

## FEATURES

## 106 MOROCCAN MAJESTY

A remarkable 1930s art deco gem has been lovingly brought back to life  
JUDITH NASATIR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN M. HALL

## 114 SEASIDE CHIC

In Bal Harbour, Florida, the designer Frank de Biasi offers a sophisticated take on the tropics

BETH DUNLOP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MASSIMO LISTRI

## 118 CZECH AND BAROQUE

Bořek Šípek is revered in his home country—and beyond—for his wry, imaginative, and quite beautiful work  
NANCY FRICK BATTAGLIA

## 124 IN HAVANA: A MOMENT CAPTURED

The Pérez Farfante house was built to the high standards of the 1950s, reflecting both the International Style and Cuban taste

HERMES MALLEA

## 130 THE LAKE HOUSE

Robert Couturier filled this replica of an Austrian villa with important modern and contemporary pieces

CLAUDIA STEINBERG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BÄRBEL MIEBACH

## 136 THE EDGE OF LIGHT

Seattle architect James Cutler's design for a Sonoma County, California, house draws on the deep distinctions between the opaque and the transparent

J. MICHAEL WELTON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ART GRICE

## DEPARTMENTS

## 26 BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Why a cocktail shaker and tray designed by Kem Weber estimated at \$7,000 to \$9,000 sold for \$34,375

## 30 THE MARKET

Notes on the world of design, museum exhibitions, and art and design fairs

## 42 HISTORY LESSON

Sharon McHugh visits a little-known masterwork by Louis I. Kahn as it goes on the market for the first time

## 50 COLLECTOR'S CHOICE

The Parisian art dealer Eric Dupont discusses his love for modern French design with Daniella Ohad

## 60 DESIGN DESTINATION

Alvar Aalto was one of Finland's most important designers, but few know the full extent of his work. Raul Barraneche offers a tour of some highlights

## 68 TALES FROM THE FRONT

Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman, who have been producing an array of important modernist work since the 1950s, talk with Jo Lauria and Dale Carolyn Gluckman

## 76 UP CLOSE

Arlene Hirst catches up with Murray Moss, now ensconced in his new digs, and reflects on his role as a design arbiter and tastemaker—past, present, future

## 84 WORKS ON PAPER

Michael J. Lassell reviews recently issued books for lovers of design and architecture

## 86 IN PERSPECTIVE

The Miami-based architectural photographer Robin Hill set out to look at America's loved and scorned brutalist architecture through fresh eyes

## 92 GRADING SYSTEM

The Parisian design dealer Aline Chastel evaluates (and gives a report card to) six different lamps by Jean Royère

## 96 CURATOR'S EYE

From a Kodak Brownie camera to a chic dress ensemble, museum specialists discuss favorite modern-era holdings in their institutions

## 144 CURRENT THINKING

Fred A. Bernstein has been visiting the Hoover Dam for decades now, and he glories in both its function and form

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# An Affair of the Heart



Top to bottom: Jerome Ackerman stands next to Evelyn Ackerman in the light-filled studio they added to their Culver City, California, home in the 1960s.

The King panel, a rare experiment in stained glass of the early 1970s, reflects Evelyn's ability to use abstraction, tight composition, and a restricted color palette to create visual impact in a small piece. *Collection of the artists.*

Evelyn began designing mosaics in 1955 and executed the early ones, such as this Young Warrior wall panel, herself. Later the mosaics were executed for the Ackermans by a family of artisans in Mexico. *Collection of the artists.*

Vase with Female Figure of 1952 represents the couple's first artistic collaboration: Jerry threw the stoneware vessel and Evelyn executed the sgraffito decoration. *Collection of the artists.*

LOS ANGELES-BASED CURATORS AND CONSULTANTS **JO LAURIA** AND **DALE CAROLYN GLUCKMAN** REFLECT WITH JEROME AND EVELYN ACKERMAN ON THEIR ENDURING DESIGN COLLABORATION

AS CURATORIAL COLLEAGUES at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in the 1990s, Jo Lauria (in decorative arts) and Dale Carolyn Gluckman (in costumes and textiles) independently discovered and fell in love with the husband-and-wife designer-artist team of Evelyn and Jerome (Jerry) Ackerman and their work. Later Jo and Dale curated two retrospectives of the Ackermans' creations—*Masters of Mid-Century California Modernism: Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman* at the Mingei International Museum, San Diego (2009); and *A Marriage of Craft and Design: The Work of Evelyn and Jerome Ackerman* at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles (2011).

