Imagining Consumers
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Blaszczyk, Regina Lee.
Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.

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Fiesta!

The four hundred crockery buyers attending the 1936 midwinter show of the Associated Glass & Pottery Manufacturers in Pittsburgh swarmed around the exhibits of the Homer Laughlin China Company, attracted by colorful pottery shown against a backdrop of a Spanish flamenco dancer. Among the hundred factory displays, the talk of the show was Fiesta tableware, a department store line that came in bright monochromatic colors: orange-red, deep blue, cucumber green, egg yolk yellow, and rich vellum. Buyers from all retailing sectors—five-and-tens, mail-order houses, department stores, and premium vendors—commented to factory salesmen J. Donald Thompson and George B. Fowler on how well Fiesta captured the mood of Depression Era America. The line’s round shapes exuded a wholesome feeling; its signature molding—concentric circles—seemed futuristic yet quaint; its imaginative mix-and-match colors suggested sunshine, merriment, and brighter days to come. Crockery men agreed that Fiesta’s tempered modernism would strike a chord with shoppers yearning for inexpensive foils to austerity. The hoopla surrounding Fiesta’s debut attested to consequential changes in design practice at the world’s largest pottery.¹

Traditionally, when pottery managers created new lines, they looked to an amalgam of experts—to salesmen, chief decorators, modelers, crockery buyers, and decal suppliers—for help in imagining consumers. Homer Laughlin’s Yellowstone tableware epitomized this design method. The tremendous success of
Yellowstone convinced general manager W. Edwin Wells to look beyond tried-and-true design methods, leading him to establish an in-house art department. Since his 1927 arrival, art director Frederick Hurten Rhead, the man responsible for Fiesta’s development, had worked diligently with crockery buyers to update Homer Laughlin’s mass-market offerings. At the 1936 show, Rhead chatted with inquisitive buyers, waxing eloquently about Fiesta and his other designs, including Oven Serve, a versatile refrigerator-to-oven line, and experimental silk screen decorations of plaids, wreaths, and polka dots. Fiesta’s reception was the crowning achievement of his career and symbolized Homer Laughlin’s commitment to stylistic innovation in a time of social and economic crisis.²

Rhead’s hiring and the creation of Fiesta tableware coincided with major shakeups at Homer Laughlin, in the pottery industry, and in the economy. During the interwar years, Wells and Joseph M. Wells, his son and successor as general manager, initiated an expansion and renovation program designed to strengthen Homer Laughlin’s alliances with mass merchandisers and to safeguard its reputation as potters to “Her Majesty—The American Housewife.” The boom-and-bust economy of the 1920s and 1930s rattled the United States Potters’ Association (USPA), destroying many less-efficient potteries. The “giant
among dishes’ survived by virtue of its size—and a product-diversification strategy that aimed to produce tableware for every pocketbook. In tough times, Homer Laughlin looked upmarket for customers, creating Fiesta in an effort to penetrate the department store trade when F. W. Woolworth and Company, Quaker Oats Company (the successor to the American Cereal Company), and other volume distributors reduced their low-end crockery purchases.3

As the 1920s came to a close, Homer Laughlin hovered on the fringes of the whirlwind stylistic revolution known as modernism, an outgrowth of and response to industrialization and urbanization. Modernists grappled with rapid technological advances, including Fordist mass production, by simultaneously celebrating and critiquing the past, present, and future. Rhead designed products that aimed to put consumers at ease with a world full of uncertainties. Fiesta incarnated this approach. Rhead’s tactics put him at odds with consultant industrial designers like Walter Dorwin Teague, who aimed to uplift taste and to precipitate social change with the tool of styling. Rhead saw himself not as a tastemaker but as an expert in technical processes and an experienced fashion intermediary. While consultants tried to impose their tastes on clients and consumers, Rhead, as in-house art director, studied women’s preferences, listened to crockery buyers, and designed products accordingly. This fundamental difference helps explain the commercial success of Fiesta and the poor reception of streamlining, the consultants’ cure-all for Depression Era woes.

Adjusting to the New Tempo

As the “new American tempo” rapidly transformed consumer society during the late 1920s, factories making everything from automobiles to clothing and furnishings scurried to increase output, lower prices, and hasten the pace of design and innovation. The best-known instance of this phenomenon occurred at General Motors, which wrested leadership in the automobile industry away from the Ford Motor Company by engaging the cogs of flexible mass production and consumer-conscious design to make a range of colorful, stylish cars for “every purse and purpose.” In the dry goods trade, hosiery mills hired stylists to upgrade the look of women’s silk stockings; in home furnishings, glass factories devised new methods for intercepting the moth of style before it metamorphosed into a new, fashionable butterfly. William A. B. Dalzell, manager at the Fostoria Glass Company in Moundsville, West Virginia, led the way by establishing an art department, which promptly broke away from the tired look of imitation cut glass and
introduced a new line of pastel tableware that gave Fostoria high visibility in the department store business. With characteristic deliberation, W. Edwin Wells slowly but surely joined the ranks of managers who acknowledged that design fever might be harnessed for corporate gain. In his eyes, design might fit into Homer Laughlin’s strategy given the right art director and the right complement of manufacturing facilities.

During the 1920s, several factors—rising energy costs, high union wages, railroad shipping boycotts, a flood of cheap Japanese imports, and shifting demand—eroded the prosperity that the Great War had brought to many United States potteries. Declining demand forced many companies to shut their doors. Between 1922 and 1929, the average household spent 6.8 percent of its annual budget on china and glassware, expenditures that paled next to those for the previous era, 1898–1916, when consumers spent 13 percent of their incomes on tableware. “Nearly every dollar of the average family income is spent before it is earned,” Wells told USPA members, nervous about their future. “It is mortgaged against installment purchases.” With the exception of chain stores, installment houses, and scheme-ware users, retailers ordered less and less pottery every year. By the end of the decade, Homer Laughlin was a juggernaut in an otherwise declining industry, controlling one-third of the output among the USPA’s forty firms. In 1927, the pottery’s daily output of Yellowstone dinnerware, made for Woolworth, could form a ten-mile line, “stretching from the Battery in New York to the Harlem River and three miles beyond.” Never before had the firm experienced such a volume of orders. Yet these developments did not free Homer Laughlin from a long-standing commitment to flexible production, fashion, and style. To ignore these matters at a moment when women shoppers clamored for smart goods would have been foolhardy.

When Paul Nystrom published *Retail Selling and Store Management* in 1925, he lent his authority as a retailing guru to an idea that had been folk wisdom among American potters for decades; women made the vast majority of household purchases, some 80 percent. The prosperity decade saw the culmination of the long trend in the feminization of shopping. Although couples shared decisions about credit purchases of pricey durable goods such as living room suites, bathroom fixtures, and kitchen appliances, women carried out most cash-and-carry transactions. In the 1920s, they shopped more—and they did so with heightened expectations in terms of style, novelty, and quality. “The housewife,” wrote Wells in 1923, “is insisting on more and better dishes than she thought she needed or could afford in the old days.” Women voted for their favorite styles
by buying certain goods and letting others sit on store shelves. For retailers, the message was clear: Women wanted up-to-date pottery to match other smart household accessories. 

Never before had the twins of fashion and style mattered so much to Homer Laughlin’s profits. As Wells coddled important buyers in his plush Renaissance Revival showroom, he grew weary of the badgering of crockery men, for even those who procured the most ordinary pottery bid him to give more for their dollars. In 1926, when Quaker Oats reinstated the practice of providing cereal eaters with pottery premiums, buyer William A. O’Grady knocked on Wells’s door with big orders—and requests for customized patterns. Similarly, when R. H. Richards at Kirkman & Son in Brooklyn coordinated the soap manufacturer’s reentry into giveaways after a seven-year hiatus, he demanded “excellent” patented designs that “must not be furnished to anybody but to his firm.” The fastidious Charles Newberry and a Mr. Evans, respectively the president and china buyer at J. J. Newberry Company, a five-and-ten, wanted “gaudy, elaborate decorative tableware.” Powerful, persnickety, and opinionated, some twenty big-time buyers consumed about 80 percent of Homer Laughlin’s output, flaunting their bulging billfolds to intimidate Wells into jumping on the stylistic treadmill. 

Initially, Wells called on his faithful colleague in decorative affairs, the decal man Rudolph Gaertner, to help actualize buyers’ wishes with chromolithographic embellishments. However, by the mid-to-late 1920s, the decalcomania business buckled under potters’ demands, lithographers’ wages, government duties, and foreign printers’ delays. After his foremost competitor, Meyercord Company, withdrew from the ceramics business in 1920, Gaertner had borrowed money from Homer Laughlin to expand his Mount Vernon print works, envisioning a bright future for American decal manufacturers. Although his factory made a “cheaper grade of patterns,” Gaertner still imported high-grade decals, relying on English and German factories for his best designs. In ill health, Gaertner became impatient with buyers, whether Newberry or O’Grady, who pressed for evermore fashionable decorations for less and less money. Yet probably better than anyone in American pottery trade, Gaertner, the surrogate art director to the East Liverpool potteries, comprehended the commercial value of art. When Wells sizzled over buyers’ entreaties, the decal man calmly proposed a simple solution: hire a designer. 

If memories of Arthur Mountford prejudiced him against art directors, Wells only needed to look at his firm’s great rival, Sebring Pottery Company, to see how
a factory design division might augment sales in modern times. Sebring retained its advantage in the scheme-ware business during the 1920s by investing in a ceramics laboratory, tunnel kiln technology, and an art department, whose staff created the warm Royal Ivory porcelain and Golden Maize line that took the pottery trade by storm in 1923 and 1925. The Sebring family never let moss grow underfoot. Learning through trade gossip about Kirkman’s plans to reorder pottery premiums in 1925, managers at the Sebrings’ Limoges China Company rushed two sweet-talking salesmen to Brooklyn, where they barraged Richards with seductive samples and promising prices. Without Gaertner’s intercession, Limoges might have expropriated Kirkman’s orders from Homer Laughlin. By 1927, the Sebrings assumed a defensive posture when other East Liverpool firms, including Homer Laughlin, started to imitate the successful Golden Glow, Golden Maize, and Antique Ivory wares they had created for installment-purchase houses. The artistic Charles Leigh Sebring fixed his gaze on the growing department store trade and, in the summer of 1927, inaugurated a developmental project on Umbertone, a tinted clay body the color of café au lait. News of this venture quickly spread among pottery managers, who chatted daily on the links of the East Liverpool Country Club or over lunch at Flemington’s tavern adjacent to the Travelers’ Hotel.

