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# AROUND TOWN
## MUSEUMS

**Review** 7720

# Ladies' first

## Women designers finally get their due in a new exhibition, but will the glory last beyond the closing date?

By **Anne Wehr**

In 1956, Charles and Ray Eames—arguably the most successful design team of the past century—appeared on a television talk show. Although their work together was an equal partnership, the show's host introduced Charles Eames first. Ray Eames, meanwhile, waited offscreen as her husband discussed their collaborative work by himself, after which the presenter announced her entrance: "This is Mrs. Eames, and she is going to tell us how she helps Charles design these chairs."

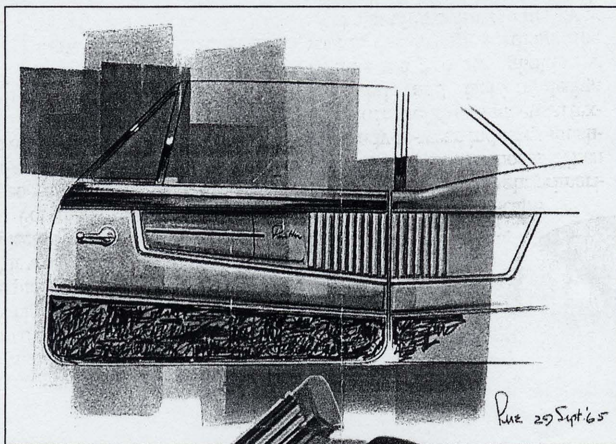
This disheartening incident reveals just one way that the work of 20th-century women designers has been vastly undervalued, and it is one of the reasons for the current show at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, "Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000." The exhibition is an impressive, well-researched undertaking that celebrates and reclaims the contributions of dozens of designers, although it sometimes sags under its own weight. The five small galleries are packed with a spectacular array of quilts, clothing, furniture, textiles, ceramics, baskets, metalwork, jewelry, and examples of interior and industrial design, made by 221 trade-school grads, self-educated artisans and practical refugees from the fine arts who sought to earn a living with their skills. With a balanced selection of mass-produced products and handcrafted objects, the show also focuses heavily on Native American and African-American women designers, who have frequently been omitted from more general surveys.

The combination of the show's ambitious scope and the center's limited gallery space necessitates a novel approach: Each of the designers in the show is represented by only one piece. This means that relatively famous names—like Florence Knoll, who single-handedly transformed corporate America's clunky offices into paragons of mod efficiency with her Bauhaus-influenced office systems, and fashion heavyweight Claire McCardell—share equal space with newcomers, one-hit wonders and 100 years of neglected talent.

For those unfamiliar with the general history of 20th-century design, this insistence on equivalent treatment of each participant—regardless of the range of her contribution—makes it hard to evaluate just who is really a who's who in this show. But it's nonetheless a well-rounded exhibition.

Eschewing the "best of" format favored by many of the past year's centennial shows, "Women Designers" offers individual histories that map a jagged outline of the century's broad changes. These transformations take place not just in the aesthetic sphere of design, but also in women's rights, industrial modernization, education and multiculturalism. For example, a 1922 hand-painted earthenware vase by Edith Brown, a supervisor at a Boston organization that gave Italian and Jewish immigrants jobs as pottery decorators, is emblematic of that era's predominant Arts and Crafts aesthetic and the contemporary belief that design was a "safe activity" for women.

Focusing on everyday objects and handcrafted artistry, the Arts and Crafts movement of the early 20th century generally welcomed women professionals—with significant exceptions in the areas of architecture and landscape design, which were taught primarily at all-male trade schools. When the ready-to-wear industry mushroomed in the '20s, commercial textile work and fashion design became the two strongholds for women designers; accordingly, the most stunning objects in the show belong to these categories. Ruth Reeves's "American Scene" textile design is an exquisite incarnation of the Depression-era push for rah-rah hometown imagery, with colorful patterns of jaunty folks at home and on the town block-printed in her trademark kaleidoscopic style. Nearby, visitors can admire a cascading dress made by the Russian-born fashion designer and sophisticated self-promoter Valentina, who insisted on modeling all of her own creations in couture magazines, claiming, "*Vogue* needs Valentina drama." Working with an exclusive clientele, she created elegant designs of man-made materials that fed the public's appetite for romance and glamour.



**RAZOR'S EDGE Jill Shurtleff's Sensor for Women razor, right, and Suzanne Vanderbilt's interior door panel for the GM Panther.**

The exhibition's success stories are fewer and farther between in the field of industrial design, although those who did manage to make inroads—often as part of a husband-and-wife team—are among the show's most familiar figures: Knoll, Eames and ceramist Eva Zeisel, for example. And although the exhibition abounds with wonderful examples of lamps, furniture, dishes, clocks and even Jill Shurtleff's now-ubiquitous little 1993 Gillette Sensor for Women razor, it includes very few designs for appliances and none for cars or heavy machinery.

This absence is, of course, no fault of the exhibition's organizers, who seem to have tirelessly mined the field to find representative works in most categories of design. Rather, it's a reflection of limited opportunities, glass ceilings and lack of encouragement. (In the '40s and '50s, GM loudly and proudly recruited many women for its design department—the so-called "Damsels of Design"—but their jobs were confined to interior and upholstery development.) However, as with any show focused on reevaluating a history based on previous omissions, the complete picture remains elusive—and at times, the selection of works in this show seems based more on an agenda of inclusion than on individual merit. "Women Designers" is undoubtedly a tremendous contribution to design scholarship, but unless it is incorporated into the standard canon of the field's history, it's in danger of remaining peripheral herstory.

**"Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts through February 25.** **See Museums.**