

# PARTNERS by design

After 60 years together, husband-wife artists Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman and their eclectic mid-century designs are gaining renewed attention

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SOMETIMES, JEROME ACKERMAN looks back on what could have been. He'd studied commercial art and pottery and was a talented designer and an even better idea man. He was also doing well as a salesman in his cousin's steel business. At one point, he was offered a job to start a ceramics department at the University of Illinois.

"I would have likely ended up teaching art," he says.

And Evelyn Ackerman could have used the steamship ticket she'd bought, sailed to Europe, and settled in Paris to become a great painter.

Instead, they met. Check out the little beauty working at the interior design shop, a friend advised. So on a wintry day in between steel calls, Jerry popped in.

"It was like a stage setting, I'm not kidding," Jerry says, during an interview in their home in Culver City that's as unpretentious as the Ackermans themselves. "There's this beautiful, young woman sitting in the back folding fabrics, and here's this guy with a frozen ass coming in. I said, 'Hi, I'm Jerry Ackerman,' and she said, 'Yes, I remember you.'"

It turns out Jerry, who was 28 and a recent Air Corps vet, and Evelyn, 24, had met briefly at art school some years back, after growing up blocks apart in Detroit without knowing each other. But this time they didn't let their meeting go for naught. By the end of the year they'd wed.

What ensued was more than a marriage. It was one of the great husband-wife pairings in the history of mid-century modern design, a category that includes



MID-CENTURY MODERNISTS. One of the most stunning pieces of work from the multi-talented Ackerman team is Evelyn's 'Girls in the Rain' mosaic (above).

Charles and Ray Eames, Gertrud and Otto Natzler, and Otto and Vivian Heino.

Unlike the other three couples, though, the Ackermans largely dropped out of historical sight. When Bruce Chernof, a serious collector of California modernism, met Jerry and Evelyn by chance at a show, he had never heard of them.

But he quickly realized that he'd been seeing their work for years without knowing who created it—in restaurants, hotels, and other spots throughout California. "We discovered we actually knew the work quite well," Chernof says.

Though not as famous as some of

their contemporaries, the Ackermans don't complain.

By the mid-1950s they were an integral part of the Southern California modernist design scene, producing silk screens, mosaics, tapestries, woodcarvings, and more—work sold in high-end galleries and furniture showrooms and shown in the leading exhibits. Their artwork appeared regularly in such influential magazines as *Arts & Architecture*, and even showed up in a panel gag in *Playboy* magazine—as an ideal accoutrement for the perfectly coiffed modern home.

"If you leaf through the *LA Times' Home*

magazine through the '50s," says Gerard O'Brien, whose Reform Gallery in Los Angeles specializes in California modern, "you can't go a week without seeing some home or some interior with an Ackerman piece in it. I think they captured the zeitgeist of that era in their tapestries."

The Ackermans' work is in many museums, including the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, which owns Evelyn's 40-piece cloisonné series 'Stories from the Bible.' "I think it's probably the pinnacle of what she's done," Jerry says.

The Ackermans are also gaining new collectors and fans, thanks to



ECLECTIC OUTPUT. Working at a consistently high-quality level with virtually every medium, the Ackermans won fame for the variety of their art. By the mid-1950s they were producing silk screens, mosaics, tapestries, woodcarvings, and more. Clockwise from top left: Evelyn in front of the the Jenev Design Studio, 1952; the company logo for their next business venture, ERA Industries; Evelyn and Jerry at their studio kiln, 1952; a tender moment with the young couple, 1948; playful at home, 2010.

media attention and to a 2009 retrospective of their work at San Diego's Mingei International Museum, 'Masters of Mid-Century California Modernism: Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman.' Their work will be shown again, starting in January, at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles.

Alfred Sils, a long-time Los Angeles wood-turner and a friend, says the Ackermans were leaders in the California crafts revival that began after World War II.



"They were among the transformational crafts artists who grew up about that time," he says.

"That group took the media crafts artists were working in, clay and wood, metal too, and began creating art pieces using these media that previously people used to make utilitarian pieces. They took these media to an entirely different level."

"This is the beginning of California modernism," he says.

