

Pathmakers

Women in Art, Craft, and Design, Midcentury and Today

By Jennifer Scanlan



Vivian Beer in her studio at work on Anchored Candy, 2014.

AN ICONIC PHOTO OF FIVE OF THE MOST FAMOUS DESIGNERS of the post-World War II era appeared in *Playboy* in July 1962; it featured George Nelson, Edward Wormley, Eero Saarinen, Harry Bertoia, Charles Eames, and Jens Risom near furniture of their own creation. The image speaks volumes about the ways in which modern design has been portrayed in popular culture and often even in museum exhibitions and history books: designers are all men, and design means furniture.

For *Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft, and Design, Midcentury and Today*, an exhibition for the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York City, my co-curator Ezra Shales and I decided to investigate and celebrate the areas in which women played important, if unsung, roles during this period. Given MAD's historic focus on craft, we looked particularly at the ways in which the resurgence of interest in craft after World War II opened doors for women to become professional artists, designers, and teachers.



Swedish design trio Front—from left, Charlotte von der Lancken, Anna Lindgren, and Sofia Lagerkvist—with their plumbing fixture designs for Axor. Photo by Alexander Schneider.

We ended up finding far more women than could be covered in a single exhibition. For the show we selected thirty-three who demonstrated the range of ways in which women contributed to modern design, including famous names such as Eva Zeisel, Ruth Asawa, and Sheila Hicks along with lesser-known ones, including Karen Karnes, Alice Kagawa Parrott, and Margaret Tafoya. (While *Pathmakers* focuses mainly on women in the United States, we did include a few women from Scandinavia, where we found a parallel situation.) The first half of the exhibition looks at the many ways in which women in this period contributed to visual culture. The second half considers artists and designers who are carrying on their legacy today.

Working in ceramics, textiles, and fine metals, women designers in the postwar period created objects for major corporations and elegant department stores. They collaborated with architects on modern interiors (and occasionally exteriors) for buildings such as the General Motors Technical Center (exterior tiles by Maija Grotell and textiles by Marianne Strengell), the Norton Simon Museum (exterior tiles by Edith Heath), the United Nations Headquarters (textiles by Dorothy Liebes), and the Ford Foundation (textiles by Sheila Hicks and tiles by Heath). They represented the United States at exhibitions and in diplomatic initiatives overseas.

Through these efforts, and through the works they created, women designers had lasting impact on postwar modernism, as well as on the generations to follow. The following profiles point up some of their important contributions. While Dorothy Liebes, Edith Heath, Marianne Strengell, and Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe are not well-known today, during the 1950s and 1960s they played key roles in interpreting modernism for the postwar world. Their innovative designs and enterprising spirits offer a forward-looking comparison to contemporary designers.

As a final thought, while our research shows that the field has expanded markedly in the past fifty years, we'd like to see women become even more prominent in certain areas of the design world—industrial design and architecture in particular.



This prototype theater curtain, designed by Liebes for the DuPont Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair, was woven from the company's Orlon and Fairtex metallic yarns. Photo by Andres Ramirez.

DOROTHY LIEBES

Dorothy Liebes was arguably the best-known textile designer in America during the postwar period. Her love of bright colors and glittery metallic threads diverges from our contemporary image of the sobriety of modern design, and yet she was undeniably modern, innovative in her use of materials both natural (such as leather, bamboo, and feathers) and synthetic.

She rose to fame for her incorporation of a handmade aesthetic into mass-produced textiles, working with factories to develop machinery that gave the look and feel of handwoven fabric. She designed textiles for clients ranging from Frank Lloyd Wright to Sears, Roebuck and Company, and worked with DuPont on developing synthetic fibers. Liebes was one of a group of women chosen to help furnish the interiors of the United Nations Headquarters, built in 1952 in New York City. She created a light, moveable screen for the Delegates Dining Room woven in wood, chenille, and lurex, typically adding both natural warmth and a little bit of glitz to the modern interior.



Detail of Apfelbaum's installation *A Handweaver's Pattern Book*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Clifton Benevento.

POLLY APFELBAUM

Liebes's skill with colors and innovative approach to materials is represented in the contemporary section by artist Polly Apfelbaum. Apfelbaum's installation *A Handweaver's Pattern Book* was inspired by a 1950 reference book by Marguerite Porter Davison. Using a punch card found at a craft store and a rainbow array of Chartpak markers, Apfelbaum stenciled dot patterns onto rectangles of synthetic velvet, in dazzling color combinations and variety. With very simple means, she probes the boundaries between high and low, the sophisticated and the simple.



Heath arranging dinnerware in the factory showroom, c. 1960. Courtesy Heath Ceramics Collection.

EDITH HEATH

Edith Heath's ceramics lent a casual, warm modern touch to both the interior and the exterior. She became well known for her tableware in clean, sturdy modern styles and warm subtle glazes. Heath took art classes, including a ceramics class, at the Art Institute of Chicago, but truly fell in love with ceramics when she met Native American potter Maria Martinez on a cross-country trip, and saw Martinez's stunning ceramics inspired by Pueblo traditions. After settling in San Francisco, Heath began to teach ceramics, experimenting at home with a wheel her husband rigged up from a sewing machine.

