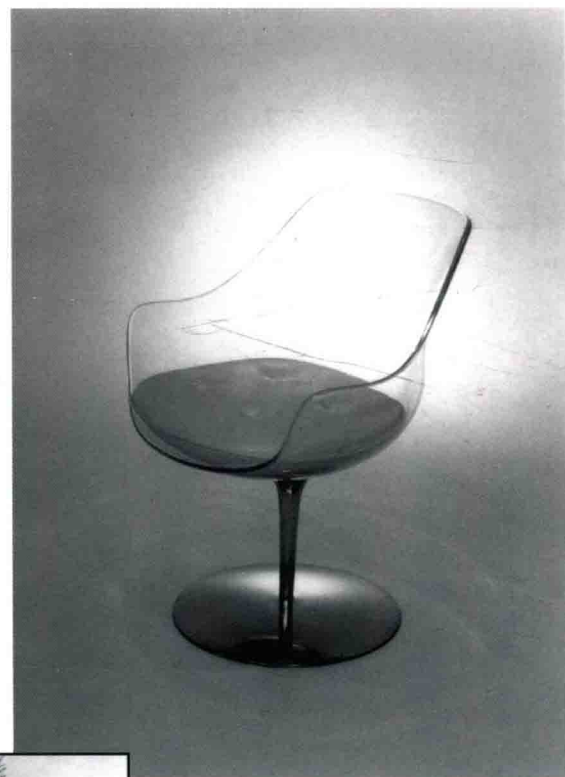
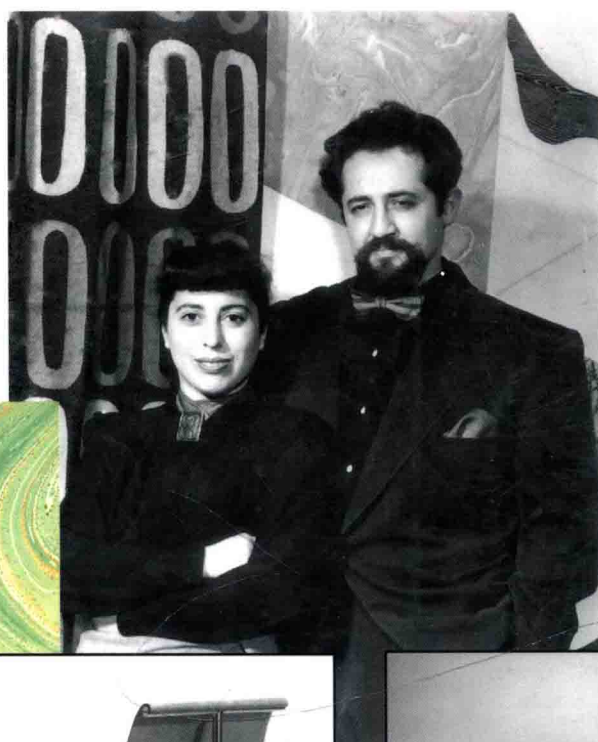




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Furniture, Textiles & Wallcoverings



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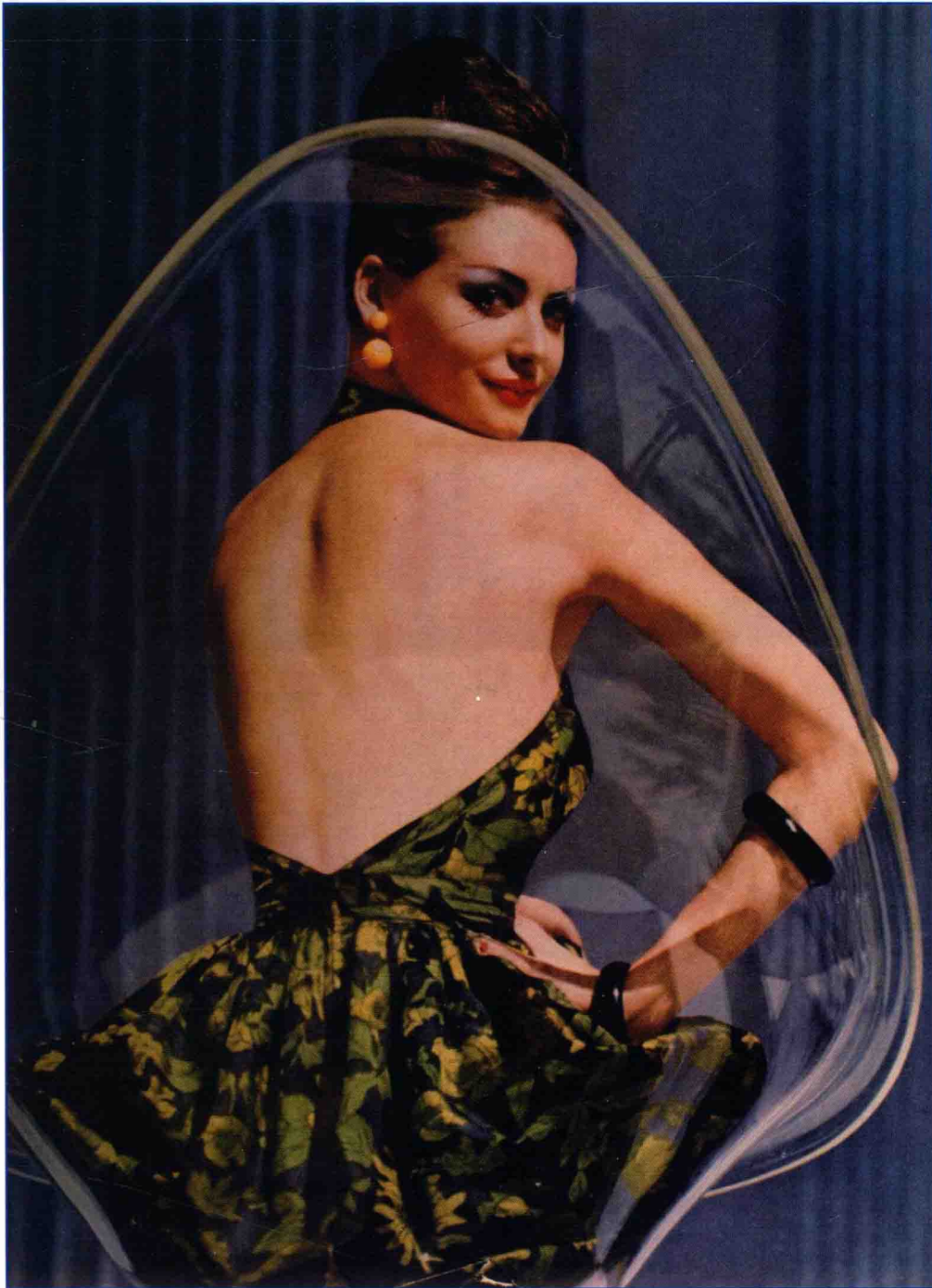
Laverne[®]