Ever watchful, Wells made one of his last major decisions before his retirement. If flashy “Charlie” Sebring could capitalize on the design craze to create lines that would turn shoppers’ heads, so too might Wells engage the mechanisms of fashion to please exasperating buyers and to offer more variety to Woolworth and other five-and-tens. Gaertner, determined that his favorite and his largest customer not be outdone by Charlie Sebring, arranged for Wells to meet Frederick Hurten Rhead, research director at American Encaustic Tiling Company (AETCO) in Zanesville, Ohio. Gaertner, who had collaborated with Rhead on decals since 1924, realized that this practical Staffordshire man, who loved consumer products, felt isolated and otherwise dissatisfied in the tile business. He also knew that Rhead had admired Wells since 1902, when, as art director for a Wheeling firm, he heard managers identify Homer Laughlin’s executive as “the coming man in the pottery field.” While the details of their meeting are unknown, Wells found Rhead had the right qualifications to direct his new art department. (Besides Sebring’s activity, precedents existed for in-house design facilities. For decades, the USPA’s Art & Design Committee encouraged close cooperation between pottery managers, designers, modelers, and decorators; by 1924, every East Liverpool pottery had its own modeling shop, the first step
toward internalizing the design process.) In August 1927, Wells rolled out the red carpet from Newell to Zanesville, luring Rhead to the East Liverpool district with promises of a juicy salary, a dedicated staff, and spacious workrooms. The gigantic Homer Laughlin appeared to be the ideal proving ground for his theories about product design and consumer markets. When news of Rhead’s hiring reached the Woolworth Building, crockery man William F. Newberry, pleased as punch, immediately congratulated Wells on his “splendid move.”

Ceramic Art Engineering

There is more than one personal taste.
—Frederick Hurten Rhead, 1931

Rhead’s fifteen-year career at Homer Laughlin (1927–42) coincided with the formative years of the industrial design profession in New York, but as a factory art director working in the manufacturing heartland, Rhead saw himself in opposition to slick “art evangelists,” such as Teague, Raymond Loewy, and the younger Russel Wright. These consultants attempted to create a public image of the designer as tastemaker, and they hoped to stimulate demand for their services primarily among appliance manufacturers, from General Electric to General Motors, that is, among companies that could afford their high fees. Rhead also appreciated the importance of styling, but he comprehended it in a different way. Whereas consultants sought to create a distinctive American style that would improve public taste and alleviate the country’s economic ills, Rhead believed that no catholic fashion would succeed in a pluralistic society like the United States. In his eyes, streamlining, the favorite style mode of design consultants, was far too monolithic, technocratic, and utopian for American consumers. Women who shopped at Woolworth in Fall River, Massachusetts, or who bought dishes on the installment plan from the Columbus Furniture Stores in Montana would never fall for it. Overall, Rhead was more attuned to the heterogeneity of American popular culture and more constrained by it, in his factory job, than his heralded rivals.

Rhead so opposed New York consultants that he renounced their label, industrial designer. Instead, he described himself most often as “an experienced practical potter and executive.” As such, Rhead claimed allegiance with the interwar era’s conservative applied arts establishment, whose outspoken proponent was John Cotton Dana, director of New Jersey’s Newark Museum from its
founding in 1908 until his death in 1929. In contrast to the high-profile industrial design movement, whose practitioners aimed to build clients primarily among quantity production firms, the applied or industrial arts tradition consisted of an atomized network of older, flexible batch production industries, manufacturers’ associations, trade journals, museums, and design schools. As the “apostle of the applied arts,” Dana tried to make sense of this fragmentation, using the curator’s medium, the museum exhibition, to endow industrial arts with cultural legitimacy. Through shows like Beauty Has No Relation to Price, which featured Yellowstone tableware and other dime store merchandise, Dana hoped to teach museum visitors to discern and appreciate beauty in everyday things. From these object lessons, workers and consumers, respectively, might learn to make and to select home furnishings that were up to date and well designed.\textsuperscript{12}

Gaining celebrity for his epigram, “An industrialist is an artist,” Dana defined himself in opposition to Richard F. Bach, founding director of the industrial arts division of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whom he berated as an elitist, a historicist, and a romantic proponent of handicraft. Beginning in 1917, Bach mounted a series of industrial arts exhibitions of contemporary objects with antecedents in the Met’s historical collections. Without question, Bach had aesthetic uplift in mind when he encouraged the nation’s textile, wallpaper, furniture, pottery, and glass industries to take inspiration from objects in the Met’s holdings. Since consumers revered period styles like English Colonial, Dutch Colonial, Spanish Mission, Chippendale, and Sheraton, Bach contended, why should contemporary manufacturers not look to the best examples of these styles? To practical men who designed products for industry, ideological differences between Dana and Bach mattered less than their shared advocacy of the industrial arts tradition. As befitted their needs, practical men picked up either man’s gauntlet to carve out lucrative careers as guiding lights to batch manufacturers. In ceramics, Rhead was an aesthetic superstar who provided Wells with understandable, attainable solutions to the pressing problem of styling for a buyer’s market.\textsuperscript{13}

Indeed, the industrial arts tradition ran through Rhead’s veins, and he continually emphasized this when dealing with those conservative pottery managers who viewed artists and designers as irresponsible, temperamental idealists. Rhead heralded from a prominent family of Staffordshire artisans, whose members served as chief decorators and art directors in major English potteries. While still an art and design student at Stoke-on-Trent, the youthful Rhead accompa-
ried his father to Brownfield's Guild Pottery, where he learned to design new shapes and decorations in his parent's office. He met the region's most experienced art directors and accepted invitations to observe design and development practices at their factories. By age nineteen, Rhead taught his own courses in an industrial arts school and directed the art department at Wardle Art Pottery, a small firm specializing in colorful art wares. Believing he had reached "the top of the tree" in the English potteries, at age twenty-two Rhead immigrated in 1902 to the United States, where he readily secured a series of positions in firms seeking knowledgeable practical men. Of Rhead's subsequent ten jobs, two positions—his art directorship at Roseville Pottery Company and his research directorship at AETCO—most influenced his Homer Laughlin career. Working at these Zanesville firms, Rhead discerned how American potteries might tap the tremendous potential of the burgeoning mass market. 14

From 1904 to 1908, Rhead collaborated with the Roseville plant superintendent John J. Herold, who streamlined the production of art pottery based on his understanding of the emerging ideas of the efficiency engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor. At a moment when most pottery managers still guessed at shop floor expenditures, Herold, a German-born decorator-turned-manager, scrutinized workers' actions, closely calculated costs, and replaced rule-of-thumb methods with techniques that promised to augment output, reduce waste, and improve product quality. Just as the stopwatch signified Taylorist practice, a powerful pocket magnifying glass symbolized Herold's predilection for detection, surveillance, and analysis. Nicknamed the "quarrelsome Dutchman" by irritated workers, Herold extended his rationalization project to Roseville's design department, enlisting the newly hired art director in his drive for efficiency. After methodically studying consumers' tastes, Rhead and Herold revamped Roseville's lines, junking obsolete jardinières covered with runny red and green glazes reminiscent of "gangrene" in favor of up-to-date art ware with mellifluous names such as Della Robbia and Olympic. Rhead considered Herold to be a model practical man; and he carefully watched the energetic entrepreneur use whatever means were available (product design, brand name marketing, and national advertising) to elevate Roseville's products in consumers' eyes. Leaving Ohio to lecture, teach, and work in small art ware factories in New York, Missouri, and California, Rhead found that potteries could operate as modern industrial enterprises rather than as haphazard craft shops. A slew of unsuccessful ventures, including the failure of his own Santa Barbara pottery, dampened Rhead's spirit, but a job offer from the world's largest tile works—a promising position as a
designer of sanitary fixtures, terra cotta, and decorative tiles at AETCO—rekindled his enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1917, the fashion for colorful building materials known as architectural faience burgeoned, and AETCO’s managers hoped to exploit this market by hiring an expert designer and colorist to direct their research department. At AETCO for ten years, Rhead sharpened his chromatic skills under the tutelage of Léon Victor Solon, a Staffordshire man who ran the company’s New York showroom and worked with architects on tiled interiors. (As the nation’s foremost architectural colorist, Solon eventually designed the color scheme for the Rockefeller Center.) At the tile works, Rhead devoted much of his time to developing new clay bodies, colored glazes, and product lines but soon became disillusioned because AETCO managers clung to “archaic” business methods and manufacturing technologies. By 1923, Rhead felt “too much alone” and longed for a job in a progressive clay-working plant with managers sympathetic to “the many commercial possibilities open to this . . . undeveloped industry.”\textsuperscript{16}

During the 1920s, Rhead assumed a series of leadership positions in the newly formed art and design division of the American Ceramic Society (ACERS), and he used this professional organization, dedicated to the technical advancement of the ceramics and glass industries, as a platform for promoting his theories—and his career. Rhead mocked the dusty developmental practices that dominated the American ceramics industry, painting an unflattering portrait of factory personnel and plant managers. He condemned “czarist” factory engineers; castigated chief decorators with a “talent for art” but little market awareness beyond the best-sellers they copied; and mocked sales managers, covered with “patina,” who could not fathom the unpopularity of “standard lines of ten or fifteen years ago” and blamed sluggish sales on the poor judgment of crockery buyers. As a curative for stylistic inertia and poor sales, Rhead urged manufacturers to establish in-house departments for “decorative ceramics research.” In these factory divisions, art directors versed in production methods, design techniques, housewares trends, and consumer taste might collaborate with scientists and technologists, respectively skilled in “materials, mixtures, and process control” and “plant design and equipment,” to create goods in fulfillment of “any market requirement.” In 1927, Rhead described the art director’s responsibilities under the rubric “ceramic art engineering”; in doing so, he equated design expression, bridled by formal rules of perspective and theories of color coordination, with the contingent process of invention, the engineer’s domain. During the golden age of engineering, this choice of words marked Rhead as a cutting-edge theo-
rist, who sought to apply an engineering viewpoint to the problem of designing consumer products. A few years later, New York advertising impresario Earnest Elmo Calkins coined the phrase “consumer engineering” to describe his agency’s approach to stimulating demand during the Great Depression. Calkins saw consumer engineering as a “new business tool” for “shaping a product to fit more exactly consumers’ needs or tastes” in order to “keep pace with rapidly changing habits and ways of living.” Its major objective: “to learn what people want and adapt the goods to these wants.” By similarly proposing to rationalize the slippery job of design and development, Rhead sought to galvanize managers of leading firms in the hope of achieving his ambition for an art directorship in a pottery devoted to “large-scale production.”