Her initial series of hand-thrown ceramics, sold at department stores such as Gump's of San Francisco, became so popular that she made the transition to production on a larger scale, though still using a limited number of skilled workers. In 1960 Heath Ceramics began to produce architectural tile; the list of clients grew to include the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Ford Foundation in New York City, and the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum).

Edith Heath's aesthetics were founded in chemistry: her research into ceramic bodies and glazes led to a durable clay that melded with the glaze when fired, creating a speckled surface that became a hallmark of her early wares. In later designs she left the rims unglazed, bringing attention in another way to the materiality of the clay.



Rendered in pure, organic shapes, McHorse's work—including this 2010 sculpture—is inspired by Pueblo ceramic traditions and European modernism.

CHRISTINE MCHORSE

Heath's interest in creating simple, pure forms, allowing the clay body to dictate the surface, and in particular her inspiration from Pueblo ceramic traditions, is reflected in the contemporary ceramic sculpture of Christine McHorse. McHorse, a (Diné) Navajo artist, learned to make pots from her husband's Taos Pueblo grandmother. Traditional Taos Pueblo pottery has simple forms made from coiling local micaceous clay. Using these materials and techniques, McHorse has developed her own vocabulary of smooth organic forms, embellished only with the sparkle of the vitreous mica in the clay. Her works are as connected to European modernist sculpture as they are to Native American traditions.



Strengell integrated aluminum thread into this 1957 rug for Alcoa to demonstrate novel ways to use the metal.

MARIANNE STRENGELL

Marianne Strengell was influential as both a teacher and a designer. Finnish by birth, she studied textile design at the Central School of Industrial Art in Helsinki, and was already established as a textile designer when she immigrated to the United States in 1936. At the invitation of family friend Eliel Saarinen, she came to work at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, eventually becoming head of the weaving department in 1942, a position she held until her retirement in 1961. As Cranbrook was home to many of the most important figures in postwar modernism, Strengell's network included Charles and Ray Eames, Harry Bertoia, Eero Saarinen, and Florence Knoll.

In addition to her teaching, she designed woven textiles for many important architects and companies, including both Saarinen and Knoll; Edward Durrell Stone; Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; and for automotive companies such as Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. An important example is a rug she wove for the Alcoa metals company, which was looking for new ways to use aluminum in the postwar economy. The rug maintained the brilliant color of the metal, combined with the softness and texture of the handwoven.



Fashioned from steel and finished with a gloss of automotive paint, Beer's Anchored Candy No. 7, 2014, takes its cues from stiletto heels and hot rods. Courtesy the artist.

VIVIAN BEER

Comparing Marianne Strengell to contemporary designer Vivian Beer, it's easy to see how opportunities for women have expanded in the past fifty years. Beer attended Cranbrook and became interested in furniture making, an area in which there were very few women designers in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, when Beer cites her Cranbrook influences, they are all men: Charles Eames, Harry Bertoia, and Eero Saarinen. She does have some obvious affinities to Strengell however. While Strengell was designing for the interiors of automobiles (the only option open to women at mid-century), Beer is inspired by the exterior of sports cars, and uses automotive techniques and paint for her lush, smooth finishes. She also, like Strengell, has redesigned metal into "softer" forms—her Anchored Candy chair has sensuous curves, and the spike of a stiletto heel.



Torun designed the Vivianna Bangle watch for Georg Jensen in 1969.

VIVIANNA TORUN BÜLOW-HÜBE

Jewelry maker Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe, or simply Torun as she was often known, stands out for her international appeal and the playful way she flaunted conventions. She didn't use gems, preferring rock crystal, moonstone, and quartz; and these stones often hung down the back, instead of the front, of the wearer.

Torun spent the 1950s and 1960s in France, in Paris and in the southern town of Biot, moving in social circles that included jazz musicians and avant-garde artists such as Picasso. Her jewelry was worn by Billie Holiday, Ingrid Bergman, and Brigitte Bardot. Later in life she followed the spiritual movement Subud, and moved first to Germany and later to Jakarta to be closer to the community. Throughout this time she designed for the Danish silver firm Georg Jensen, including perhaps her most famous piece, the Vivianna Bangle watch. Of the watch, she wrote: "I wanted to free people from the slavery of time.... The watch is open ended to symbolize that time should not bind us, and the dial like a mirror reminds us that life is now."



Front's WaterDream, a group of copper plumbing pipes and fixtures, was designed for Axor, 2014.

FRONT (Charlotte von der Lancken, Anna Lindgren, and Sofia Lagerkvist)

We're delighted to include the Swedish design trio Front in the contemporary section. Like Torun, they have taken an entirely fresh approach to design. In Pathmakers, we include their work in an area of metalwork not usually associated with women: plumbing fixtures. Axor, the design division of Hansgrohe, invited Front to reimagine the shower experience. Front decided to focus on the part of the shower that isn't usually seen: the copper piping, along with the valves, couplings, and funnels that form the water circulation system. This concept was translated to the final showerhead produced by Axor.