. From there, rough stepping stones descend to the two-level living room – an indoor terrace, really, protected by a few boulders that serve as a low wall – that overlooks the double-height dining room below, on the lowest level. A dramatic serpentine staircase of massive boulders cascades down to the dining room, which is flanked by an open kitchen tucked underneath the mezzanine. Melding the house's foundations to the incline of the quarry wall enabled Wright to provide each of the main living areas – bedrooms, living and dining areas – with its own outdoor stone patio, accessible through large pivoting or sliding glass doors.

A focal point of the living space is a massive cedar trunk, from a tree that Wright found growing on the property, which serves as the building's primary vertical support post. Thirty inches in circumference, it supports a 28-foot long, two-foot wide oak beam. Smaller exposed beams rest on stone corbels. Other natural elements were incorporated into the house, such as door knobs crafted from stones found on the property and tree branches used as newel posts, window sills and bathroom towel bars.

In a poetic approach, the house's lighting was conceived as a combination of fluorescent and incandescent fixtures, candlelight, oil flares, flames from the fireplace and moonlight. Most artificial lighting is recessed or

– Andrea Truppin



Above A view from the mezzanine to the entrance stairs, with the living room at left, shows Wright's attention to color and texture. The green wall is embedded with hemlock needles, tying the interior to the view of a hemlock tree outdoors.

Right Used as a family room, the mezzanine was also where Wright's daughter, Annie, studied. Burlap fabric above a built-in couch conceals overhead lighting fixtures. The Audubon print of a turkey was displayed in summer, but was changed in winter to a Silver fox. The timber framework of the mezzanine forms open shelving that marks its boundary with the living room on the next level down. Further to the right, similar framing descends beneath the mezzanine to separate the kitchen from the dining area below.

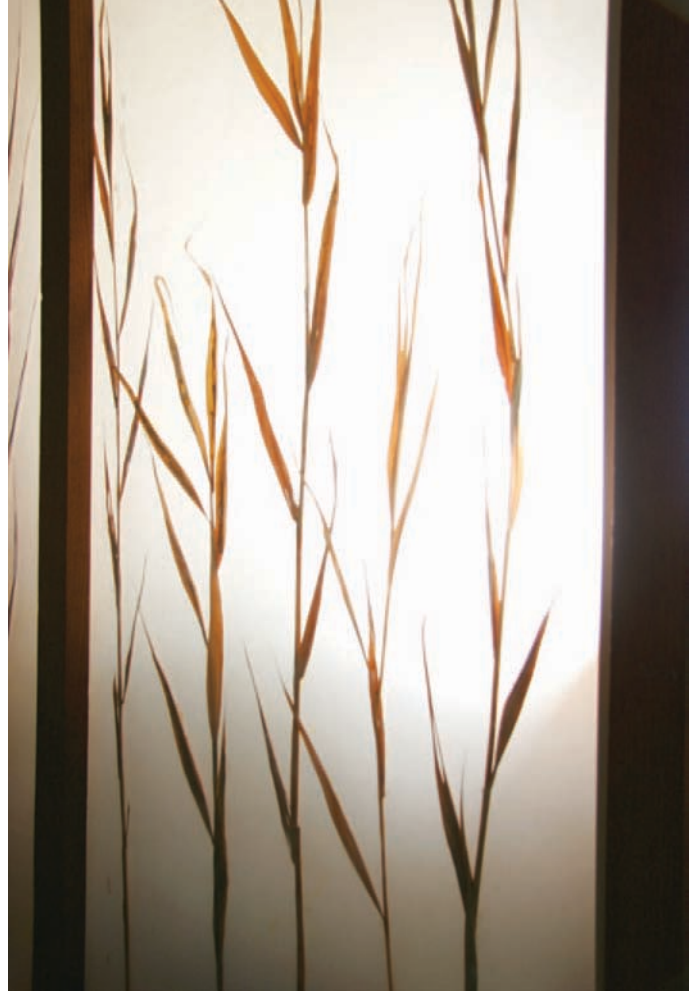
concealed behind plastic, Styrofoam or fabric. A clear sliding bathroom panel features a collection of 100 butterflies of different colors and sizes which are illuminated by natural light from outside. Another clear panel, inlaid with leaves and flowers, is lit by recessed fluorescent lighting at the top and bottom.

The studio, which was also Wright's personal living space, was built deep enough into the bank of the quarry that some of the windows are just above ground level, providing what Wright described as a "worm's-eye view." Above, wildlife circulates on the planted green roof.

