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DESIGN REVIEW

DESIGN REVIEW; Giant Strides Beyond Traditional 'Feminine' Fields

By GRACE GLUECK

The 20th century has been quite a trip for female American designers, who first made a play for attention as a group by showing their work in a Women's Building at the Chicago world's fair in 1893. They were mostly white, middle class and skilled in "female" pursuits like textiles, wallpaper, ceramics, embroidery, jewelry, bookbinding, lace making, china and decorative painting. They were after not much more than recognition for their talents.

Today the ranks of female professional designers has swelled, and they are also in fields once all but closed to them, like architecture and landscape, graphic, industrial and film-set design. And a Europe-oriented outlook has shifted to include the work of women of different ethnicities. Women have made such progress in the white male world that the designation "female designers" now has little meaning.

So why the show "Women Designers in the U.S.A., 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference" at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts? In the same spirit, wrote Pat Kirkham, a professor at the center who assembled the show and its weighty catalog, as the turn-of-the-century feminists who favored separating women's art and design from that of men at the world's fair. "They believed a separate show would better highlight women's work and achievements and lead to greater understanding and appreciation of it," Ms. Kirkham wrote.

On view at the Bard Graduate Center are objects designed by some 220 women in the 20th century. Not only are they in fields traditionally considered "feminine," like textiles, but they also represent areas still resistant to women, like industrial design, in which women designed auto interiors and upholstery fabrics but very rarely the car itself. The show stresses the women's ethnic diversity, with special attention to blacks whose work until recently was dismissed as hybrid African-American, lacking the "authenticity" of sought-after American Indian objects.

The scope of the show is amazing: from high couture by the black designer Ann Lowe to pottery by Fannie Nampeyo of the Hopi-Pueblo culture; from an Arts and Crafts-style necklace of silver, gold and pearls by the early-20th-century designer Josephine Hartwell Shaw to an austere sofa by the midcentury modernist Florence Knoll; from a quiet 1903 garden design by Beatrix Jones Farrand

to Edith Head's costumes for Grace Kelly and Cary Grant in "To Catch a Thief" (1955) and Polly Smith's over-the-top befeathered get-up for Miss Piggy in the 1996 film "Muppet Treasure Island."

Architecture, landscaping, interiors, furniture, textiles, apparel, books, posters, tableware, wallpaper, lighting, ceramics, jewelry, pottery, baskets, quilts, fashions, floor coverings, doors for cars, silverware, costumes, film sets and industrial products cram Bard's tight -- and recently redesigned -- galleries. Presented along with plans, photographs and videos, the objects are cleverly arranged to take maximum advantage of the space.

At the century's beginning, the Arts and Crafts movement rode high, emphasizing the importance of "common objects." It led to the revival of handcrafts and promoted truth in materials, with the idea that beauty and utility could coexist. Among the outstanding examples from these early days are an intricate, subtly colored "Dragonfly" wallpaper (1905-1910) with Art Nouveau antecedents, designed by Zulma Steele; Ellen Gates Starr's delicate 1905 cover design of stylized leaves and flowers for a leather-bound edition of "Paradise Lost"; and an elaborate bronze-and-crystal candelabrum (circa 1916) by Marie Zimmerman.

Work by American Indian women was of particular interest in the Arts and Crafts period. Among the pottery, baskets, textiles and jewelry here are treasures like the "Bright Morning Light" basket bowl (1921), woven of tule and fern root with an overall pattern of black claws by Dat So La Lee, a former laundress of Washoe ancestry. Another, much later, is a "Crossroads of the Continents" belt (1990) by Denise Wallace. Of silver, gold, semiprecious stones and fossilized walrus tusk, Ms. Wallace's belt links together tiny figures in the traditional regalia of her Aleut ancestors.

African-American designers are also played up in the show, particularly in fashion and textiles, the two fields that were initially most accessible to them. Arresting textile patterns like Lois Mailou Jones's "Totem Poles" (1928) and Beverly Nusom's "Wild Banana" (1971) are presented, along with a stunning "Debutante Gown" (1958-60) of white silk satin adorned with a trail of fake roses by Ann Lowe, the first black designer to join the fashion establishment when she opened a New York salon in 1950. (She designed Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding gown.)

