

The International Museum of Dinnerware Design:
Dinnerware + Design + Decoration

SOFA Chicago 2019

curated by Dr. Margaret Carney

Clay and glass objects are among the earliest surviving artifacts from ancient cultures. Dinnerware is included among these. Thousands of years ago when these objects were in daily use, some of them were decorated. Throughout dining history when makers created the bowls, plates, jars, ewers, and utensils utilized in our daily lives, decisions were made to decorate or not to decorate these forms. Some of the earliest Neolithic pottery in China, dating back to more than 7,500 years ago, was simple unassuming grey earthenware pottery. Other times, the coil-built earthenware pots were painted with memorable yet timeless designs in black and red mineral pigments.

In modern times, both artists and designers for industry made similar aesthetic decisions. The focus of the IMoDD collection is dinnerware that is of notable design, whether unadorned or highly decorated. IMoDD's *D + D + D* exhibition at SOFA Chicago 2019 reveals through visual examples, some of the reasons why collectors, the betrothed, and consumers, in general, are attracted to and choose the dinnerware they select, whether it is exceptional studio pottery created by contemporary artists, or manufactured masterpieces from the great designers for industry.

Dinnerware + Design + Decoration presents from the IMoDD permanent collection, superb examples of both dinnerware genres, which exemplify a diverse range of form and surface decorating techniques. Masterpieces of tableware displaying sculptural embellishments, carving, faceting, sprig decorating, decals, hand-painting, incising, and various glazing techniques such as wax resist and crystalline glazes are featured. White, undecorated teapots and a coffee pot designed by Eva Zeisel and commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, as well as the popular Hallcraft *Tomorrow's Classic* line for Hall China, are juxtaposed with a plethora of identical yet colorfully and even fancifully decorated teapot and coffee pot forms. The decal patterns on these manufactured pieces have imaginative names such as *Mandalay, Wisteria, Spring, Holiday, Lyric, Fantasy, Arizona, Caprice, and Peach Blossom*. Eva Zeisel created the original basic form in white, and the decorated teapots followed. More choices for consumers; more sales for the manufacturers and distributors.

Eva Zeisel is often quoted as saying to the consumer pondering which tableware to purchase, "When in doubt, buy white."¹ The idea is based on the fact that all food looks good on white china. Decoration can add another dimension to the work, complementing and enriching (or in some cases, competing with) the basic form. Yet collectors and diners are drawn to not only good shapes and forms, but also to surface decorations and

patterns on their tableware. IMoDD presents the dinnerware; the audience at SOFA gets to decide what they like and then think about why they are drawn to the forms and decorations.

It may seem contradictory, but Eva is also quoted as saying (about her Hall China lines of dinnerware in the 1950s), “Only now is a thirst for color, warmth, joyousness as well as impatience with...’pure form’ again focusing...attention on ornament.”² When placed side-by-side, Eva’s teapot and coffee pot forms in white for Hall China in the 1950s, as well as her earlier *Museum* line created for the Museum of Modern Art, reveal the choices consumers made in terms of good design, and the same beautiful forms embellished with fresh patterns and decorations.

The same can be said of Frederick Carder’s sublime Pyrex glass teapots designed for Corning Glass Works in the 1920s. Pure forms are juxtaposed along side the same teapots with exquisitely engraved decorations and monograms. In the 1920s these innovative teapots sold for just a few dollars each. A 1923 advertisement noted one could purchase a dozen assorted teapots (unadorned) for \$48.00.

The manufacturers of dinnerware also made savvy decisions about their dinnerware being marketed in basic white or monochrome hues or offered with hand-painted designs. Glidden Pottery, located in Alfred, New York, used a Ram Press to manufacture their various dinnerware lines, but all were lovingly hand-painted. Look closely at the 1950s Glidden dinnerware with poodle motifs, and one can see that no two poodles are identical. The same can be said for the Glidden Pottery *Snowdrop* pattern place settings commissioned in 1956 for the members’ lunch room at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York City. Designed by Fong Chow and Glidden Parker, each snowdrop was hand-painted onto each plate, bowl and cup.