At first glance, Rhead’s proposition for bridging the realms of “ceramic art” and “engineering” seemed like the musings of a transplanted English dreamer versed in the antimodernist ideology of the Arts and Crafts movement. This sentimental veneer hid the makings of a corporate expert cognizant of new quantity-production methods and modern management practices that had gained footholds in big businesses like steel and autos. Without hesitation, Rhead exploited his English charm and erudition, for these assets softened his invective among conservative American pottery managers, who still esteemed Staffordshire traditions as the apex of the potter’s art. In reality, Rhead idolized British potteries less than many American managers, for his youth in the Five Towns left him with indelible memories of secret glaze recipes, impenetrable craft hierarchies, a repressive family wage system, and devastating trade depressions. Exposure to both sides of the Anglo-American potting trade, combined with his observations of United States industry in general, led Rhead to theorize that the future of potteries reliant on changing tastes and on volume distribution rested in a fusion of American and British manufacturing methods. Rhead’s theories dovetailed with the massive modernization at Homer Laughlin, wherein Wells grafted quantity-production practices in the form of tunnel kilns onto a time-honored batch production setup.

As an expert in ornament, shape, and color, Rhead filled his office at Homer Laughlin with the tools of his trade, including art books, historical artifacts, and extensive files on American, English, and European factories. From Herold, Rhead learned to keep meticulous records, recording daily accomplishments in a desk dairy. Yet the business of determining what Homer Laughlin’s customers wanted depended on more than competent draftsmanship, potting know-how, good librarianship, and curatorial skills. It required studying women as they
selected, purchased, and used objects, making sense out of the evidence drawn from these observations, and, ultimately, applying that information to new generations of products. Whether buying a wedding gift for a bride, dining at a friend’s home, or browsing through the china and glass displays of department stores in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and New York City, Rhead perpetually contemplated consumers in action. At a moment when most pottery manufacturers still viewed the consumer as “an uncertain quantity,” Rhead attempted, through these observations, to discern in his “slow and rambling manner” precisely what “various groups really like—and why.”

Rhead ventured to develop an understanding of consumer tastes just as social scientists started to categorize people according to income, education, and expenditures for the benefit of industrial capitalism. Building on the tradition of Progressive Era budget experts, sociologists Robert Lynd and Alice C. Hanson classified population segments by purchases of goods such as food, clothing, and appliances for their contribution to Recent Social Trends in the United States. In Rhead’s eyes, such researchers’ generic descriptions of furniture, curtains, toasters, and stoves were of little use; managers in style-conscious companies needed to know the type of furniture, the color of the draperies, the brand of the toasters, the age of the stoves, and so forth. “I would like to see a chart showing some approximate classification of the public taste,” he wrote, with “some estimated proportion for each distinctive style, with price ranges and potential volume for each group.” In essence, Rhead longed for tabulated results from consumer surveys. But only a few large publishers, including the Curtis Publishing Company, and major advertising agencies, such as J. Walter Thompson, had scientific methods for collecting and analyzing survey data. This kind of fact gathering was time-consuming, costly, and available only to large accounts. Lacking access to such capabilities, Rhead saw it as his job to explicate the subtleties of consumers’ ceramics choices—delineating preferences for white or ivory clay bodies, for floral or geometrical motifs, and for gilding or lack of gilding—and to make sense of such details on behalf of Homer Laughlin and its retail customers.

Without question, Rhead’s foray into market research drew heavily on well-established developmental practices in American potteries and glassworks, for his approach to imagining consumers depended on firsthand observation. Wells, Newberry, and Gaertner comprehended the value of scrutinizing the marketplace, but these men admitted befuddlement when they tried to discern motivation. Rhead avoided the pitfalls of trying to define desire, a task better suited
to philosophers than to product designers. Instead, he focused his energies on reading the material world and evaluating what he saw in ways that he believed would be useful to his firm. Trained during his boyhood to look, Rhead believed that he could decipher preference patterns often incomprehensible to contemporaries other than seasoned crockery buyers.²¹

Rhead's youthful experiences shaped his worldview in other ways, for he employed an English model—the template of a hierarchical society with inviolable class boundaries—to interpret what he encountered on the American landscape. In Rhead's mind, consumers used all many objects—houses, automobiles, clothing, pets, and furnishings—as powerful communicators, and they did so to demarcate social class. Tastes varied among America's six major socioeconomic groups—immigrant, working, lower-middle, upper-middle, upper, and elite classes—but preferences within each had the endurance of "religious beliefs." For the most part, the greatest influences on taste included daily social interactions, fashion trends, and "advertising propaganda." Just as ecclesiastical rituals changed slowly from generation to generation, class-based taste preferences evolved sluggishly, and dramatic shifts occurred only occasionally as revolutionary jolts. In this context, beauty often seemed an immutable and monolithic ideal, particularly to tastemakers wearing blinders that obscured their views of all but the pinnacle of the social pyramid. In categorizing consumers, Rhead displayed remarkable tolerance for their tastes. Any loathing, he reserved for the rich. With derision, he described "good old DARs" and "society-page experts" like "Mrs. Van Demon" and "Mrs. Push Rusher II" as status mongers who surrounded themselves with "pedigrees of parents, pups, pots, and pictures," rode around in Pierce Arrows and Cadillacs, and shopped at exclusive china shops for dishes by Wedgwood, Spode, or Minton—all for the sake of flaunting their so-called good taste. In Rhead's eyes, what constituted beauty to one social class often held no appeal to other groups, and the manufacturer that realized this fashion fundamental would come out on top.²²

Just as important, Rhead's roots in the British class system supplied him with a perspective on American society that prompted a reevaluation of Thorstein Veblen's and Georg Simmel's trickle-down theories. These original deterministic theories held that the eager masses, consciously or not, emulated the lifestyles and consumption habits of elites. Rhead believed that sometimes consumers saw their economic betters as material paragons, but more often, they did not. Those indoctrinated by the educational system to appreciate "boiled-

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down” art, such as high school graduate “Ethyl Smith” and college graduate “Sarah Hunt,” shopped at five-and-tens and department stores searching for dinnerware patterns in “styles and types which they have been told are in good taste.” Status emulation figured into these women’s lower-middle and middle-class tastes. The more typical dime-store shopper bought Woolworth’s dinnerware not because she wanted to copy the mayor’s wife but because she found it affordable, practical, and beautiful. “Mrs. Jim Brown,” an elevator operator’s spouse, selected decal dishes because these inexpensive objects matched the wallpaper and curtains in her three-room apartment. Mrs. Brown took as much pride in her dime-store dinnerware as did “Mrs. Vassar-Yale” in “her best porcelain.” Price and prettiness shaped the product expectations of working-class women, for whom making do on small budgets mattered more than making appearances. Each social class possessed a distinctive material vocabulary for self-expression, but women in the upper echelons coveted the lifestyles of the rich and famous to a greater extent than did those who struggled simply to pay their bills.23

Rhead was on target vis-à-vis motivation. Wealthy consumers such as Arthur A. Houghton Jr., heir to a glassmaking fortune made in Corning, N.Y., patronized Tiffany & Company’s Fifth Avenue store, where he bought costly Minton china. Looking up the ladder, social climbers satisfied their longings with Wedgwood spinoffs; working women, with American pottery. In 1937, Katherine Wicks Perry, a New Jersey bride of a congressional aide living in Washington, D.C., bought on a “pleasure trip” to England a Wedgwood dinner set in the Grosvenor pattern, embellished with a hand-tinted Florentine border of griffins, leafy scrolls, and cattle skulls (plate 2). Around the same time, Elizabeth Petrowski, a mill operative working for the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, Massachusetts, purchased from a house-to-house canvasser a yellow dinner set for her twenty-two-year-old daughter’s hope chest, selecting a floral decal pattern that suited Nellie’s traditional tastes (plate 3). For decades, Perry and Petrowski each cherished their sets—for different reasons. Perry loved her bone china for what it said about her “good taste.” During the 1980s, the aged invalid suspiciously eyed a researcher visiting her rest home bedside; by careful voice inflection and word choice, Perry emphasized the elite European origins of her service, using the phrase “my Wedgwood” to impress the inquisitor with her knowledge of beautiful, expensive things. In contrast, Nellie Petrowski never thought twice about who made her East Liverpool dishes. Nonetheless, she for decades dis-

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played the service in a glass-fronted china cabinet built into the kitchen of her four-room flat. Used only for holiday dinners—Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, and Easter—the fragile earthenware remained impeccable when Petrowski gave it to her daughter as an heirloom in the mid-1980s. To Petrowski, the dishes were more than eye-catching decorations and special occasion utensils. A divorced mother of three, Elizabeth Petrowski had acquired Nellie’s set by pinching pennies, by saving a bit every week from her meager and unpredictable paycheck earned at American Woolen. Bought with “blood money” during the Great Depression, “Babci’s dishes,” as the yellow dinner service was always called, symbolized a working-class woman’s determination to help her daughter participate in American consumer society, against unbelievable odds.  

