

EVA ZEISEL
By Tom Felt

Most readers of the HEISEY NEWS have heard the name of Eva Zeisel and probably know her as the prestigious ceramic designer who became Heisey's art director in 1953. Although her association with the company was relatively brief, she did create at least two patterns for Heisey and some of you may have pieces from her No. 1637A Town and Country line in your collection. Those who are really fortunate may even have an example of the much more elusive No. 6009A Roundelay line - my own experience with this pattern has been limited to looking at the pieces on display in the Heisey Museum.

What most people don't know, however, is how extensive and fascinating Eva Zeisel's entire career was. What follows is not directly related to Heisey, therefore - who was only one of the many illustrious clients Mrs. Zeisel designed for - but is of interest in its own right. It also amplifies and corrects some of the information previously published about her (including some details in the Candlestick book). I am indebted for most of this data to the catalogue essay written by Martin Eidelberg for a book entitled EVA ZEISEL: DESIGNER FOR INDUSTRY, published in 1984 on the occasion of an exhibition of her work organized by Le Chateau Dufresne, Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Montreal.

PART 1, THE YEARS IN EUROPE

She was born November 11, 1906 in Budapest, as Eva Polanyi Stricker. Her family was quite wealthy and typified the best of the upper middle class, with its cultural and social aspirations. In 1912, while she was still a child, the family moved to Vienna where she lived for several years.

Her father owned a textile factory. Her mother was a scholar, an early feminist, and actively involved in Austro-Hungarian politics. From a very early age, Eva showed an interest in art and began painting while still a teenager.

Following World War I, the textile factory had to be sold and the family returned to Budapest. In 1923, at the age of 16, Eva entered the Royal Academy of Fine Arts there, with the goal of becoming a painter. However, her father's business dealings had not been as successful during these years as they had previously been and this may have influenced her decision to withdraw after only three semesters. It became her plan to learn a craft instead, something that would allow her to live simply but with the freedom to paint. Her aunt had a collection of Hungarian peasant pottery which Eva had admired and so, even though she had never made any pottery herself, she decided to become a ceramist. At her mother's urging and for fear of becoming only a dilettante at the craft, she became an apprentice in a pottery shop, performing all of the same duties that the other, traditionally all male apprentices did.

In March, 1925, when she was only 18½, she began her own pottery, using a hothouse on the family property as her studio. She exhibited at a local trade fair and received recognition as the first female journeyman potter. It is interesting to note as a sign of the times that friends were horrified not so much at the idea of her having adopted a career as they were that she was seen sitting unchaperoned with a male friend at the trade show.

In 1926, the Hungarian government invited her to send some pieces to the country's display at the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial celebration, where she received an honorable mention.

She also began designing for the Kispester Pottery at about this time. This was a new company which had just formed in Budapest and some of her work for them was exported to the United States. They created a separate art department for her and the pieces she designed for them had the fanciful and whimsical air that was to characterize so much of her later work. She also continued to espouse her own independence by spending the entire week at the factory, sometimes even sleeping there, which was considered very bold for a young lady of her times. She worked for them for less than a year, however, establishing the trend that was to dominate her professional life of moving rapidly from one firm to another, usually on a freelance basis. In the case of Kispester, however, her departure occurred when the bank which controlled the company ordered the art department closed because the workmen were spending too much time on her designs and not enough on the main product of the company, which was sanitary porcelain such as sinks and toilets.

From 1927 to 1928, she spent six months working for Hansa Kunsteramik in Hamburg and then, in the fall of the latter year, was appointed ceramic designer for Schramberger Majolika Fabrik in the Black Forest. Of some interest to Heisey collectors is her recollection of adapting a design by the French ceramist, Jean Luce, for use at

Schramberg. It was one of Jean Luce's earthenware plates that inspired Heisey's New Era pattern just a few years later.