A Schiffer Book

Laverne®

Furniture, Textiles, & Wallcoverings



Michael Krzyzanowski



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Nancy, Hannah and Mikey for their patience, and to Bob and Muriel for their support in all things.



Early Laverne stationary headed with the horse logo, which was used by the Lavernes in various forms throughout their company history. Photo courtesy of R. Gallagher

Other Schiffer Books on Related Subjects:

Modern Furniture Designs 1950-1980, Klaus-Jurgen Sembach

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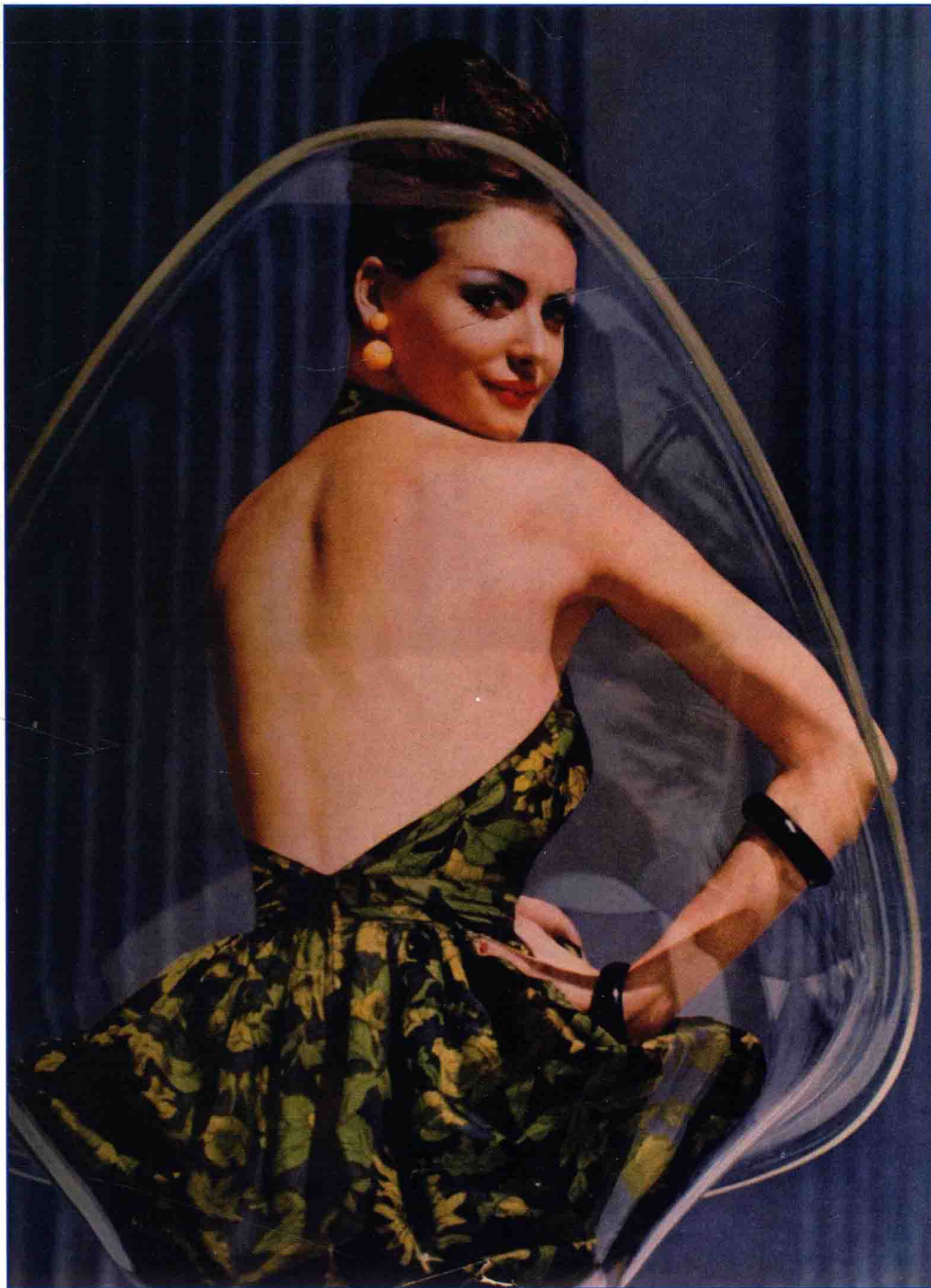


