

Love's Labor Lost

NEW YORK DEALER **LARRY WEINBERG** RECALLS THE PLEASURE OF HELPING CLIENTS ACCRUE AND ARRANGE A TOP-CLASS MODERN DESIGN COLLECTION—AND THE SORROW OF SEEING MUCH OF IT GO ON THE BLOCK



The living room in the clients' Central Park West apartment in New York contains a Dunbar marble-top coffee table, a Piero Fornasetti magazine rack, a grouping of Laura Anderson ceramics, and a Jacques Adnet lamp. The painting above the mantel is by California artist Alexander Nepote.

IT ISN'T OFTEN A GALLERIST GETS TO FURNISH AN ENTIRE APARTMENT for clients with impeccable taste and discerning eyes. Less common still is a commission to furnish multiple residences around the country for those clients—a job that lasted over a period of a dozen years. I feel lucky that I had this happen once in my career. Moreover, several of the projects involved the restoration of modernist structures, including a Richard Neutra house in California. Together, my clients and I sat through countless auctions waiting for just the right lot. All told, I was able to weave about six hundred vintage objects and artworks into several dozen livable and fresh-looking room settings. In retrospect, it was obvious that I shared with these clients an affinity for mid-century American design and craft.

My clients had a desire to create a low-key and informal lifestyle for themselves, a preference that corresponded to the offerings at my first New York gallery, Lin-Weinberg: simple, even Spartan, designs from the late 1940s produced by Knoll and Herman Miller. Some of the first pieces I placed in their spaces included a 1946 Florence Knoll credenza, a George Nelson and Associates CSS storage system, a Milo Baughman desk, and an Eames

molded plywood dining chair. Added to the mix were corresponding European pieces such as an early Alvar Aalto tea cart.

Over time, mirroring Lin-Weinberg's trajectory, my clients' tastes evolved toward a greater confidence in 1950s American design with more visual flair. Increasing sophistication was reflected in the elegance of an Edward Wormley "even-arm" sofa, the fluidity and swagger of Vladimir Kagan pieces, and the architectural naturalism of a George Nakashima cabinet and a Phillip Lloyd Powell bench. European accents, such as coat racks by Le Corbusier and Osvaldo Borsani, added range and depth. The spaces we designed became abstract compositions in themselves, with greater power to delight.

With greater connoisseurship came a greater emphasis on individual pieces, vetted for beauty, rarity, and historical significance. Among American designs, we acquired the only known example of Alexander Girard's freeform sofa table for Knoll, produced about 1948, which was offered at Wright in March 2005. I showed this table to Carl Magnusson, Knoll's design director at the time, and after attempting unsuccessfully



Left: A 1950s George Nelson modular lounge chair for Herman Miller, shown in a cliffside Montauk residence. The tiles are based on a Gio Ponti design.

Center: A 1960s Earthcells planter by California designer David Cressey for Architectural Pottery, purchased at Los Angeles Modern Auctions.

Below: A superb mid-century Tapio Wirkkala plywood Leaf dish, purchased at Wright in Chicago.



to procure it he persuaded Knoll to reissue it. In two areas—lighting and ceramics—our collaboration yielded museum-quality collections. Lighting allowed designers a particularly free rein for expression. We deployed floor lamps, table lamps, and sconces as functional sculpture. American standouts include a Grasshopper lamp by Greta Magnusson Grossman, procured years before the current mania for her work; a mint-condition lamp by Lester Geis from the 1950 MoMA lighting design competition; and scarcely seen designs by the visionary Chicago architect Otto Kolb and by Milo Baughman’s wife, Olga Lee. European luminaries include the French designers Michel Buffet and Pierre Guariche, and their Italian counterpart Gino Sarfatti. The highlight of this part of the collection is a Serge Mouille five-arm wall light that once belonged to Alexander von Vegesack, founding director of the Vitra Design Museum, an institution created by the titular German firm that has enshrined and continues to produce the best of classic twentieth-century modernist design.