An outside path leads to a "secret" exterior room tucked into the quarry wall, that Wright described as his private retreat. The room provides a direct view of the house and pond, but is almost imperceptible from inside the residence itself.

Wright planned the inside color palette at Dragon Rock to change in summer and winter to blend and contrast with the outdoors. The winter dining room draperies were made of ribbons, 1½ inches wide, in three shades of red. In summer they were replaced with loosely-woven panels of white yarn. Kitchen cabinets were double faced,





Above, clockwise from top left This cast doorknob with a brass finish and “man in the moon” molded face is in Wright’s studio; As a teenager, Annie Wright created panels for her bedroom with her father, embedded with reeds from the quarry pond; This door knob was made from a stone found on the property.

Opposite The Venetian tub and floors in Annie Wright’s bathroom are made of Murano glass tiles in five shades of blue. A laminated, translucent sliding door panel features a collection of 100 butterflies. The shower wall incorporates granite from the quarry. A dogwood tree branch serves as a vertical towel holder. The tub looks out onto a secluded stone terrace, reflected in the mirror at right. **Inset** Annie Wright enjoys the tub with her friend Anne Hurwitz in 1959.

Open to All

Manitoga is open to the public from May through October, with guided 90-minute interpretive tours offered on selected weekdays. Tours cost \$15, are limited to ten people and require reservations. In keeping with Russel Wright’s desire that the property be a place to learn about nature, hikers are welcome on the trails during daylight any time of the year. A donation of \$5 per person is appreciated and applied toward trail maintenance. For more information, contact the Manitoga office at 845/424-3812 or visit www.russelwrightcenter.org.

turned to the Indian-red side in winter and the white Formica side in summer. Slipcovers for couches and chairs allowed similar color changes. The dining room chandelier, wrought iron in winter, was switched with a plastic globe in summer; a Snowy owl Audubon print, which hung in the summer, was replaced with an American Black or Silver fox print in winter.

A centerpoint of Wright’s easy-living approach was the efficient use of space. At Dragon Rock, examples include a 14-foot counter-balanced kitchen cabinet that can be raised into an opening in the ceiling, leaving a pass-through to the dining room. Kitchen drawers open on both sides of the counter. Pocket windows in the studio drop into the wall to quickly unite the interior with nature outside. In Annie Wright’s room, the back of a built-in sofa flips up to create bunk beds.

LEGACY

As Wright’s products began to decline in popularity in the late 1950s, he closed his business. In 1961 he moved to Manitoga permanently. When Wright died in 1976, he left the house and grounds to his daughter. Manitoga Inc., a non-profit entity formed to restore the property, purchased it in 2001 and is in the process of raising funds to bring it back to its 1960 condition. During restoration, the house and studio remain open for tours.

A visit to Manitoga is an experience in discovering the origins of American modernism, as well as a journey into one individual’s approach to living in harmony with nature more than a half century before the idea came into vogue. It is a visual and historical treat that should not be missed. ■

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Russel Wright for You

Russel Wright Studios, led by Wright's daughter, Annie, promotes and protects the legacy of Russel Wright and oversees the licensing of authentic Russel Wright products. www.russelwrightstudios.com.

FOR THE TABLE

Wright's American Modern dinnerware, designed in 1937, was produced from 1939 to 1959. It was the most popular American dinnerware ever produced, with more than 250 million pieces sold. Amazingly, the line almost died on the drawing board; according to Patrick Dickson, designer and partner at Russel Wright Studios, its shapes and colors were seen as such a radical departure from conventional pottery of the time, that the American pottery companies, predicting its failure, declined to produce it. "Finally," says Dickson, "Steubenville Pottery Company, of Steubenville, Ohio, desperate from the effects of foreign competition and on the brink of bankruptcy, agreed to produce the new American Modern dinnerware if Russel funded the development of the original molds."

Because so much American Modern was produced, it is relatively easy to find vintage examples. The signature "Russel Wright" and the words "Mfg. by Steubenville" are impressed into the clay. But if you want a dishwasher safe, matched set, there is a new option. The line was reissued last year by Bauer Pottery of California, a venerable company that ran from the late 1800s to 1962. In 1998, Janek Bonieki restarted Bauer and began reproducing the company's signature brightly colored "California" tableware from the 1930s and '40s. For its American Modern production, the greatest challenge has been recreating Wright's saturated, subtle colors. The glazes are so transparent, says Bonieki, "they pick up anything that is underneath." Last spring, he was finally satisfied with Bauer's version of Wright's 1940s and '50s colors – among them Coral and Chartreuse, the deep green Sea Foam and a soft grey called Granite – and last month, he introduced Wright's speckled Glacier Blue. He is also offering some Wright pieces in bright Bauer colors, like a rich yellow and deep red. Prices range from \$18 for a small plate to \$75 for the iconic pitcher. Each piece is embossed with the mark "Russel Wright by Bauer Pottery, California, USA." To order: 888/213-0800 or www.bauerpottery.com.