The Ackermans' goal back in 1949 wasn't quite so lofty: "There's an over-riding factor,"

Jerry says, and Evelyn completes the thought: "We had to make a living."

Jerry, who'd studied art at Wayne University in Detroit and ceramics at Alfred University in New York, and Evelyn, who'd studied at Wayne, were far from wealthy. But they were inspired—in part, by an exhibit of modern design they caught in Detroit a year after they married.

"Either I or Evie made the comment, 'Boy that's really something. I think we can do something like that,'" Jerry recalls.

By 1952 they began doing it, starting a ceramics studio in Los Angeles

even though Eastern potters denigrated California as "a land where ladies are sitting out there painting strawberries on ceramics," Jerry says. "So I said, you know, what's wrong with strawberries?"

Jerry produced simple, decidedly modern slip-cast pots—some decorated by Evelyn. They called their operation 'Jenev Design Studio,' for 'Jerry' and 'Evelyn.' The pots were quickly accepted by a top modernist showroom.

But life was tough—a one-room



apartment with a Murphy bed and windows that had to stay shut to keep out sawdust from a neighboring lumberyard. They got to thinking. “We did one-of-a-kind pieces, custom work,” Jerry says, and Evelyn adds: “But that’s hard to make a living doing.”

“We had to grow, and we couldn’t produce (everything) ourselves,” Jerry says. “What were the alternatives?”

Their answer: They would design the work and produce prototypes to be replicated in limited production by other craftspeople. Over the next three decades their mom-and-pop corporation (later called ERA Industries) became a mini-multinational, with

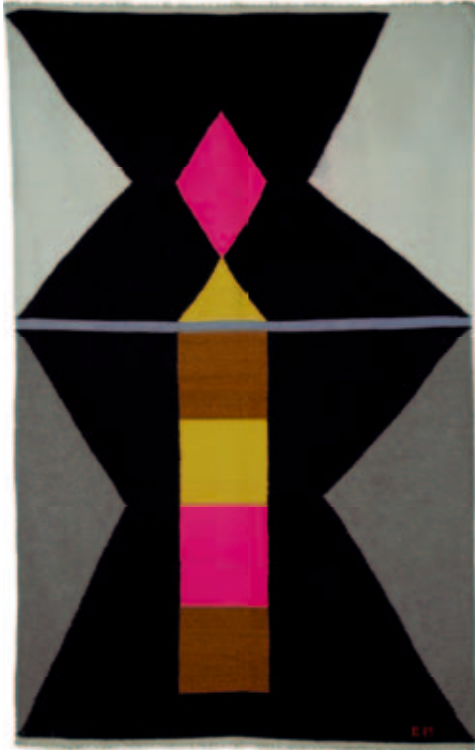


period, forget craft—who was able to work at that level at virtually every medium there is,” Sils says.

Farming out production allowed the Ackermans to price their work

low enough so “young people like ourselves” could buy it, Jerry says. “We didn’t have much money,”

In its simplicity and abstraction, the work was very modern—and the



**ACKERMAN SHOWCASE.** Six diverse Ackerman pieces (clockwise from top left): herringbone bowl (Jerry); ‘Young Warrior’ (Evelyn mosaic); ‘Launchpad’ (Evelyn tapestry); Antico door pulls (Jerry); ‘Dorthea’ (Evelyn sculpture); ‘Cat Table’ (Evelyn mosaic). Also pictured above are two covers of *Home* magazine (of the *Los Angeles Times*) from the late 1950s, both showcasing Ackerman art as integral ingredients in modern interiors.

workshops of skilled craftspeople in Southern California, Mexico, Greece, and elsewhere producing multiple editions based on their models.

A few craftspeople they knew grumbled. “I heard comments about me that I’d left the field of ceramics and hadn’t stayed true,” Jerry says. “I kind of figured, you know, sour grapes. What are you going to do?”

But Jerry, though a card-carrying member of the American Craft Council, was also heavily influenced by the Bauhaus, the prewar German school that sought to imbue industrial production with high-quality design.

“We collaborated on a few of the designs,” Jerry says, “but Evelyn was really the main designer.” The textiles

artists, illustrators, and animators as Mary Blair, Gene Deitch, and Jim Flora.

