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“Jenev Design Studios—we thought it sounded very European.” —Jerry



OPPOSITE Sensitive forms combined with soft, matte glazes were the hallmark of Jenev ceramics. Jerry's black-and-white palette and 12½-inch high vase feel fresh 60 years after it was made.

2. JEROME + EVELYN = JENEV

In 1953, a year after the Ackermans moved to California, they rented a small industrial space in West Los Angeles for \$66 a month, and launched their first business, Jenev Design Studio. Short on cash but long on talent, ingenuity, and youthful optimism, the couple put into practice their belief that those qualities, along with enthusiasm and hard work, would enable them to succeed. On a limited budget, the Ackermans outfitted the studio with the necessary equipment, including a large kiln. Initially, Jerry tried hand-thrown ceramics, but the couple soon realized they could not survive solely by making one-of-a-kind pieces. Jerry revived the molded, slip-cast techniques he had learned at Alfred University. Slip-casting is a method in which liquid clay (slip) is poured into a plaster mold and then released when firm enough to handle, enabling limited production of the same form. Jerry spent the first year creating shapes, making molds, perfecting production techniques, developing glazes and clay bodies, and establishing decorative treatments. Some pieces were glazed in minimalist matte-finish black and white, others in shades of ochre and rust, while still others included Jerry's decorations. Evelyn decorated selected pieces in one of two techniques: *sgraffito* or *Mishima*. The former involves incising through layers of slip on an unfired clay body to produce an outline drawing—in Evelyn's case, abstracted figures. The latter involves incising a design and filling it with contrasting colored clay or slip, then covering it with a transparent glaze.

Evelyn, inspired by an exhibition of mosaics the couple saw in San Francisco, began experimenting with that technique, using both glass and porcelain tiles to equal effect. Initially she did both the design and execution of tabletops and framed wall pieces. Eventually, however, to keep up with the demand, they established a small atelier in Mexico to produce the mosaics to Evelyn's specifications. As with many of their products, the mosaics were scaled to work in both traditional and modern homes and offices, although some notable exceptions included a series of architect-commissioned exterior building decorations. The first was for the two-storey façade of an apartment building on Kiowa Avenue in West Los Angeles.

The Jenev years were marked by experimentation with varied materials and diverse techniques. In yet another outlet for Evelyn's creativity, she began designing charming silk-screened designs on fabric and window-shade material, which were hand-printed by a professional silk-screener. Like the mosaics, the silk-screened fabrics were well-suited for residential applications. Intent on broadening their distinctive product line, Jerry executed his and Evelyn's designs in sand-cast aluminum and cast cement, and experimented with carved wood.

Jerry also took on the responsibility for the direct marketing of their products. With his ready wit and outgoing personality, he marketed Jenev products to well-known retailers such as W. & J. Sloane, Barker Brothers, and J.L. Hudson, as well as to prestigious showrooms like Carroll Sager Associates and Paul McCobb Directional Furniture. Jerry's first sale was to Jules Seltzer, owner of a prominent modernist furniture showroom in Los Angeles.

At the same time, the Ackermans began receiving commissions from designers and architects. Jenev products quickly became popular, and brought success and visibility to the Design Studio. Additionally, a selection of Jenev ceramics and mosaics received the distinction of being included in many significant ceramic and design exhibitions, and were featured in such publications as the *Los Angeles Times Home* magazine and *House Beautiful*. By its third year, the Jenev Design Studio was a viable and successful endeavor, thanks to the talent and hard work of its founders. The next step in the business plan was expansion and relocation nearer to the flourishing Los Angeles design district. —Jo Lauria and Dale Carolyn Gluckman



OPPOSITE The Ackermans' accomplishment of being included in all the California Design shows is chronicled in the series of catalogs. Piled up on a George Nelson bench Jerry and Evelyn purchased at Herman Miller when they were first married, the catalogs reflect the growth of the shows over the years.

3. CALIFORNIA DESIGN EXHIBITIONS

The story of California Modernism begins with World War II and the westward migration of Americans searching for jobs in wartime industries. People continued to settle in California after the war, attracted by economic opportunity and the mild climate. Furnishing industries, design firms, and craft studios arose, stimulated by the post-war housing boom. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, the designer-craftsmen of the Golden State were at the center of innovation and individual expression in American applied arts. During this period the California Design program was initiated, to showcase groundbreaking works that became the hallmark of California Modernism, reflecting a revival of craft and the adaptation of industrial technology to artistic use.