More inclusive in many respects than earlier theories on consumption, Rhead’s ideas were influenced by cultural values that marked certain groups as insiders and others as outsiders. While he coined clever Anglo-American names to describe major economic groups, Rhead lumped some people into generic categories, arguing that “colored” folks and “immigrants” shared preferences for “primitive” colors and decorations. These conjectures about the hoi-polloi are unsurprising given Rhead’s British roots and the context of the interwar years, when nativism reshaped immigration policy, fed resurgent racism, and more. During these decades, native-born white workers perceived African Americans and immigrants as extreme examples of primitive cultures; Rhead understood this perspective. As he began the slow, complicated process of deciphering taste, Rhead identified Homer Laughlin’s customers as members of the larger Anglo-American culture that he and his superiors understood, respected, and targeted as their main clientele. 

Rhead survived at the helm of Homer Laughlin’s art department by embracing two cardinal principles: first, the consumer was sovereign; second, design was a collaborative process. Above all, he believed that only consumers, rather than self-appointed art reformers, could “tell the manufacturer what to make.” Like all historic actors, Rhead lived in the real world, which inevitably constrained him. Since few consumers articulated ideal china preferences—only “exceptional” people asked clerks for products “not seen in the stores”—Rhead had to figure out women’s desires in the tried-and-true manner, relying on retail buyers as fashion intermediaries. At the same time, he had to satisfy his bosses, steering clear of decorations that raised the hackles of cost-conscious managers and engineers. Again and again, Rhead explained successful creative development
as an “organizational activity” involving a “pooling of ideas,” likening his job to that of a movie director, to provide artistic atmosphere, orchestrate decorative action, and smooth ruffled feathers.26

The Wave of Modernism

When we speak of “styling,” we have the crux of the whole problem of development, a problem which concerns an understanding of what we are making now, and why; of what the other fellow is making now, and why; of what we will make next, and why.

—Frederick Hurten Rhead, 1941

From Wells’s perspective, Rhead arrived in the nick of time; the “wave of modernism” sweeping across the home furnishings trade brought economic opportunities. The expensive handcrafted objects displayed at Paris’s Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in 1925 cast a long shadow. One after the other, large urban department stores across America mounted pseudo-Parisian exhibits featuring products with a modern twist, including china and glassware. The American manufacturer fortunate enough to secure orders from one of these high-profile retailers received considerable newspaper and magazine publicity. Through Marshall Field and similar stores, glassware by Fostoria and its major competitor, A. H. Heisey & Company, often appeared in articles and food advertisements in the Delineator, Good Housekeeping, and Better Homes and Gardens. For a batch production pottery like Homer Laughlin, whose budget, variable output, and modus operandi prohibited investment in national advertising, such gratis exposure, combined with the cachet associated with being displayed in a department store china section, had immeasurable appeal. Wells and Rhead ventured to capitalize on this prestigious and profitable trade.27

None of this is to suggest that Wells contemplated letting go of his lucrative business with Woolworth, the great consumer bazaar (figure 1). More than anyone, Homer Laughlin’s general manager realized that his bread and butter depended on high-volume, mass-market accounts. In 1927 Wells added a second tunnel kiln facility, Plant No. 7, to his Newell site to sate the appetites of hungry chain stores, scheme users, and mail-order houses, but recent failures in the East Liverpool district alarmed him. To safeguard his firm’s future, he sought to broaden and deepen its client base. Confident of Homer Laughlin’s standing
with volume distributors like Woolworth, Quaker Oats, and S. H. Kress & Company, Wells looked for greater visibility in upscale markets, to department stores like Cleveland's May Company, St. Louis's Famous-Barr, and New York's R.H. Macy & Company, all of which promised access to consumers willing to pay a little bit more for "something different."  

To a veteran potter like Wells, the notion that artifacts played important psychological roles in consumers' lives came as second nature. Furthermore, this cool-headed student of the material world realized that object symbolism was undergoing a fundamental transformation that accounted for underconsumption in the pottery industry. Rightfully, Wells surmised that the success of firms like General Motors, which encouraged Americans to climb the "ladder of consumption" with automobile purchases, adversely affected the home furnishings market. Whereas brides of the cut glass age had taken pleasure from collecting, using, and displaying china and glassware, many women now found dishes less appealing as symbols of prosperity, individuality, and class mobility than major durable goods acquired on credit. The compulsion of monthly or weekly payments reminded people of their financial obligations, making major installment purchases seem precious, for the threat of repossession at default enhanced the feelings of value ascribed to durable goods like radios, refrigerators, and cars. To Wells, evidence of this symbolic shift abounded: the eclipse of the china cabinet, the waning demand for hundred-piece dinner services, and skyrocketing sales of inexpensive open-stock lines like Yellowstone. Yet the excitement surrounding department stores' modern European exhibitions, which featured French, Austrian, and Swedish china and glass, also demonstrated that some shoppers still had unrequited longings for the right kind of tableware. Rhead concurred that college-educated "Lucy Rhodes" and "Sarah Hunt" frequented...
department store nooks in search of “anything except something in crass taste” and high school graduates “Ethyl Smith” and “May Brookes” trailed close behind, rejecting “old-fashioned” decorations in favor of “styles and types which they have been told are in good taste.” With Rhead’s advice, Wells planned to use styling as a tool for satisfying the unfulfilled yearnings of these middle-class department store shoppers.29

Wells pursued the Macy account beginning in 1928, believing himself well equipped for department store negotiations. He soon became rattled by the personnel—the ever finicky buyers and their self-possessed stylist helpmates—that staffed this consumption palace. Since the war, Macy’s had built a reputation as a fashion leader, employing college-trained stylists “to study new desires” and help factories create merchandise in “good taste.” The gigantic store served more than sixty thousand customers daily during holidays and boasted some 150 selling departments, including a whole floor devoted to china, glass, and other household accessories. As usual, Gaertner facilitated communication between manufacturer and retailer, working closely with Macy’s china buyer, a Mr. Olsen, and the store stylist Ford Tarpley, on a forty-one-piece set ornamented with decals of great bridges, including Brooklyn’s. But when a committee of Macy’s “stylists and art experts,” Tarpley included, rejected the proposed design—“turned it down flat”—Gaertner was “disgusted with this decision.” Since Olsen and the china department’s sales staff remained enthusiastic about the pattern, Gaertner refused “to be influenced by the verdict of a few young men and women, who have no commercial experience, but believe they know something about applied art!” With yet a third tunnel kiln factory, Plant No. 8, under construction and Newberry carping as usual, Wells had little time or inclination for stylistic poppycock. Throwing up his hands, Wells turned the Macy project over to the very recently hired Rhead. Whereas Gaertner had balked at the store’s muscle flexing, Rhead responded by putting on kid gloves.30

The big difference between Gaertner and Rhead lay in their approaches to embellishment, a difference that signaled, among other things, the eclipse of a visual culture dependent on highly refined representations. Gaertner had done much to upgrade the chromolithographic aesthetic, but he remained wedded to Old World conventions—to floral sprays, stylized borders, and realistic landscapes—that had begun to lose ground to simpler fashions. In contrast, Rhead appreciated the look of simple, modernist designs. Nothing exemplified the new mode better than Charlie Sebring’s Leigh line, the outgrowth of his Umbertone project. At Sebring Pottery Company, art director Joseph Palin Thorley collab-
orated with consultant designer Gale Turnbull and stylist Dorothea O'Hara to design a series of novel shapes, forms, and decorations for Leigh ware. A promotional virtuoso, Charlie Sebring in 1928 opened a showroom at New York's Waldorf Astoria to entertain top buyers at an exclusive preview of Leigh ware, made at his pet pottery, Leigh Potters, in Alliance, Ohio. Macy's men reportedly stopped dead in their tracks upon seeing Turnbull's Green Wheat decal pattern on several Leigh shapes. Gaertner's nemesis, Macy's stylist Ford Tarpley, featured Green Wheat in a china and glass exhibition and spotlighted it in newspaper advertisements. So, when Tarpley rejected the Brooklyn Bridge pattern, he did so with Leigh ware in mind. 31

Sebring's victory gave substance to Rhead's theories about decorative development and corporate strategy. Notwithstanding his respect for Gaertner, Rhead recognized that the design lexicon of the decalcomania tradition was almost exhausted after thirty years. By engaging the cogs of ceramic art engineering, Sebring had replaced "pretty posies" with some fifty distinctive, fashionable decorations. At the moment when Homer Laughlin earned its livelihood from nickel
dishes, Macy's sold Leigh in "short sets" containing eighteen, twenty-four, thirty-two, or forty-eight items for more than seventeen dollars each. The Sebrings' successful strategy had revamped the Victorian hundred-piece dinner service into a smart, up-to-date object of desire and provided one solution to the problem of underconsumption. Rhead so admired the Leigh line and Sebring's boldness that he exalted Green Wheat as the "best modernistic tableware pattern" made in America or Europe.  

The appeal of the Green Wheat pattern stemmed from Turnbull's fusion of conservative and avant-garde elements. Middle-class women had responded to extreme art-moderne styling with trepidation. Some felt that ultramodern accessories, like the spotted or zigzagged pottery designed for British manufacturers by Susie Cooper and Clarice Cliff, were ill suited to conventional decorating schemes, while others objected to cups and teapots with "decided angles and sharply contrasting surfaces," finding these objects "difficult to handle comfortably." They wanted products that were different from those of their grandmothers but that fit into "interiors of every sort." Green Wheat filled the bill.  

