

The Playful Search for Beauty

Eva Zeisel
Industrial Designer
Born November 13, 1906

By Karen E. Steen



Eva Zeisel's indomitable love of life, expressed in exuberant curves, guarantees her a unique place in design history.

There's an aura of wonder about Eva Zeisel. It's in the fantasy of her forms, her passionate engagement with the world, and the extraordinary twists of her life. How, one must ask, does a 94-year-old find herself writing three books, designing a retail interior, and developing new lines of furniture and tableware? How does an industrial designer who is almost blind develop the look of objects? How does someone who survived solitary confinement as a political prisoner maintain such a love of life that it's visible in every piece she has ever made?

"Her will is overwhelming," says filmmaker Jyll Johnstone, who is working on a documentary about Zeisel. "She has her frailties, but she won't talk about them." That will has been the one constant along Zeisel's path from bright daughter of Hungary's cultured aristocracy, to hardworking designer in European factories, to political prisoner facing execution in Stalin's Russia, to Jew fleeing Nazi Austria, to influential American teacher and industrial designer. The turnabouts can be hard to fathom. How, for example, did exuberant designs such as her Belly Button room divider follow 16 months of solitary confinement on false charges? "Well, you come out so pleased with life," Zeisel explains. "Everything is unexpectedly colorful. Life is a present. That is why one shouldn't have scandals, one shouldn't have ill humor, one shouldn't be cranky--that is the moment that is life. One should respect it."



This past July Zeisel returned to Russia for the first time since her release from prison in 1937. The Lomonosov Factory, where she worked as a designer in the 1930s, had invited her to participate in a critique of the factory's work, and Zeisel offered to develop a new line of tableware while there. In the factory's museum Zeisel discovered a tea set she'd made. The design had later been adopted by the government as a commemorative trinket; one iteration featured

a picture of Stalin himself. Zeisel recounts this with an amused grin.

"The playful search for beauty"--what Zeisel says best describes her work--is an equally accurate account of her personality. "She comes through in everything she makes," says David Reid of KleinReid ceramics studio. The vases Zeisel designed for Reid and his partner, James Klein, in 1999 have a voluptuous dignity that reveals her trademark touches: the hourglass silhouette of traditional Hungarian pottery, an essence of love and abundance, and a certain pettability to the arc of each curve. This is true of the gentle, rounded creatures in her 1946 Town and Country dinnerware, and of the crystal vases and metal bowls she's recently created for Nambé. "How she relates to curves is so amazing," marvels designer Von Robinson, Zeisel's assistant on an interior for the Original Leather Co., in Manhattan, and a line of wood-and-glass furniture. "She's never done a wrong curve."



The locus of the Zeisel magic is in her hands: she uses them to describe anything visual--shaping air into arcs and bowls--and to design despite her poor vision. She cuts out paper silhouettes, then works back and forth with a modeler, gesturing to explain a curve, until the piece is correct. As a result, her designs have an expressiveness that's rare in household objects. "There is some sort of emotional transfer," she says, citing the devotion in her fan mail. "I love the people for whom I made it, and it comes across--they accept my love."



This exchange fuels one of Zeisel's current projects: a book-length essay called "The Magic Language of Design." In it she argues for a return to the ornamentation she grew up with and is still surrounded by in her Manhattan apartment, crammed with the Biedermeier furniture her family brought over from Hungary.

"[Things] talk to us by their shapes, contours, color, weight, temperature, surfaces, sound, and most clearly by their associations," she writes. "Our century's designers believed that their rules and principles would permanently dictate what divided good design from bad. These rules aimed at silencing communication between the maker of things and his public. The things themselves lost their magic." It's a position she's argued solidly since 1931, when she wrote an article called "The Designer Speaks Her Mind" for the trade paper *Die Schaulade*. "[The Bauhaus] was against all personality, all individualism," she says dismissively. "It was rejecting the eI." Though her work in the 1930s and '40s used geometrical forms characteristic of the era, Zeisel always felt she worked outside of trends. "I don't fit into art history," she says.



Perhaps the most accurate attempt to contextualize her work is now under way at the British Museum, where curator Judy Rudoie is planning a permanent display of twentieth-century design that will feature Zeisel as its centerpiece.

"She's one of the few important twentieth-century designers who's still with us, who we can talk to," Rudoie says, "so I'm using her as a case history to explain how a designer for industry works." With samples of Zeisel's work, Rudoie will illustrate the process behind the creation of objects we use every day.

Rudoie couldn't have a better subject. Process is the essence of Zeisel's work, and she's very articulate about it. "One doesn't do the style of the time, one does what a particular problem requires," she explains. She recalls that her Baby line, a set of dishes for feeding infants, came about when car manufacturers stopped making spark plugs out of porcelain. The factory that had supplied them ended up with a vast amount of five-inch-tall kiln space to fill. "That is why we made the Baby line--not because children didn't have enough dishes," she says, "but to fill in what the spark plugs left open."

Now companies let Zeisel design objects of her own choosing. That freedom--paired with a philosophy that melds together work, play, and creative expression--makes retirement a moot point. After all, the "playful search for beauty" is a quest without an end point. "If you're doing this because you have something to give, it doesn't matter how old you are--you're just going to keep doing it," Robinson says. "She can't be stopped. She's so alive with projects, so alive with design."