Jerry and Evelyn Ackerman were pioneers in this movement and an integral part of the creative energy of the era. Opening their Los Angeles design studio in 1953, the couple played a central role in shaping a distinctive California decorative style—one often characterized by the use of natural materials, textural contrasts, saturated colors, and an experimental approach to form. Their attractive and well-made objects for the home reflected the principles of modern design as defined by the philosophy of the Bauhaus (the influential German art and design school that flourished from 1919 to 1933). The Ackermans built on the Bauhaus belief that the “applied” and “fine” arts were equally important and vital. They experimented with adapting new methods of production that combined handwork with semi-industrial processes, making their work more affordable for “young couples just like us,” as they often said. Over the course of their professional careers, they integrated their knowledge of fine art, craft, and folk art to create a body of iconic work that has become emblematic of the California modernist aesthetic. Under the leadership of arts visionary Eudora M. Moore (1918–2013), the California Design series helped launch numerous artists' careers and was responsible for putting California on the map as a trendsetter in craft, design, and popular culture. The first annual California Design exhibition was initiated in the winter of 1954–1955 by the Pasadena Art Museum as a West Coast counterpart to New York's Museum of Modern Art's *Good Design* exhibitions. This was followed by annual exhibitions from 1956 to 1962, three triennials, in 1965, 1968, and 1971, and California Design '76: A Bicentennial Celebration. The first seven shows displayed a broad selection of home furnishings, decorative accessories, and household consumer goods. Beginning with the eighth California Design exhibition in 1962, a jury system was established that continued through to the final exhibition in 1971. The later shows expanded both in quantity and scope to include prototypes and one-of-a-kind experimental objects. These exhibitions and their accompanying booklets or catalogues were testaments to Moore's belief that California was “an incubator for contemporary design.” Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman can claim the rare distinction of being accepted into every California Design exhibition—with the inclusion of over 50 works spanning multiple categories—underscoring their importance as designer-craftsmen in mid-century California. —Jo Lauria and Dale Carolyn Gluckman



OPPOSITE Designed in 1958, the *Hot Summer Landscape* tapestry in a pink, orange, and red palette, was a striking composition of biomorphic forms. The many tapestries Evelyn and Jerry produced over the years held to their credo of creating “handcrafted works of art of distinctive design, warmth, and texture.”

4. THE ERA OF ERA

In late 1956, Jerry reconnected with Sherrill Broudy, an old school friend from Detroit. Broudy, a designer, was working with the Los Angeles architectural firm of Victor Gruen. A commercial partnership was formed and Jenev Design Studios became ERA Industries (in 1963, Industries was changed to Industries).

The partnership, though short-lived, encouraged the Ackermans to expand their repertoire of designs. Evelyn became the team’s primary designer, with Jerry taking charge of production and marketing. While traveling, Broudy helped make contacts. Utilizing an innovative combination of traditional techniques and modern production methods, the Ackermans became known for their diversity—designing decorative accessories, hardware, and architectural elements in fiber, wood, mosaic and metal that were distributed nationally.