“There’s a level of whimsy in Evelyn’s work that I think is really endearing,” says O’Brien, whose gallery has a wall filled with Evelyn’s fabric work. “Evelyn was interested in storytelling.” His favorite works by her, O’Brien says, are the abstract pieces.

James Elliot-Bishop, who writes about California ceramics and designs, appreciates the stripped-down modernity of Evelyn’s representational designs. “She removed all the extras and left just what was functional,” he says. “That’s how I see her work.”

The Ackermans also won fame for the variety of their media. “I don’t know of any craft artist—any other artist



**ON EXHIBITION.** Clockwise from top left: inside the Ackermans’ Culver City home, 2010; ‘Zodiac’ wood panelcarve (Evelyn); ceramics (Jerry); ‘Female Figures’ vase (Jerry with Evelyn); finger puppets (Evelyn); horses door pulls (Evelyn).

Ackermans assume many of their fans lived in modern homes.

Joe Eichler certainly saw the connection between their work and the homes he was building. In the early 1950s, the Ackermans met Eichler, armed with an introduction from their friend Emil Betsy, an architect who worked for Jones & Emmons, one of

Eichler’s architectural teams.

Jerry and Evelyn had headed north, thinking they might relocate. Eichler met them at his Palo Alto office and showed off his job sites. The Ackermans were impressed.

“I said, ‘We’re doing ceramics,’” Jerry recalls. “How would we make a living up here?” He said, ‘Jerry, I’m

going to be building enough houses up here that if you could sell a pot to each one of these houses, you’ll be doing fine.’ He was a good salesman.”

Still, they remained down south because they’d already built up contacts.

By the mid-1950s, a workshop of traditional Mexican weavers was producing Evelyn’s very untraditional

textiles, a relationship that continued for 25 years. They were also producing mosaics and silk-screens—later hooked rugs, wood-carvings, wood-carved architectural panels, even hardware for doors and cabinetry, and knife-holders.

By the early 1960s they were turning out the wooden carvings using a multiple spindle carver that could create 24 panels at once. They were produced for a firm called Panelcarve (later called Forms + Surfaces), run by one of Jerry’s old school buddies.

ERA had a small Los Angeles showroom of its own, with up to eight employees, though all production work was done elsewhere. Evelyn did her designing and made the prototypes in her home studio.

Jerry spent six or seven weeks a year on the road, visiting designers, Bloomingdales’ reps, and the like. “It wasn’t easy,” he says, “getting into a city, making a cold call.”

But it paid off. Architects and designers

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nationwide—Skidmore Owens Merrill, Welton Beckett, Jones & Emmons, Buff and Hensman, modernists most of them—specified Ackerman work in their jobs.

“We were ahead of the curve in terms of decorative accessories,” Jerry says. “Prior to our tapestries and mosaics and wood carvings, everything that went into a house was either a painting or print.”

Evelyn created custom work as well, turning out 12 huge tapestries for Litton Industries’ Paul R. Williams-designed headquarters in Beverly Hills. They produced gold-anodized aluminum panels for a dress shop, a mosaic wall for a London hotel, and other custom jobs.

For 30 years Jerry handled the business, never throwing a pot. “I never stopped doing designing, but it was in conjunction with Evelyn. I was not instigating design unless I had an idea, then I would do a rough sketch and Evvy would develop it.”

As for the business, “He did it all,” Evelyn says.

“Jerry could meet people, talk to people. He was gregarious. I was shy and retiring, and we were a perfect match. He could do things I couldn’t do, and I could do things he couldn’t do.”

Though Jerry and Evelyn spent most of their time working, they became friends or acquaintances with many of the leading designers, artists, and architects of the time, including the Heinos, Natzlers, and Eameses, Peter Voulkos, Laura Andreson, Beatrice Wood, John Folliis, Rex Goode, Dan Dworsky, Ray Kappe, and *Arts & Architecture*’s editor John Entenza.

They knew Quincy Jones well, and used his associate, Becsky, to remodel and expand their rather plain 1948 tract home on a quiet street in Culver

City, where they have lived now for 54 years. The result is an interior that’s entirely mid-century modern, although the exterior provides no hint that there is anything special inside. They have filled the home with pieces by Eames, George Nelson, and other modern designers, and art by their contemporaries and themselves.

