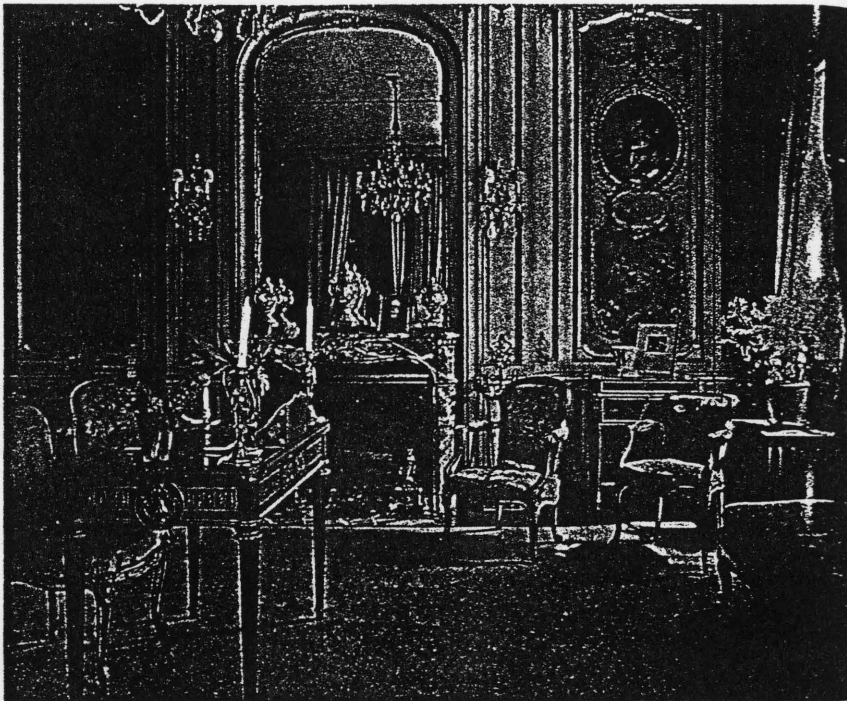
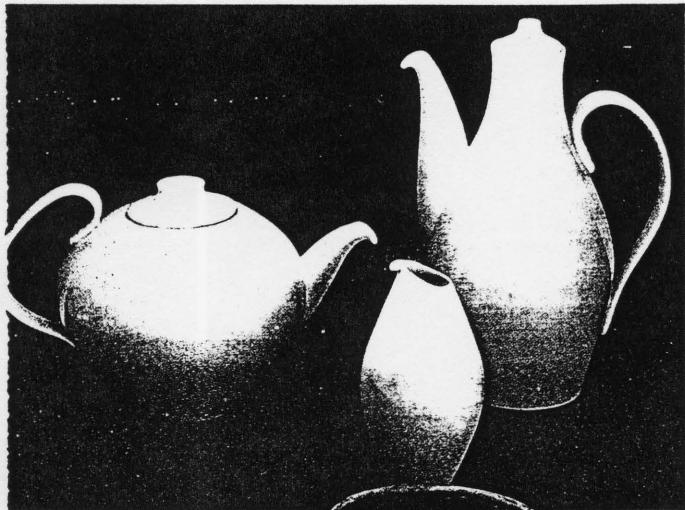


WOMEN'S WORK

An electrifying exhibition honors 230 American designing women of the 20th century and uncovers a trove of long-neglected talents

BY MARTIN FILLER



Highlights of female high style in the USA, from top, left to right: Totem Poles fabric by Lois Mailou Jones, 1928. Eva Zeisel's Museum porcelain for Castleton China, 1942-43. Elsie de Wolfe's 1913 boudoir for Mrs. Henry Clay Frick, New York. Hopi jar by Nampeyo, c. 1910. Silk-satin debutante dress by Ann Lowe, c. 1960.

When design historian Pat Kirkham first told her boss, Susan Weber Soros, founder and director of the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture about her proposed exhibition on 20th-century design by women in this country, the sophisticated Soros had one immediate reaction. "It won't all be quilts, will it?" she asked. As it turns out, the show "Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity in Difference" does indeed include a number of remarkable handmade bedcovers. But this ambitious project also covers far more, and does it so provocatively that it is likely to permanently alter the public's perception of the subject.

Not since the first flush of feminist studies spurred by the women's liberation movement in the sixties and seventies produced several landmark books and exhibitions has there been a show that sets the historical record straight as effectively as this one does. The definitive catalogue (Yale, \$80) accompanying the exhibition includes an

encyclopedia series of essays that delve more deeply into the backgrounds of each medium than any gallery show can hope to achieve. Richly illustrated and impressively researched, this important book is certain to become a classic reference on the subject.

