

Zeisel holds a cup from the porcelain tea set she designed in 2000 for Lomonosov, the St. Petersburg factory founded by the czars.

SAMPLE

# Eva's Ardor

*Having escaped Stalin, the Nazis, and whims of fashion, Eva Zeisel is still turning out her gentle, affable brand of modernism at 100. For CELIA MCGEE, the designer's legacy is also something personal.*

**M**y mother's wedding china was Eva Zeisel. Unconventional, low-to-the-table, biomorphic, in a lustrous bronzed brown. Bohemian modern. Just like my mother who, as she used to tell it, finally caught my absentminded academic father's eye when she fainted from some unspecified ailment (hangover? starvation budget?) on the stoop of his Greenwich Village apartment building. She was a beautiful graduate student in English at NYU and he the handsomest professor. They married in 1947, the year Red Wing Pottery began producing the Zeisel Town and Country dinnerware my mother would eventually hand down to me.

Now acknowledged as one of the great designers of the 20th century, Zeisel arrived in America in 1938, fleeing the Nazis and

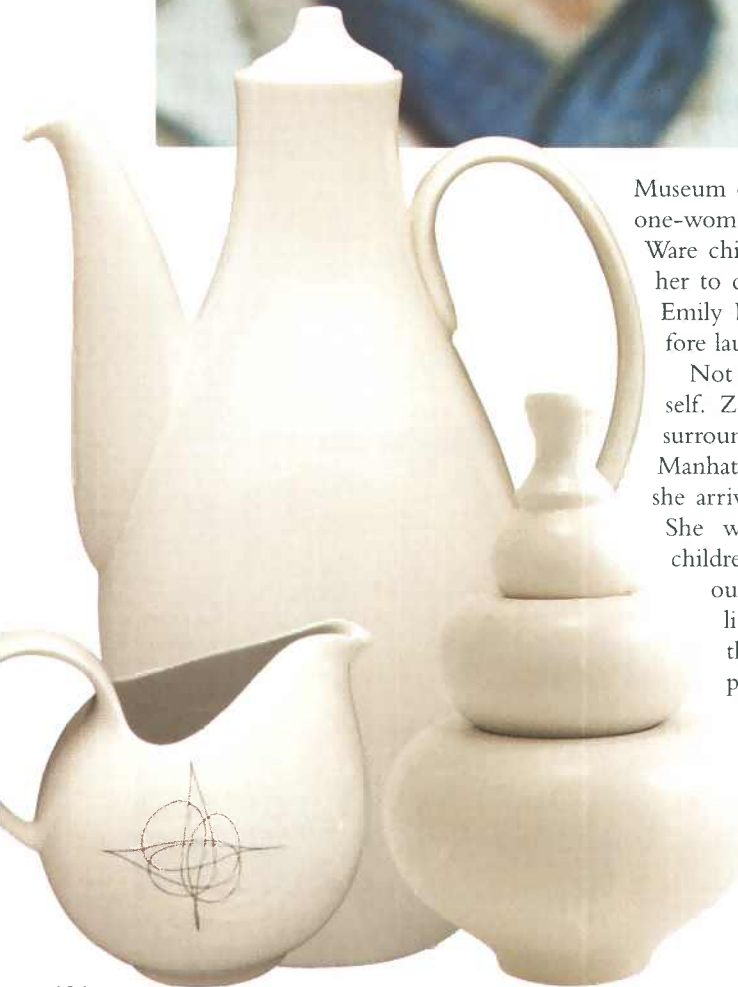
the fall of her native Hungary. Almost immediately she went to work—for a china company, a giftware company, a film company in need of miniature plaster models. Mass production she knew how to do. In 1932 she had gone to the Soviet Union and quickly rose to the position of artistic director of Russia's China and Glass Industry. Then one midnight in 1936, Stalin's government arrested her for an alleged assassination plot against the supreme leader. After 15 months in mostly solitary confinement, Zeisel was released suddenly, without explanation, and began her long flight through Europe to the United States. Her friend Arthur Koestler put some of her experiences into his cold war best seller, *Darkness at Noon*.

By 1939 she had initiated the country's first industrial design course in ceramics, at the Pratt Institute in New York. In 1946 the

Zeisel stands in front of a self-portrait she painted in 1928. Below: The designer's Museum Ware coffeepot, a Tomorrow's Classic creamer with Fantasy pattern decoration, and her stacking Pillow vases for KleinReid.



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Museum of Modern Art gave her its first one-woman show, exhibiting the Museum Ware china service it had commissioned her to design for Castleton. Zeisel read Emily Post on American etiquette before launching into the project.

Not that she could afford a set herself. Zeisel recently turned 100, and surrounded by birthday flowers in her Manhattan apartment, she recalled how she arrived here with \$64 to her name. She was struggling, with two little children, when Red Wing sought her out to devise a reasonably priced line. It was intended to appeal to the same people who bought the popular Fiesta dinnerware and the products of Russel and Mary Wright. That included young marrieds like my flamboyantly intellectual mother and gentle left-leaning father, for whom the frilly-aproned Eisenhower era seemed worthy only of reacting against.

Does Zeisel own a set now? “Yes, of course, somewhere,” she says with a wave that is both imperiously vague and dismissive. She would rather talk about the new design work she is doing: a group of rugs; a new tea kettle for Chantal; more glasses for Nambé; a sink and bathtub for Signature; tables, candelabra, and jewelry trees for Eva Zeisel Originals, a company started by her grandson. Today she is on a first-name basis with the dinnerware buyer for Crate & Barrel, which has been reissuing items from her Hallcraft Century and Tomorrow’s Classic patterns and asked her to design a coffeepot to commemorate her centenary. In 2005 she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York.