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Acknowledgments

Without the valued contributions of the following people this book would have been impossible to compile. I would like to thank them all for their efforts. First and foremost, Rick Gallagher generously loaned archival materials and shared his depth of knowledge concerning all things Laverne. Richard Weissenberger gave tireless effort to provide information on the designers associated with the Laverne Textile Division. Simon Andrews at Christie's auction house in London provided expert advise on 20th-century design, and Charlotte Grant for the loan of documentation from the Christie's archive, George and Georgina Enoch for their wild enthusiasm and use of their library, Liliane Fawcett and Themes and Variations in London for their expert guidance regarding Laverne's European output, Gordon Forrest for information on Laverne's Canadian production, and Court Noxon for his personal incite into the Lavernes' work, Elaine Lustig-Cohen for the generous loan of rare images from the Alvin Lustig archive, to Stephanie Cassidy at the Art Students League for her supreme efforts in researching the times and dates of the Laverne's tenure there. Special thanks go to Debbie Hunt for all her work with the photography and to Avi Laverne for the loan of some very personal family archival information, which added greatly to the tone of this work.



A small drawing by Estelle on tissue paper. Photo courtesy of R. Gallagher

Preface

The aim of this book is to expose the whole Laverne concept and to catalogue it as factually as possible. All the furniture and textile designs have been dated from references in the various contemporary presses, interviews and archival company documents. Other information has come from personal and to-date unseen Laverne family archives. Much of the tone of this book has been colored by past personal interaction with Erwine Laverne himself. In writing this history of the company, it has been pertinent to stick to the academic rather than delve into the colorful and sometimes ambiguous 'details' that so often appeared. Printed in full are the main catalogues of works produced by the company accompanied by archival and rare images of prototypical and limited production pieces. It is hoped that the images and information found in this book could be a reference for the academic, and a visual inspiration for all.

In the late summer of 1984, I had seen an ad in the Furniture for Sale classified section of a suburban Maryland newspaper that read, "plastic chair for sale," and it might have said "red cushion," I'm not sure. I went to see that plastic chair, and \$40 later I was leaving with my first piece of Laverne furniture. I went home and consulted my bible of those formative times: Klaus-Jurgen Sembach's *Contemporary Furniture*. Published in 1982, Sembach's book was all I ever wanted to believe in. It was, as stated on the cover, "An International Review of Modern Furniture." That to me pre-dated all other references to post-war furniture design and was, to me, a gateway to the heavenly worlds of Eames, Nelson, Wegner, and Paulin. That book was a large, broad, sharp sword that let me cut through every abject used furniture shop in every dangerous neighborhood in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. And there it was, number 382, Estelle and Erwine Laverne's *Lily* chair. After some serious investigative probing, I found a phone number for a "Laverne" and left several excited and possibly slightly cryptic messages. I finally got a phone call from Erwine Laverne himself, in the autumn of 1984. As I sat in that elegant *Lily* chair talking to Mr. Laverne in New York, he seemed quiet curious as to who I was, who my wife was, and how I came to own one of his chairs. Quite openly curious, in fact, it almost seemed that as I was putting the phone down there was a knock at the door and there he was, in person. Perhaps in reality it took a bit longer, but it all seemed surreal in retrospect.

In those heady, pre-internet, pre-Taschen design book times, my wife and I lived in a tiny square apartment in Silver Spring, Maryland. We spent our lives, for the most part, buying 1950s furniture from filthy junk stores, estate sales, and flea markets and driving it up to New York where we sold it to a select group of antique dealers.

In those far-off times, there were hardly any galleries interested in these things; the whole modern design phenomena was in its infancy. There were no shops selling reproduction 20th century furniture and there were no Arne Jacobson Egg chairs in ads for cat food. People actually threw away the furniture their parents had owned from the 1950s. Heaven! My wife, Nancy, was an artist and had been raised around her family's business, A and R Auto, Washington's oldest and most prestigious junkyard. It was her deep fiscal wisdom that had come up with the thought that we should pull our trade out of the gutter and open a shop. We would make it very tasteful, esoteric, and even aloof. It could even be a "gallery." The time for "new antiques" was upon us, and we thought we should be in the vanguard by opening a Washington flagship and elevate ourselves to shopkeepers.

