

A collection of colorful, abstract ceramic objects. The central piece is a large, shallow bowl with a wide, plain white interior and a rim decorated with bold, geometric patterns in red, blue, orange, and pink. To its left is a small, white ceramic mug with a handle, also featuring the same abstract patterns. In the foreground, there are two small, white ceramic pieces, possibly handles or spacers, with the same patterned design. To the right, a large, dark-colored ceramic object, possibly a lid or a large bowl, is partially visible, featuring a green and black checkered pattern and a white handle. The objects are set against a dark, textured background.

MICHAEL WOLK

DESIGNING for the TABLE

Decorative and Functional Products

MICHAEL WOLK



Library of Applied Design

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*Christmas Rose Fine Bone China,
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I must also acknowledge and thank my own staff, Lourdes Fernandez, Susan Halpern, and Glenda Herzog. Their talents and dedication to our other design projects allowed me the time and peace of mind needed to search through thousands of photographs to discover the unique and beautiful designs you'll see throughout these pages.

Finally and certainly most essentially, I want to thank all the artists, designers and photographers whose work is featured here. This book would not exist were it not for their imagination and creativity.

Dedicated to my wife Henri and our son Hunter, my special family.

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PEOPLE AND TABLETOP—PERFECT TOGETHER

By Steven G. Changaris, CAE
Executive Director
National Tabletop Association

Whether people gather for an exquisitely prepared meal in a fine restaurant or are called to the table by Mom, they share a unique and common experience. Before sampling the cuisine, their senses of sight and touch take control as they connect with the elements of the table setting laid before them. Impressions range from the regular and usual to the atypical and different. Feelings well up inside and immediately bring a mix of sensations—comfort, anticipation, fellowship, love, thankfulness and more. The enjoyment of the dining experience is indelibly shaped by the visual and tactile impressions created by the stemware, flatware, dishware, serving pieces and tabletop accessories gracing their table.

Tabletop manufacturers are constantly being challenged by consumers in an increasingly complex and global marketplace. Typically, our manufacturers need to be creative, traditional, futuristic and trendy. Yet, they are always sensitive to the consumer's often fickle interest in balancing design with functionality in tabletop products. Tabletop manufacturers, by meeting the challenges of today's marketplace, continue to uniquely position their products to be a force in our lives now and into the future.

The sum of the modern tabletop experience is definitely more than just pieces of tabletop. The real sum blends diverse elements: the basic human need to eat; an array of raw materials from silica to metal; various design influences which range from formal, casual, seasonal and traditional. And, when all combined, the experience reflects the personal expression of the host or hostess. Like people or the intricacies of a snowflake, no two tabletop settings are the same.

The editor who brings this book to you has done a wonderful job in researching tabletop. *Designing for the Table* presents a most contemporary and up-to-date view of tabletop. This book gives our imaginations a jump start on tabletop's future by clearly showing us where we've been and where we are today.

The National Tabletop Association was formed in the mid 1980s by the diverse interests composing the tabletop industry, ranging from manufacturers of dinnerware, stemware and flatware to industry publications and allied interests.

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NEW TRADITIONS IN TABLETOP DESIGN— A GALLERY OWNER'S PERSPECTIVE

By Deborah Farber-Isaacson
Co-owner, Mindscape Gallery

Tradition. There's a word just brimming with associations—cultural, familial, historical, personal. We think of tabletop traditions in terms of hospitality, the kind that nurtures and warms us, at small private gatherings or state dinners steeped in ceremony. The very styles that epitomize the applied decorative arts, including today's functional tabletop designs, are based on traditions—the continuation of a cherished ritual, the charming aesthetic of a treasured heirloom. But tradition is a very large concept, big enough to accommodate both our contemporary lifestyles and our appreciation of time-honored qualities such as graciousness and beauty. Clearly there is room for a diversity of tastes—of forms, periods, materials and styles. Most especially, there is room for individuality.

Taste, as I've come to realize after nearly two decades of marketing contemporary art and functional craft objects, is a multi-dimensional concept in its own right; it glitters with facets too numerous to count. In fact, our aesthetic preferences are every bit as complex and wide-ranging as our interests; we appreciate a lot of different designs for a lot of different reasons.

In a field as broad as tabletop design, which encompasses a segment of the contemporary craft industry, finding things to like is as easy as setting the table. Are you consistently drawn to the sparkle of handblown crystal? Do you just have to smile at the brightly enameled colors encased within a fused glass plate? Does your hand fit perfectly around the porcelain mug that holds your morning coffee? Maybe it's an artist's wit that appeals to you as you light the candle in a sculpted metal candle holder. Or perhaps it's your curiosity that's engaged by a process as rich in spirit and centuries-old philosophy as raku ceramics.

