

# THE DINNERWARE MUSEUM: WHETTING YOUR APPETITE

BY MARGARET CARNEY, PH.D.



Kate Maury, *Stacked Candle Holder/Epergne*, 2012  
cone 6 porcelain oxidation hand-built from slab with both slip  
cast and press molded attachments, 14 x 11  
The Dinnerware Museum, Gift of the Artist, 2013.34  
image courtesy of Peter Lee

To some people, the term dinnerware conjures up images of grandma's old dishes with metal knife marks on the dinner plates. This special exhibit at SOFA CHICAGO 2013, *The Dinnerware Museum: Whetting your Appetite*, reveals a refreshing approach – featuring masterpieces of the tabletop genre created by contemporary artists, as well as notable historic dinnerware by the leading designers for industry, juxtaposed with an uncommon focus on fine art that references dining and a bit of kitsch thrown in for good measure. The Ann Arbor-based Dinnerware Museum brings enough dinnerware to Chicago to whet your appetite.

Established in 2012 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, The Dinnerware Museum has an international focus collecting industrially designed and manufactured as well as one-of-a-kind dinnerware and accessories created from ceramic, glass, wood, metal, lacquer, paper, and plastic and celebrates a significant aspect of our daily lives from ancient times to the present. The Museum additionally acquires non-functional sculptural work referencing dinnerware. Furthermore, the Museum collects related archival materials from individual artists, designers, and companies, including photographs, advertisements, personal and company records, equipment, and research materials.

While there are more than a thousand pieces in the permanent collection of the Dinnerware Museum, with ceramics being the primary medium, there are important art works in metal, glass, plastic, paper, wood, fiber, and more in the collection. The collection is international in scope, with work from the U.S., China, Japan, England, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Taiwan, Portugal, Canada, and elsewhere. Even this small exhibit, about eleven pieces of dinnerware

sets, selected for SOFA, has work from the U.S., Canada, England, and Portugal. Some work epitomizes “good design” in mid-century dinnerware, while other work represents the best in contemporary dinnerware. There is at least one example of the best in prototype design created in plastic by rapid prototyping; one rare engraved glass teapot from the 1920s that will make you nostalgic for bygone eras; one celadon-glazed centerpiece that will make you yearn for formal contemporary dining opportunities; some Pop-art creations that will make you wish you were alive (and wealthy) in the 1960s; a contemporary dinnerware set for one that will make you wish you were lucky enough to be dining alone; some fine art referencing dinnerware such as Bill Parry's *Knife Fork Spoon* sculpture that will bring out your abstract sensibilities; 3-D wire scribble sculpture from Portugal that will add a new dimension to your definition of what dinnerware is or isn't; as well as a teapot form that will question the old maxim, form follows function; a “found” china plate with repairs by the artist Michelle Taylor unlike any you've seen before; and the kitsch included in this special exhibition is not gratuitous. Kitsch plays a pivotal role in this eclectic collection. Dinnerware can be beautiful, educational, and frequently fun or playful.

Good design is a key component of the masterpieces in the permanent collection of the Dinnerware Museum. Corning first began manufacturing Pyrex teapots in 1922. In the early 1920s, the Corning Glass Works' leading designer was the British-born Frederick Carder (1863-1963). Among his many creations were a category of glass Pyrex ware that was advertised in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1923 as “the 365-Day Gift” – a “delight forever,” “the universal gift.” It was much more than that when one was

able to acquire the attractive squat Pyrex teapot that Carder designed with its rare engraved decorations and even an occasional precious monogram.

*Setting for One*, created in 2011 by potter/designer Paul Kotula, is inspirational work. The beauty of his design – choice of materials, forms, and glazes – is exceptional. Any diner would relish the opportunity to have this place setting on their table, and any dining experience would be enhanced. Any food would taste more scrumptious and its use would result in one memorable, unforgettable event. One can imagine so many varied foods nesting in the bowl. Yet *Setting for One* is so sublime in its sculptural resonance that it borders on sacrilege to even think of placing anything inside it.

In 2009-2010, Portuguese designer Joana Carvalho created *Kit Café* (or *Coffee Kit*), an injection molded spoon, cup and saucer, made of biopolymer that is non-polluting and biodegradable. It was to have been produced with a coffee bean, with the coffee cup later serving as the planter, if one wished. The design never went into production, but in 2013 the designer emailed the file so that a plastic prototype could be created for the permanent collection of the Dinnerware Museum. It's a beautiful and practical design. It is hoped that her idea of creating a non-polluting and biodegradable version of *Kit Café* will ultimately be realized.