As might be gathered by this association of her name with Luce's and thus, indirectly, with Heisey's New Era, much of her work at this time was in the style now known as art deco. Summarizing an article she wrote for a German periodical in 1932, Martin Eidelberg states that she felt "the aim of the modern movement was the purification of taste through the use of geometric forms, noble materials, and self-imposed limitations." She was not in accord, however, with "soul-less" modernism. "Charm and provocative delight are essential aspects of her designs" from this period, which can be described as a "combination of rational planning and whimsey." An examination of the pieces she created for Heisey nearly three decades later will show this same rational approach towards the utilitarian requirements of the pieces coupled with the sense of whimsey which could almost be said to have been her trademark over the years.

In 1930, she moved to Berlin and began designing for Christian Carstens Kommerz, a combine of several German factories. She found the intellectual climate of Berlin very stimulating, and became friends with many young scientists, artists and writers, including Arthur Koestler.

In January, 1932, there was an even greater change in her life. She left Berlin at this time to go to the Soviet Union, at first merely to visit out of curiosity about what she perceived as a noble social experiment, but ultimately to stay for nearly six years. At this period, the Soviets were very receptive to foreign experts whose abilities could be utilized to further the programs of the Five Year Plan. She worked at Lomonosov, the former Imperial Porcelain factory in Leningrad, and at the Dulevo factory near Moscow, which was reputedly the largest ceramic manufacturer in the world.

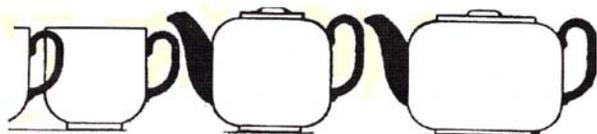
The emphasis in the Soviet Union was on standardization and one of her first assignments was to create a set of dinnerware that could be used throughout the entire country. However, no sooner had she completed that project than the government began to issue directives reversing its position on standardization and so these designs did not go into full production. It is interesting to note that her work at this time took on an almost classical simplicity, foreshadowing much of the work she was to do during her American years.

In addition to many other projects, she also departed from her previous work by doing designs for porcelain electric fixtures and glass bottles for the perfume industry. This latter was her first experience with glassware design, predating by many years her rather brief later association with this field.

That her work was highly honored by the Soviets is indicated by their naming her Art Director of the China and Glass Industry of the Russian Republic. In September, 1937, however, Soviet attitudes changed drastically and foreign experts suddenly became no longer as welcome as they had been. She was removed from her position and left the country shortly thereafter.

Her next stop was Vienna, where she joined Hans Zeisel, a young lawyer and sociologist she had previously met in Berlin and whom she planned to marry. She made arrangements to return to designing dinnerware for the Kispester factory in Budapest, but once again political occurrences were to interfere. In this instance, her plans were cancelled by the rise to power of the Nazis. On March 12, 1938, the day that German troops invaded Austria, she left the country on the only train allowed to cross the Swiss border. She then sought temporary refuge in England. Her mother was briefly detained by the Gestapo and it was only with great difficulty that she eventually also managed to obtain a visa for England. It was there that Eva and Hans Zeisel were finally married.

For permanent residency, however, they followed the example of so many other Europeans uprooted by the threat of war and sailed for the United States to join Eva's younger brother who was already living there. Thus, in October, 1938, they arrived in New York where she soon began the career which was to truly bring her international fame.



32. Zeisel, Design for standardized tea service (Lomonosov), c. 1933.

PART 2: EVA ZEISEL IN THE UNITED STATES

Although largely unknown in this country, it was not long after her arrival in America in 1938 that Eva Zeisel began what was to become a highly successful career here. She designed a line of giftware for the Bay Ridge Specialty Company in Trenton, New Jersey, which was promoted as American Art China/Eva Zeisel. The line included vases, bowls and covered boxes, with some of the pieces repeating shapes she had originally created for Schramberg in Germany.

