

All about Eva

SHE'S 102 AND STILL PRODUCING FRESH DESIGNS IN HER SINGULAR CURVES. OLIVER BENNETT MEETS THE AMAZING MS ZEISEL



As the boss of The Rug Company, Christopher Sharp is sent a lot of speculative designs. "Most go in the bin," he admits. But in 2007 he received an intriguing package from New York. "We opened it to find three rug designs on wooden boards. They were brilliant: so contemporary and fresh." Sharp looked up the artist's name – Eva Zeisel – and almost fell off his chair. "She turned out to be 100 years old, with this incredible past. I was astonished."

It's now two years later and the three splendid rugs have been issued. The story is typical of Zeisel, whose life reads like fiction. In fact, the 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*, by Arthur Koestler, Zeisel's one-time lover, includes passages based on her memories of incarceration in Stalin's Russia – one part of her epic journey through the 20th century. Born into Hungary's intelligentsia, Zeisel (then Stricker) became a ceramics apprentice. She got a job firing pots in Hamburg's red-light district, before leaving for the Schramberger ceramics factory in the Black Forest, where she designed tea sets, plates and vases, "keeping 30 to 40 workers busy". Her pieces from this era are now expensive, collectable antiques.

It was a period of hard-edged seriousness, led by the Bauhaus, Germany's progressive design school. Although forward-looking, Zeisel was against the Bauhaus ethos. "Too mechanistic, serious and geometric," she says. "I like curves because they feel like people. My aim is to make contact with my audience. One can speak through curves more easily than through straight lines."

Europe in the late 1930s was not a safe place for Jews, however, and Zeisel left for New York when Hitler marched into Vienna. Arriving in America with only \$64, she taught at the Pratt Institute and churned out product designs. Remarkably, her Museum porcelain set for Castleton, designed in 1946, was the first ever undecorated white table china.

Since then, Zeisel has worked with various international manufacturers, including Royal Stafford in the UK, which last year brought out the One-0-One range, named for her age. She has also created glasses, sanitary ware, cookware and furniture – Zeisel estimates she has designed 100,000 products. However, she hadn't created rugs before now, but, as ever, took up her favourite curve theme. One of her Rug Company designs, based on the bellybutton, is called Dimpled Spindle, which Zeisel considers "a more attractive name". "She's obviously a perfectionist," says Sharp. "It took a while. But she was lovely."

As Zeisel says: "I design things as gifts for others. I do not design for self-expression." But the most amazing thing is that, at 102, Zeisel is still designing at all. "It's remarkable," says Sharp. "A lesson to us all." She is flattered to be so highly praised, but does she care about her place in history? A pause. "No." □



Zeisel in front of her Lacy X rug, £4,385. 1 Dimpled Spindle rug, £2,835, and 2 Fish rug, £2,580, from therugcompany.info. 3 Candlesticks, from £30 each, from evazeiseloriginals.com. 4 Spring card case, £30, and 5 Capital pen, £55, from utilitydesign.co.uk. 6 Mother & Daughter table, £1,207, from evazeiseloriginals.com