Museum showcases works of unconventional centenarian

by Ann Jarmusch

Alert and friendly in spite of fragile health, Eva Zeisel sat nestled against a small sofa inside the Mingei International Museum in San Diego, her snowy hair in striking contrast to her black evening clothes.

Polite admirers fluttered around this 100-year-old lady, one of the 20th century's most remarkable and revered designers of tableware and furniture. Zeisel had flown from her home in New York City the previous day to attend the opening of the first major West Coast presentation of her factory-made ceramic, glass, metal and wood objects.

CLASSIC CENTENARIAN - Designer Eva Zeisel was in San Diego for the opening of her exhibit at the Mingei International Museum. She sits beside a table she designed in 1983. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett.

EXTRAORDINARY DESIGNER - Hungarian-born design Eva Zeisel put extreme hardship behind her to focus on bringing beauty in utilitarian form to middle-class kitchens and dining rooms. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett.

"Eva Zeisel: Extraordinary Designer at 100," on view at the museum in the city's Balboa Park through Aug. 12, includes her designs from the 1920s to the present. It features dinnerware, vases, tables and decorative items produced in Europe, England, the United States, Russia and Japan.

Robert Wright, a prominent San Diego interior designer, was among those who took a turn sitting beside Zeisel. He asked her to sign the bottom of a 10-inch, white ceramic vase he'd bought at the museum store.

"It's very symmetrical and simple, with a pear-shaped bottom and tulip-shaped top," Wright said later. "Her first comments were how she thought that was one of the only vases that looked better with a flower in it, and that I really should keep flowers in it. So I don't know for sure if I selected her least favorite or most favorite!"

CENTENNIAL HONORS

"Did she tell you what she's working on now?" Jean Richards, Zeisel's daughter and traveling companion, asked a visitor who noted the designer's ability to stay current. One example from the show: an attractive, X-shaped stand for tidy temporary storage of household recyclable bags, bottles and newspapers.

This utilitarian wood prototype, however, is outnumbered by far in the Mingei show by sleek, curvy designs in glazed ceramic, clear or colored glass and the silvery metal alloy used by Nambe of Santa Fe, N.M.

A vast array of patterned china marks a century of household taste, from polka dots and smiling wildflowers to stylized autumn leaves and atoms with silver orbits. Few of these patterns came from Zeisel herself, although she hand-painted china early in her career and doesn't object to applied decoration. Tellingly, perhaps, she's returned to the pure white dishes she first specified during the 1940s.

The Mingei museum's show is one of several major exhibitions and events being held across the country to honor Zeisel's centennial of creativity and unfailing zest for life. The Hungarian-born design star put extreme hardship behind her to focus on bringing beauty in utilitarian form to middle-class kitchens and dining rooms.

Born in Budapest in 1906, Zeisel was recognized for her design talent at an early age and became the first woman member of the Hungarian Guild of Chimney Sweeps, Oven Makers, Roof Tilers, Well Diggers and Potters.

"I worked in one (pottery) factory after another," Zeisel said during an interview before the opening. "It was an unusual job (for a woman), to be a designer."

After advancing in the ceramics field in Germany, Zeisel went to Russia to visit a friend, she said. An

international traveler by the time she was a teenager, Zeisel told author Lucie Young she was drawn to Russia "to see what is behind the mountain." She ended up moving there to work; in 1935 she was named artistic director of Russia's state-run China and Glass Industry.

Tragically, Zeisel was ensnared in a Stalinist purge of artists, intellectuals and opponents. She was falsely accused of plotting to assassinate Stalin and imprisoned for 16 months, 12 of them in solitary confinement. (The KGB released transcripts of her interrogation to Zeisel several years ago.)

When she was unexpectedly released onto a train bound for Austria, relatives met her with relief. But within six months, Zeisel, a Jew, boarded another train out of that country, fleeing Hitler's advancing troops.