We secured a lease on a beautiful, high-ceilinged space in a neighborhood called Adams Morgan. When Mr. Laverne learned of our plan to sell designer furniture from the 1950s and 1960s, he came down from New York for a visit at lightning speed. So there we all were, Nancy, Erwine, and I in the tiny Silver Spring apartment with the *Lily* chair; all getting along quiet famously. Nancy and I wanted to buy old stock from Mr. Laverne, and Mr. Laverne wanted to sell us furniture. Off we all went to see the beautiful space we had secured, Nancy, Erwine, and myself. Then, back to the tiny square apartment. Our plan was deeply sophisticated because at that time we were full of good taste and cutting-edge ideas that had never been tried before. We told Mr. Laverne how we were going to paint the whole beautiful space white. A big white cube, and then fill it up with furniture, each piece displayed in the most modern way. As I mentioned, we had the good taste and the sophistication. As a matter of polite course, Mr. Laverne listened to our plans and, when we were finished, he began to tell us what was really about to happen. It had nothing to do with anything you have just read. In order for us to buy the Laverne furniture, we would have to create the suitable Laverne environment to put it in. We had the space and apparently

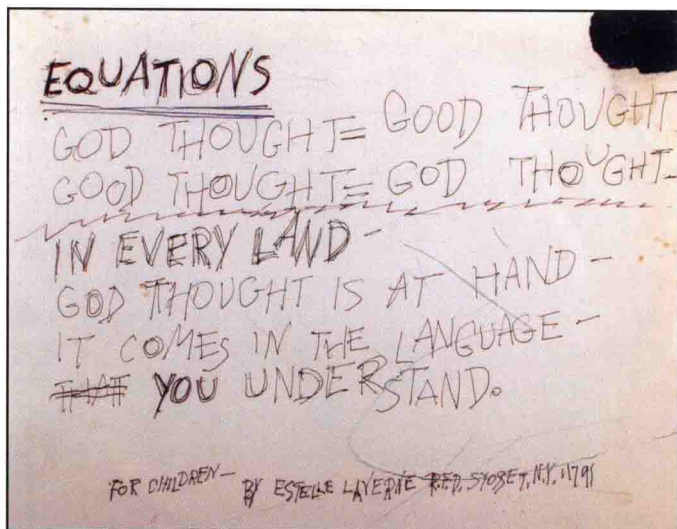
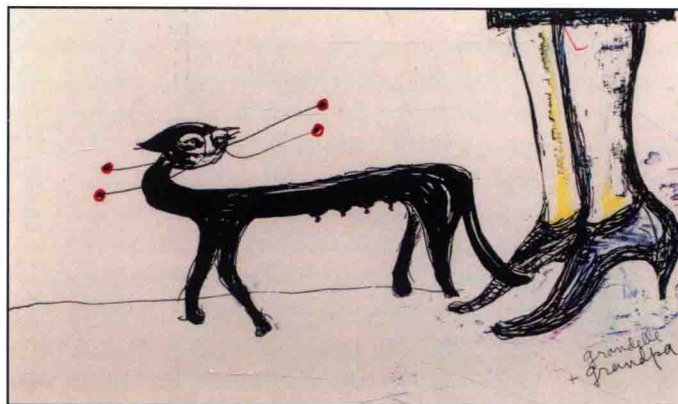
we were to step aside and let this charming man from New York employ us in the opening of our own business.

And so it was that we bowed to experience and set to work. I was to organize the painters and wallpaper hangers, and keep the landlord out of the way, to get the coffee, and pick places for us to have dinner at the end of each day. Nancy was to be the driver of Erwine, from the train station to Silver Spring and all around town, whenever needed. Everything else was out of our hands. The whole Laverne thought process ran, briefly, like this:

If you want to get an Invisible settee, it must be set against a wall of Marbalia. If you have a wall of Marbalia,

then the opposite wall must be painted beige. If you have a beige wall there, then the adjacent wall must be covered in a Piranesi mural. If you have the Piranesi mural, then (suddenly) the ceiling, which is 14 feet up in the sky, must be painted blue. It had to be a very particular blue, too, a very difficult shade to achieve.

During this exciting and often confusing process, we handed over what was almost at that time our entire life savings, and it was well worth it. When the paper with which we had covered the windows with came off (Laverne was keen to create an air of intrigue amongst the neighbors), we stood before what was, in essence, the last Laverne showroom.



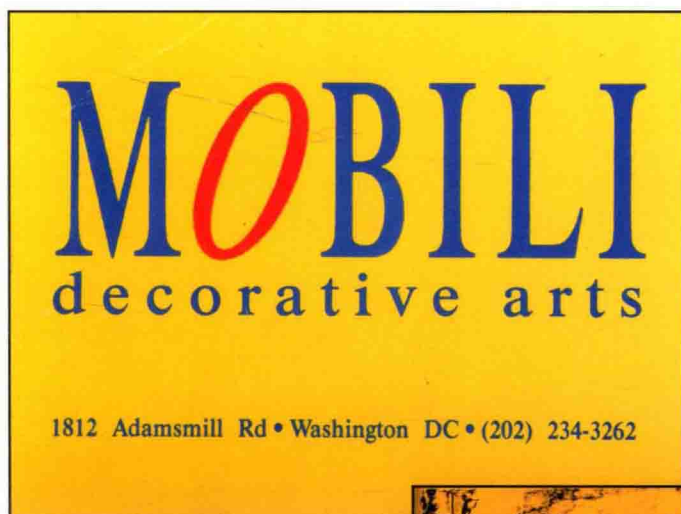
Poetry with accompanying artwork by Estelle, probably penned in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Her poems were often submitted to *Magical Blend Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Hiram Poetry Review* among others.

We soon realized that the interior Erwine Laverne had created for us introduced us to a concept in interior design that far exceeded our imaginations. The Marbalia wall coverings and Piranesi mural began to generate an abundance of free publicity for us. Virtually every interiors magazine gave us favorable copy, and our original naive concept of having a clean, white space, thankfully, never came to fruition.

