

AT HOME

A Potter, a Pioneer, A Candlestick Maker

By KATHARINE HERRUP

There are perhaps few centenarian women who celebrate their 100th year with a launch of newly designed furniture, but then Eva Zeisel is no ordinary woman. She is widely considered one of the premier industrial designers of the past century; her ceramic pieces are sought-after collectors' items.

This Friday, Ms. Zeisel's aptly named Century Signature collection is featured as part of the 2007 Architectural Digest Home Design Show at Pier 94. The collection includes a limited edition trestle table, a lounge chair, a brass candleholder, acrylic jewelry trees, and a table that can be used as a desk or for dining. (The collection is available to purchase only through a Web site, EvaZeiselOriginals.com.)

During a recent visit to her home on 115th Street on the West Side, Ms. Zeisel pointed to two new lounge chairs, which will be included in the show. Her home includes other items created during a career that spans several decades. A dark wood trestle table stands in a corner. The structure is sturdy, but, as with so many of Ms. Zeisel's pieces, the design is intricate: The silhouette of a mother and baby bird had been carved out, and the pair were depicted chirping to each other. The table is one of the limited edition "Mother & Daughter" trestle tables also in the collection.

Whether Ms. Zeisel is designing furniture, collectibles, or pottery,

it is all the same for her.

"I design as a gift for others," she said.

The fluidity and consistency of her designs are visible in all her pieces — the lines are curvy, feminine, sensual, and very touchable.

"I don't create angular things," Ms. Zeisel said. "I'm a more circular person — it's more my character." She lifted up her hands to make spherical motions, adding, "Even the air between my hands is round."

While Ms. Zeisel is best known in the design world for her ceramic work, she began designing furniture in the 1990s, after a nephew, John Striker, asked her to create some pieces for his office at Brownstone Publishers.

After the project, she continued to design furnishings because, she said, "there is the ability to carve that you can't do with ceramics and glass."

When she was about 18 years old, Ms. Zeisel began studying pottery at the only remaining potters' guild in her native Budapest.

"When I decided I wanted to do pottery, my mother said I better do it seriously," she recalled.

Ms. Zeisel became an apprentice to a Hungarian pottery master and quickly graduated to journeyman status. She took a job in Hamburg, Germany, where she worked under yet another pottery master. But she was yearning for something more.

"I wanted to go see the bigger world," Ms. Zeisel said.

Ms. Zeisel moved on to Berlin



HEUICHUL KIM

EVA ZEISEL With acrylic pieces at her Upper West Side home.

where she designed more than 200 objects for Schramberger Majolika Fabrik, a large industrial design factory. There, she often threw parties for fellow Hungarians, including the author Arthur Koestler and the physicist Leo Szilard, a participant in the Manhattan Project who received the patent for the atomic bomb.

"It was a very fashionable phase," Ms. Zeisel said of her time in Berlin entertaining intellectuals in her studio apartment.

In 1935, she moved again, to Russia, where she accepted a position as artistic director of the China and Glass Industry. But on May 28 of the next year the young designer was arrested and imprisoned for 16 months on (false) suspicion of plotting to assassinate Joseph Stalin. Ms. Zeisel was eventually cleared of the charges and expelled to Vienna. Not long after, she left for England, where she met and married Hans Zeisel, and set sail for America.

Within a year, she had established the first course in ceramics to be taught as an industrial design at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

It would augur a pattern of firsts for the pioneering designer. Ms. Zeisel was the first to have a solo exhibit of porcelain ceramics at the Museum of Modern Art. In 2004, she became the first designer to have her work sold at the contemporary housewares shop, Crate and Barrel. The Classic Century collection (the store's best-selling dinnerware set) is on view at the show this week.

Ms. Zeisel's most popular dinnerware set was intended to be short-lived. Red Wing Pottery in Minnesota commissioned Ms. Zeisel to design something trendy, a little Greenwich Village, and not meant to last. The Town and Country line instead became the potter's most sought after and collected, proving the timelessness of Ms. Zeisel's approach to design.

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