
With a vast array of information already available about this storied Hungarian-American designer, Eva Zeisel: the Shape of Life looks to expand our understanding and recontextualize this extraordinary figure. Best known for her undulating, organic forms and iconic dinnerware produced by Hall, Red Wing, Hollydale, Riverside, Rosenthal and numerous others, Zeisel, born in 1906, is still active today. She continues to create furniture, ceramics and glassware for various manufacturers.

Despite some notable design flaws, this exhibition catalog for the 2005 show at the Erie Art Museum contributes some keen insights on Zeisel's late career, while including helpful features such as a nine-page life chronology, a plate stamp chronology, and an index. One of the chief merits of the four written works in the catalog is that they tend to focus on recent developments rather than dwell on Zeisel's fascinating, but well chronicled, history. For those studying design and its impact, Zeisel continues to be a worthy subject. Her work over the last twenty years shows a creative mind still reaching, evolving, refining, inspiring, as she further imprints her stamp on our material culture.

For those interested in Zeisel's collaboration with The Orange Chicken Gallery in New York, this book is practically indispensable. Indeed, without this collaboration, and the gift of work from this period by the gallery owners, Don Joint and Brice Brown, the show would have been much less intriguing. Much of the introduction by John Vanco, the entirety of the first essay by James Pearson and a good portion of the main text by Lance Esplund rightly focus on the work created during this partnership. The final piece by Kelly Armor, Erie Art Museum’s Director of Education and Folk Art, describes educational outreach efforts among three diverse groups: gifted children from an inner-city elementary school, students from a suburban middle school, and fifteen women from a domestic violence shelter. Each group worked with the museum to create audio tours of the Zeisel exhibit. All of these works are interesting, authoritative, clear and keenly descriptive.

While the text of the catalog is superb, the design is somewhat challenging. Its small stature limits image size, and page seams often intersect photographs. There are some other odd choices, especially the use of backgrounds that use a muted two-toned palette that is quite distracting. Overall though, the work is a welcome addition, especially for those looking to build a more complete view of Zeisel’s career. Recommended for museum or academic libraries with an interest in American design.

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