Over the course of the next few years, our education in all things Laverne continued at a steady pace. With each meeting there would be new stories with tales of design from the heyday of post-war furniture. The first was the story of fiberglass fabric, Owings-Corning, and the Jack Parr Show. The Lavernes had been instrumental, along with their Architectural Research Unit (comprising William Katavolos, Ross Littell and Douglas Kelley) in the development of fiberglass fabrics. Laverne had taken an image of a Matisse painting, made a silk-screen from it, and printed it onto the new fiberglass fabric. Once mounted in a large light box, the "Matisse print" came to vivid life and introduced fiberglass fabric as the newest and most groundbreaking textile to date. Although this was an intriguing example of the Lavernes' pioneering textile design (he mentioned that the Matisse in the light box had made its debut on a famous T.V. show), it did not appeal to our customers. They found the ambiguity connected to the name Matisse (was it

a Matisse or not?) and the vagueness of Erwine's explanation as to whether it could be considered a Matisse or not off-putting, and so the Matisse had to go back. That meant back to a warehouse in Long Island City where the bulk of the remains of the Laverne furniture and textile empire had been stored.

There were stories of all the 1950s designers. Who knew whom, and who came to who's party, and who traded furniture with them. There were Hans Hofmann stories and the tale of meeting Estelle in the Art Students League cafeteria. We would go to a restaurant and hear more design tales, then drive Erwine back to the train for New York. Every month or so we would sell something for him and he was pleased to be back in business again, albeit now working with two inexperienced Washingtonians. The original Lily chair was placed with the Museum of American History and it was with great pride that Erwine went to the museum to see it. We would go to New York and visit him; we went to see the movie theater they had designed in mid-town Manhattan and sometimes we just met at some appointed coffee shop. He often showed up in an old, and I believe rented, station wagon. We would hear all the stories about his wife, Estelle, and her gradually failing health; we got to know her vicariously. She wrote poems to us and sent them via Erwine. In those days, all went well, in fact swimmingly.



Card from Mobili Decorative Arts, showing the last commissioned interior by Laverne. The yellow card shows the Laverne Piranesi mural.



Later, all began to slowly unravel. The amusing stories and *bon mots* became salted with an air of desperation. Estelle had become more infirm and was under the care of various doctors; everything seemed to have become an expense. Erwine often had to rush off or get back to be with her before the doctor came or the nurse left. The roof of his home, Laurel Hollow, was in need of repair and its contents were getting water damaged. There had been a fire and Estelle needed more help. There came a point when he could no longer cope, physically and perhaps financially. It was a difficult task in the 1980s to sell a Katavolos, Littell, and Kelley anything. A few people wanted some of the more staid icons, such as Charles Eames chairs or Eero Saarinen pieces, but in Washington all things related to design were slow.

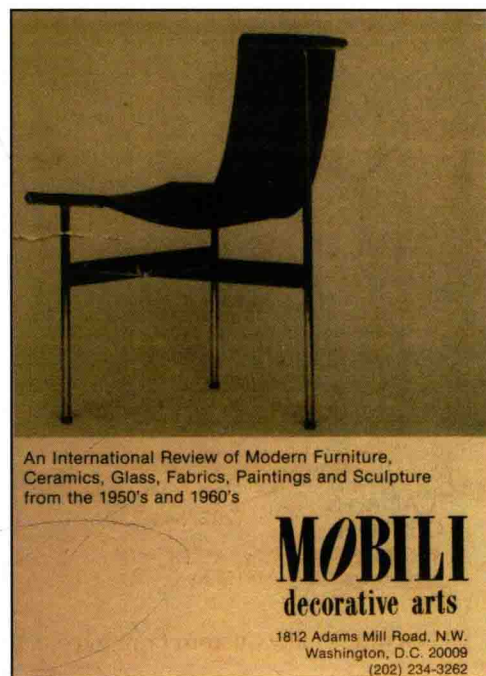
We began to hear rumors that Erwine was selling items around Manhattan. His stories, now from a distance and over the phone, were more confused. He came to us once and said he had been mugged on the subway, and he looked like he had. Other times he would unexpectedly arrive at the Washington train station rather bemused, and lost. His feet had become slightly swollen and he had difficulty walking. We saw him less and less. Our gallery had gone over to more saleable Knoll and Herman Miller pieces, and suddenly the only thing in the gallery that was Laverne was a roll of Fun To Run that hung from the high blue ceiling. We hardly ever heard from him. The phone calls petered out and he was, himself, unreachable. We had no way of knowing where he was or what had become of him.



Flower settee with Junior and Esquire Golliwogs; in the background is a space painting by Erwine Laverne and Marbalia wallpaper, at Mobili Decorative Arts, Washington, D.C., 1985.