In September 1939, she began teaching ceramic design at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, a relationship that would continue for fifteen years. (In fact, she remained on the faculty at Pratt until just a few months before she began her association with Heisey and only left reluctantly when her husband accepted a professorship at the University of Chicago. After little more than a year, however, she reopened her studio in New York and began to divide her time between the two cities.)

In 1942, she was commissioned to design a dinnerware service for Sears, Roebuck & Co. The result, a very modern line, was called Stratoware. Martin Eidelberg cites this set as representative of Eva Zeisel's pragmatism. "Cups, for example, had downswept handles and were designed to be easily stacked to save storage space. The pitcher handles were molded as part of the vessel to decrease the chance of breakage and reduce cost." It can be assumed that this same careful study both of the uses of the pieces and the exigencies of manufacturing techniques were an important part of her later designs for Heisey.

Unfortunately, because of wartime restrictions, Stratoware had to be discontinued after only a little more than a year and it wasn't until 1946 that Mrs. Zeisel finally achieved national success. This came as a result of the commission of a dinner service by a company which had been recently formed in New Castle, Pennsylvania. The Castleton China Company had been attempting to establish both prestige and publicity for themselves by using artists like Salvador Dali and Thomas Hart Benton to create decorations for their wares. The commission was made to Mrs. Zeisel through the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and it was there, in April, 1946, that her new Museum service was first shown. The shapes were all classically simple, with a use of oblongs and curvilinear forms. She described the change in style herself as a departure from the "compass and ruler era" to a new "lyrical" style with what she termed a "poetry of communicative line." The service was very well received and garnered much interest, establishing her reputation.

Her next commission was for the Red Wing Pottery in Minnesota. Released in the spring of 1947, the new line was called Town and Country, the same name used seven years later for Heisey's No. 1637A pattern. The Red Wing set features unusual, often humorous shapes, whereas the later Heisey pieces are much more prosaic and less adventurous. Perhaps typical of the Red Wing pieces are the salt and pepper shakers, which look just like the "Shmoo" from Al Capp's *L'il Abner*. (It should be pointed out though, that Eva Zeisel designed Town and Country some years before Capp created the Shmoo.)

TOWN AND COUNTRY was the name of a popular magazine and was chosen for the Red Wing set to emphasize its intended use for casual dining. Here there is some comparison with the later Heisey pattern. As Martin Eidelberg describes the pottery pieces, "In her designs Zeisel sought a sturdiness appropriate for informal meals." The same words could be used with equal appropriateness in talking about the No. 1637A line.

It's probably also important (and pertinent) to point out the differences between the Museum service and the Red Wing set, even though they were both introduced within a year of one another. Again to quote Eidelberg, "Zeisel responded in accord with the needs of each client. Thus, although there are certain basic chains of ideas and forms throughout her oeuvre, her designs show a great diversity--more so, perhaps, than if she had worked for one manufacturer with a single corporate image." Thus, while her work for Heisey can certainly be related to both her earlier and later creative activities, it is nevertheless unique in a number of aspects associated both with the medium involved (glassware) and the factory's specific needs in 1953 (to create an "up-to-date" image).

Many other commissions followed, including another line for Sears, Roebuck (for its Mexican market) and sets for the United Glass and China Company of New Orleans, Butler Brothers of Chicago, Charm House of New York, and the Riverside Ceramic Company in Los Angeles. She also designed for other industries, creating stainless steel vessels with plastic handles for General Mills, aluminum picture frames, mailboxes, syrup dispensers, plastic serving dishes, and other utilitarian objects. Harking back to her years in Moscow, she designed perfume bottles for Charles of the Ritz and Richard Hudnut.

Her most popular dinnerware service was designed in 1950 and released in January, 1951. Sold as Hallcraft/Tomorrow's Classic, it was made by the Hall China Company of East Liverpool, Ohio, who had previously been best known for their decorated tea pots, and distributed by the Midhurst China Company. This was the first tableware to be made by Hall for retail distribution and ads in the trade journals touted it as "America's fastest selling modern dinnerware." Combining the classicism of her Museum service with the shapes utilized in Red Wing's Town and Country set (but with the whimsy restrained) I find much more resemblance between this set and Roundelay than is apparent in any of the other chinaware designed by Mrs. Zeisel. Both sets rely on very round shapes with accentuated curves; the pitchers, although treated differently at the necks, are especially closely related.

