



DESIGN

HOME STYLE

A sinuous shape for everyday objects

“I AM DESIGNING,” SAYS THE 101-YEAR-OLD EVA ZEISEL. “I AM NOT *still* designing.” For the Hungarian-born industrial designer whose tableware, furniture, glassware, tiles, and other designs share pleasantly curvy forms and indelible appeal, it’s inconceivable not to design. Zeisel is a living legend, but of the unpretentious variety. “It’s something fun to do,” Zeisel says of her work. “I’m a playful person, and I always have been.”

Most recently that playfulness has yielded a handful of designs in various media—three rugs for the Rug Company based on her midcentury tiles; One O One dinnerware, named after her age, for Royal Stafford available at Bloomingdale’s; lighting for Tazza Mia café in West Chester, Ohio; and brass candlesticks for Jameson Enterprises of India, available from www.evazeiseloriginals.com, the online retail store founded by her grandson, Adam Bass Zeisel. All were introduced in the last 18 months. “I get something in my mind,” she says, “and I try to make it a concrete piece.” And Zeisel shows no sign of slowing down: in the works are a baby feeder and spoon for the Neue Galerie gift shop and catalogue, glass Christmas ornaments, and two sets of flatware.

Zeisel was born Eva Amalia Striker in Budapest in 1906. At the age of 17, she entered the Royal Academy of Fine Arts to study painting, but turned to pottery, a more stable trade. Soon Zeisel’s list of firsts began to take shape. Within a year, she apprenticed to a potter and became the first woman accepted into the local potters guild. In the following years she held positions at factories around Europe, at which time her ceramic designs—tea sets and tableware influenced by the geometry of the Bauhaus movement—were some of the first, and certainly the earliest by a woman, to move into mass production. In 1936, four years after she moved to Russia, Zeisel was imprisoned for 16 months,

falsely accused of plotting against Stalin’s life (the novel *Darkness at Noon*, by her friend Arthur Koestler, is based on her experience). She was released without explanation and in 1938 she made her way to New York, a city she likes to describe as “many countries in one place.” Eva and her husband Hans Zeisel had \$64 between them.

Zeisel quickly got to work, establishing an industrial ceramics curriculum at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn while designing for various manufacturers. Museum White, an iconic porcelain dinner service for Castleton, was sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. Three years later, when the museum exhibited a 25-piece collection, Zeisel became the first female designer to launch a solo show there. Zeisel’s body of work from the last 70 years has been vast, revered, and accessible, with designs for Hall China, Design Within Reach, and KleinReid. In 2005 Crate & Barrel unveiled Zeisel’s Classic Century dinnerware, a reproduction of her prized 1950s designs for Hallcraft. Zeisel has been awarded the National Design Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2005 by the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

Zeisel says she strives for “harmony and loveliness” in all her designs. In the studio, the silverware she is developing exists in the form of cutout paper and soft balsa carved by her assistant so that the designer can feel the dimensions. Zeisel’s daughter, Jean Richards, says her mother can see and feel when a slope or curve is off by as little as 1/16 of an inch. When asked about her utensils in progress, Zeisel picks up a paper fork and, testing out the shape, brings the tines to her mouth. “It must be something lovely to hold,” she declares. Then she chuckles and chomps at an imaginary morsel, for her own amusement as much as for the visitor’s. She’s still playing. —LIZ ARNOLD

