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Designing Women

Female designers finally get their due in an exhibition at New York's Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts.

By CONNIE KOENENN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

In 1931, Belle Kogan, who had been the only female in her high school mechanical drawing class, opened her own New York City industrial design studio. Specializing in pewter and silver items, the talented Kogan became one of the first industrial designers in America to experiment with plastics and developed a client list that included Red Wing Pottery, Libbey Glass Co. and Dow Chemical Co.

Yet when she made a business trip to a Midwestern electrical appliance manufacturing company, her hosts were shocked. "The engineers decided they couldn't work with a woman," Kogan told a 1939 interviewer, recalling that the company's letter of invitation was addressed to Mr. Bell Kogan. "So I collected my fee of \$200 plus expenses and left."

Kogan is one of 221 female designers—many of them pioneers—whose work is represented in an ambitious exhibition opening Wednesday at New York City's Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts. The center is unveiling "Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference," a multifaceted exhibit tracing a century's progress of women in the world of design.

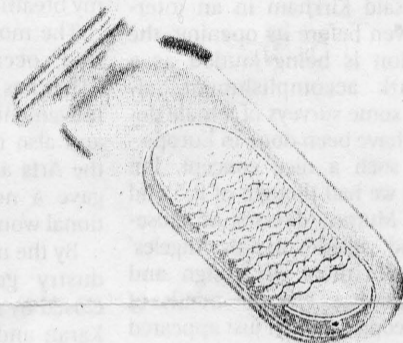
As other fields from Hollywood to space exploration have focused on the achievements of women, the center hopes to reclaim women from their generally marginalized role in the history of design and the decorative arts. "We hope it makes a national impact," said project director Pat Kirkham, a senior faculty member at Bard, who

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A Bonnie Cashin mohair and suede suit from 1964.

Metropolitan Museum, New York



Gillette Co.

"Sensor for Women" razor, developed by Jill Shurtleff.

A Textured Timeline

Deborah Sussman chose to create the timeline for the "Women Designers in the USA" exhibit on gossamer polyester rather than a solid surface because "I wanted it to have a female presence—a feeling of motion and fabric."

The gauzy timeline, organized by decades, is suspended on clear plastic rods, appearing to float from the ceiling. The heat-transferred images on the sheer fabric include an illustration of each object in the exhibit along with text and highlights of the cultural and social conditions women designers faced in the 20th century.

"The timeline is two layers, and we went through an enormous amount of technological research to get the best quality of image digitally," said Sussman, one of the nation's leading environmental graphics designer. "Imagine taking a piece of gauze and trying to print a crisp image with captions you can read."

Working with staffers Jennifer Stoller and Ana Llorente-Thurik at Sussman/Prejza's loft studios in Culver City, she has juggled the "massive amounts of material" provided by project director Pat Kirkham into a vivid picture of a feminist century.

Sussman herself is represented in the exhibition by her firm's design for the cutting-edge graphics look of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics—the explosive aqua, orange and magenta triangles that became synonymous with the energy of the games.

Although Sussman/Prejza is known for major graphics projects around the world, from EuroDisney Corp. to South Coast Plaza, Sussman says the Bard timeline "sort of consumed us."

"It's one of our smallest projects and the kind that makes my year," she said. "I loved it!"

—CONNIE KOENENN



AL SEIB / Los Angeles Times

From left, Ana Llorente-Thurik, Jennifer Stoller and Deborah Sussman admire the timeline that depicts a feminist century of design.

Designers

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has been working on the project for three years.

During the last 100 years, women have produced work in every design field, with textiles, basketry and fashions among the most heralded. And though many of the women represented in the exhibition achieved fame—such as Eva Zeigel, Maria Martínez, Ray Eames, Edith Head and Anne Klein—many others remained obscure.

Today, women are making their marks across the board. The scope of contemporary work in the exhibition embraces Los Angeles designer April Greiman's ("Inventing Flight" film (with Dale Herigstad) for the "Century of Flight Exposition" in Dayton, Ohio, Nancy Goslee Power's plans for the Norton Simon Museum Gardens, Jeannine Oppewall's production design for the movie "Pleasantville" and Deborah Sussman's graphics designs for the 1984 Olympics.

"This is the first major exhibition in the United States looking at women designers across the whole field," said Kirkham in an interview. Even before its opening, the exhibition is being lauded as a landmark accomplishment, although some surveys of female designers have been done in Europe.

