Design Notebook: The art of dining has produced many beautiful objects.
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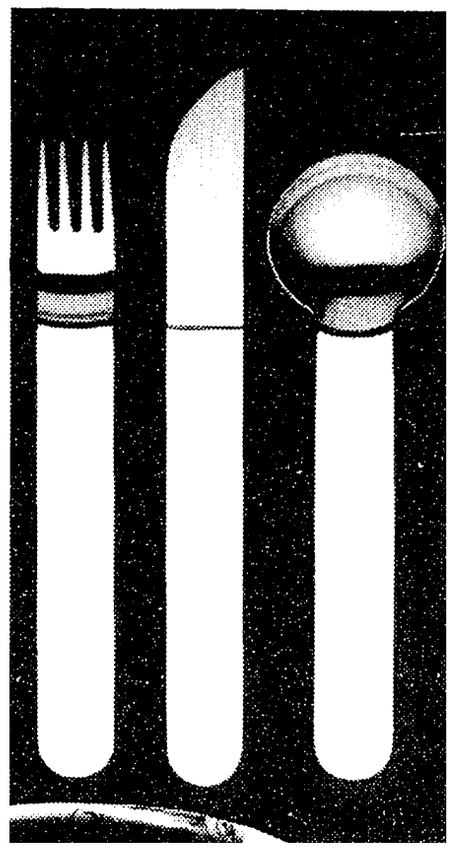
Design Notebook

Ada Louise Huxtable

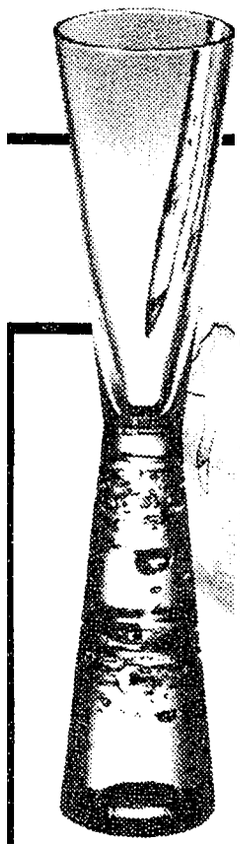
The art of dining has produced many beautiful objects.

Dinnerware designed by Russel Wright in the 1930's for Steubenville.

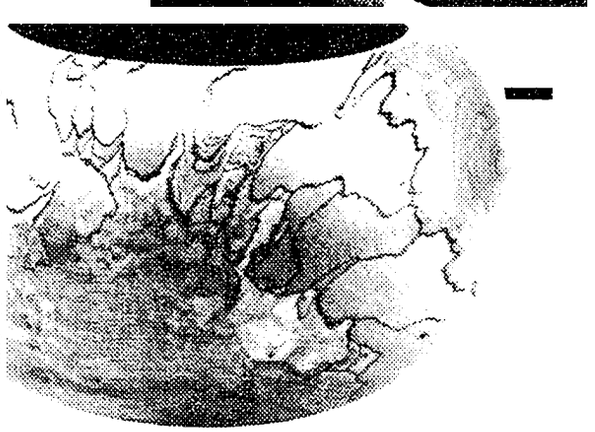


'Boca' flatware, left, by Sergio Asti for H. E. Lauffer.

Display includes drawings of dining through the ages.



Timo Sarpaneva's wine glass for Iittala, Finland.



Maple bowl designed and made by Mark Lindquist.

Mitch Bader, American Crafts Council

NO human activity takes more different forms than eating — from raiding the refrigerator to a ceremonial banquet. The history of civilization can be charted by refinements in dining, and the history of taste can be recorded in objects for the table.

Eating can be as free and impetuous as snatching an apple from a tree (served by a serpent, the apple had extraordinary consequences) or bound by the most rigid social conventions, from napkin folding to tea service and the correct order of forks and spoons. Dining with Sèvres and vermeil denotes position and wealth and a set of formal, elaborate values, but a table set with simple pottery can have equal elegance and esthetic worth.

The best settings enhance food in a way that goes far beyond the need to eat. The blush of summer peaches on a willow tray, the bloom of purple grapes in a crystal epergne, luminous ruby wine in a stemmed goblet are not essential to sustaining life. They are part of a total appeal to all of the senses unique to the act of dining, for a pleasure that is at once elementary and highly cultivated, on the most intense and personal level.

To these pleasures of the senses are added the pleasures of social intercourse, a phenomenon that turns eating from the most basic of human needs to the most sophisticated of pastimes. Nothing reflects the customs, beliefs and behavior of any particular period more accurately than how, what and where people eat.

In our own time, a technological revolution has transformed food and its preparation and an architectural revolution has changed houses and human relationships. The distance from the medieval pecking order of seats above or below the salt to the casual 20th-century lifestyle can be measured by plates, knives and spoons.