Tomorrow's Classic also led to Eva Zeisel's first major association with the glassware industry, when she was called upon to create a line of complementary drinking glasses in 1952. We'll take a closer look at this line, which was called Silhouette and was made by Bryce Brothers, in the concluding part of this article next month.

Jumping ahead in the chronology to 1954, around the same time that Mrs. Zeisel was working for Heisey, it appears that she was also embarked on a commission for the Western Stoneware Company of Monmouth, Illinois. Working in stoneware, she developed nearly 50 new shapes, including 15 new patterns. According to the CROCKERY & GLASS JOURNAL, these ranged from "a basic dinnerware line with ...serving pieces in classically quiet and simple shapes" to one of her most collectible lines, which the JOURNAL described as a "surprise," employing charming and "humorous bird shapes." It may not be coincidental that the cuttings she designed for Roundelay at around this same time also utilized stylized themes from nature, although her fish cutting is more austere and does not radiate the humor so apparent in the Western Stoneware pieces. (The molds for this set were also used in 1957 by the Hollydale Pottery in California and, in 1963, the line was taken over by Richards Morgenthau with pieces produced by the Nikko Toki Company of Japan.)

Significantly, this was a continuation of a trend in her design which had been cited in THE JEWELER'S CIRCULAR KEYSTONE in December, 1951: "Speaking of her work, Mrs. Zeisel...believes that dinnerware should again be shown in open breakfronts and glassed credenzas, instead of being tucked away as purely utilitarian objects." This was in remembrance of the way pottery pieces had been displayed as decorative accents in the Hungary of her youth and it is not unlikely that she approached the design of glassware (particularly in the case of Roundelay) in this same spirit.

In mid-1956, what was to be one of her last major American lines was released, again by the Hall China Company. The pattern was Hallcraft/Century. She also designed a line around this time which combined pottery with rosewood and brass for Salisbury Artisans in Connecticut. However, by the mid-1950's, the American ceramic industry was suffering a decline very similar to that being undergone by the glass industry and most of her work over the next 10 years was done abroad. In 1957 she created a best-selling pattern for Philip Rosenthal in Bavaria which was marketed as "Eva." She then worked in the Mancicoli pottery near Florence.

Back in the United States, she taught industrial design at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1959 to 1960.

In 1963 she traveled to Japan, where she worked for several months at the Noritake factory, though none of her designs were placed in production. At the same time, her last major American ceramic commission was made for the Hyalen Porcelain Company of Hickory, North Carolina.

By the mid-1960's, she had all but retired as a designer, devoting her time instead to an interest in American history and only rarely working in her original field. In 1983, an exhibition of her work was organized by Le Chateau Dufresne (a museum of decorative arts in Montreal) and the Smithsonian, which eventually traveled to a number of museums in the United States. The inception of this exhibition, in which Mrs. Zeisel was closely involved, also served as a catalyst for the designer as well. Although she was then in her mid-seventies, she went back to Hungary, purposefully interested in returning to her roots in design. There, she created a number of pieces for the Zsolnay factory, famous for its use of iridescent glazes. And then, truly bringing her career full circle, she was invited to work in the Kisperster Pottery -- the same factory she had done her first professional work for nearly sixty years before and to which she had planned to go back in 1938 before being forced to leave Austria by the Nazis.

In his preface to the catalogue for the exhibition mentioned above, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., summed up her career: "Thinking back to Eva Zeisel's work as it appeared on the scene some forty years ago, one remembers the sense of liberation she evoked.... Vital rhythms and decisive accents have kept her designs memorable over the years.... The importance of Eva Zeisel's work is more than historic, it is pertinent to the condition of design today."