More than any other cultural phenomenon, the evolution of casual dining, or easy eating, accelerated an appreciation of the modern style in table accessories. Factors such as the servant problem, the rise of apartment living, and Prohibition reconfigured cultural expectations of womanly duties, at least for the middle class. Facing shortages of suitable domestic servants, good cooking wines, and spacious pantries, middle-class women rejected the Victorian ritual of formal dining and its accessories, including elaborate cut glassware, specialized silverware, and hundred-piece dinner sets. Although a hallmark of civilization before the war, the Sunday dinner seemed like a "relic of barbarism" during the 1920s. Even the best middle-class housekeepers, who liked "nice things in the house," discarded their buffets and glass-fronted china cabinets as old-fashioned. The home furnishings director of Better Homes and Gardens, Christine Holbrook, lent her authority to eating in the kitchen, pantry, and dining nook, declaring that the new mode was here to stay. Although consumers continued to acquire china and glassware, enjoying these artifacts for their symbolic properties, the declining utility of enormous dinner services eroded the tableware market as it had existed for decades.

Meanwhile, a chromatic revolution gripped the home furnishing trade following the introduction of new pigments, lacquers, and dyes by the American chemical industry. Before the Great War, the German chemist Wilhelm Ostwald and the American educator Albert H. Munsell had established competing sys-
tems of color theory, which achieved currency among art teachers, commercial artists, and manufacturers. Afterward, prescriptive writers like Matthew Luckiesh, an outspoken lighting engineer who eventually worked as General Electric's colorist, reminded producers that color, with its powerful sway over mood, could be used to sell goods. By the 1920s, experts in manufacturing and merchandising pooled their resources to create chromatic objects in all shapes and sizes; the four-color advertisements introduced by the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1924 constituted a visual watershed in the publishing world. Writing about color and industry in their inaugural issue, *Fortune*’s editors declared the Anglo-Saxon at last released from “his chromatic inhibitions” and ready “to outdo the barbarians” in his use of brilliant hues.35

In the domestic sphere, color worked wonders, declared *Better Homes and Gardens*, “transforming even the simplest and least expensive interior into almost unbelievable beauty.” As the locus of activity, the kitchen quickly became the focal point of the household’s chromatic revolution (plate 4). Coal and oil stoves dirtied kitchens and required householders to give their kitchens frequent face-lifts. Paint hid grease and grime. New accessories offered another solution to dinginess. In 1926, New York’s leading retail buyers, including those at Macy’s, initiated a color-in-the-kitchen movement, stocking housewares departments with bright red, blue, green, and yellow equipment, from sponges and brooms to major appliances. Within months, chromatic fever gripped the entire retail trade, taking the “fairer sex by storm.” Shoppers insisted on pots, pans, cutlery, glassware, and pottery that matched their breakfast nook sets. By the decade’s end, the colored kitchen craze extended beyond Broadway and Lake Shore Drive to include “Mrs. Housewife” on Main Street. The fastidious Mrs. Shearer, a middle-class consumer in Washington, D.C., found gratification in modernizing her kitchen with color. Painting the walls a rich ivory and the woodwork jade green, she pronounced the new look “pretty good.”36

As color became the “prima donna” of household decoration, stylists learned to fuse color theory with popular psychology in ways that appealed to manufacturers and retailers intrigued or bewildered by chromatic furor. Hazel H. Adler, who billed herself an interior decorator, color merchandiser, and president of the Taylor System of Color Harmony on Fifth Avenue, counseled clients such as Sears, Roebuck & Company, the National Lead Company, and B. F. Goodrich & Company on chromatic matters. Most notably, she advised the Ford Motor Company on color choices for its Model A. Adler also wrote promotional booklets for firms like the George W. Blabon Company, a linoleum manufacturer,
advising consumers that “a colorless home” revealed “a colorless personality.” She knew that colorless or dull people were out of tune with the twentieth-century “culture of personality,” which prized people with strong self-images who could nonetheless relate to the crowd. While the selection, use, and display of colorful products provided women with avenues for self-expression, the acquisition of household objects made by quantity production allowed consumers to declare affinity with mass culture. The prerequisites for fitting into American culture were paradoxical, and color embodied those incongruities. Experts like Adler engaged these principles to advance their consulting firms and to promote color mania.37

In the tableware trade, the dual forces of informality and color initially coalesced in Fostoria’s line of daintily tinted glassware, aimed at a middlebrow audience. For decades, manufacturers like Steuben Glass Works had made chromatic art ware for the “classes.” In turn, pressing factories imitated Steuben’s art glass palette, creating gaudy iridescent items—today known as carnival glass—for a larger portion of the market. But Fostoria’s breakfast, luncheon, tea, and dinner sets in transparent hues of azure, dawn, orchid, and topaz were novel when introduced in 1925. Fostoria had a simple goal: use these modestly priced lines to wrest a share of the profitable trade in wedding present china away from American and European porcelain factories. To pique middle-class interest, Fostoria created conservative designs like Minuet, a Colonial Revival shape for “the modern hostess,” who appreciated “all the grace and charm of early America.” Hiring New York–based N. W. Ayer & Son to develop a national advertising campaign, Fostoria—and competitors that scurried behind—made colored glass dishes into fashionable dining services.38

In the crockery arena, retailers from Boston to Philadelphia picked up the chromatic gauntlet by promoting brightly colored faience. Department stores, importers, and gift shops filled their windows with so-called peasant pottery from Italy, Holland, and Czechoslovakia. Food packagers placed these bright dishes in advertisements for raisins, oatmeal, and puffed rice, which looked delicious in bowls of pink, green, and yellow. When Mildred Maddocks Bentley, director of the Delineator Home Institute, set a luncheon table for six, she chose for its centerpiece a polychrome Italian majolica bowl filled with pink tea roses. Accustomed to the refined, tight look of the decalcomania aesthetic, consumers gasped at the brightness and the looseness of these designs, which suggested cozy, cheery, and comfortable living. Fostoria glassware and peasant pottery slowly accustomed people to a new look in tableware design.39
By the late 1920s, Ohio potteries had jumped on the chromatic bandwagon, garnering all their resources to emulate Fostoria's pale hues and majolica's bold designs—with mixed results. Successful products like Sebring's Mayglow and Homer Laughlin's Yellowstone had demonstrated what color could do for crockery sales. When Limoges and the Edwin M. Knowles China Company initiated research on Peach-Blo and Mayglow, pink-bodied decal tableware, Homer Laughlin's sales staff pressed their art director to think pink. Rhead loathed it as the “color of fat blondes and naughty ladies” and decided to turn the pink idea upside down. To create a new decorative type for quantity production, the art director had to distinguish between transient styles and sound styles, selecting treatments from the latter group as models for development. As Leigh Potters fully understood, the design process drew upon a pottery's ornamental trinity: clay bodies, shapes, and decorations. Changes to those sacred cows could not be taken lightly. Thinking of Green Wheat, Rhead urged managers to sidestep the pink fad, proposing a long-term research project geared toward creating tableware with “color values” of “universal appeal.” Why not join the fashion brigade of potters promoting short sets for easy eating? If his rhetoric sounded much like an advertisement for Fostoria or an after-dinner speech by Charlie Sebring, it also speaks of Rhead's awareness of the competition.40

In facilitating new decorative treatments for department stores, Rhead relied on the stylistic coaching of the crockery buyers Gerald S. Stone, who succeeded Olsen at Macy's, and George S. Ujlaki at Gimbel Brothers. Known in the crockery trade as dean of the buyers, Stone had a reputation for his smooth manners, keen eye, and creative ideas. In 1929, Rhead had positive experiences with Stone, Olsen, and Tarpley, who visited West Virginia to discuss the next year's lines. These aesthetic arbiters of Macy's wanted modern designs, but they urged Rhead to pursue “conservative development.” With Leigh ware on their minds, Macy's men gently dismissed the decal world of “pretty roses” and “dicky daises.” Similarly, Ujlaki, “not interested in existing patterns,” urged Rhead to consider new textures and colors, including ocher and coral. Overall, these crockery buyers confirmed Rhead's belief that the time was ripe for a new look in ceramic decoration.41

The creation of new clay bodies and colored glazes lay at the core of Homer Laughlin's stylistic evolution, requiring team work by Rhead and the factory chemist, Albert V. Bleininger, who brought complementary knowledge to the project. Much about the development project was hit-or-miss; often, Rhead tested Bleininger's promising glazes on experimental shapes with horrendous
results. By 1930, they had refined a series of art glazes in French rose, Sienna brown, and leaf green that looked good on Rhead's sculptural shapes. (Helen Ufford, associate director at the Delineator, praised these lines as versatile enough for every meal, illustrating the ware in her column.) Riding the success of Homer Laughlin art glazes, Rhead next year introduced Clair de Lune, a gray-blue that suggested the "pale soft, alluring color of the moonlight," and Vellum, a smooth off-white "the texture and color of old ivory." He applied these glazes to the rectilinear Century shape, embellished with modernistic decals. Department store buyers welcomed Century Vellum, ordering some twenty-four million pieces during its introductory year alone.\(^\text{42}\)

Homer Laughlin exited the Jazz Age with a new look. By 1929, 90 percent of the firm's wares were made with ivory bodies. These off-white goods had clear, yellow, or pastel art glazes and bold modern-style decals. Consumers' changing taste preferences, as expressed through the voices of crockery buyers and in sales statistics, led the firm to reassess the decal aesthetic. Ironically, Rhead's hiring coincided closely with the peak year for decal sales. At his urging, Homer Laughlin adopted an annual model change, introducing one or two new shapes every year and eliminating older items as demand dwindled. The pottery also started to make short sets for Gimbels, Macy's, and other highly visible New York department stores. While volume customers like Woolworth and Quaker Oats continued to stock decal pottery, the appearance of those decorations changed as dime store and scheme-ware buyers also pushed for designs that were simpler, bolder, more colorful, and more modern. With these visual innovations—initiated on the urging of crockery buyers—Homer Laughlin in large measure took the first steps toward fracturing decalcomania's strong hold on pottery decoration.\(^\text{43}\)

A New Deal for American Dinnerware

An art director's job is to make stuff which will sell.