Encompassing a wide variety of design disciplines—industrial, fashion, embroidery, landscape, jewelry, movie production, transportation, and graphics—"Women Designers in the USA" is equally comprehensive in spotlighting women outside the mainstream. Such celebrated figures as ceramist Eva Zeisel, weaver Anni Albers, polymath Ray Eames, Hollywood costumer Edith Head, furniture designer Florence Knoll, and fashion reformer Claire McCardell are all rightfully represented. But the vast majority of the women chosen are still unknown to all but specialists in their respective fields. Kirkham, >



ESTATE OF LOIS MAILOU JONES (1)

They're Back!

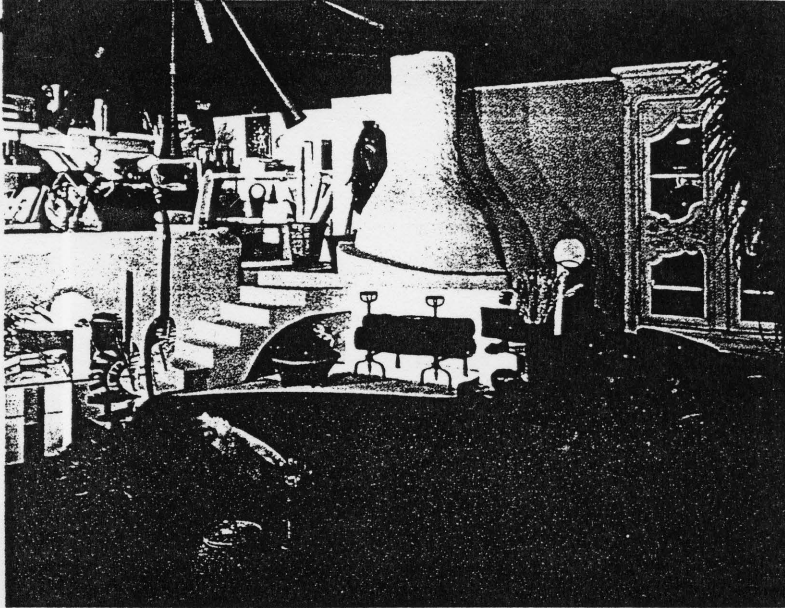
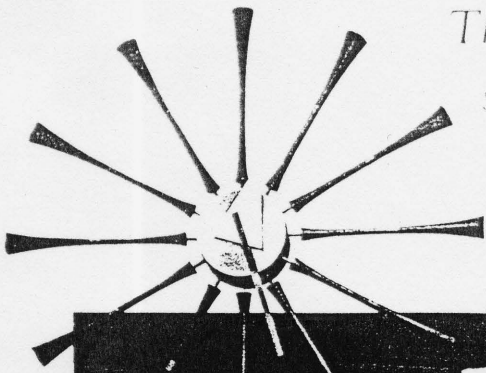
The Bard exhibition sets the record straight in several instances where male partners have tended to overshadow their female counterparts

author of an acclaimed 1995 study of Ray and Charles Eames

that convincingly elevated the reputation of the wife to the level of her husband's, knows a great deal about the ways in which women have been marginalized in the past. And she wasn't about to let it happen again to the designers in her show.

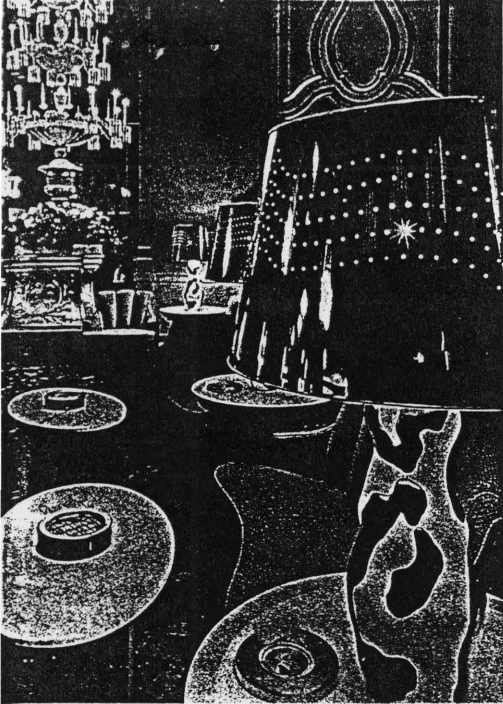
"Our brief was to include all and everyone, and not to be Eurocentric," says the British-born Kirkham. For example, in the early decades of the last century, Native American women potters and weavers became cult figures among white collectors, while African-American craftswomen were virtually ignored by them. As a result, even accounts written at the time can be unreliable documents of what was actually being produced. To redress that imbalance, this revisionist curator has put together the most politically correct design show in recent memory.

COURTESY OF DOROTHY DRAPER & CO., INC. (1)



Biomorphism by American women, from top: Howard Miller clock by Lucia DeRespinis, 1957-58. Barbara D'Arcy room, Bloomingdale's, 1970.

