



DIVERSITY & DIFFERENCE

Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000

Seamstress

Dentist

Sailor

Butcher

Old Man

Barber

Cook

Carpenter

Fisherman

Doctor

Druggist

Banker

House Wiper

Ball Player

Mechanic

Teacher

Cow Boy

Doctor

Elephant

Democrat

Democrat

BY ANDREA DINOTO

Belle Kogan is hardly a household name, yet as the head of her own industrial design firm from 1930 to 1970 (an astonishing feat, at the time), she designed a host of household objects, everything from plastic kitchenware to stylish ceramic vases and award-winning silver serving pieces. Clara Barck Welles's name is less well-known than that of the important silver company, the Kalo Shop, she founded in Chicago in 1900 and ran as both designer and silversmith. Jackie Peters, an African-American trained in fashion and fine art in Chicago and Paris, was aided in establishing a successful career in textile design by the civil rights ferment of the 60s. The legendary designer Bonnie Cashin entered fashion by way of the theater, having designed costumes for the Roxyettes in the 30s.

These are just a few of the hundreds of women whose varied and inspiring stories are revealed in *Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference*. This lavishly illustrated, handsomely designed book was published in conjunction with the eponymous exhibition at Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, New York City (through April 8). The organizers worked within a broad definition of design that included both handcraft (one-off and production work) and industry. Their goal was to identify and credit deserving women designers—ranging from potters, weavers and metalsmiths to industrial, interior and landscape designers—and to redress the marginalization of their considerable contribution to American design.

The exhibition showcased outstanding and refreshingly unexpected work in every medium that included a 1936 modernist silver teapot by Margret Craver, a machine-stitched Seminole skirt by Lena Frank and a 1998 Timex watch by Judith Reichel Riley. Also represented were fine examples of cutting-edge graphic design and typography, postmodern art furniture, renderings of interiors and, on video monitors, movie stills illustrating set and costume designs.

All these and more are to be found in the book—edited by Pat Kirkham, a professor in the history of design at the Bard Graduate Center and the exhibition's curator—which assembles the stories of such women into 16 chapters, each a mini-history of its subject organized chronologically, so that in most cases we start anew at 1900 and proceed through a hundred years of achievements. The subject of women in design is complex in that it is an expression of the feminist movement, embraces (as noted) both handcraft and manufacturing, and extends across a wide design spectrum. So it is not surprising that the book's overall organization is somewhat quirky. First, an illustrated decade-by-decade timeline provides useful, at-a-glance feminist historical context. Next, a prefatory essay, "Social Change and Changing Experience," by Eileen Boris, gives a concise and strong-minded summation of the women's movement, which effectively gave many women the courage and support to overcome gender bias and pursue their dreams.

In Chapter One, Kirkham and Lynne Walker offer an overview of issues affecting women designers, including access to education, the importance of support and mentoring, and, interestingly, a look at couple design partnerships—notably, Charles and Ray Eames and the architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown—in which gender bias has denied the wife co-equal credit.

Subsequent chapters on specific design fields tell uniquely interesting stories. Wendy Kaplan's chapter on the Arts and Crafts movement reveals the way in which training schools, such as the Society of Decorative Art founded by Candace Wheeler in New York in 1877, laid the groundwork for women to enter the craft world early in the 20th century. A chapter on textile design by Mary

Schoeser and Whitney Blausen illuminates the major role played, often anonymously, by women in that field. Valerie Steele traces the evolution of fashion design from nameless 19th-century dressmakers to couturiers to celebrated ready-to-wear designers like Claire McCardell and Donna Karan.

Two chapters devoted, respectively, to the struggles and achievements of Native American and African-American designers tell the secret histories of these often "invisible" women. We learn, among other things, that as much as white women have struggled for recognition, they themselves have been guilty of ignoring and even denying the contributions of women of color. For example, we learn that Ann Lowe, the great-granddaughter of a slave, who built a significant reputation among upper-class women of both races for the design of sumptuous ball gowns, "was virtually ignored by the press" for her design of Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding dress.