The world of tabletop design is so great that the selection of available art forms is limitless. It's as wide open as our imaginations permit and as inspiring as the talents that design and create what we think of as art.

At Mindscape Gallery, collectors of tabletop ware tend to be collectors of art forms in general, often viewing these products as potential additions to their collections. Not only do they combine one-of-a-kind crafts with commercially manufactured pieces, but they add antiques, a dash of primitive, a touch of glitz, or anything else that may capture their fancies. They may use their tables to display the works of many different artists, or to show variations on a favorite theme. There are artichoke and tulip collectors, and aficionados of frogs and unicorns in every layer of society. The charm, in every case, lies in the diversity displayed.

There is appeal, as well, in the endless variations to be found in things made by hand. A set of wheel-thrown porcelain bowls is guaranteed to vary in size. The glazes will differ from piece to piece, depending upon where things were placed in the kiln during firing. Bubbles or seeds appear in even the finest studio-blown glass. What we think of as flaws in ware produced under strict factory control may be viewed as desirable when the object is made by an artist. Collectors don't simply forgive such inconsistencies. They actively enjoy them.

The accent on individuality, which collectors appreciate and use so deftly, clearly begins with the maker. Tabletop products come not only in all kinds of styles, but with all kinds of intentions. Some are down-home utilitarian; others are elegant, or make daring design statements. Some are whimsical; others represent unique aesthetic perspectives. Some push their materials, representing advances in technology, or rare skill and craftsmanship. While some pieces blend harmoniously on the table, others nearly shout for attention.

There is, in addition, a function to each. Art critics, though not unanimously, generally acknowledge that art may now reside on the table, not simply on pedestals or within frames on the wall. If a critic is especially open-minded, an art form may hold soup or serve salad. It may pour tea or decant wine.

It is the design-minded public, however—hosts and diners, collectors and their guests—who have discovered an even greater truth about tabletop design. There is a unique pleasure to be found in using art, in interacting with it and incorporating it into our lives. It's an experience that's even better when we share it with friends and family across the table. That, too, is surely a tradition worth honoring.

Deborah Farber-Isaacson is a professional craft advocate, author and co-owner of Mindscape Gallery, located in the Chicago area suburb of Evanston, Illinois. Established in 1974, Mindscape is one of the oldest and largest craft galleries in the United States, representing over 350 contemporary American artists.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s, the French Surrealist poet André Breton predicted “the distinction between art and life, so long held to be necessary, will be contested and will conclude with its being canceled out in principle.” Seventy years later, this prediction is holding true in virtually every aspect of everyday life. The distinction between design and function, between art and utility, has given way to a sensibility in which there are no longer any firm barriers between aesthetics and practicality.

Historically in this country as in most of the Western world, artists pursued personal expression in the traditional art mediums of painting, drawing and sculpture. Their work was considered to exist on a wholly different plane than the work of craftsmen and artisans, who were making objects to fulfill the functional needs of their clients. This distinction between fine art and craft did not exist in other cultures, namely the Far Eastern cultures of Japan and China as well as primitive societies. For tribal people and the highly advanced Eastern civilizations, utilitarian objects held a very high place in the social value system. Japanese tea sets, for example, have ramifications which extend far beyond the act of drinking tea. They hold ritualistic and aesthetic significance which transcends pure functionality.

The work in this book demonstrates the variety of ways in which utilitarian objects transcend their function. Each serves in practical ways, and in more profound ways as well. They act as a kind of mirror, which reflects an image of ourselves and the quality of our daily existence. In many cases, these objects offer deeply meaningful commentaries on the social significance of being alive—of breaking bread, sharing a meal, engaging in social interaction.

Just as important, these objects return aesthetics to the world of daily life. They offer a more humanistic perspective on existence. Most are tactile as well as visual, offering their owners a level of enjoyment which is at once comforting and thought provoking. According to *Metropolitan Home*, design has become a social force, with the power to help us heal and to connect to one another and to the universe. Design-conscious objects serve a deep-rooted function by forging a link between ourselves and our environment. In this respect, design isn't simply about how things look, but about how things feel and the way they work.

Often, objects developed by corporate marketing divisions lack the substance of true design, because they lack a spiritual core. Aesthetics is, in its essence, a form of magic. When the cavemen painted their walls, they weren't merely engaging in decoration: they were practicing one of the basic arts of survival. The objects presented in this book display the same potent force to charm us, to console us, and to enrich our lives with a sensual form of meaning. Insofar as the human soul still requires a connection beyond itself, the objects shown here are the most potent form of modern magic that we know.

—Michael Wolk

Table vignette, with antique and contemporary carved wooden accessories, designed by Ton Luyk.

Photo: Iran Issa-Khan



CHAPTER ONE

Dishware

*Beaufort Fine Bone China,
designed and manufactured by
Spode.*