And my mother’s vintage dowry dishes? Collectible. Valuable. Works of art. I see ones like them in museums. Hotelier André Balazs acquired Zeisel room dividers for the lobby of The Standard in Hollywood. The Lomonosov porcelain factory, founded in St. Petersburg by the czars, has

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TALISMANPHOTO; COURTESY THE MILWAUKEE MUSEUM OF ART; COURTESY THE DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART; 20TH-CENTURY DESIGN FUND (2)

produced a limited-edition tea set by the designer that costs \$4,200.

In the late forties, around the time Zeisel created her Town and Country collection, time-saving concepts for busy working mothers were just taking hold. She came up with designs in mix-and-match colors so pieces could be combined at whim, artistically. My mother was a painter and a college teacher, and looking at snapshots taken in our homes over the years I realize she carried over Zeisel's savvy scheme to our kitchens, with their differently colored cupboard doors and drawers. The creamers and teapots and sauceboats can also function as vases or pencil holders or sculptures about mothers and children, husbands and wives, families. When Katharine Hepburn welcomes Spencer Tracy for dinner in *Desk Set*, the Tomorrow's Classic pattern Zeisel did for Hall China plays a role in the courtship.

Zeisel, whose white upsweeping hair recalls the bird shapes and Hungarian folk pottery that influenced her, still has furniture in her apartment from her childhood home. The sofas, cabinets, tables, and chairs are mostly Biedermeier, with plump curves and elegant proportions. They appear another source of her soft, touchable modernism, a repudiation of the chilly, angular Bauhaus style in force when she started out. Her pieces seem to want to be cradled, held, and

stroked—one curator has referred to their “pettability”—but they are also impressive examples of engineered balance. Various inspired by breasts, belly buttons, babies’ bottoms, tulips, and Budapest’s Art Nouveau architecture, they are often designed to be stackable, which saves space and makes new, communicating shapes.

When dining and entertaining turned away from American factory ceramics in the sixties, Zeisel also took a break,

My mother kept using the china all along. I humored her, even though it wasn't to my taste. I'd rejected her quaint beatnik ways by breakfasting instead on Tiffany. Who was Eva Zeisel anyway?

Luckily I learned before my mother died several years ago, as my own interest in design history surfaced. I fiercely wanted those plates, platters, cups, and saucers—not just for myself

but for my daughter when she grew up. I wanted them to be her heirloom china, a family legacy of loving great design.

But she was young and there was someone in between: my brother. Very much his mother's son, he was a curator of architecture and design and would soon have a museum to run, with the accompanying dinner parties to give in a wonderful modernist house nearly contemporary with Zeisel's Town and Country pattern.

I offered him the china on long-term loan, until the appropriate moment came for my daughter to receive what our mother had shared with us. He accepted; it has served him well. So well that he's forgotten the deal we made. He says he loves me very much but can't imagine what I'm talking about. I'll just keep reminding him until his memory is joggled. I can't blame him. There is nothing like original Zeisel. My mother's Zeisel. ■



Pieces from the Town and Country collection, launched in 1947, and the story of Zeisel's Hallcraft Century partnership.

of almost 20 years, occupying herself with antiwar activism, scholarly interests, and crash-padding family and friends at her country house in upstate New York. A return trip to Hungary in 1983 got her creative juices flowing again, which coincided with a renewed appreciation for her work. She was asked to return to designing, for the ceramics and glass studio KleinReid, for Nambé, Chantal, and others.

## Where to Buy Zeisel

### EVA ZEISEL ORIGINALS

Cofounded by the designer's grandson, Adam Bass Zeisel, the Boston-based company produces her tables, candelabra, and jewelry trees. 617-606-5921; [evazeiseloriginals.com](http://evazeiseloriginals.com)

**THE ORANGE CHICKEN** From 1998 to 2001 this New York shop collaborated with Zeisel on

reissues of some of her classic pieces in new materials and finishes, as well as original designs. It closed after 9/11, but orders can still be placed by phone or online. 570-742-8859; [evazeiselorangechicken.com](http://evazeiselorangechicken.com)

**KLEINREID** This New York design studio has worked with Zeisel on porcelain serving

pieces, vases, and editioned prints of her graphic designs. 718-937-3828; [kleinreid.com](http://kleinreid.com)

**NAMBE** Drinking vessels, lamps, vases, bowls, and salt and pepper shakers by Zeisel are available at Nambé retail stores. 800-443-0339; [nambe.com](http://nambe.com)

**MUSEUM SHOPS** The Milwaukee Art Museum shop (414-224-3200; [mam.org](http://mam.org)) carries select Zeisel designs, as do the Erie Art Museum in Pennsylvania (814-459-5477; [erieartmuseum.org](http://erieartmuseum.org))

and the Mingei International Museum in San Diego (619-239-0003; [mingei.org](http://mingei.org)), which is showing “Eva Zeisel—Extraordinary Designer Craftsman at 100” through June.

**VINTAGE ZEISEL** For older pieces, sources include the Web site Retrospective Modern Design ([retrospective.net](http://retrospective.net)) and the New York shop Mood Indigo (Showplace Antiques Center, 40 W. 25th St.; 212-254-1176; [moodindigonewyork.com](http://moodindigonewyork.com)).