The Dinnerware Museum has a diverse permanent collection with a burgeoning collection of fine art referencing dinnerware. Some work is beautiful, playful and amazing at the same time. This definition pertains to the innovative and imaginative 3-dimensional wire scribble sculpture created by the Portuguese artist David Oliveira. While this artist (born 1980) has focused on



wire sketches relating to the human form, including a rendition of *The Pieta*, the Dinnerware Museum acquired a 20-piece “set” of dinnerware in 2012. The wire scribble sculpture includes wine bottles and goblets (with one spilling wine), a stack of dirty dishes, a chicken, seafood, serving utensils, and more. They are mesmerizing, illusionary, and captivating.

American sculptor, William Parry (1918-2004) created an impressive body of work during his lifetime. He taught primarily at Alfred University and while he always thought of himself as a facilitator, he inspired his students on a daily basis with his insights and unique vision of the universe. In the early 1990s he created a series of sculpture sets which he titled *Knife Fork Spoon* or *KFS*. They were oversized abstract implements created from white stoneware with black copper oxide slips which gave them a slightly prehistoric or bone-like appearance. His genius is yet to be fully appreciated, except by his students.

Canadian artist Léopold L. Foulem is known for his three dimensional abstractions of ceramic vessels within metal frames. While the mounts set the context for the exploration of the ceramic container, they are intended to spark



a conversation regarding his atypical sculpture. Key among this thoughtful series of work is *Blue Willow Teapot in Mounts*, created between 1997-1999, and first exhibited in Amsterdam at the Ceramics Millennium conference in 1999. Casual viewers who are unfamiliar with Léopold's work are frequently dumbfounded to learn that this is not a functional teapot as it appears. They grow thoughtful when they learn that his ceramics are about ideas and that he considers himself “some kind of composer and theoretician instead of a virtuoso.”

Not all artists create elaborate candle holders or epergne. In fact, few can and even fewer do. Kate Maury creates beautiful functional work that is also highly decorative. Her travels in India and China influenced her present three-dimensional, free-standing, hand-built forms which are celebratory from every angle. The use of celadon glazes welcomes the diner to an outwardly sublime experience, yet the beautifully encrusted forms – full of nature's bountiful birds and seashells and plant motifs – belie a layered history of experiences full of joy and exuberance.

There are only a few gifted designers who lived past their 100th birthdays. One of course, was Eva Zeisel. The other was

the creative design genius and inventor Viktor Schreckengost. Among his many accomplishments is his 1955 dinnerware that he designed for Salem China. The shape with its distinctive tripod feet utilized on the hollow ware forms (teapot, cup, serving dishes, sugar, etc.) is referred to as *Free Form*, and the most prized pattern is *Primitive*. The Dinnerware Museum was fortunate to acquire a place setting from his widow Gene Schreckengost, as well a



the loan of some the rare serving pieces for this special exhibit at SOFA CHICAGO 2013.

In sharp contrast to the whimsical shapes and designs created by noted designer Viktor Schreckengost, are the sets of 6 porcelain dishes created by Roy Lichtenstein a decade later, produced by the Jackson China Company in 1966 in an edition of 800. What's black and white with an abstract pattern of lines and dots painted to appear as enlargements of half-toned images? It's Roy Lichtenstein's Pop Art dinnerware service for one!

While it could be considered true kitsch in 2013, the red and white plastic *Chow Chow Train* created in the 1940s was probably just the latest amusing and functional dish set designed for a child in your life. The plastic train compartments hold the food, the smoke stack is the tumbler, and the little fork and spoon resemble the train's conductor and engineer – ready to delight and feed the happy child. While it might make one nostalgic for mid-century childhood, it serves as a reminder that dinnerware comes in many forms and materials, serving a diverse audience.

Traditional pottery conservators would be surprised by the technique employed



by the talented contemporary British sculptor Michelle Taylor in her “restoration” artwork. Her 2012 series *Narrative Artefacts* employs “found” domestic china – teacups and dinner plates, which are then deconstructed and altered through industrial techniques such as sandblasting, cutting and drilling. The “repairs” consist of hand-crafted materials such as textiles, print, knit, embroidery and vintage paper. The juxtaposition of hard and soft materials, industrially manufactured china with the hand-crafted “restoration” is intended to reflect how emotional attachment can be created with inanimate objects. Her work draws upon a personal childhood narrative of maternal loss. As the idiom goes, her tragic loss is the viewer's gain, as her work presents a balance of both beauty and personal memories with each viewer's unique, unknown experiences.