TOUCH IS THE ESSENCE

Somehow, these death-defying experiences didn't darken Zeisel's outlook on life or squelch her playful design urge. In 1938, she immigrated to New York from London with her new husband, Hans Zeisel, and became a college instructor, mother and successful designer for numerous companies.

From Sears to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Zeisel designs have been in demand in this country from the 1940s onward. The dinner service she created for MoMA was the first modern, all-white china designed in the United States, according to Joyce Corbett, guest curator of the Mingei exhibition. When MoMA exhibited this dinner service, Zeisel became a design-world sensation.

She followed this with another successful all-white china set called Tomorrow's Classic for Hall China Co. In 2005, Crate & Barrel reissued this set under the name Classic Century, making few modifications to the original molds.

Zeisel stepped into the 21st century by designing a mug for Classic Century, "because people don't drink out of coffee cups anymore," said Pat Moore, the San Francisco-based founder of the Eva Zeisel Forum for collectors (www.evazeisel.org) and a major lender of Zeisel's designs to the Mingei's show.

Moore owns more than 1,000 pieces by Zeisel, including a fine porcelain tea set produced in 2000, when Zeisel was invited to return to Russia's Lomonosov factory that employed her as a young woman. This delicate service, coveted by collectors, is on loan to the Mingei. At home, Moore takes pleasure in using vintage Zeisel dishes and bowls, but she limits herself to pieces that are chipped or cracked.

People tend to feel connected to Zeisel through her work, which begs to be touched, noted Jim Drobka of Los Angeles, the show's other major lender.

He began collecting midcentury dinnerware by designers such as Russel Wright and Ben Seidel 18 years ago, but came to prefer Zeisel's work. It can be humorous like her so-called Schmoo salt-and-pepper shakers, comforting like her biomorphic serving dishes that nest together like siblings, and sensuously elegant like her rounded glass or silvery vases clustered together to form tabletop sculpture.

The designer returns again and again to simplified bird forms, which turn out to be uplifting and useful. Silhouettes of paired lovebirds, necks arched and wings spread, provide stunning support for several glass-topped tables. Bird heads with dots for eyes become whimsical knobs for casserole lids.

Drobka lent the museum a trio of smooth, "singing bird" salt-and-pepper shakers, which seem all the more delightful once you know Zeisel designed them to rock slightly.

"Part of (the attraction) is her story and that she's with us," Drobka said. "I think there's more of a bond you get when you hold her pieces."

Because she doesn't see as well as she used to - or maybe she always did this - Zeisel wants to hold any ceramic object she's asked to identify as one of her own. Still designing by cutting paper curves and punctuating her conversation with gestures, she wasn't content to pose for a portrait beside one of her sensuous pitchers. She reached for it, living proof of her published comment, "Everything I do is a direct creation of my hands."

IT'S A GIFT

"(Zeisel's) impact on 20th-century design is really underestimated," said Ronald L. Labaco, an art historian who organized a survey of furniture, glass and ceramics by Ettore Sottsass, an influential Italian designer and architect, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2006. For one thing, he said, Zeisel dared to use soft forms and swooping curves during the early 20th century, when the philosophy at Germany's powerful Bauhaus dictated designs with hard edges and crisp right angles.

"She was always very in tune with what was happening at the time in the art world," added Corbett, the guest curator. "I don't think most people recognize that about her."

The exhibition makes Corbett's point easy to grasp, showing how Zeisel moved from hand-painting geometric designs on her Bauhaus-inspired ceramics to the organic shapes that characterized midcentury modern art, then on to minimalism at the time sculptors were stripping their forms to the essence.

Zeisel didn't care to delve into ideas behind her work during an interview and shied away from being called an artist.

"It's a pleasure to me to produce (my designs) as a gift ... an everyday gift," she said simply.

DATEBOOK

"Eva Zeisel: Extraordinary Designer at 100" through Aug. 12; Mingei International Museum, 1439 El Prado inside Balboa Park, San Diego

Admission: adults, $6; ages 6 to 17 and students with ID, $3; 619-239-0003 or www.mingei.org

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