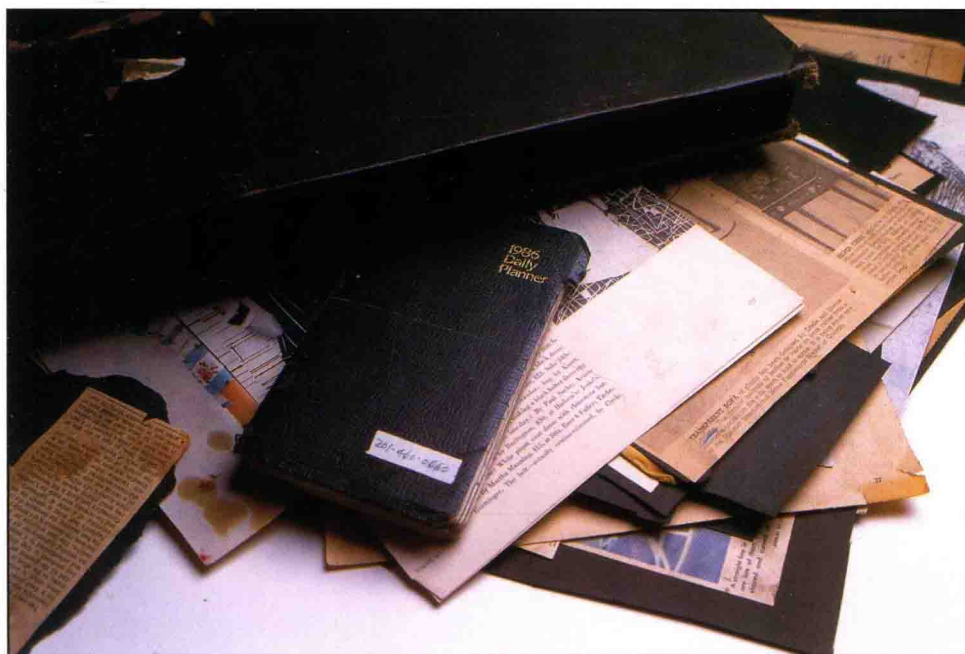
In the end, we found out that he was in a nursing home in Brooklyn. When we contacted the staff there, they were reluctant to speak to us because we were not family. After several lengthy phone conversations with the staff at the nursing home, we felt it was safe to make the drive to Brooklyn and visit him. A friend (someone who had also met Erwine on several occasions) and I drove to Far Rockaway to see him. We had been pre-warned that he might not recognize us, and he did not at first, but I feel that towards the end of that last meeting he did begin to find himself again. Perhaps it was my imagination. My friend left him with a pile of architectural magazines, pictures of Laverne furniture, design articles, and Marbalia samples. That was the last time I ever saw Erwine. A little later we went to Laurel Hollow. That once-hive-of-artistic-activity was long gone. The roof was gone. Most of the walls were crumbling. The house had been obliterated by time, the elements, and roving, spray-painting, beer drinkers. All that remained of the once-proud design empire was the memory and some rotten remains of scrapbooks and newspaper articles covered in rubble and dirt.

And so it is that a design company that was so rich in invention, innovation, and beauty had disappeared. The outstanding contributions made by the Lavernes to 20th



The last advertisements where Laverne furniture was used by Mobili Decorative Arts, Washington D.C., 1985.

century art and designs are many. The early work of William Katavolos, Ross Littell, and Douglas Kelley have proven to be timeless. Laverne's invention of the Invisible Group of furniture has never been eclipsed or successfully added to. Marbalia as a wall treatment is still without compare today. Sometimes furniture is designed and that design cannot go any further; it cannot be embellished or copied under another name. These are the works from the company Laverne: the 'T' chair, the Lily and Buttercup chairs, the Tulip chair, and the concept of the Golliwog, all beyond the reaches of plagiarism.



The remnants of the Laverne archive.

Chapter I

Background

The Lesters and the Levines



Estelle and Erwine Laverne, date unknown.

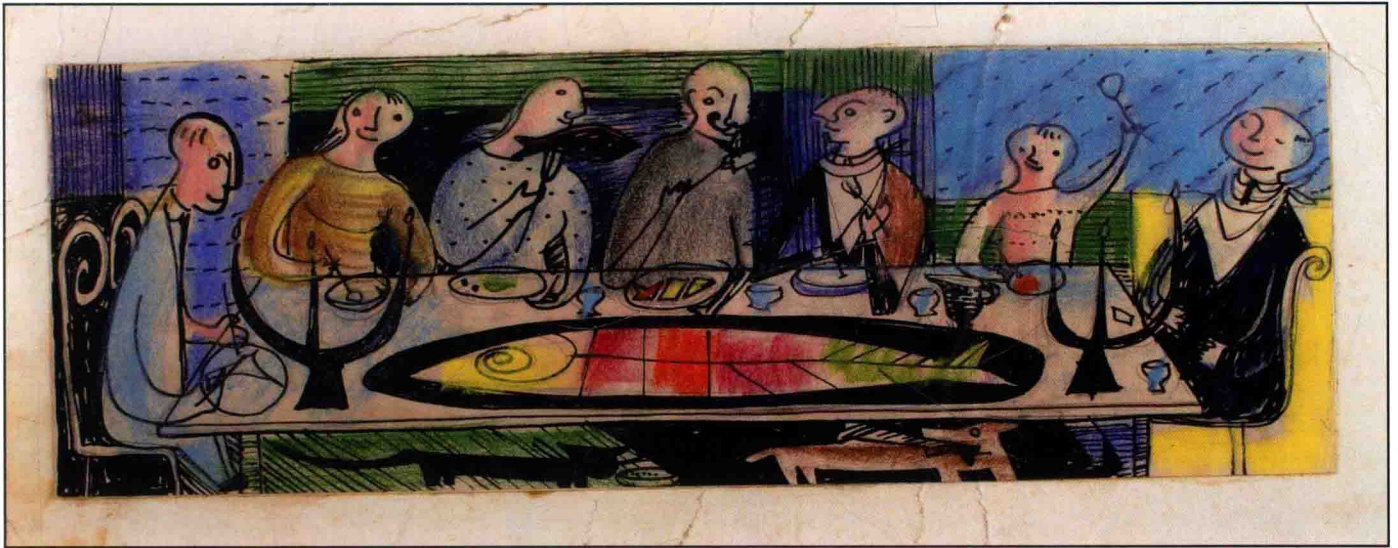
The Laverne family name originally had been Levine, and Erwine's mother and father, Max and Molly, had been émigrés from Russia, settling first in New Jersey and later moving to a two-story house in Brooklyn, New York. Max and Molly had eight children: Erwine, Philip, Louis, Nathan, Albert, Morris, Sarah and Rachel. Erwine Laverne (1909-2003) was born on March 1st. Max Laverne worked as an artist and itinerant muralist. While Max was often away from the family, traveling to his various commissions (where ever they might be), the children grew under the guidance of their strong, Russian-born mother. Molly Laverne was the very backbone of the Brooklyn home. In later years she came to be described by her son, Albert, as "having a scientific bent..." and being "self educated, thoroughly cultured, and highly intellectual." It would seem the fam-