**Jo Lauria:** I was introduced to Jerry's talents through his studio pottery in the late 1990s when working on the exhibition *Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000*, but I soon realized Jerry was part of an accomplished and successful design team with Evelyn, his wife of over fifty years.

**Dale Carolyn Gluckman:** When my husband and I married, his mother gave us a small hooked rug with the initials "E.A." I had no idea who E.A. was. When I met Evelyn Ackerman many years later at LACMA, where she was a volunteer researcher on our eighteenth-century exhibition, the penny still didn't drop. We became fast friends, however, and eventually I met Jerry and learned of their design careers. Then I realized whose initials were on our rug: Evelyn Ackerman's.



After leaving LACMA to pursue their individual projects, Jo and Dale joined forces and their complementary specialist knowledge to organize a long overdue retrospective of the fifty-year design collaboration of the Ackermans.

**Jo:** We realized how under-recognized they were. We wanted to put them in the spotlight, make their work known to a wider population. The more we learned about their remarkable body of work, the more we realized how important they were to the development of California mid-century modernism.

The Ackermans played a central role in shaping a distinctive California decorative style—one characterized by the use of natural materials, textural contrasts, and saturated colors. Their attractive and well-made objects for the home reflected the principles of modern design as defined by the philosophy of the Bauhaus. They built on the Bauhaus belief that the "applied" and "fine" arts were equally important and vital. Over the course of their professional careers, they integrated their knowledge of fine art, craft, and folk art to create a body of work that has





Above left: Evelyn created the design and color palette for the California Poppies wall hanging and then sent a detailed drawing with color samples to artisans in Kashmir, India, who hand-stitched it, 1970. Later versions were hand-hooked in Japan.  
Collection of the artists.

Above right: The Ackermans have lived with the Cats mosaic table in their home ever since Evelyn designed and produced it in 1955.  
Collection of the artists.

The Fantasy Landscape mosaic was built in sections in the Ackermans' studio and installed on the side of an apartment building on Kiowa Street in Los Angeles in 1956. It is registered with the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles.

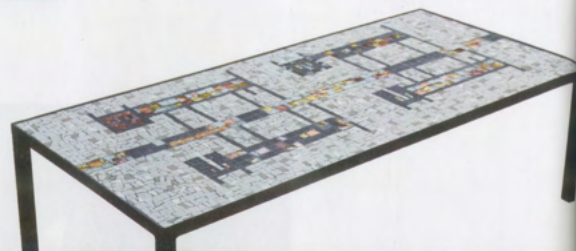
become a benchmark of the California mid-century aesthetic.

**Jerry Ackerman:** We believed in the Bauhaus philosophy of combining fine art, craft and industry to produce quality goods, striving to make things of which we could be proud. Utilizing our design and fine art backgrounds, our goal was to create affordable, commercially viable decorative accessories.

Evelyn Lipton (born in 1924) and Jerome Ackerman (born in 1920) lived six blocks apart in Detroit. They attended the same schools and both studied art, but they didn't know each other growing up. They met in 1948 and married the same year while continuing their studies at Wayne University (now Wayne State University) in Detroit. In 1949 the newlywed art students saw the exhibition *For Modern Living*—a survey of modern design organized by Alexander Girard—at the Detroit Institute of Arts. What they saw changed their lives.

**Jerry:** It opened our eyes to an exciting new way of thinking. There were examples of Eames furniture, V'soske carpets, Kurt Versen lighting. We walked through all that and just said, "Wow!" We thought if the Eameses could do it, so could we.