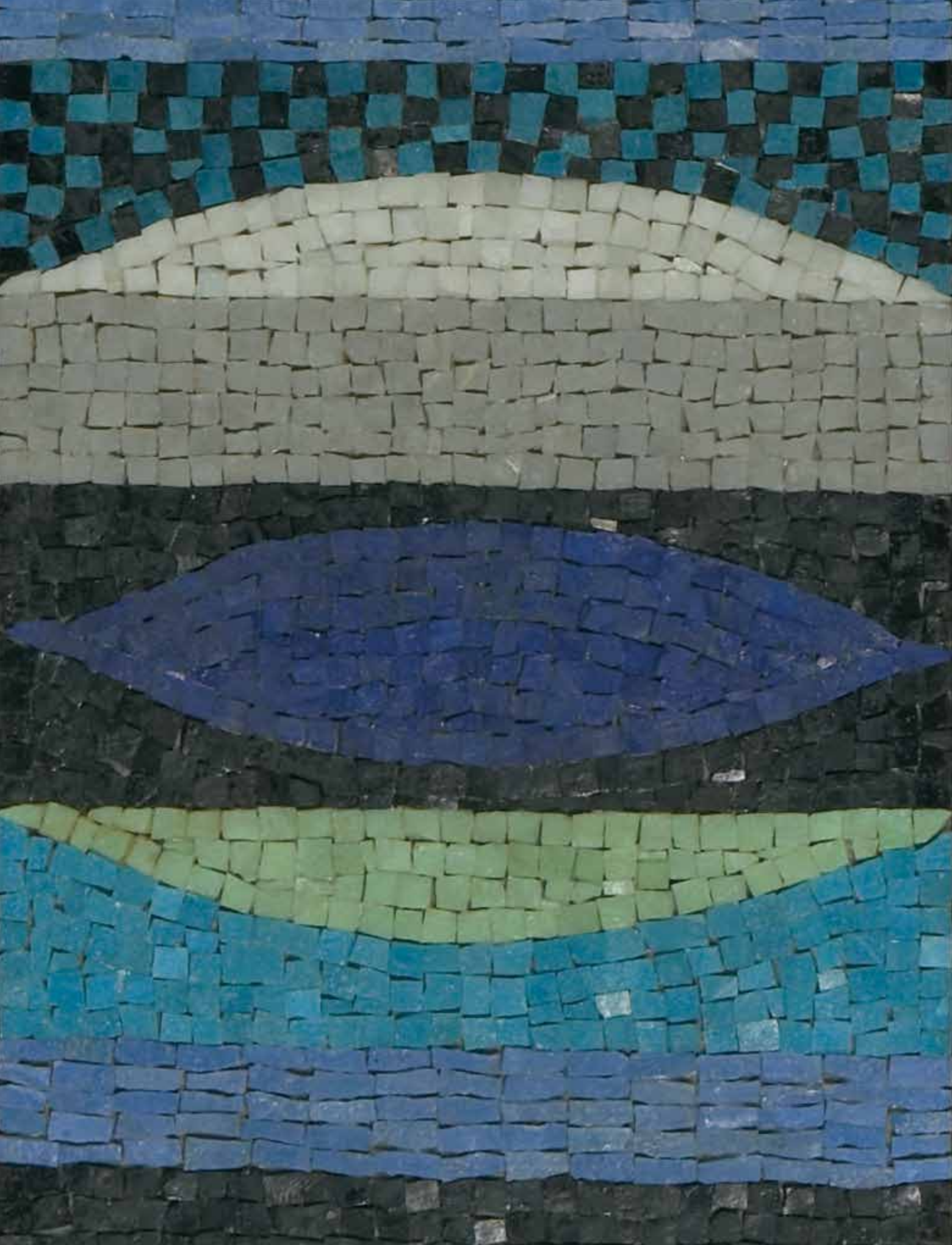
Contributing to the success of ERA Industries was Evelyn’s ability to create in a wide range of styles, from geometric minimalism to biomorphic abstraction to whimsical stylization. Evelyn had a sophisticated eye for line, color, and form, and the rare ability to design across a range of materials, and to create works of vastly different scale, from small woven hangings to large architectural mosaics. In addition, many of their colorful textiles and mosaics were made in cool and warm color combinations to work with different interior palettes and thus appeal to a wider client base.

It was during the ERA years that the Ackermans realized they could no longer make all the pieces themselves and meet market demand, so they explored ways to create their handcrafted items in small workshops. Their interest in, and respect for, traditional craft techniques eventually led them to ethically utilize the skills of craftsmen in Greece, India, Italy, Japan, and Mexico. This allowed the couple to create limited production runs in small artisan workshops, thereby enabling them to survive economically while keeping their prices affordable.

At the same time, in order to augment their own design lines, the Ackermans decided to showcase the work of selected craftsmen that met their high standards. They imported furniture, textiles, lighting, hardware, and other handcrafted or limited production items from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Selling to the contract furnishings, interior design, and architectural markets across the country, the Ackermans developed longstanding relationships with well-known contemporary firms such as Carroll Sagar, Van Keppel-Green, and Curt Wagner. Jerry developed sales representation in major markets while continuing to personally call on designers, architects, and stores. Beginning in the late 1950s, they exhibited in the Los Angeles Gift Shows and other trade shows.

Los Angeles was a major center of modernist design and, as the housing market exploded, the demand for well-designed home furnishings grew. The *Los Angeles Times Home* magazine referred to its residents as the “design-intoxicated postwar generation.” In 1959 the Ackermans decided it was time to be more visible by opening their first showroom for the architecture and design trade, located on Melrose Avenue and San Vicente boulevards, across from the future location of the Pacific Design Center. When they outgrew their showroom on Melrose in 1964, they moved to larger quarters a few blocks away on Beverly Boulevard, across from the Herman Miller showroom, and on the same block as Jules Seltzer. This location, in the heart of the design community, offered premier exposure and increased opportunities for interaction with architects and interior designers.

In 1979 the Ackermans, with Forms+Surfaces, moved to what would be their last showroom—in the Pacific Design Center. Jerry and Evelyn Ackerman joined their complementary talents in their collaborative venture. Their keen awareness of the market and ability to keep things fresh by introducing new designs on a regular basis resulted in a prolific output of products that embodied their modernist artistic sensibility. —Jo Lauria and Dale Carolyn Gluckman



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE The natural variation in the glass-tile colors gave the pieces in Evelyn's 12- by 60-inch *Ellipses* a depth and dimension that flat colors would have lacked. In a 1961 Palmer & Krisel model home in the Pacific Tract, San Diego, California, the mosaic was paired with a *Vista of California* table to complement the striking interior photographed by Julius Shulman.