ily had a solid and interesting upbringing. Although Max's work painting in synagogues and church's often kept him away from Brooklyn, whenever the opportunity arose he would employ his boys to work with him. Erwine's formative artistic experiences would have been in New York shrines atop a scaffold, filling in the backgrounds of murals painted by his father. As a testimony to these poignant artistic experiences, seven of the eight children --with the exception of Albert and Morris -- made their careers in the business of art or design. Philip went on to design modern furniture with his son, Kelvin, and initially his other son, Seymour, in a business known as the Philip LaVerne Collection Company. Louis became a decorator and the owner of an antique store on Third Avenue near 57th Street in Manhattan. Nathan worked with Erwine for many years in the production of wallpapers, as did their sister, Rae (Rachel), and her husband, Joseph Himmelstein, who was the foreman of the company. Their sister Sarah was married to Bert Kaiserman, who also worked for Erwine. Morris, the youngest brother, served as a tail gunner in the Air Force and was killed while on duty. Albert inherited his mother's more stoic qualities and went on to become an eminent (and dapper) New York psychiatrist.

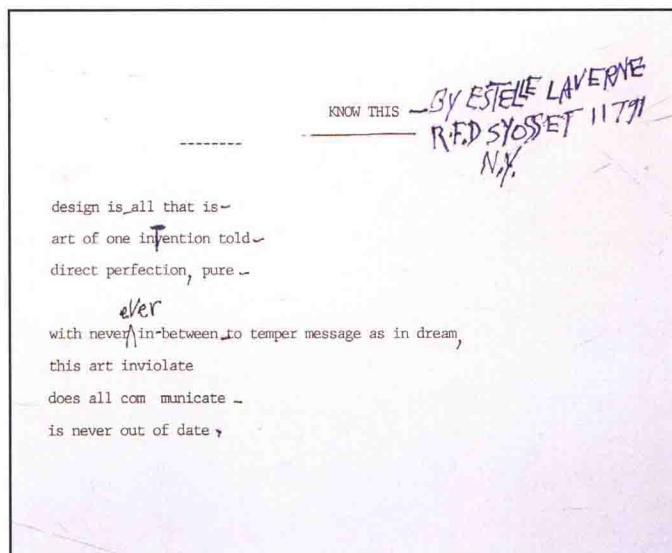
Their mother, Molly, had raised the family almost single handedly and had a profound influence on Erwine, in the formative Brooklyn years. So did their artist father who opened up the world of painting and expression to the family through his art. The parents were more than capable of giving the family a solid, intelligent, and artistic environment in which to grow; both showing formidable intellectual ability. Molly spoke Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Russian, and of course English, and Max was rumored to have been able to play chess with several different people at the same time, and win!

Estelle Lester (May 29th 1915-1997) was an artist. Little is known about Estelle's early years, yet she, too, was born into an artistic environment. Her father, Isaac Lester, had owned a silversmith's shop in Manhattan near Bloomingdale's store close to the entrance to the subway

at Lexington and 57th Streets. Estelle's mother, Minnie, had been a homemaker and looked after the family at their house in Astoria. Estelle had two sisters, Gertrude and Muriel. Similar to the Levines, the Lester family had also originally come from Russia or possibly Lithuania.



A small painting attributed to Erwine Laverne, showing what seems to be a celebratory feast, possibly a holiday. Pictured are Estelle and Erwine Laverne, with unknown others.



A poem on design by Estelle Laverne.

Chapter 2

NEW YORK

It is said that every person is destined to some extent to be a product of their environment. For Estelle Lester and Erwine Laverne, New York City of the 1930s was that environment.