Now black women are active in most areas of design, from computer graphics to industrial interiors, although the catalog essay points out that "issues of gender and race remain." Carole Bilson, a product designer working for Eastman Kodak, has created equipment like an ultrasound imager (circa 1992). There are photographs of a smart private interior by Cecil N. Hayes for a Florida residence (1996), a sparkling corporate office by Courtney Sloane (1996) and a sample of very postmodern-looking industrial carpet designed by Holly Hampton for the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark (1995-96).

Also well chronicled in the show and in its catalog is the progress women made moving from "interior decorators" to interior designers in residential and corporate areas. Early on, the profession was strictly male. But there were women like Mary Jane Colter, whose 1902 decor for an Indian gift shop at the Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque led to a job as house architect for the Fred

Harvey Company, for which she designed everything from hotels to dining-car interiors.

The better-known Julia Morgan did William Randolph Hearst's California estate, San Simeon, begun in 1919 and finished in 1937. Elsie de Wolfe, who abandoned an acting career for posh interiors, got her start by designing those of the Colony Club (1905-07), New York's elite all-woman bastion. One of the best-known women in the profession, Sister Parish, famous for her chintz-filled "country house" rooms, was part of the team that redid the White House interiors during the Kennedy administration in the 1960's.

By 1960 the majority of interior design students and practitioners were women. Since then much stricter standards of training and professionalism have been established in the field and women today not only do corporate headquarters but also hotels, stores, banks and casinos. Yet there is still a long way to go, the catalog essay argues, not least in terms of recognition. After 70 years of professionalism the best-known name in the trade is the very commercial tastemaker -- not a designer -- Martha Stewart.

Although it stands on its own and was separately conceived, "A Woman's Hand: Designing Textiles in America, 1945-1969" at the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology makes a wonderful complement to the Bard exhibition. Displaying all breeds of textiles, from apparel to industrial fabrics, it includes the work of more than a few of the artists in the Bard show, including Anni Albers, Ray Eames, Vera Neumann, Ruth Adler Schnee, Marianne Strengell, Esther Haraszty, Maria Kipp, Estelle Laverne and Ruth Reeves. In some instances, they are represented by the same designs.

The F.I.T. show, organized by Lynn Felsher, curator of textiles at the museum, displays work by more than 40 designers and includes about 75 printed, woven and knitted textiles. It is arranged thematically in four areas: Organic Nature, Modernism, Traditional and Pop/Op/Mod-1960's.

The 25 years covered were a period of great growth in the textile industry, when public demand for new fabrics was high. Working in the design departments of large mills, in their own studios and as freelance designers, women made significant contributions, but what they produced was mostly anonymous.

One of the industry's few female stars was Dorothy Liebes, known for her experiments with boldly textured woven fabrics that incorporated seemingly incompatible materials like bamboo and glitzy Lurex. Her prototype for a window blind in 1952 is a folksy, hand-woven affair of Lurex, cotton chenille, linen, silk and rayon on painted wood slats.

Less innovative, but in demand, were hand-screened prints. Among them are prizes like Theresa Kilham's "Quetzalcoatl" and "Cameroon" (both 1950), cued by Aztec and African themes. Other highlights of the show include a psychedelic screen-print furnishings fabric (1967) by Marcelle Tolkoff, and the Mexican-inspired geometric dress fabric "Serape," designed by Nina Lewin in 1951.

Unfortunately, the show's installation is less than inspired, which makes viewing it more of a challenge than it should be. But for anyone interested in the development of postwar textiles, it's a prime primer.

"Women Designers in the U.S.A., 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through Feb. 25. "A Woman's Hand: Designing Textiles in America, 1945-1969" is at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Seventh Avenue at 27th Street, Manhattan, (212) 217-5800, through Jan. 13.

Photo: The design for "Dragonfly" wallpaper (1905-1910) by Zulma Steele. (Bard Graduate Center)