Devoting separate chapters to these two ethnic groups, though laudable and long overdue, has its ironies. African-American women produced decidedly mainstream textile design (discussed in the African-American chapter), but their work is absent from the larger discussion in the textile chapter. In a reversal of that logic, jewelry by Native Americans—so aesthetically related to their weaving and regalia designs—is removed to the jewelry chapter, where an oddly inclusive assemblage gives new meaning to the word eclectic: Zuni inlay is cheek by jowl with Arts and Crafts gold work, modernist silver, a few costume pieces, 70s biomorphic items, 80s woven metal and 90s conceptual design.

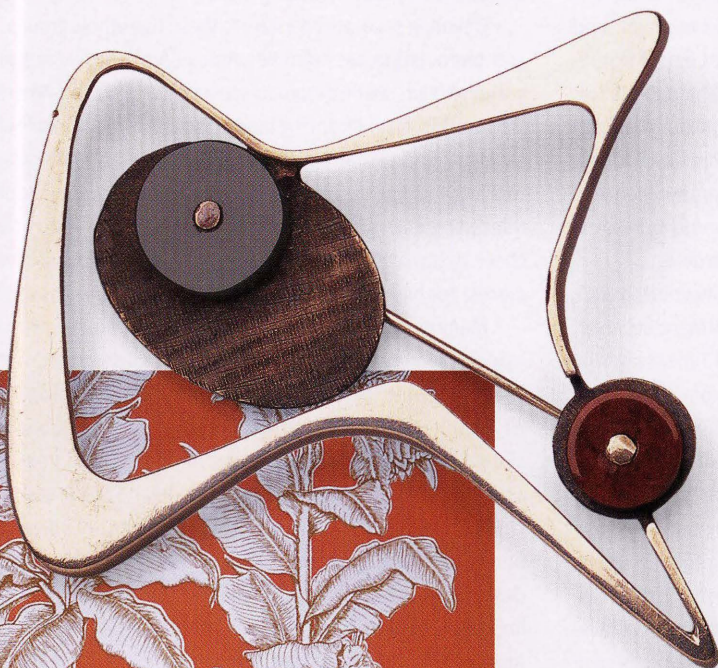
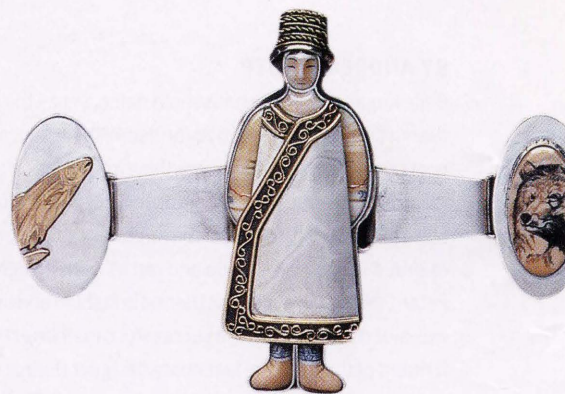
Many more stories are told than objects illustrated, with the result that the reader is sometimes frustrated to find a verbal description for which no picture is provided. And there are a few omissions that are hard to fathom. In the jewelry chapter, no mention is made of Angela Cummings, one of the first women, along with Elsa Peretti, to be featured at Tiffany's, and who went on to establish a thriving international business in handmade fine jewelry. In the chapter on landscape design, the architect Maya Lin is given a few appreciative sentences, but her Vietnam Veterans Memorial—arguably the 20th century's central design icon—though cited, is not pictured. And there is no discussion of the important, century-long contribution of numerous costume designers for the American theater, including Lucinda Ballard in the 40s and, in our era, Theoni Aldredge, Patricia Zipprodt and Willa Kim.

The design of the book itself, by Patrick (!) Seymour, under the direction of Ellen Lupton, is noteworthy, with text set in "Mrs Eaves," a highly readable 18th-century-revival typeface designed by Zuzana Licko in 1996. The challenge of working with hundreds of mostly full-color photos of diverse objects is deftly handled, if at times with a bit too much "equal protection" in sizing. In the quilts chapter, for example, one would have hoped for one or two full-page photos.