By 1952 Jerry and Evelyn had each earned MFA degrees—she in fine arts from Wayne and he in ceramics from Alfred University in upstate New York—and had settled in Los Angeles, where they opened their first studio, Jenev. They were drawn to the warm climate, dynamic art and design community, and the postwar economic and housing boom that created a demand for well-designed, handcrafted home accessories.



**Jerry:** Evelyn and I were both interested in experimenting with new materials and new ways of using materials. At that time in California there was a progressive attitude that encouraged experimentation, and we exploited this freedom in our design approach.

The Ackermans began to put into practice their idea that a pair of designer craftsmen could succeed through ingenuity, talent, and hard work. Throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, the couple successfully sold to the contract furnishings and interior design markets while attracting critical notice in important museum shows, notably the famous *California Design* series at the Pasadena Art Museum. The Ackermans hold the distinction of being included in every *California Design* exhibition—with more than fifty works exhibited—underscoring the importance of their work. Their partnership was a harmonious blend of complementary talents and temperaments: Jerome was the "idea guy" and salesman, while Evelyn was happiest behind the scenes, designing in the studio. Their unique artistic collaboration permeated every aspect of design and production.

**Evelyn Ackerman:** How many couples can work together and last? Not many. If I couldn't do something, he did it. If he couldn't do it, I did. We just worked all the time; it's what we wanted to do.

In 1956 Jenev became ERA Industries, and their line grew to include a wide variety of limited-production decorative accessories such as mosaic wall plaques and tables, woven and hooked tapestries and rugs, architectural elements that included carved wood panels, and hardware. Evelyn created designs in a wide range of styles, from geometric to biomorphic abstraction to whimsical stylization, and Jerry would find new or traditional raw materials, adapting industrial manufacturing techniques, or connecting with handcraft workshops around the



Above right: The Ackermans' kitchen reflects their design aesthetic with a Saarinen-inspired table and chairs complemented by an arrangement of Jerry's recent hand-thrown stoneware vessels. Evelyn's carved wood Signs of the Zodiac panels of 1964 hang at the right with a 1947 painting by Jerry. Glimpsed through the doorway is the handwoven Cat and Bird tapestry of 1962.

Center left: A youthful Jerry and Evelyn at a potter's wheel in the Jenev Design Studio, which they set up in West Los Angeles in 1952.

Bottom left: Evelyn's Queen tapestry echoes the warm California colors of a room pictured on the cover of the April 12, 1964, issue of the *Los Angeles Times Home* magazine.

Bottom center: In 1953 and 1954 Jerry designed the models, molds, and glazes for these functional slip-cast earthenware vessels, which were produced in limited editions in the 1950s. Collection of the artists.

world to make them. Their imagery ranged from simple yet sophisticated abstract designs to charming stylized birds, monkeys, kings and queens, zodiac symbols, and figures derived from folklore.

**Jerry:** We utilized skilled craftsmen and industrial methods wherever feasible all over the world to execute our designs. This enabled us to create limited production runs in small artisan workshops. As time passed, our business grew and Evelyn continued to amaze me with her creative talent in so many directions.

**Dale:** The key to their success, in addition to very hard work and enormous talent, was threefold: Evelyn's ability to interpret a design across mediums (the same imagery in mosaic, tapestry, and etched metal, for example); to produce in warm and cool color schemes; and to scale pieces to modest homes (and sometimes not so modest ones). These last two made ERA products appeal to the broadest possible clientele and meant that Ackerman furnishings lent warmth, texture, and a very California palette of high-key colors to interior spaces.

**Jo:** Ackerman pieces have a timeless appeal for people who want to live with beautiful, well-made decorative objects and textiles. Today, their classic mid-century work is being rediscovered by a new generation of collectors and design enthusiasts.

Perhaps their daughter Laura Ackerman Shaw sums it up best:

**Laura Ackerman Shaw:** My parents pursued their pas-



sion with a shared bond of love and mutual respect. They brought together their creativity, optimism, versatility, and hard work in a joint life and career that spanned six decades—truly a love story of longevity and success.

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