—Frederick Hurten Rhead, 1936

During the Great Depression, Homer Laughlin's largest customers curbed their orders, and the firm's new general manager, Joseph M. Wells, scrambled to cope with changes in the pottery's customer base. Tightening his belt, William A. O'Grady slowly cut Quaker Oats' purchases from $1.6 million in 1930 to $500,000 in 1935. Woolworth's orders dropped from $3.8 million, or 54 percent of Homer
Laughlin’s sales, in 1929 to $1 million, or 22 percent of sales, in 1935. In part, Woolworth and other five-and-tens had discovered a Depression Era golden goose: glassware in pale hues of pink, green, yellow, and blue. An ideal mass-market product, this imitation Fostoria tableware, made by midwestern factories like the MacBeth-Evans Glass Company, retailed for half the price of comparable ceramics. Showy, cheap, and plentiful, this glassware dovetailed with Woolworth’s seizure of the color-in-the-kitchen idea. Chromatic household accessories, including green kitchen gadgets and pink, green, and yellow tableware, had filled dime store shelves for years. Moreover, Woolworth’s retrenchment coincided with Newberry’s retirement in 1930 and the hiring of P. G. Frantz as his successor. A fan of foreign chinaware, Frantz fumed when that year the USPA, represented before the Ways and Means Committee by the aging W. Edwin Wells, pressed Congress for heavy duties under the Smoot-Hawley tariff. Newberry might have tolerated his old friend’s testimony, but Frantz, who enjoyed roaming around Europe in search of novelties, exploded when the Senate approved the advance. “Joe” Wells did everything to make amends, enlisting Gaertner and Rhead to turn on their charm, but nothing worked. Frantz turned his back, buying from Homer Laughlin only those goods he could not find elsewhere.44

In part, the younger Wells steered his firm through these hard times by piecing together sales to small customers, undercutting less competitive USPA firms and, inevitably, pushing some tottering potteries over the edge. To enlarge his share of the scheme-ware business, Wells trimmed pennies per dozen off the prices of Quaker Oats’ cups, saucers, plates, bowls, sugars, and creamers, hoping to entice O’Grady into buying more goods. Emulating the Sebrings, he probed the recesses of the premium trade, answering the calls of small vendors who wanted bits and pieces of crockery for even the most minor of promotions. During the early 1930s, Frank A. Sebring Jr., who managed the Salem China Company in Salem, Ohio, built a profitable trade as purveyor to movie theaters, which gave away tableware at midweek pictures to encourage moviegoing. Few potteries lavished as much effort on “dish night” as did “Tode” Sebring, who pioneered the practice of product placement as an advertising mechanism and whose dish deliveries included fantastical display units. Other Sebrings followed suit, with movie palaces consuming much of the Depression Era output of Limoges and the Sebring Pottery Company. Wells waded into the fray and soon routinely sold dishes to some three dozen movie houses in Chicago. By 1932, one incensed Sebring salesmen became so irritated by the competition that he
Dish night at a neighborhood theater, 1932. Salem China Company Collection, National Museum of American History Archives Center, Smithsonian Institution
condemned Homer Laughlin’s output as “five-and-ten trash” in a telegram to a New York distributor catering to movie theaters. Wells went on to copy Salem’s strategy of building customers among furniture stores, relying on small jobbers for distribution to this market, rich with installment sales. Still, this patchwork business hardly satisfied Homer Laughlin’s capacity: five tunnel kiln factories, whose efficient operation depended on round-the-clock production.45

Frustrated by the state of the economy and alarmed by the Woolworth debacle, Homer Laughlin’s managers evaluated their approaches to technology, design, and markets. As the Depression wore on, the dish-making colossus closed two of its plants; the company could not afford any more losses. Just as the economic crisis eroded consumer purchasing power, competition from cheap imported ceramics—“millions of dozens of cups and saucers” from Japan—threatened mass-market potteries. Concurrently, Czechoslovakian and German
potteries, desperate for a nibble of the American chain store trade, developed automatic machinery that formed cups and plates—thus undercutting American prices. At the end of his long career, W. Edwin Wells solemnly announced to the National Brotherhood of Operative Potters that only “well-managed and modernly equipped factories” would pull through. The proof was in the pudding: Kresge’s Mount Clemens Pottery Company reportedly operated at full capacity. The senior Wells’s farewell statement to the union presaged major technical changes that would take place at Homer Laughlin during the ensuing years under his son’s direction.  

Much like contemporary automakers, who used styling in an effort to stimulate car sales, the younger Wells engaged the triumvirate of industrial science, product design, and manufacturing technology to revive the chain store trade and to enlarge the department store business. First, he expanded the firm’s decorative research program, adding in 1931 an annex to Plant No. 5 for the art department, the ceramics laboratory, and a new pilot plant. Next, Wells invested heavily in mechanical engineering, hiring in 1934 Walter Howard Emerson, a graduate of MIT who had Fordized production at Kresge’s Mount Clemens. In charge of Homer Laughlin’s new planning department, Emerson reorganized production in several complex stages, using mass-production methods to make the base of a product, leaving the firm’s managers with a spectrum of opportunities in the realm of decorating. His mechanization projects increased throughput but did not compromise Homer Laughlin’s commitment to flexible production or cramp Rhead’s options in terms of product design.  

Meanwhile, the art department also geared up, functioning much like “a tool or a machine” that churned out some five hundred drawings, three hundred models of shapes, and three thousand decorated samples each year. As ceramic art engineer, Rhead spent an average of two hours per day in conferences with factory officials, salesmen, crockery buyers, admen, printers, materials suppliers, and decal manufacturers and another two hours supervising the work of an assistant art director, two staff modelers, some china decorators, and a few errand boys. With administrative tasks completed, he worked on new decorations for established clients or new customers, creating modernistic banded wares for Macy’s and Gimbels or dreaming up syndicate patterns for W. T. Grant Company. However, his foremost responsibility was creating new lines for the mid-January trade show in Pittsburgh. At this annual spectacle, the most important department store buyers contemplated which patterns to stock in the
forthcoming year. There, Wells expected the fruits of ceramic art engineering—good designs in the modern style—to inspire big-time buyers to carry Laughlin wares. 48

As important buyers pressed Wells for novel products, their exhortations reached fever pitch, reflecting consumers’ “insatiable” desires “for something new, something different, something more beautiful, something more useful, and, in particular, something cheaper.” In effect, the mode for soft, casual colors had run its course by 1934, and buyers searched for a new look. To some extent, visual freshness might still be achieved by placing modernistic decals against subdued backgrounds, but the market could only bear so many Green Wheat spin-offs. At Limoges, designer Viktor Schreckengost, a native Ohioan who worked on the shop floor at various Sebring potteries before attending art school, broke aesthetic ground with Flower Shop, a flat decal design whose novelty captured the fancy of department store shoppers. As competitors imitated Limoges’s bright red and green motif, prices fell so much that “flowerpot” dishes became dime store staples. In addition, European factories were hit hard by the Depression, making it difficult to procure high-quality decals on time and creating eleventh-hour delivery crises. Gaertner’s death in 1932 toppled the apple cart, eroding whatever advantages Homer Laughlin had among foreign printers. The best way out of this decorating dilemma was to diversify the firm’s embellishing options, breaking away from tried-and-true decal technology. Although it never disappeared from the potter’s tool kit, decalcomania started surrendering its crown during the 1930s to new decorating methods, including relief molding, simple hand painting, bright chromatic glazes, and silk screening. At Homer Laughlin, the slow death of decals went hand in hand with the rise of simple shapes and colorful glazes geared toward casual dining in the home. 49

In 1933, some industry observers argued that the repeal of Prohibition struck the final blow against formal dining; more than ever, consumers stocked their kitchens with informal accessories. Even if they did not drink, consumers living on Depression Era incomes had to cook and entertain themselves at home. Many dusted off their dining room tables and reinstated the evening meal with a twist of informality. In 1933, the Chase Brass & Copper Company targeted stay-at-home diners with the first of its “table electrics” designed for the new buffet dinner. Determined to capture the attention of easy eaters, Wells made his initial move with a dramatically different product for Homer Laughlin: baking dishes, called Oven Serve. Designing this line for Woolworth after the dime
store introduced twenty-cent merchandise in 1932. Rhead took his cues from Corning Glass Works, the Crooksville Pottery Company, and the Harker Pottery Company, which made casseroles and other baking dishes. Frantz’s antipathy began to fade when Woolworth restaurants started cooking daily specials in Oven Serve, putting baking dishes filled with scrumptious preparations in windows to lure hungry shoppers inside. With Woolworth orders back, Wells offered Oven Serve to premium vendors, department stores, and hardware stores,
giving contest to the Pyrex monopoly on cookware shelves. The Oven Serve experiment showed Wells that Depression Era consumers were ready, willing, and able to buy decal-free crockery especially designed for easy eating.\textsuperscript{50}

In this context, Homer Laughlin’s managers took the first real steps toward creating the chromatic line that took the 1936 Pittsburgh show by storm: Fiesta. Two forces came together in the design process. In 1934, the sales manager Louis K. Friedman, in charge of the pottery’s department store accounts, advocated that Homer Laughlin “imitate . . . Italian glazes.” (He referred to the inexpensive, gayly colored peasant pottery from Italy, Spain, France, Mexico, Ireland, Hungary, and Germany that was being sold in quaint department store nooks called “Little Mexico” or “Normandy Kitchen.”) About the same time, Wells pressed for emulation of the more costly California faience, the modernistic tableware produced by two Los Angeles structural clay-working firms, Pacific Clay Products and Gladding, McBean & Company (plate 5). (With their wild colors, West Coast ceramics embodied the uninhibited spontaneity of California’s casual lifestyle, which \textit{House Beautiful} described as “hot-off-the-griddle” like “Hollywood’s own backdrops.”) As Fae Huttenlocher showed in \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}, these solid-colored dishes, created expressly for buffet dining, complemented “red apples and blush-tinted pears” in “gay table settings” for fall meals. Helen Sprackling wrote in her \textit{Better Homes and Gardens} column that Pacific’s pumpkin yellows and Apache reds could be mixed, making it ideal for “simple entertaining.” To Sprackling, a hostess’s success depended on “unforgettable food” and on table settings made chromatically attractive with Ohio glassware and California pottery.\textsuperscript{51}