**IN A CAVERNOUS SPACE
I WAS POWERFULLY MIXED AND SHAPED
INTO MY FULL GOLDEN POTENTIAL.
BEING ADMIRERD FROM EVERY ANGLE,
I EXUDE QUARTS AND QUARTS
OF CONFIDENCE.**

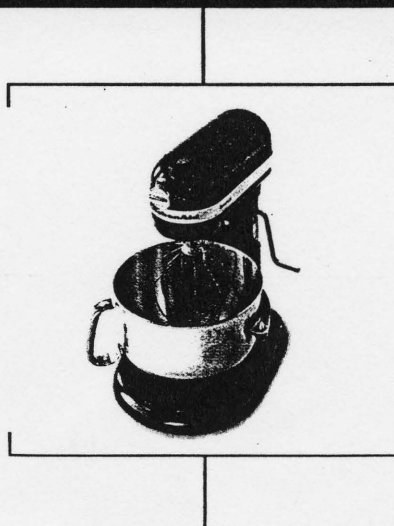
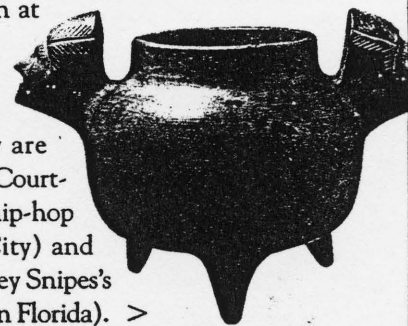


Dorothy Draper's 1935 lobby for Mark Hopkins Hotel, San Francisco. Indian Head pot by Doris Wheelock Blue, Catawba tribe, c. 1970.

ate for some time to come. One particularly inspired addition to the roster of high-style American creators is Ann Lowe, the Harlem-based society seamstress best remembered as the designer and maker of Jacqueline Bouvier's wedding dress for her first marriage, to Senator John F. Kennedy. Here Lowe is done proud by a couturier-quality silk-satin debutante dress of the late 1950s, lent by the Black Fashion Museum in Washington, D.C.

Some people are likely to see Kirkham's radical reapportionments as too skewed toward racial minorities. More than ten percent of this exhibition's 221 objects are baskets, ceramics, rugs, jewelry, and costumes made by Native American women, with works by African-American women just as numerous. On the other hand, this emphatically original selection is likely to reverberate

Yet for all Kirkham's efforts to be panoramic in outlook, certain fields seem too erratically covered. The first seven decades of 20th-century interior design are represented by Elsie de Wolfe, Eleanor McMillen Brown, Dorothy Draper, and Sister Parish, a quartet of formidable WASPs quite at odds with Kirkham's otherwise multicultural approach. In fact, there were few opportunities in high-end decorating for anyone but the well-connected before the great social upheaval of the late 1960s. After the 1970s—embodied in an earth-toned Barbara D'Arcy model room for Bloomingdale's and Ellen Lehman McCluskey's zany takeoff on the Brighton Pavilion at the Waldorf Astoria's Peacock Alley lounge—only two more interior designers appear. They are the African-Americans Courtney Sloane (for a sleek hip-hop music office in Jersey City) and Cecil N. Hayes (for Wesley Snipes's Afrocentric living room in Florida). >

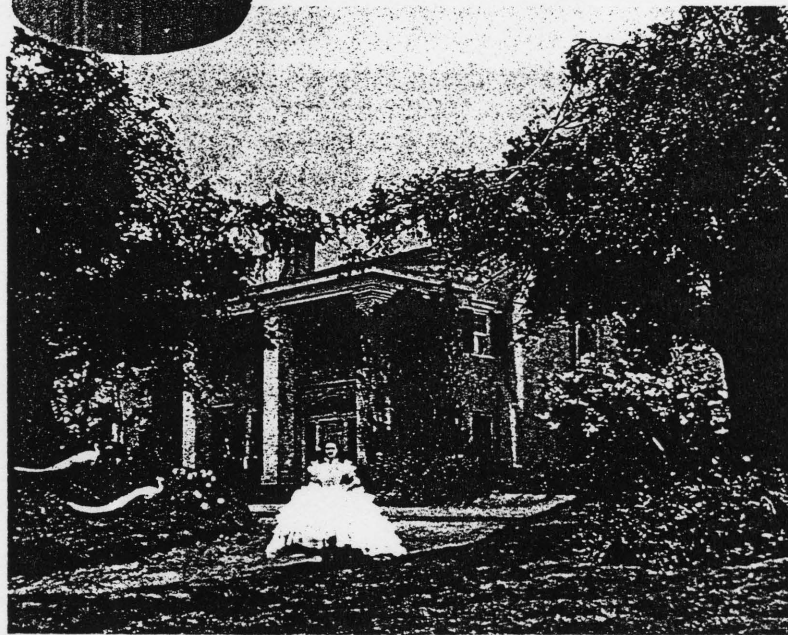
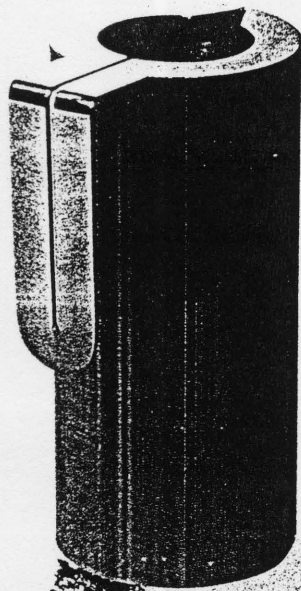