These few criticisms aside, *Women Designers* is an impressive documentation of its subject, and a book that should be a part of any serious design, or feminist, library. Like its provocative cover image, a detail of a poster featuring a dancer's leg in high-heeled shoe and mesh hose on the run, the book captures the spirit of women who have overcome the constraints of their sex in a man's world with style and grace, and without the sacrifice of their femininity. ■

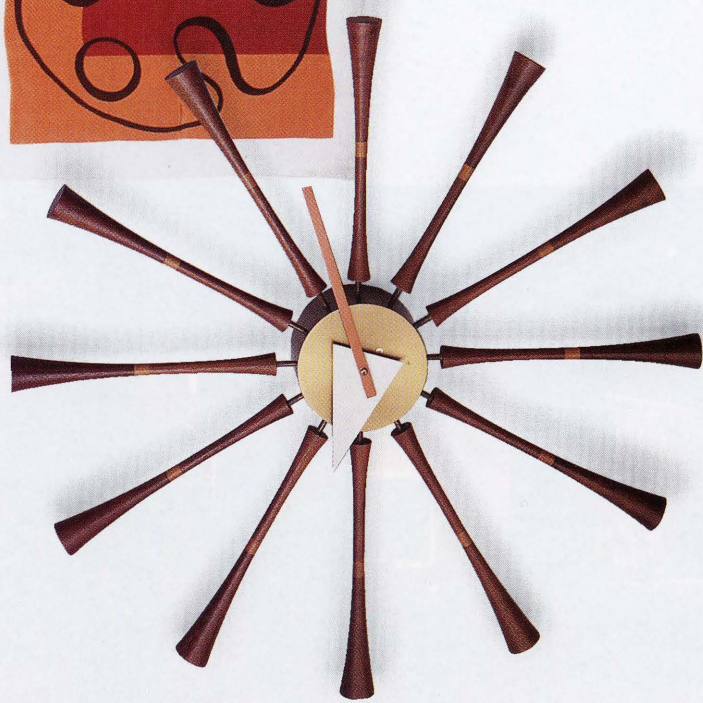
Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference edited by Pat Kirkham, 2000, the Bard Graduate Center, New York, NY, with Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 203-432-0964; 462 pages, texts by 21 contributors, illustrated. \$80.

Andrea DiNoto is the author of Art Plastic: Designed for Living (1984) and The Pressed Plant (1999).



LEFT TOP TO BOTTOM: EVA ZEISEL—*Museum* teapot, coffee pot and creamer, ca. 1942-43, glazed porcelain, coffeepot 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches high, manufactured by Castleton China, Shenango Pottery, collection of Bernarda and Felicísimo Labaco, photo/Bruce White; MARGARET DE PATTÀ—Brooch, 1946-58, silver, chrysoprase, jasper, 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ by $\frac{1}{8}$ inches, collection of Denis Gallion and Daniel Morris, Historical Design, photo/Bruce White; BEVERLY NUSOM—*Wild Banana*, 1971, detail, cotton, 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ by 50 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, screen-printed textile by The Design Works of Bedford Stuyvesant, collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art; MARIA MARTINEZ and JULIAN MARTINEZ—Jar (San Ildefonso Pueblo), ca. 1935-43, blackware, 8 by 9 inches, collection of Institute of American Indian Arts Museum.





TOP TO BOTTOM: DENISE WALLACE—*Crossroads of the Continents*, 1990, detail, belt (Sugpiag), silver, gold, semiprecious stones, fossilized walrus tusk, 40 inches long; RUTH REEVES—*American Scene*, 1930, detail, block-printed cotton textile, 105½ by 47¼ inches, collection of Yale University Art Gallery; MARION DORN—*Headscarf*, 1941-43, screen-printed silk, 38½ by 35½ inches, collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art; LUCIA DERESPINIS—*Wall clock*, model no. 2239, 1957-58, wood, brass, painted metal, 22½ by 22½ by 2½ inches, designed for George Nelson and Company, manufactured by Howard Miller Clock Company, collection of Gansevoort Gallery, photo/Bruce White.