Reproductions of selected American Modern pieces as well as pieces from Wright's Casual line were produced in 2002 and 2003 by Oneida, Ltd. and named Russel Wright. They are easily spotted by the silkscreened markings on their bottoms (including the name Oneida). Colors are similar to, but not always exactly the same as, the originals. Prices are affordable, around \$20 for a Manitoga Blue pitcher.

Wright's Pinch stainless steel flatware, originally made by Hull, was also reproduced by Oneida for a few years until 2005, in a slightly larger size than the original. Examples bear the Oneida stamp, and are more sought-after than the Oneida dinnerware reproductions, costing as much as 50 percent of vintage prices.



Above Vintage dinnerware by Wright in Dragon Rock's kitchen includes American Modern pitchers and creamers by Steubenville Pottery; Melmac Residential cup and saucer by Northern Plastic; Casual teapot by Iroquois China. Annie Wright attributes her becoming a chef to her father's attention to the presentation of food on the plate.

Below left Bauer Pottery's reissued American Modern dinnerware.

TYPICAL PRICES

American Modern Teapot

Vintage: \$115 (Coral) \$150 (White)
Bauer: \$65 all colors
Oneida: \$10 to \$20 (Charcoal Gray)

American Modern Dinner Plates

Vintage: \$8 (Coral) \$15 (Chartreuse)
Bauer: \$25

American Modern Pitcher

Vintage: \$100 (Coral)
Bauer: \$75 all colors
Oneida: \$22 (Manitoga Blue)

Casual – vintage only

Stacking sugar/creamer – \$30
(Pink Sherbet and Ice Blue)

Pinch Flatware

Teaspoon, vintage: \$45
Oneida, 5-piece place setting: \$100



 www.retrospective.net
www.hiandlmodern.com
www.mostlywright.com
www.replacements.com

Furniture

Russel Wright Studios produced the American Modern furniture series, about 24 items, from 2005 to 2007. All handcrafted in the U.S., they were exact copies of the pieces manufactured by Conant-Ball from 1935 to 1938. These new pieces occasionally appear on the collector market and are priced on par with originals in good condition. They can be identified by their clear natural finish over solid maple construction and trademarked Russel Wright signature branded into the wood. Vintage pieces of Wright's Modernmates furniture line from the 1940s for Conant-Ball can also be found.

TYPICAL PRICES *Vintage only.*

Modernmates six-drawer dresser, with mirror \$600;
Vanity, with mirror, no bench \$1300; Dining table, drop leaf,
six upholstered side chairs \$3000

Pair of end tables in birch and rattan for Conant-Ball, \$725

Walnut desk, 1950s, \$4,450

Streamlined Lounge chairs, 1940s, \$4,800

Samson Folding chairs, set of 4, \$3,500



Russel Wright Studios also produced a limited run of the the *Pony* chair of 1932, originally made for the Museum of Modern Art, with sculpted arms hand carved from solid Primavera wood. A number of *Pony* chairs are still available exclusively through Highbrow Furniture: www.highbrowfurniture.com.

www.1stdibs.com A portal for many dealers.

www.metroretrofurniture.com

www.newportmodern.com

Spun Metal Collection

Russel Wright's spun metal collection of the 1930s was reissued in 2004 by HK Designs of Pittsburgh, a metal fabricator specializing in industrial metal spinning for architectural environments. According to Rick Kline, who heads HK Design, Wright's "early works in spun aluminum, incorporating new materials and technology, launched his career and crystallized his philosophy of 'good design is for everyone.'" The new vases, planters, stackable tumblers and small reflector lamp were recreated with the exact dimensions, materials, finishes and processes as the originals. Each is stamped with the Russel Wright signature and the HK Designs logo. The company has also produced an aluminum version of Wright's popular wood-and-bamboo *Roly Poly* cart of 1936, two round trays suspended between vertical hoops. Prices range from \$40 for a tumbler to \$550 for the reflector lamp. The cart is by special order and costs \$5,000. To order: 412/349-0019, www.hkdesigns.com.

TYPICAL VINTAGE PRICES

Aluminum tray, trimmed in reed, \$75

Torchere, aluminum and limed oak, \$325

Bun warmer, reed handle, complete with insert, \$185-375

Cheese tray, covered, walnut insert and knob, \$225



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