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Apart from racial issues, questions of attribution have often been a problem when women designers work in collaboration with men, and the Bard exhibition sets the record straight in several instances where male partners have tended to overshadow their female colleagues. Some label-conscious collectors of midcentury modern may be disconcerted to learn that a starburst wall clock from the office of George Nelson Associates was designed not by Nelson himself but by his colleague Lucia DeRespini. Here Lella Vignelli gets solo credit for a 1971 silver pitcher previously attributed to her and her husband, Massimo. Win Anderson is listed as co-designer, with Jack Lenor Larsen, of the Mylar-encrusted Magnum textile of 1970. And Robert Venturi's iconic plastic laminate Queen Anne chair for Knoll is ascribed to him and his



Twentieth-century women tackled every modern medium, top to bottom: Silver pitcher, 1971, by Lella Vignelli. Florence Yoch and Lucile Council's 1939 production design for *Gone With the Wind* included this scene at Tara. Gillette's Sensor for Women razor by Jill Shurtleff, 1993.

partner-wife, Denise Scott Brown, for the first time since its creation back in 1979.

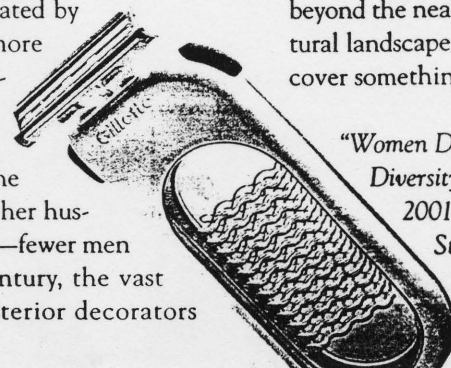
Another revealing tendency that Kirkham discovered in assembling this show is how an increase in the number of women in a design profession can result in men's leaving it. At the beginning of the 20th century, interior decorating was dominated by males. But as more and more women took it up—including some, like Sister Parish, who began decorating for friends during the Depression to supplement her husband's diminished income—fewer men did. By the end of the century, the vast majority of American interior decorators

were female. Though men are not fleeing architecture at the same rate, the number of women in that profession has skyrocketed since the 1970s, when educational opportunities were fully opened to them. But there are a few holdout fields in which the gender ratio remains wildly disproportionate, especially product design, which today is so closely linked to male-dominated high-tech industries.

The question of gender politics aside, there is a great deal of visual pleasure to be gained by a leisurely tour through "Women Designers in the USA." Particularly strong are the entries in landscape design, including a Philadelphia Main Line estate by Beatrix Jones Farrand, a niece of Edith Wharton's, whose professional attainment in her chosen work was no less distinguished than that of her novelist aunt's. Much more motivated by social conscience was Marjorie Sewell Cautley, who did the landscape design for Radburn, New Jersey, the revolutionary new town laid out by architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright in 1928. Instead of chopping up the community into a welter of fenced private yards, Cautley, Stein, and Wright created sweeping tree-shaded commons inspired by the principles of America's landscape genius, Frederick Law Olmsted.

Consensus is more likely to prevail with historical distance. Who would challenge the importance of Frank Lloyd Wright's Arts and Crafts protégé Marion Mahony, or Julia Morgan, pioneering architect of Hearst Castle? But the final decades of the 20th century as defined by this show are likely to raise some lively debate. For every obvious honoree—Vietnam Veterans' Memorial architect and furniture designer Maya Lin, fashion and lifestyle superstar Donna Karan, graphics goddess Lorraine Wild, and mod hatter Patricia Underwood—there are a dozen others whose claims to fame have yet to be cemented.

But that's the fun, and indeed the serious purpose, of catchall exhibitions like this one. By questioning who's there, who's not, and why, the dialogue of design is given new immediacy. Rather than decreeing a new pantheon, "Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000" encourages us to look beyond the neatly circumscribed borders of our cultural landscape, and in doing so prompts us to discover something more in ourselves. ■



"Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000: Diversity and Difference," Nov. 15–Feb. 25, 2001. The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 18 West 86 Street, New York; 212-501-3000.