California colored dinnerware, which depended on low-temperature firing, was not unique. In terms of production, the Golden State had a small but well-established ceramics industry that filled the local demand for faience tiles and garden pottery. This clay tile industry took off following the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, which popularized a Spanish Colonial style. Stemming from a confluence of Spanish, Mexican, and Native American heritages, this aesthetic depended on striking blue, green, and yellow tiles for much of its eye appeal. By the 1920s, clay workers introduced chromatic household accessories to match their architectural faience. Wells recognized that firms like Gladding McBean had neither the interest nor the capacity for making pottery on a mass-production basis. When California faience made a big splash at the 1935 Pittsburgh show, the quest to add new dimension to Homer Laughlin’s product portfolio ensued.\textsuperscript{52}
Without question, Homer Laughlin’s “California” undertaking rested on the strong foundation laid by earlier research and engineering projects, with behind-the-scenes technical accomplishments making design innovation possible. When working on the Vellum glaze, Bleininger conquered the problem of application by adapting atomizers to suit continuous-flow production; and when laboring over Oven Serve, he discovered how certain percentages of talc affected the shrinkage, porosity, and durability of clay bodies. Emerson continued to fine-tune the firm’s production setup, often in response to Rhead’s request for small technical adjustments that made a big difference in the product’s appearance. In tandem, spraying equipment, low-temperature clay bodies, and other new gizmos and concoctions became key elements in Homer Laughlin’s technical repertoire. Yet it was the stunning juxtaposition of modern shapes with dramatic colors, rather than the details of glaze composition or firing temperatures, that excited crockery buyers at the 1936 Pittsburgh show. Technical ingenuity undergirded the firm’s design resiliency, but stylistic precociousness still depended on a close reading of the marketplace, making the business-culture nexus the most important node in this tale about Homer Laughlin’s “new deal” in dinnerware decoration.

Working on the “California development” that evolved into Fiesta enabled Rhead to measure his theories about American social classes against the reality of mass markets. Consumers like Katherine Perry relished everything about California ware, using her aquamarine set “only at breakfast” for decades until all but a few pieces had broken. Perry perfectly fit Rhead’s vision of a middle-class woman, with her smart quarters at the Eddystone in Washington, D.C., outfitted with Sheraton-style furniture, politely worn Asian rugs, and modern odds and ends. If he had visited Perry’s four-room apartment, Rhead might have knowingly nodded at her heirloom cut glass and Bavarian china, glanced appreciatively at her Wedgwood dinner service, scowled at her Japanese luncheon set, and quietly sized up her California dishes. Personally, Rhead disliked the “crude appeals” of California faience, with its “greens the color of gangrene, yellows and browns the color of manure,” and “equally offensive” pinks and blues. He much preferred soft art glazes, like those developed for Gimbels’ Ujlaki. Still, the job of ceramic art engineering demanded suppression of personal preferences for the firm’s benefit. With Wells commanding him to spare no effort or expense on the California spin-off, Rhead pressed on.

To capture the attention of department store shoppers who had vehemently rejected skyscraper modernism, Rhead blended the old and the new in Fiesta,
endowing the line with a good deal of the commonplace and a sprinkle of novelty (plate 6). This fusion came through in the look and the name of the product, designed to trigger responses among middlebrows searching for “anything except something in crass taste.” In the visual realm, Rhead crafted Fiesta’s shape in the hybrid style now identified as art deco, a stylized modernism toned down with historicist references. By January 1935, Rhead’s modelers had stumbled upon a “jolly and pleasant” shape with “concentric circles” that would act as a foil for “obvious and brilliant colors.” The globular forms harked back to the earthy Arts and Crafts aesthetic, but the low-relief circles meant different things to different audiences. Traditionalists equated the rings with marks left by the old potter’s wheel, while modernists recollected the futurist imagery from the Worlds of Progress Expositions. When managers met in the spring to select the best glazes from among those developed by Rhead and Bleininger, salesman Friedman pressed for “blatant” hues “that shouted the most.” The art director held his tongue but quietly countered with a palette of four hot colors that cried out and a satiny ivory vellum that exerted a calming effect. Thus through shape and color Fiesta embodied the contradictions of modernism. Made with flexible mass-production technology, the line nevertheless remained tied to nature and tradition by virtue of its roots in California and the Spanish Colonial Revival. Rhead’s equivocation ensured that Fiesta would visually appeal to audiences that otherwise rejected modern styling.55

In the verbal realm, Fiesta’s name carried the same double meaning as its shape and palette, although much of this symbolism is lost on today’s consumer. In April 1935, Rhead and Friedman contemplated appellations; names like Park Lane, Plaza, and Rhapsody had ritzy connotations; euphonious terms like Tazza, Tazza Faience, Chalte Faience, and Dashe Faience, little cultural meaning. Searching for a lively, fun-and-sun name, they toyed with Flamingo before deciding on Fiesta, the Spanish word for feast or holiday. A fabulous choice, Fiesta resonated among conservative and avant-garde audiences alike. To those versed in the Spanish Colonial Revival, the name obviously referred to California living. With Mexican tourism on the rise, some consumers took Fiesta to be a reminder of exotic vacations spent south of the border. To those who stayed at home and read Stuart Chase’s 1931 best-seller, Mexico: A Study of Two Americas, Fiesta stirred up memories of the simple village inhabitants of Tepoztlán, who lived machineless lives and made beautiful folk crafts. Moviegoers may have recalled favorite films in fantastical Spanish settings; and tango lovers possessed by the dance marathon craze thought of their favorite Latin beat. Finally, to the
party crowd and the literati, the name had a distinctive modern twist, for *Fiesta* was the alternate title of Ernest Hemingway's bullfighting novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). With its multiple meanings, the name Fiesta reflected some of the fundamental tensions embodied in the design of Homer Laughlin's new object of desire.  

Throughout 1935, Rhead solicited opinions on the new line from buyers, who suggested this and that about shapes and colors. Having created Fiesta for department stores, Homer Laughlin's managers quickly discovered how much the line appealed to high-volume distributors. By summer, dime store crockery men admitted that they would buy—if the price was right. Although Fiesta never entered the pottery's decorating rooms, high startup costs and expensive ingredients dictated that Wells reserve the line for his carriage trade. Trying to give Gerry Stone at Macy's a run for his money, Ujlaki of Gimbel's asked for exclusive control of Fiesta in December. When Wells refused, the Gimbel's buyer nonetheless submitted an immense order for his New York store, a sign that portended well for the forthcoming show.  

At Pittsburgh, buyers' eyes popped out: "Fiesta was so outrageously different and so low in price," Rhead bragged to a colleague, "that everybody bought it whether they wanted it or not!" In reality, Fiesta's success was a matter of contrast, for other East Liverpool potteries showed copycat patterns or extreme motifs, either boring or shocking crockery men. The stylist Simon H. Slobodkin had so modernized the rooms of the W. S. George Pottery Company that buyers not dumbfounded by his avant-garde designs were put off by the ostentatious display, featuring black patent leather flooring, red shelves, blue cellophane curtains, and bright white lamps. To create Homer Laughlin's exhibits, Rhead drew on his love of Mexicana, developed during his Santa Barbara years, and created the Fiesta girl, a sensual flamenco dancer who became the line's symbol and an omnipresent figure on brochures and display units. In Homer Laughlin's rooms, buyers admired images of the senorita, whose limberness, glamor, and festivity stood in sharp contrast to the hokeyness of dish night's little Dutch girls. Fiesta not only caught show goers' attentions with its "smart rather than arty" shape and bright yet harmonious color but also sustained their interest with its potential sales appeal. Sold through the open-stock system, Fiesta epitomized casual tableware, "sport" dishes in mix-and-match colors. A shopper could decide on her own chromatic combinations, using blue plates, red cups, and yellow bowls if that selection met her fancy. The Fiesta ensemble fully embodied Hazel Adler's theories; by choosing Fiesta, a woman might de-
clare membership in mass culture, and, by mixing colors, she would display her individuality or personal taste. Recognizing this versatility, many buyers, big and small, from St. Louis's Famous-Barr to Syracuse's E. W. Edwards & Son, immediately bought Fiesta in every color; more cautious retailers went home to mull over the novelty, submitting orders during the spring. Back in Manhattan, Bloomingdale's china department showcased Homer Laughlin's Fiesta next to some California ware. Pleased with sales of the new tableware, Gimbel's Ujlaki canceled his order for Pacific Clay's faience and spotlighted Fiesta as his premier color line. 58

As buyers flocked to Homer Laughlin's hotel rooms to see Fiesta, they encountered another novel tableware embellishment: silk screen decorations. By tradition, potters used the Pittsburgh show as a coming-out party for dish debutantes, but they also depended on the exhibit, packed with competitors, buyers, stylists, and journalists, as a vehicle for testing less mature products. In the opening days, salesmen displayed all their goods, including experimental pieces; if too many passersby snarled or scoffed, blushing salesmen stashed the new stuff under the counter and pulled out tried-and-true patterns. For designs that survived this rite, sales staff anxiously awaited the midshow arrival of wide-awake journalists like Madeline Young Love of China, Glass and Lamps and Fae Huttenlocher of Better Homes and Gardens, whom they pressed for feedback—and free press. Such was the case in 1936, with Homer Laughlin's new silk screen decorations. 59

During the 1930s, Rhead watched the gigantic Toledo-based Owens-Illinois Glass Company introduce dime store tumblers with brightly colored silk screen motifs. Licensed to use equipment patented by Solar Laboratories in Beaver, Pennsylvania, an Owen-Illinois subsidiary, the Libbey Glass Company, silk-screened three thousand tumblers per hour at a machine attended by one operative. Recognizing the mass-production potential of this "baby," Rhead, Bleininger, and the plant manager, Harry Spore, pressed Homer Laughlin's managers to try out the technique, with Solar providing experimental decorating equipment by late 1935. At a moment when potteries sought to achieve maximum novelty at least cost, silk screening offered several advantages. In the art department, the new method provided Rhead with a fast mechanism for satisfying buyers like James Faulds, the crockery man at Kauffman's department store in Pittsburgh. Excited about the new technology, Faulds gave Friedman some fabric samples with "new designs," hoping the Rhead might use these swatches to create "something modern in dinnerware decoration" for his store. If buyers'
cloth samples left him uninspired, Rhead might create borders, brushwork motifs, or banded effects: the decorative possibilities were endless; the final products, of good quality. On the shop floor, silk screening offered significant cost reductions, as four women, each working for $3.50 a day, could decorate six hundred dozen items. In comparative terms, silk screen decorations cost from two to four cents per dozen, while other embellishments cost from fifteen to twenty-five cents. The technology had several glitches—screens broke if improperly fitted, some shapes failed to accept color—but it worked splendidly once the kinks were ironed out. When Homer Laughlin showed prototypes at Pittsburgh in 1936, competitors rushed home to contact Solar. Astounded at the designs, Woolworth’s new crockery buyer, H. H. Lindquist, more sympathetic to USPA potters than his predecessor, P. G. Frantz, predicted that silk screen decorations would be a “very effective weapon against anything Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Ethiopian, or otherwise.”