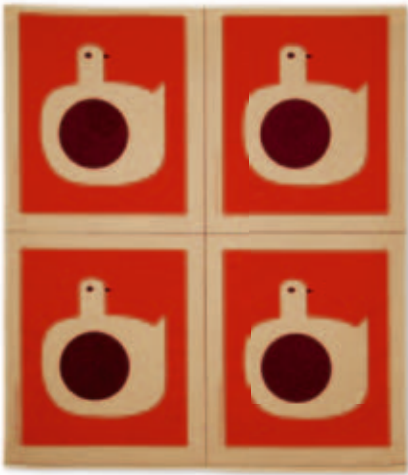
Jerry, 90, and Evelyn, 86, who are known for their hospitality, do not come

they were given distinguished alumni awards for their work, and then Jerry was named 2010 recipient of the Alfred University Alumni Award for distinguished achievement.

Their daughter Laura, one of their biggest boosters, lives in an Eichler home in Northern California. She grew up helping out in her parents’ showroom and at gift shows, meeting famous architects and designers along the way. She remembers



**ACKERMAN REVIVAL.** Evelyn and Jerry are back in the spotlight, and so is their wonderful art. Left to right (all by Evelyn): ‘Mourning Dove’ and ‘Striped Candy Tree’ tapestries, Santa Barbara mosaic.



across as design legends; Jerry might be a retired steel salesman and Evelyn a retired teacher.

Jerry continues to do ceramics, though a bad back rules out throwing pots these days. Instead, he does slab construction and casts pieces from his original molds. As he goes about his day, Jerry often sings American standards. A lyric baritone, he once considered a career with the big bands.

Evelyn no longer creates art. After retiring, she developed an expertise in antique dolls, dollhouses, and costuming. She has written many articles and books on the subjects.

Both Ackermans remain active, enjoying friends, family, dining out, and their newfound fame. They also have been spending time organizing their extensive archive. Many people who collect their work have become friends, and they often hear from collectors anxious to learn more about their work.

This year has been a big one for the Ackermans. First, they were honored by Wayne State University, where

her parents writing a play and creating a puppet theater and puppets for her birthday party, and making finger-puppets for her nursery school that they later turned into products.

When asked about the Ackermans’ importance, dealer Gerard O’Brien, who’s raising a family, mentioned their work, then their life. “It’s a fantastic example,” he says, “that they were able to run their business the way they did, doing what they wanted, and raising a wonderful daughter, Laura.”

Jerry says: “I guess we have left—well, the word ‘legacy’ is over-used. But I think we can be proud of what we have done.” ■

*Additional photography: John Eng, Dave Weinstein; and courtesy the Ackerman family, Los Angeles Times. Mark April images ©2010 Mark April.*

• ‘Furnishing the Modern Home: the Work of Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman’ will show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, January 26 through May 8, 2011. [cafam.org](http://cafam.org)

• For more about the Ackermans and their art, visit [ackermanmodern.com](http://ackermanmodern.com)

## Ackerman art on view

- The Reform Gallery includes work by the Ackermans. 601 N. La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles. [reform-modern.com](http://reform-modern.com)

- ‘Fantasy Landscape,’ Evelyn Ackerman’s large mosaic mural on an apartment building, can be enjoyed at 11957 Kiowa Ave., Los Angeles.

- Meditation Mount, a meditation center, has a pair of Evelyn’s Zodiac doors leading to its meditation room and open to the public. 10340 Reeves Road, Ojai. [meditation.com](http://meditation.com)



**SEE FOR YOURSELF.** There’s a trail of Ackerman art throughout California.

- In Palo Alto, Castilleja School has a pair of Evelyn Ackerman’s Panel-carve doors. 1310 Bryant Street.

- In Palm Springs, the transom on the Alan Ladd Building has a carving by Evelyn Ackerman. 500 South Palm Canyon Drive.

- In Michigan, the Ahavas Israel synagogue has a set of four carved sanctuary doors created by Evelyn in 1979 in memory of her twin sister Roslyn. 2727 Michigan NE, Grand Rapids.