"It's such a nice concept, I'm wishing we had thought of it," said Maggie Murray, director of museums and galleries at Los Angeles' Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising. "In the minds of many people, women just appeared on the working scenes in the last 20 years, and that's not true. There were women pioneers blazing trails at the turn of the century."

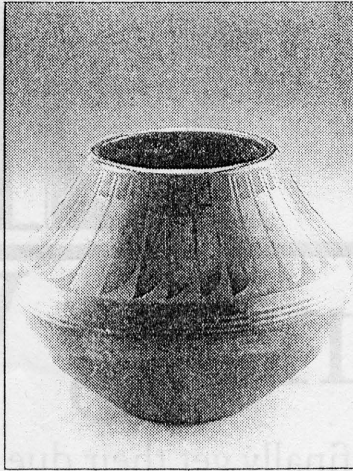
"Knowing Pat Kirkham and the significant professionals she has gathered together, I think this will be one of the resources that curators from here on can utilize," said Jo Lauria, assistant curator of decorative arts at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "If women aren't cited for what they did and what impact they had, they are lost to memory."

The acceptance of women has shifted and changed over the years, depending on what was deemed appropriate for them to do at any given time," according to Kirkham, an expert on design and gender who also edited the 460-page illustrated book for the exhibit.

Women began the century in occupations considered feminine such as embroidery and china decoration. And the few design patents issued to women early in the century were for domestic items such as meat or vegetables



Bard Graduate Center



Institute of American Indian Arts Museum

Silver and gold necklace with pearls by Josephine Hartwell Shaw in 1910, above left. Pottery bowl by Maria and Julian Martinez, 1945-50.

choppers, a kitchen bin and linoleum. And in 1942 when Harvard University admitted women to its Graduate School of Design, it was only "for the duration of the war," Kirkham noted.

"I guess one should not be surprised at how hard it was for women to make their way in the 1930s and '40s, but some of the stories of discrimination just took my breath away," said Kirkham.

The most dramatic change, she said, occurred after the 1970s. "That has to do with the women's movement and wider aspirations, and also the enormous impact of the Arts and Crafts revival, which gave a new validation to traditional women's work."

By the mid-1980s the fashion industry gender gap was being closed by such designers as Donna Karan and Liz Claiborne, and the field was energized by new ethnic diversity was Asian American designers Vivienne Tam, Josie Natori

and Vera Wang.

Another important trend was an emergence of African American designers in many fields. "What's been going on in the last 25 years, particularly with women, is as important as the Harlem Renaissance," said Kirkham. Among such names as graphics designers Fo Wilson, Holly Hampton and Michele Y. Washington, and interior designers Courtney Sloane and Cecil N. Hayes, many link both African and African American culture in their work.

The exhibit also focuses on the "work of outstanding beauty and utility" produced by Native American women. Artists such as potters Lucy Lewis and Maria Martinez and Navajo weaver Gloria Begay have used traditional designs with modern nuances. In other instances, design traditions were completely transformed, such as the "Star" quilts with a basketball motif given to young athletes by the Sioux in

Montana. They replaced buffalo robes once awarded to warriors. "I don't think Native American art is ever static," said Kirkham. "The idea that women did just what their mother or grandmother did is just kind of crazy."

Hollywood early on accepted women in costume design, producing such mid-century names as Edith Head and Helen Rose. Female costume designers today still outnumber men 6 to 1.

Women, however, faced exceptional barriers in art direction and production design until the last quarter of the century. They have made strides in film production design and industrial design, two fields still most dominated by men.

By late 1999, leading up to this year's Academy Awards, about 20% of Hollywood releases had female production designers, including Naomi Shohan for the Oscar-winning "American Beauty."

Similarly, throughout the century, women remained a small minority of industrial designers in the United States. Jill Shurtleff, who joined the Gillette Co. in 1984 and is represented in the exhibition by her "Sensor for Women" razor, recalls in the book, "When I first came to Gillette, never mind being the only woman designer, I was the only female professional on my floor for years—and that included designers, engineers and businesspeople."

Although the field of industrial design remains dominated by men, women are making inroads, said Kristina Goodrich, executive director of the Industrial Designers Society of America. "You can see it in our awards programs," she said. "We just did a student portfolio review for our national conference, and 40% were women."