The Art Deco patterns on the striking *Modernistic* line of Royal-Rochester, Fraunfelter China, and Hall China coffee urns, waffle irons, batter bowls and syrup servers are also all individually hand-decorated. The backstamps on each piece clearly record that they are “hand-painted.” However, decal decorations can be just as mesmerizing, as can be seen on the abstract fish decorations applied to the Shenango China *Well of the Sea* dishes from the Hotel Sherman in Chicago (1948-1972). However, a different decorative technique was used manufacturing of the TEPCO restaurant ware from California, in the *Confucius* pattern believed to have been designed for a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco. The repetitive pagoda, curved bridges, pathways and foliage images are captivating and were created by the use of stencils and airbrushed colors.

Manufacturers of dinnerware have celebrated individualized tea services that pair a great manufacturer with a gifted decorator. The pre-1920s Belle Epoque Art Nouveau hand-painted Bavarian Schönwald Porcelain tea service acquired by IMoDD in 2019 is a fine

example. The teapot, underplate, and cream sugar were all hand-painted with violets and gold touches by Pickard China artist Phillip Wight, who signed each piece.

Some forms, the simple, ubiquitous round/circular plate, for example, vary in shape but even more in surface decoration. Think of the work of designer Piero Fornasetti, who decorated his plate forms with literally hundreds of images of his muse Lina Cavalieri, an Italian operatic soprano and actress and renowned beauty of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is unlikely anyone ever ate from his ornamental plates. Six examples from the IMoDD collection provide an introduction to his obsession. Be warned, the attraction to Lina is contagious.

In England in the 1800s, Josiah Wedgwood designed (for Wedgwood) a rather *trompe l'oeil* covered game pie dish that looks a lot like a game pie pastry, but was actually created from a new clay body Wedgwood called Caneware. The form had sculpted or molded relief decorations of rabbit and game bird motifs. It must have been considered quite an innovative table pleaser when there was a flour shortage during the Napoleonic Wars and even the wealthy could not access such commodities. When the pastry-like cover was removed, a simple stew was revealed within the ceramic liner.

The collections at IMoDD illustrate an acquisition balance between manufactured and one-of-a-kind pieces created by artists. Contemporary work includes sublime temmoku faceted tea bowls by ceramic artist Jeff Oestreich from 1992, a masterful sculpted butter dish by Kate Maury, a monumental punch bowl with a spectacular crystalline glaze by Lea Zoltowski, and a celebratory cake stand by Tara Barnes-Stumpf, to name a few. In addition to Jeff Oestreich, other contemporary artists included in the IMoDD permanent collection who decorate their pots rather minimally, with sublime faceted forms and rich monochromatic glazes include Warren MacKenzie and S.C. Rolf.

Other artists, such as Lea Zoltowski and Herb Sanders choose decorative crystalline glazes. While decals are most closely associated with industrially produced dinnerware, Paul Donnelly combines decals with beautiful celadon glazes, as can be seen on his beverage set with a walnut base. Artist Kate Maury utilized a number of decorating techniques in her masterpiece butter dish sculpture titled *Lamb O'God*. The lamb is cast, and the flowers and all other decorative features are pressed in sprig molds. She slab built the form the lamb rests on. Lustre glazes work harmoniously with the fine drawings on Julia Galloway's place settings. Elaborate and tantalizing fun surface treatments can be seen in Tara Barnes-Stumpf's masterwork of a cake stand, *To Have and to Hold*, from 2016. Tara hand-builds her figures hollow using coils and slabs. Her dramatic terra cotta cake stand has five layers of decoration including slip underlay, wash underlay, and wax resist. The tantalizing, repetitive donut motif is also made through sculpting individual pieces and applying them to the surface.

It is not unusual for contemporary artists to vary their pottery decorating techniques from piece to piece. Examples of pottery made by the husband and wife team of Vivika and Otto Heino in the IMoDD permanent collection demonstrate this concept. One bowl dated 1993 with an iron red glaze shows slip being used as a decorating technique, while one of their squat vases dated 1991 is decorated with a glaze dotted with iron spots. Still other small Heino bowls were decorated with homage to Japanese calligraphy using wax resist techniques.

This *D + D + D* exhibition does not intend to answer the question of whether the consumer should choose simple form over ornate decoration, but would rather have the audience consider why one makes such selections when choosing their dinnerware. The exhibition was organized and curated by the International Museum of Dinnerware Design, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹ Lois Maxin, "White China Best to Start," *New York World Telegram and Sun*, May 16, 1957, p. 20.

² "New Directions in Dinnerware Seen by Designers," *Retailing Daily*, March 31, 1952, p. 36.