In the world of architecture and design, the ornamental modern that had been prevalent in the 1920s was being replaced by the purity of the machine. The frenzied energy of the growing city was erupting upwards with the new architecture. It was the age of the skyscraper. The artist John Marin (who had originally trained as an architect at the Pennsylvania Academy in Philadelphia) noted the buildings of Fifth Avenue as "man-made mountains of energy" and sought to paint "disorder under a big order." New York had become the most important center for this new "Metropolitanism." Raymond Hood, who had designed the American Radiator Building in 1924, went on to lose all Gothic pretensions with the New York Daily News Building (1929-31) and the McGraw-Hill Building (1930-31). William Van Alen created the Chrysler Building (1928-31) in an overt 'building as machine' comment on the New York skyline. Shreeve, Lamb and Harmon created the unbridled and truly monumental Empire State Building (1930-31). The New York Metropolitan Opera was passed over at Rockefeller Center as 'Radio City' took command; another loud praise for the new modernity. These were great times for New York in the arts, with the founding of the Museum of Modern Art (1929) and the opening of the Whitney Museum (1931). Throughout the city a vivacious celebration in new design held sway. Ruth Reeves created a 'Manhattan' textile design, Viktor Schreckengost designed the 'Jazz' punchbowl, resplendent with a skyscraper motif. Paul Frankel entered the fray with his ultra-streamlined 'Skyscraper Furniture' line. Whereas Paris in the 'teens and twenties had been the bastion of modern art, New York in the 1930s had emerged as her successor. The newly engineered world of America was epitomized in the



A painting by Estelle Laverne, date unknown.

explosive atmosphere found in New York City. While American enterprise was being celebrated in the architecture of Manhattan, a new order of American artists was in evidence. Alfred Stieglitz and his Gallery 291 emerged as the undisputed proponent of *avant-garde* art. Stieglitz was to sponsor American Modernism rather than import a European artist to do the job. Although he did hold the first American exhibitions of both Matisse and Picasso, his true forte was to establish a climate of cultural equality in the arts with Europe, rather than a perpetuation of an inferiority complex that had been in evidence before. The American

scene was explosive as seen in Georgia O'Keeffe's painting *Radiator Building Night New York* or Stuart Davis's mural *History of Communications*. Davis's mural would have been a wild awakening to Erwine Laverne after his formative experiences with his father's ecumenical mural works. It was in this new American delirium that the young artists Estelle Lester and Erwine Laverne lived and worked. This was the environment that molded them.

Chapter 3

The Art Students' League

One of the most powerful influences in the careers of the Lavernes was undoubtedly the Art Students League in New York. The Art Students' League was, for them both, a commanding and pervasive undercurrent, which ran parallel to their design careers. Its influences were always present.

Their association with the League began as students in the 1930s and continued through to the early 1970s, coinciding completely with their careers in design. It can be noted that their studies at the League started at an analogous time to the formation of their business, and their studies there ended at the beginning of the demise of Laverne International. The League was the Lavernes' private-life therapy: a place of escape and a place where they could be artists. It was the savior of their sanities, the nourishment of their inspirations.

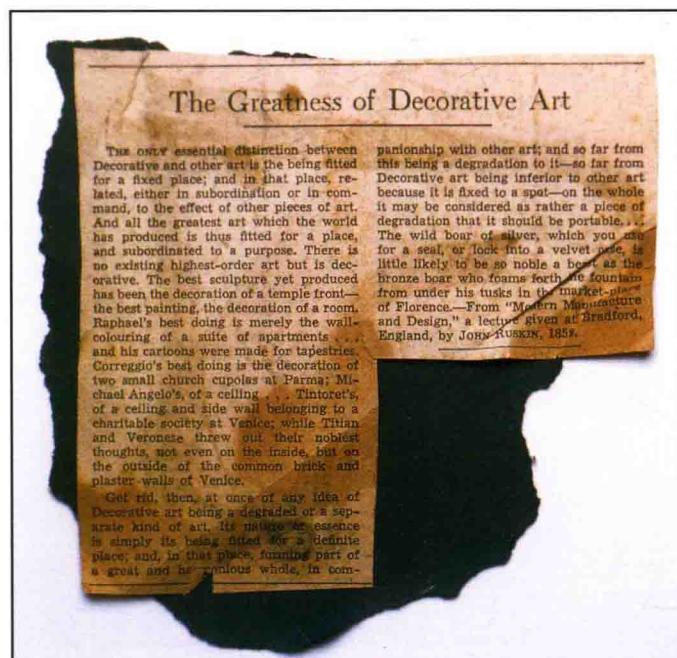


A painting by Estelle Laverne, date unknown.



A painting by Estelle Laverne, date unknown.

The Art Students' League, founded in 1875, was based on the French *atelier* system, whereby the course work was set by the individual views, methods, and philosophies of each instructor. It was an art school for artists. There was no degree or diploma and no set curriculum. Past students returned to teach other students. It was an esteemed art-based co-operative. The students were there to profess a love and need of art, and there were never any other superficial motivating forces to be found, purely artists in creative exchange with other artists. The Leagues' alumni reads as a virtual index of American modern art: Winslow Homer, John Sloane, Georgia O'Keeffe, Thomas Hart Benton, George Grosz, Calder, Pollack, Hans Hofmann, Paul Manship, Roy Lichtenstien... all can be counted as either teachers or students. The scope of such a talent pool could never be underestimated and it was in this veritable pool of art-knowledge that the two Lavernes' swam.



The Greatness of Decorative Art was written by John Ruskin. This deeply significant newspaper clipping, whereby decorative art is fully endorsed by Ruskin as a true art form, was saved by the Lavernes. "The best sculpture yet produced has been the decoration of a temple front; the best painting, the decoration of a room." This powerful and poignant essay would have certainly given great comfort to the Lavernes, if they ever had cause to reflect upon the meaning of their work when seen in comparison with their calling as artists.