As the Ackermans expanded from the Jenev line of mosaic tables and wall plaques, they found that the labor-intensive nature of the work necessitated establishing a workshop in Mexico to increase production. Glass and porcelain tiles were hand-cut to fit the individual designs. As with the textiles, Evelyn would send a full-size drawing with samples of the tile colors. The design was then transferred onto a Masonite backing and the tile glued onto it. Once finished, each piece was framed. After a decade, the Ackermans discontinued production of the mosaics when they discovered that others were copying their popular designs. —J.L. and D.C.G.



LEFT AND OPPOSITE Evelyn married a sophisticated sense of design with whimsy, creating pieces that were playful but not frivolous. The height of the loops was varied in the hand-hooked 1962 *Garden*, left, and the 1964 *Rain*, opposite, wallhangings that each measured 23 by 32-inches. The variation of cut loops and longer loops against the tight loop of the background added tactile dimensionality.

OVERLEAF Among the first hookings executed in Japan, the 1959 *Girl with Birdcage* and *Girl with Flowers*, each measuring 16 by 48-inches, reflected one of Evelyn's recurring motifs: girls holding flowers, birds, or musical instruments. These popular designs were sold through furniture, design, and department stores such as Barker Brothers, Leslie's, J.L. Hudson, Macy's, and Neiman-Marcus.

Evelyn's interest in textiles began at the University of Michigan, where she had taken a weaving class in 1941 and fell in love with the tactile quality of handwoven fabric. In the late 1950s, the couple decided to introduce woven hangings as part of the ERA line, in addition to the silk-screens. They knew from experience that weaving was a slow process, so they needed a workshop that could produce Evelyn's designs. They found a group of skilled weavers outside of Mexico City who were producing traditional woven wool serapes and could adapt to the Ackermans' requirements. Evelyn's bold designs and bright colors were a departure for the weavers, but they embraced them and worked with ERA for many years.

To produce the all-wool handwoven tapestries, the weavers followed Evelyn's full-size drawings and detailed instructions color-keyed to yarn samples. The hand-dyed wool was woven on simple looms and a sample of each new design was sent for approval. Evelyn's first design in 1957, *Hot Bird*, was followed by many more over the next 20 years.

Continuing to explore new ways of executing her designs, Evelyn experimented with the hand-hooking technique in the late 1950s. This led to the production of area rugs, which ERA had hand-made in Osaka, Japan. Soon realizing that they were not equipped to compete in the overcrowded, and thus highly competitive, contemporary rug market, the Ackermans changed direction, moving to smaller wall hangings using the same technique. The size of the loop (long or short) and whether or not it was cut permitted variations in texture and depth. From the first designs, *Venetian Dusk*, *Sun and Lion*, and *Seed Pod*, these highly textural hangings were popular and proved to be the most successful line of products in ERA. Evelyn would continue to add new designs throughout the 1970s. —Jo Lauria and Dale Carolyn Gluckman



OPPOSITE Commissioned to create twelve 6- by 8-foot tapestries for the Litton Corporation, the Ackermans took a leap of faith and sent the designs to Greece, where skilled needlepointers worked in sections. The full-sized drawing hanging on the wall behind them guided every stitch.

RIGHT In 1957, architect Robert Mayer asked Jerry to design a freestanding sculpture to be set in a shallow pool for the Chandler's shoe store in Pasadena, California. The branches were drawn freeform, sand-cast, and assembled. Then, bird and flower forms were added.



Beginning in the mid-1950s, designers and architects frequently engaged the Ackermans to design and produce large-scale, one-of-a-kind special commissions in metal, mosaic, textiles, and wood. ERA's most complex and ambitious commission took place over two years, commencing in 1968. Evelyn served as the artist-in-charge of the production of 12 large-scale wall hangings commissioned by the interior design firm Saphier, Lerner, & Schindler. The 6 by 8-foot hangings on the theme of commerce were to hang in the newly constructed Litton Industries corporate offices in Beverly Hills. It took Evelyn ten months to develop the full-size drawings from postcard-sized sketches, each needlepoint square annotated with detailed specifications. The size required finding another textile source, and through the Greek craft project Their Majesties' Fund, the Ackermans found expert craftswomen. —J.L. and D.C.G.

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—Dan Chavkin and Lisa Thackaberry, Los Angeles, June 2014.

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