(To conclude next month with a look at Eva Zeisel's glassware designs.)

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Eva Zeisel's TOMORROW'S CLASSIC pattern by HALLCRAFT

Compare the shape of this pitcher with the pitcher she designed for Heisey's Roundelay pattern.

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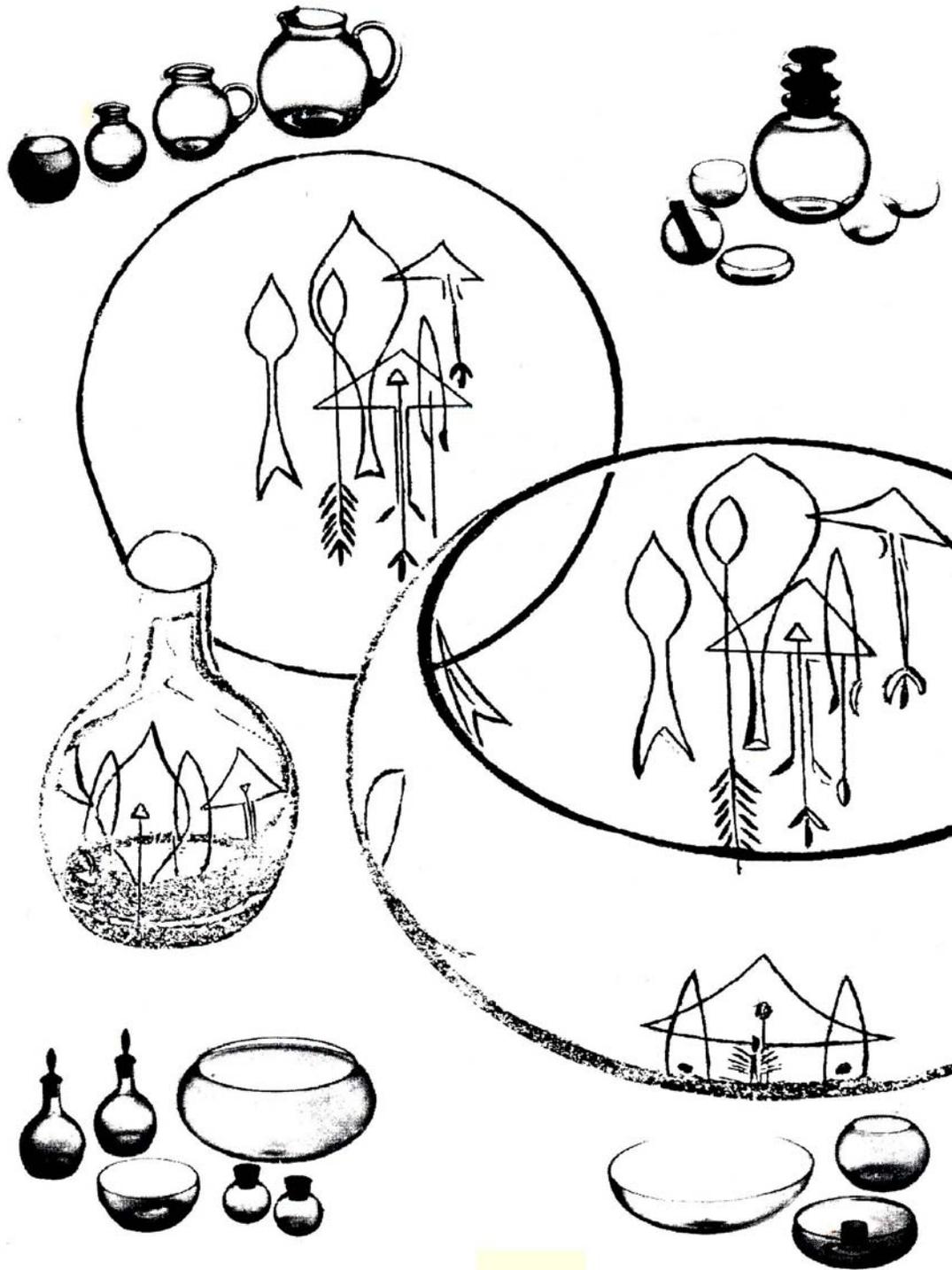
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This is 6009A Roundelay, designed by Eva Zeisel. Most of these items were made in Dawn. The cocktail shaker evolved from a ball vase. Most of the cuttings on this pattern are very modern, such as these pictures. The pattern was never cataloged but it did appear in a price list sent to the salesmen and these are original Heisey pictures.