It is not surprising that anything as socially complex and sensuously satisfying as the art of dining has produced some of the more beautiful objects made by man. The art of dining is also the art of the table top, or everything that goes on it, and it is an art form that began to be practiced as soon as there was a table.

According to the reckoning of the American Craft Museum, that goes back about 2,000 years. With the help of the National Endowment for the Arts and the ceramics company Rosenthal AG, the museum has undertaken a survey of those 2,000 years and the vast range of objects it embraces.

The result is "For the Tabletop," an exhibition of glass, porcelain, pottery, plastic, paper and just about everything else that has ever been made by hand or machine for dining purposes, set against a background of photographs and slides of the history and nature of dining over the centuries. The show will open to the public this Saturday and be on view at the museum, 44 West 53d Street, through Dec. 29.

Naturally, there are limits to the selection, dictated by space, reality and the specific concerns of the museum and its sponsor, the American Craft Council, which emphasizes the work of American craft artists, a skilled and professional group.

The show is not, in any way, one of those table-setting displays created by media personalities for mythical, and often ludicrous, occasions. It stresses the infinite variety of design and use, through provocative juxtapositions. A number of handsome, historical examples have been lent by the Brooklyn Museum, and the background material stresses the past, but the majority of the approximately 250 items shown are of 20th-century design.

This limitation — which could easily be considered one of desperation, considering the vastness of the subject — has its rationale. Radical changes in social customs, esthetic criteria and production technology have resulted in a 20th-century explosion of tableware. As Paul J. Smith, the director of the American Craft Museum, points out, choices have never been greater.

The material falls into two categories: handcrafted, and designs for mass production. In the latter group are examples by architects, among them Josef Hoffmann, Eliel Saarinen, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright, and industrial designers, who dominated commercial production in the years just before and after World War II. These include ceramics and plastics by George Nelson, Russel Wright and Raymond Loewy. Russel Wright's low-slung pottery was bought by all newlyweds with pretensions to modernity in the 1940's. A complete set in a particularly revolting shade of chartreuse will call up many memories.

Objects are also grouped according to themes: there are portables, from picnic equipment to astronauts' gear; disposables, from the leaf to stylish paper party plates; a suggestion of dining environments, and a section on food services as ritual and ceremony. A catalogue documents both social and stylistic history; the two are inextricably linked at mealtime.

Needless to say, such a survey can be neither comprehensive nor truly representative; it is inevitably arbitrary and highly selective. The show has a pervasive feeling of randomness rather than of a carefully structured thesis, and there are many disturbing omissions, measured by exacting standards of design. On the other hand, there are surprises, like the virtual reinvention of the cup or mug in a series of esthetically and functionally delightful containers by Masahiro Mori. And there is a great deal to see, and enjoy, and think about.

I must confess that I can take crafts or leave them alone, and my enthusiasm is measurable in inverse proportion to the degree to which they look as if they are made with the feet. A truly beautifully crafted object has a satisfying quality of form and color that never palls. Like any work of art, it has a subtle life of its own. The more skilled and sensitive the execution, the more ways in which it pleases the hand and the eye. Cute crafts, especially those things called witty that frequently incorporate parts of elfin people, leave me cold.

Not surprisingly, there are some very fine craft pieces in the show. The range is broad, from a delicate, oddly proportioned but quite perfect cup and saucer by Elsa Rady to Paul Nelson's roughly rectangular, bold black "plates," each different, and each with extraordinary nuances of surface shape and light.

Personally, I set an eclectic table. Unmistakably handcrafted 17th-century goblets in a deep turquoise hue coexist with satin-smooth wedding-band china of the 19th century and Tiffany Studio glass. My 20th-century preferences run to the still-unsurpassed designs of the Italians and the Scandinavians of the 1950's, on the order of Tapio Wirkkala and the Castiglione brothers.

The table objects that these gifted artists — who were often architects — designed for industry or limited production have a consistent, urbane grace and visual and tactile pleasure that come only from the total understanding and mastery of a material and a consummate sensitivity to its intrinsic properties.

Much of this work has been in continuous production in Europe, but has never been imported by American buyers more interested in the market value of name-designer knockoffs and novelties. The highly publicized use of "fine artists," like the painters Victor Vasarely and Roy Lichtenstein, has produced disappointing, decorative appliqués. Their work for production never reaches the esthetic brilliance of the best 20th-century designers.

That understanding of material and function still serves, from the remarkably elegant plastic dinnerware of Massimo and Lella Vignelli to the equally elegant folded, origamilike paper cup crafted by Amy Anthony. Unfortunately, some things — both crafted and machine-made — that look absolutely marvelous in the abstract, look absolutely awful in the home, unless everything is designed to match.

But what is beyond style and change and transcends taste and custom is the act of dining's spirit of shared pleasure and fortune, summed up in one of the catalogue essays by Eric Larrabee.

"The top of the table," he writes, "remains a focus of aspiration, pleasure, sociability, and renewal in the immutably symbolic act of breaking bread together."