Inevitably, the mandate to furnish was coupled with the desire to collect. Such was the case with Architectural Pottery planters—prized by my clients for their geometric clarity or gentle biomorphism, as well

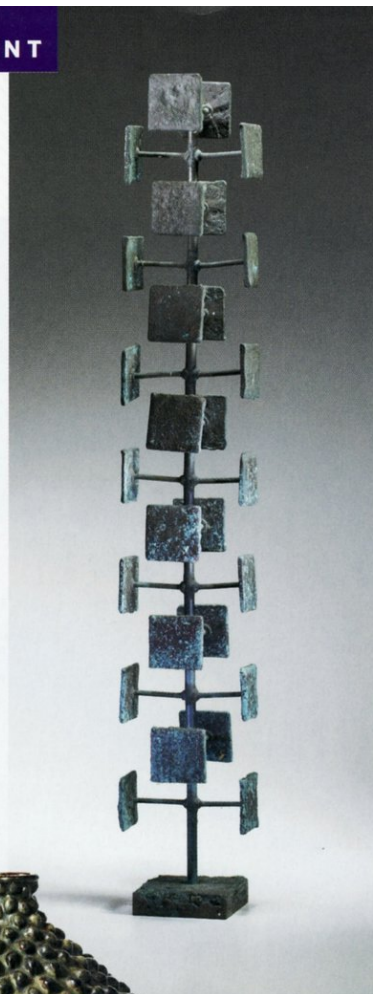


as their textures, colors, and practicality. We amassed some two dozen or so vessels, almost all early unglazed examples in white or red, including a few Sombrero planters and the larger Pig and Peanut forms. All wound up in use, either indoors or out, at their California style modernist houses and New England cottages alike.

Indeed, no medium ignited our shared passion for design as much as fired clay. From bud vases to triptych panels, the creativity and artisanship manifested in ceramic art inspired my clients’ greatest enthusiasm—not least in the “love of the hunt”—and gave them the most joy in ownership. Represented in the collection are premier pieces by distinguished American studio potters Gertrud and Otto Natzler, Leza McVey, Claude Conover, Maija Grotell, and Laura Andreson. Groupings of pieces by Scandinavians such as Berndt Friberg and Carl Harry Stålhane graced shelves in my client’s house in Michigan. The most outstanding pieces came from long-held private

collections: two large and stunning Lucie Rie flaring vases owned by Dame Lucie's friend and hairdresser, which came to us via Phillips de Pury and Company; and two immense and spectacular Axel Salto vessels from the philanthropist and potter manqué Parker B. Poe, acquired through Brunk Auctions of North Carolina.

Poe's ceramic art collection, assembled in the 1960s and 1970s on trips to New York, Copenhagen, and London, also included major examples by Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada. While I didn't expect the pieces to fly under the radar, I also didn't expect the feeding frenzy that took place, testament to the fervor generated by Poe's combination of curatorial savvy and long stewardship. Fortunately, my clients appreciated the opportunity presented at the sale and persisted; among the seven lots we purchased was the cover



Above right: A multiplane construction by Harry Bertoia, c. 1966, purchased at Wright.

Center, left: Living room of a Martha's Vineyard beach cottage, showing a Gino Sarfatti hanging fixture above a Charlotte Perriand cafe table.

Center, right: The monumental Axel Salto vase, c. 1940s, for Royal Copenhagen, purchased at Brunk Auctions in North Carolina.

Below: A rare Alexander Girard sofa table for Knoll, c. 1948, purchased at Wright.

lot—a large Axel Salto budding vessel that remains one of the best examples of his work I've seen.

Times being what they are, my clients recently decided to divest themselves of many works. Some eighty items from their collection opened Sotheby's March 7 "20th Century Design" auction. It is with mixed emotions that I view the Sotheby's sale. On the one hand, many of the wonderful rooms, at once stimulating and serene, that I helped to create have been broken up. Pieces carefully placed into dialogue with one another have been wrested out of context. On the other hand, the auction provided a wonderful showcase for my clients' long labor of love. But these pieces have been passed on to others before: disseminating them permits the conversation to continue.