PART 3: GLASSWARE DESIGNS

As mentioned in the previous installments of this article, Eva Zeisel's association with glassware design actually goes back to the 1930's, during her stay in the Soviet Union, when she designed perfume bottles and was named art director of the China and Glass Industry of the Russian Republic. This experience was capitalized on in the late 1940's in this country, when she was once again called upon to design containers for perfume, but this time for such illustrious clients as Charles of the Ritz and Richard Hudnut.

It wasn't until 1952, however, that she created her first real line of glassware and, not surprisingly, this was an offshoot of one of her best known ceramic commissions. An announcement appeared in the August, 1952, issue of THE JEWELERS' CIRCULAR-KEYSTONE stating that Sun-Glo Studios of New York had "entertained the press just prior to the New York China and Glass Show to introduce its new line of 'Silhouette' glassware designed by Eva Zeisel. The glassware, in both color and shape, was created to coordinate with the Hallcraft Dinnerware line which Mrs. Zeisel also designed and which was introduced at the Pittsburgh Show last January by the Midhurst China Co." This refers, of course, to the Tomorrow's Classic line, made by the Hall China Company of East Liverpool and distributed by Midhurst, which was probably her most popular set and which was being advertised as "America's fastest selling modern dinnerware."

There is no additional information available on Sun-Glo Studios but, in fact, the Silhouette line was actually made by Bryce Brothers in Mount Pleasant, PA. (one of the factories now owned and operated by Lenox). Colors available were amber, amethyst, smoke brown, chartreuse, green, blue, and clear, all "flowing from a luminous shadow at the top to a deep-gleaming base," according to the October, 1952 issue of INTERIORS. Like Tomorrow's Classic, Silhouette employed slightly bulbous shapes (curved to fit the hollow of the hand) with flared rims and a much more pronounced foot than used on the ceramic pieces. The pieces were meant "to combine the traditional grace of stemware with the functional simplicity of the tumbler."



Zeisel. Silhouette glassware (Bryce Brothers), c. 1952.



Prestige glasses

Then, in December, 1953, an advertisement appeared on the back cover of the CROCKERY AND GLASS JOURNAL announcing that Mrs. Zeisel had been appointed as Art Director for A. H. Heisey. It must be remembered that, by 1953, Heisey was already suffering from the economic difficulties that would eventually lead to the factory's closing four years later and it is clear, from the advertising copy, that they were aware of the need to find new markets if they were to survive. "The entire Heisey organization is buzzing with fresh, sparkling ideas . . . designed to set a series of brand new trends in the handmade glass industry . . . Be sure to visit the Heisey exhibit at the January Pittsburgh show. There you will see unveiled for the very first time several new groups of glassware by Eva Zeisel. This revolutionary exhibit will indicate to you Heisey's competitive design plans for the future."

That this was meant to be a major change in direction for Heisey was underscored by a quotation from Eva Zeisel herself which was used in the ad: "Right now, exciting things are going on at Heisey. Whole new horizons are opening up ... many original concepts in glass design and production are being inaugurated. Such a re-birth in a respected, well-established firm is bound to stimulate sales ... bound to capture new markets."