The successes of the Pittsburgh show propelled Homer Laughlin to the top of the stylistic ladder among American potteries. Fiesta and silk screen lines opened mass-market pottery to the chromatic and casual revolutions. In mid-1936 the Textile Color Card Association, an organization that established chromatic standards and predicted fashion hues for each style season, introduced a collection of “pottery tones,” featuring faience blue, ceramic green, and Spanish magenta. In December, Mabel J. Stegner featured a holiday breakfast table set with Fiesta in Better Homes and Gardens, signaling Homer Laughlin’s victory over California wares, which had appeared in this middlebrow magazine for several years. Woolworth’s Lindquist pressed Wells to create a downscale version of Fiesta. As business picked up in 1936, Lindquist prepared to restock his five-and-tens with good-looking crockery that would appeal to down-and-out middle-class shoppers who browsed at Woolies. In response, Rhead designed Harlequin, a less expensive monochromatic line in an exaggerated streamlined shape. By the mid-1930s, streamlined modernism, condemned by department store shoppers, found ready buyers in the dime store trade. Style was a peculiar thing, with a trajectory nearly impossible to predict. Fiesta and its stepchild, Harlequin, challenged the fundamental rules of trickle-down fashion theory.

As orders poured in for colored and silk screened lines, Homer Laughlin’s tunnel kilns remained up and running during the “Roosevelt recession” of 1937. Ever watchful of costs, Rhead began to create plainer shapes compatible with silk screening, trying to balance customer expectations with the constraints the
new technology imposed. Silk screening breathed new life into the casual color mode, endowing tableware with a soft, bold modernism that was difficult to achieve with chromolithography. Monochromatic lines, silk screened shapes, and gay modern decals, some depicting Mexican scenes of sombreros, cacti, and peasant vases, found niches in Homer Laughlin's product portfolio. Yet despite this revolution in decoration, Rhead continued to create lines covered with
floral decals; consumers at all price levels and taste preferences continued to buy quantities of pottery decorated with “pretty posies.” For decades, Homer Laughlin would continue to serve this segmented market. The decal aesthetic died a long, drawn-out death.⁶²

Homer Laughlin’s newfound status as style kingfish rattled the USPA’s long-time aesthetic leader, Charlie Sebring. The Depression had driven Leigh Potters out of business, and the Sebring family’s pottery interests coalesced around three firms that Charlie Sebring helped to manage: Sebring, Limoges, and the Salem China Company. As he tried to upgrade these firms’ product lines, Charlie Sebring watched Homer Laughlin and turned greener than Green Wheat with envy. In 1937, his West Virginia rival dominated all the trade shows, and Sebring’s potteries “failed to impress the buyers with the distinctiveness and unusualness” of their offerings. “We did not have,” he complained to other top managers, any new lines equivalent to “Barbara Jane or Ivory Porcelain or Umbertone or Pink Body or Flower Shop or Petit Point,” referring to the Sebring-Leigh-Limoges hit parade. Grasping for ideas, he and Schreckengost visited Homer Laughlin and Libbey to witness silk screen technology in action. Shortly afterward, Charlie Sebring rushed back from the home furnishings show in New York, reporting excitedly on the popularity of ceramic cookware of all shapes, sizes, and colors. The clincher came when he proposed a decorative development program that sounded like a blow-by-blow account of Rhead’s accomplishments: creating colored bodies, developing a talc body, making cookwares, experimenting with banding machines, establishing a pilot plant, introducing “colored glazes of the California or Fiesta type,” and adopting the silk screen process. To survive cutthroat competition from low-wage economies like Japan’s and Czechoslovakia’s as well as that from open shops and mechanized glassworks, the Sebrings had to develop higher-priced products, broaching big middlebrow markets like Montgomery Ward. ⁶³

By decade’s end, the East Liverpool potteries experienced design fever, with factories searching for ways to please the eye without sacrificing utility. In many respects, Rhead had achieved his dream for the tableware industry, for most design-conscious firms had hired experienced practical men to orchestrate decorative development. At Knowles, Vincent Broomhall, an East Liverpudlian who had studied design at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute of Technology, worked with decal manufacturers to simplify and loosen up the look of chromolithographic designs. At Taylor, Smith & Taylor, the Staffordshire man Thorley, who had left the Sebrings, created Fiesta copies in bright and pastel colors. Pulling them-
selves together, the Sebrings made a big splash at the 1938 Pittsburgh show, where “artists and designers from other potteries were seen making notes and sketches” of Jiffy Ware, a cooking line designed by Schreckengost. When asked to revamp Salem and Limoges offerings, Schreckengost, then teaching at the Cleveland School of Art, wisely insisted on input from the firm’s sales manager, who understood the competition, attended all the trade shows, and, most important, knew all the buyers. Like Rhead, these designers adopted the maxim, “keep up with the customers,” and avoided “snooty decorative types” that appealed little to average consumers.64

The managers at Steubenville Pottery Company in Ohio took a different approach to design when they agreed to manufacture products designed by Russel Wright, a young New York consultant seeking to build a signature American line. A decorative dabbler turned designer, Wright secured a good degree of visibility when his aggressive spouse promoted his designs among Manhattan tastemakers. Introduced in 1939 as a dinnerware breakthrough, Wright’s American Modern, with organic shapes, speckled glazes, and artsy-craftsy colors such as bean brown and curry green, owed much to a nascent studio pottery move-
ment and even more to the vogue for casual color that had been unfolding for a
decade. Like the leaders of the industrial design profession, Wright had little
patience for prevailing mass-market fashions. Rather than creating pretty, in-
expensive patterns that “Mamie Jenkins” and “Mrs. Brown” would buy, he ex-
pected to remold these women’s tastes and the world in his own image through
better design. Despite the celebration of Wright as an aesthetic god by curators
and design historians, the truth is that he spent four years trying to find a pot-
ttery that would adopt his designs, ultimately settling for Steubenville, a small
factory desperate for business during the Depression. Riding on the success of
California ware and Fiesta, Wright’s products achieved greater visibility in the
postwar era, when growing purchasing power enabled more consumers to buy
into the middle-class way of life. Even then, Steubenville’s output paled next to
that of mass-production factories like Mount Clemens and Homer Laughlin.
Rhead shared his distaste for American Modern with one of his siblings, who
sent him a cartoon mocking Wright’s interpretation of easy eating and the “form-
follows-function” rubric promulgated by tastemaking consultants. Addressing
the USPA, Rhead described Wright’s cream pitchers and sugar bowls as being
modeled after “male urinals” and “infant toilets.” American Modern, he argued,
reflected an “elementary knowledge and appreciation of form”: it was “slithery
and wise-cracking rather than smart, the type of ware one would expect to be
used by parlor pinks and communists.”

During World War II, American potters dominated the domestic market for
table accessories, as hostilities temporarily curtailed imports of Czechoslovakian, German, and Japanese ceramics. Inch by inch, American ceramics regained their footholds in five-and-tens, especially after the sinking of the gunboat U.S.S. _Panay_ in 1938 precipitated a boycott of Japanese products. With essential raw materials like uranium oxide reserved for military use, Homer Laughlin curtailed production of some bright glazes, such as Fiesta’s yellow and red. Facing dwindling decal supplies, the firm focused on getting the most out of monochromatic, banded, and silk screen embellishments. Overall, wartime shortages forced potters’ hands in terms of design, ushering new visual responses to the versatility question among USPA firms. Confronted with a scarcity of skilled labor to apply delicate handles and finials, Schreckengost introduced simpler forms and shapes. To the dismay of East Liverpool potters, popular magazines like _Life_ spotlighted the accomplishments of factories like Syracuse China and Lenox China, peripheral firms whose porcelain tableware in part filled the voids in middlebrow and highbrow markets created by the hiatus in European trade. Such publicity fanned prejudices against American earthenware table accessories, with middle-class shoppers buying porcelain made by decorating shops and hotel china factories for the sake of owning “fine china.”

At Rhead’s death in 1942, members of the USPA lamented more than the passing of the “outstanding designer in the ceramic field.” They mourned the end of an era. Managers at Homer Laughlin remembered his “immense energies and broad interests,” his “quick perception and vigorous . . . expression,” and his abilities as a writer, critic, and innovator. When this veteran of the potteries died of cancer after a lifetime of exposure to often-hazardous materials, colleagues suspected that product design in the pottery tableware industry would never be the same. Uncannily, American potters sensed their own demise when equating Rhead’s passing with the destruction of the “the mold, the case, and the block.” Within two decades, the American tableware industry would be reduced to a handful of factories struggling to survive amid competition from foreign potters, plastics manufacturers, and quantity-production glassworks. No voice like Rhead’s would rise above the vortex of the postwar market, offering a vision for decorative development that would liberate the stumbling industry from the nightmare of inexpensive Japanese imports, especially designed to meet the demands of American consumers. 67