Opposite  
William Parry, *KFS (Knife Fork Spoon) 28, Stand*, 1994  
white stoneware with black copper oxide slip  
The Dinnerware Museum, Gift of Amanda Parry Oglesbee  
and Brian Oglesbee, 2012.3 a, b, c  
image courtesy of Brian Oglesbee

David Oliveira, *3D Wire Sketch Sculpture*  
wire, 20 pieces of various dimensions  
The Dinnerware Museum, Museum Purchase, 2012.15  
image courtesy of Bill Walker

Joana Carvalho, *Kit Café (Kit for Coffee)* prototype designed, 2009-2010, fabricated by Federal-Mogul Corporation by rapid prototyping, 2013, plastic, 1.25 x 6.75 x 6  
The Dinnerware Museum, Gift of the Artist, 2013.37  
image courtesy of Bill Walker

Viktor Schreckengost, designer The Salem China Company, Salem, OH, *Free Form* shape, *Primitive* pattern dinnerware, 1955 semi-vitreous china, glazed  
The Dinnerware Museum, Gift of Gene Schreckengost (dinner plate, cup and saucer), 2013.43, 2013.44, 2013.45 serving platter, teapot, serving dish, sugar, on loan from Gene Schreckengost. image courtesy of Bill Walker



Paul Kotula, *Setting for One*, 2011  
stoneware, laminated wood, glass, 7.5 x 23.5 x 20  
On loan from Wayne Higby. Photo courtesy of Tim Thayer



Frederick Carder, designer, Corning Glass Works, manufacturer engraved Pyrex teapot, c. 1920s  
glass, engraved, 5.75 x 9 x 5.5, tray: 7 inches in length  
The Dinnerware Museum, Museum Purchase, 2013.6  
image courtesy of Bill Walker



Michelle Taylor, *Narrative Artefacts 3 Chintz*, 2012  
dinner plate, textile, print, silk thread, vintage paper  
10 inches in diameter  
The Dinnerware Museum, Gift of the Artist, 2013.48



The Dinnerware Museum is known for its collections, yet there is more to its story than that. The office and storage facility for the Dinnerware Museum are located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. While the museum is searching for its ideal location and fundraising, it is prioritizing on raising visibility for this unique year-old institution – through temporary or “pop-up” exhibitions. The first was held during April and May 2013 in a historic 1842-era Greek Revival building located in Ypsilanti, near Ann Arbor. The second exhibition has been saved for SOFA CHICAGO 2013, as part of its 20th anniversary celebration. Other exhibitions are scheduled in the next few months – in Ann Arbor and in Traverse City, Michigan.

The evolution of the museum has been described as creating a dream museum in the 21st century, one place setting at a time. The final version will remain more than grandma’s dishes. The emphasis on good design, whether created as industrially manufactured dinnerware or by contemporary artists as one-of-a-kind art work will be the focus, no matter the medium being ceramic, glass, lacquer, wood, plastic or fibre. Collecting fine art referencing dinnerware will be the other focus – sculpture and 2D work. There ultimately will be a reference library, with an archive consisting of photographs, advertisements, patents and related

materials. Exhibitions will feature selections from the permanent collection, traveling exhibitions, juried and invitational shows, and rooms devoted to collections of distinct genres such as Fiesta Ware, Hall China, Rosenthal, Depression glass, and more. Fine art will be a major focus, with sculpture, photography, paintings and the decorative arts, well-represented. There will be captivating “period rooms” with lively vignettes or tableaux of dinnerware *in situ*, such as an Arts & Crafts breakfast nook complete with Fire King green glass dishes or a traditional Japanese tea room with tatami mats, etc. The gift shop will be an essential feature of the museum, along with research facilities for collectors and scholars, and frequent symposia relating to dining and dinnerware. Through all of it combined, ubiquitous dinnerware will provide a window into our material culture, norms and attitudes toward food and dining.

The wish list for the Dinnerware Museum is long. In addition to a permanent facility, there is the desire to collect masterpieces world wide, ancient to contemporary, from all pertinent decorative and fine arts media. While MOMA will always own Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined cup, saucer and spoon, and the Art Institute in Chicago will always own Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, and the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria della Grazie,

Milan, will always own Leonard da Vinci’s mural *The Last Supper*, and The Brooklyn Museum will always own Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, the Dinnerware Museum may some day gather together these cultural icons (that aren’t fixed murals) during an exhibition and symposium devoted to dinnerware and dining as a celebration of this significant aspect of our daily lives.

Opposite  
Léopold Foulem, *Blue Willow Teapot in Mounts*, 1997-1999  
ceramic and found objects, 8.75 x 7.75 x 5.83  
The Dinnerware Museum, Gift of the Artist, 2013.36  
Image courtesy of Richard Milette

BW Moulded Plastics (Pasadena, California, 20th century)  
Jack and Jill Chow Chow Feeding Train, c. 1950s  
train car dish, smokestack cup, conductor and engineer spoon and fork, BW Flexware plastic, 4.5 x 13.5 x 4.375  
Dinnerware Museum, Promised Gift of Margaret Carney and Bill Walker. Image courtesy of Bill Walker

Roy Lichtenstein, *Place Setting*, 1966  
Jackson China Company, Durable Dish Company, Falls Creek, PA  
whiteware  
On loan from Susanne and John Stephenson  
Image courtesy of Bill Walker

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