The first of the new lines was No. 6009A Roundelay and it was definitely an innovation for the company. (The “A” designation at the end of the pattern number seems to have been used to differentiate Eva Zeisel’s designs from the rest of Heisey’s production.) The line is entirely blown, consisting of 16 pieces. All of the pieces are “useful” items, except for the bud vase (which was made from the oil bottle) and a console set - but, of course, even these latter pieces are intended for use on the table, thus fulfilling Mrs. Zeisel’s oft stated goal of designing items which are both functional and decorative. Although some pieces have been seen in crystal, the sole price list for Roundelay offers them in Dawn only. In fact, this color was introduced at the same time as Roundelay and it is likely that both the color and the new line were simultaneously developed to complement one another (and to entice the market for “Scandinavian Modern” which was so popular in the 1950’s). Roundelay, with its very plain, round shapes was given a certain allure by the color, which would naturally tend to be a lighter grey in the thinner portions (the rounded sides) and closer to charcoal at the rims or bases. Thus the color becomes integral to the decorator’s intention.

(It should be mentioned that it was not unusual for Eva Zeisel to immerse herself in all aspects of production when designing a new line. As CHINA, GLASS AND DECORATIVE ACCESSORIES had written about her back in May, 1946, “At all times Mrs. Zeisel works closely with the factory in every aspect of producing the samples, for she believes that only by supervising every phase of production and not allowing anyone at the factory to adapt and change the drawings or sketches, can one achieve results that satisfy the designer, as well as convey his idea exactly ... with the designer controlling the whole production process down to the last 1/16 of an inch.”)

She was also responsible for the design of a series of very modern cuttings to be used on Roundelay. I say “modern” advisedly, however, because her Fish cutting could almost have been taken from a prehistoric cave painting, it is so simple and yet evocative. Although more austere than some of her previous “natural” designs in ceramic, it nevertheless suggests the same light touch and enjoyment of whimsey that inspired them.

That Roundelay was not the change in image that Heisey required is now well known to the collector today, for whom pieces are virtually impossible to find. It was introduced in January, 1954, but can’t have been in production for more than a couple of months at most, never making it into a catalog. A second line of tumblers which also came out in January, No. 6007A, seems to have met with even less success. It was previously totally unknown; the molds are now in the HCA’s possession (for a juice, a sherbet, a 12 oz tumbler and a 15 oz iced tea) but whether this will eventually enable us to identify any actual pieces from the line is problematic.

In fact, although there was still another pattern designed by Eva Zeisel introduced in 1954, it is pretty likely that her employment with the firm had already been terminated by sometime after March and did not actually last much longer than a few months altogether.

No. 1637A Town and Country, like Roundelay, was probably created primarily for production in Dawn. A pressed line, the pieces are much heavier and they are also relatively plain. However, a slight optic in the glass, similar to that used in the Saturn pattern, creates the same illusion of a variance in the color, with lighter “rings” just visible in the glass. Town and Country was more successful and, in fact, won a “Good Design” award in 1955. The pattern then remained in production until the factory closed. Originally consisting of twelve items (all drinking or serving pieces), half of the line was still being offered in 1956 and Imperial reissued the salad set, bowl and 16” plate up until the early 1960’s.

Although Eva Zeisel had earlier made a pattern with the same name for Red Wing Pottery in Minnesota, it has no relationship to the later Town and Country, which is much more solid and does not demonstrate the tendency towards the grotesque displayed by the Red Wing set.

Although her association with Heisey must have ended early in 1954, this was not her last experience with the glass industry. Later that same year, she designed a line of tumblers for the Federal Glass Company in Columbus, one of the largest manufacturers of machine-made glass. Called Prestige, this line is once again characterized by its simplicity, with a false sham providing “the illusion of a very heavy bottom providing the glasses with extraordinary reflections,” in Mrs. Zeisel’s own words. A second line, called Stockholm, was also issued by Federal several years later.

And that completes the story of Eva Zeisel and her influence on American glassware - a footnote in the story of her adventurous and highly acclaimed life.

