

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

What's So California About Bill Stern?

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When did you first get excited about California design?

In the 1980s I bought a set of solid color pottery dinnerware from a neighbor who was moving. I didn't actually need more dinnerware than I already had but after I put this eye-catching 4-color luncheon service made by Vernon Kilns in a display cabinet I started searching for more of it. Soon I heard that Vernon was just one of many companies that began producing "California pottery" in the 1930s. And then I learned that California pottery was just one expression of "California design" which encompassed all manner of industrially made products including household goods like furniture and lamps.

Did California design just happen because a few creative people got inspired, or were there social and economic factors at work as well?

I'd say that social and economic, as well as geologic and topographical factors came first. In architecture, Santa Barbara's Spanish Colonial Revival stucco look was decreed after much of what had been a wooden Victorian city burned in the aftermath of the 1925 earthquake. The immediate causes of the unprecedented surges in product design in California were the state's dramatic increases in population, notably in the 1920's when the population of Los Angeles doubled in 10 years – and then during and after World War II when the state's population grew by almost 8 million people in twenty years. All those newcomers, who had to furnish thousands of new homes with dinnerware and furniture and decorative items, created a large new market for locally designed and produced goods.

You can take the design out of California, but can you ever take California out of the design?

Yes, but only if you consider imitation to be a form of admiration.

Mass-manufactured solid-color pottery dinnerware originated in California in about 1930 and became one of the state's first nationally distributed man-made products. (Levi's had been shipped to the rest of the country since the 1870s.) Then in 1936 a dinnerware company in West Virginia began marketing an imitation of California pottery whose very name, Fiesta, was a deceptive allusion to the state's Mexican heritage

You're the founder and executive director of the [Museum of California Design](#). What's next for the museum?

On August 10 our next exhibition, CALIFORNIA'S DESIGNING WOMEN, 1896-1986, will open at the Autry in Griffith Park. It honors forty-six women designers whose work spans a century of major aesthetic movements from Arts & Crafts to Art Deco to Mid-century Modern and beyond, including many who worked with the cutting-edge technologies and materials of their day such as Lucite, molded plywood and computer-aided graphics.

And on May 14 I will be giving a talk at LACMA called "What's So California About California

Design?” in conjunction with that museum’s exhibition “California Design 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way” for which I was the consulting curator.

Your house is a veritable mini-museum of California pottery. Did you ever break anything?

Rarely. Recently a painting fell off a wall and hit a particularly beautiful Mid-century California pitcher. I felt guilty because I consider myself to be the conservator of these fragile expressions of American culture.

(Happy ending: the Edmund Ronaky pitcher for Jaru Art Products is being restored.)

Photograph of Bill Stern by Peter Brenner

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