These are original Heisey Co. photos. The description is also original. Note especially that Heisey indicated that the tops to the oils and salts were subject to change.

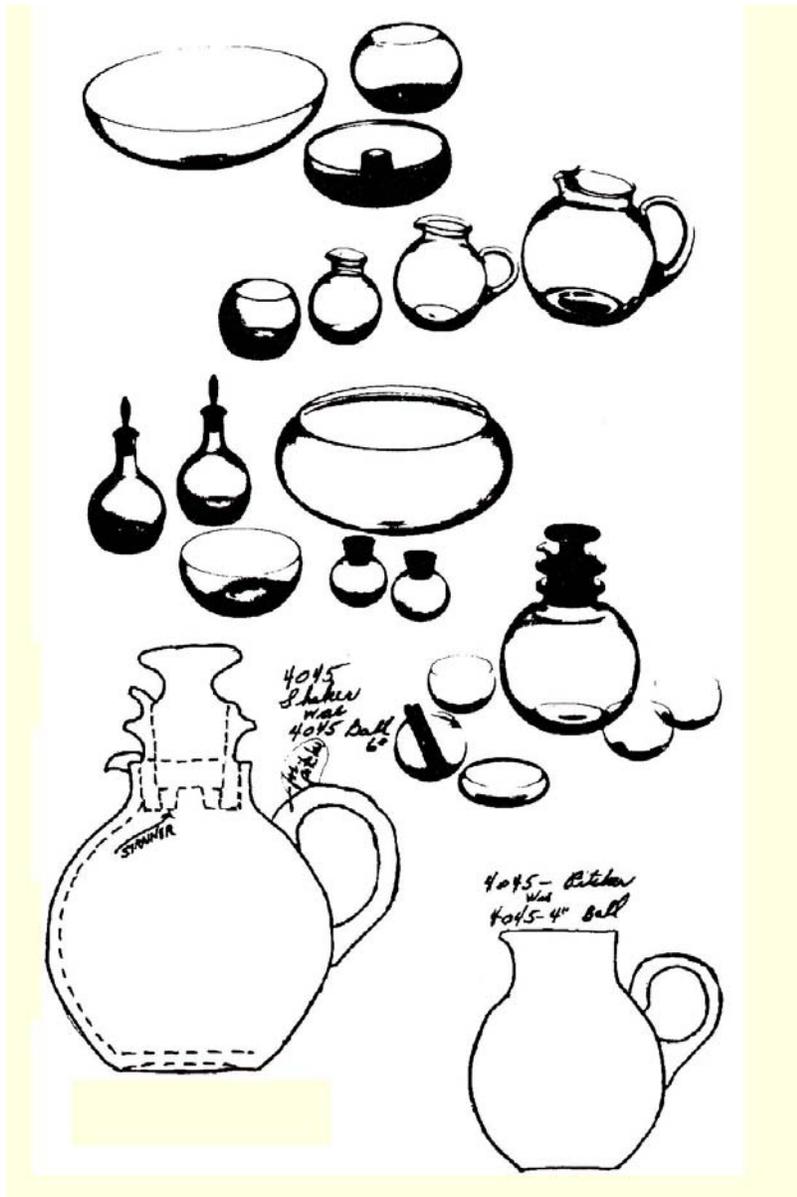
ROUNDELAY pattern in "Dawn" glass by Eva Zeisel.

TOP LEFT: Gardenia Bowl, Mayonnaise and Candle Centerpiece.

TOP RIGHT: Sugar, Creams, 16 oz. Pitcher and 54 oz. Ice Lip Jug.

LOWER LEFT: Large and Individual Salad Bowls; Oil Bottles; Salt and Pepper. Oil and Salt tops subject to change.

LOWER RIGHT: 54 oz. Cocktail Shaker, Cocktail Glasses, Cigarette Holder and Ash Tray.



Tracings from original Heisey drawings. These eventually became part of Roundelay.