CHAPTER 7

Easier Living?

In his widely circulated Guide to Easier Living (1954), the industrial designer Russel Wright outlined a formula for middle-class domestic bliss that revolved around carefree suburban life and casual dining. The New York consultant urged readers to shake “free of traditionalism” and cast aside the “hard shell of snobbish convention” reflected in formal attire, afternoon tea parties, sit-down dinners, and living room suites crafted in Chippendale or Sheraton styles. As the self-appointed spokesperson for the cult of informality, Wright privately stood in stark opposition to advice columnist Emily Post, watchdog for a diminishing gentility. Whereas Post advocated “drinking tea gracefully from a fine flaring cup,” Wright encouraged “more drooling, less fancy etiquette, and less housework.” His stake to cultural authority rested on an idealized portrait of America as a nation free from racial strife, urban congestion, class conflict, and ethnic diversity. Wright’s products expressed the postwar longing for a return to a fairy-tale normalcy, wherein the “democratization of things” ensured consensus.

A student of nationally renowned industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes, Wright crafted his career as the king of casual domesticity by capitalizing on developments partially given expression by Frederick Hurten Rhead’s work at the Homer Laughlin China Company. Rhead had chortled at Wright’s 1939 American Modern line for the Steubenville Pottery Company: a national style seemed ludicrous to an art director whose firm catered to so many different
clients and consumer groups. Yet Wright’s American Modern—a dinnerware staple at department stores such as the Hecht Company in Washington, D.C., F. and R. Lazarus & Company in Columbus, Maison Blanche in New Orleans, and Foley’s in Houston—prefigured a major ideological transformation of the postwar era. By the late 1940s, the notion of one American taste resounded among countless consultants, including glassware maven Freda Diamond. A graduate of the Cooper Hewitt School of Design for Women, Diamond defined herself as a great synthesizer who scanned the audience, digested what she saw, and assimilated the hodgepodge to create one best product that would appeal to everyone.2

Diamond’s consensual outlook crystallized during the interwar years, but the Great Depression thwarted her ambitions for uplift. Spending six years as a department store stylist at Manhattan’s Stem Brothers, she became exasperated with managers who clung to traditional looks: “I was sure that given the opportunity to choose and to buy better taste and fashion merchandise at moderate prices the average consumer would respond with alacrity, and this would stimulate more interest in the home and make for additional business.” In 1938, she gave substance to her modernist theories with her designs for simple, Shaker-style furniture produced by the Herman Miller factory in Grand Rapids. Diamond’s big breaks came during and after the war when she teamed up with businesses, big and small, that welcomed her market-shaping orientation. Then, some home furnishings producers counted her among the design profession’s Olympians. She created lines for the Libbey Division of the Owens-Illinois Glass Company, Continental Can Company, Pennsylvania House Furniture, Yale & Towne, Foster Grant Company, and Window Shade Manufacturer’s Association, while working as style coordinator for retailers such as Hartford’s G. Fox & Company, Allentown’s Hess Department Stores, and Los Angeles’s May Company.3

Diamond’s affiliation with Associated Merchandising Corporation, a national department store conglomerate, exposed her to firms eager for help with cracking the profitable home furnishings nut. She summarized: “Working with department stores as home furnishings coordinator and stylist gave me the opportunity of meeting and speaking to their customers and observing at close range what they were interested in buying. It helped me enormously in designing a product that could CREATE DEMAND. Also being involved as a consultant with the people in advertising and publicity both at the retail and wholesale level gave me a chance to help SHAPE DEMAND.” The booming economy of the 1940s enabled design consultants to approach clients with the confidence of soothsay-
ers—and to describe their subjects with comparable audacity. “Over the years,” Diamond recalled, “my reputation for knowing the taste of the average American consumer grew.” Although Rhead, the fashion intermediary, understood the market as stratified by class, the tastemaker saw only one customer: a middle-brow who could be taught to appreciate upscale lines. A picture of feminine elegance in tailored suits, bold jewelry, and enormous hats, Diamond impressed managers who wanted to secure the woman’s perspective and the designer’s eye in one neat package.4

During the war, Diamond established her forty-seven-year relationship with Libbey, the consumer wing of Toledo container giant Owens-Illinois. Descended from Edward Drummond Libbey’s cut glass factory, the division reentered the carriage trade in 1940 with Modern American stemware, modeled to capture a business once dominated by Scandinavian and Czechoslovakian crystal. Although ill fated, this effort to create a distinctively American glassware nevertheless illustrates Libbey’s budding interest in a nationalist aesthetic, which came to maturity in peacetime. When advertising executives from J. Walter Thompson predicted that backyards would become the new domestic locus, Libbey managers in Toledo hired Diamond to design casual products. With her finger on fashion’s pulse, the New Yorker spiced up deadly dull sales meetings: “Pinks are the thing. Don’t get into darks and blacks and dark blue. Pink.” After surveying retail colleagues about patio possibilities, she created Hostess Sets, a line embodying the themes of domesticity, gaiety, and informality. Introduced in 1946, these popularly priced gift packages of machine-made tumblers featured happy motifs like Carnival, Tally Ho, and Merry-Go-Round, which promised the good life to a population tired of rations. Within eleven years, Libbey had sold more than thirty million glasses in her designs, mostly in sets of six or twelve.5

To be sure, Wright’s and Diamond’s emphasis on casual living, better design, and “good taste” suited big businesses like Owens-Illinois, whose professional managers searched for ways to cut costs, increase throughput, and conquer enormous markets. Diamond’s Flair shape received the Museum of Modern Art’s 1952 Good Design Award, and the Toledo men basked in the glory. “We know that fine design is essential to our high-volume business,” trumpeted general manager A. M. Turner, “and recognize that many other businesses understand this truth.” Yet taking this executive braggadocio as evidence of a seismic shift in design practice is problematic, for quantity-oriented Libbey did not typify home furnishings firms. For much of the postwar era, batch producers still dominated this market. Revisiting some familiar firms to see how this less-visible majority
responded to “multi-media” designers and to cultural prescriptions for easier living is a fitting wrap-up for this tale about imagining consumers.  

Coping with Consensus

When Lord & Taylor spotlighted Italian faience as a hot housewares line after World War II, New York City’s most prestigious department store sent American retailers a signal: Imports will return. Similarly, Freda Diamond did her bit for foreign goods by spreading the word about American taste among Italian craftsman and Japanese manufacturers targeted by government economic development programs. During the 1950s and 1960s, the nation’s potteries and glassworks experienced a major upheaval when foreign trade policy, including
the multilateral General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades, opened the United States to inexpensive products from Europe and Asia. An explosion in melamine tableware, aggressively pushed by established molders like Boonton and new entrants such as Royalon and Lenox, exacerbated the import crisis. (Ironically for Homer Laughlin, the enormous appeal of plastic stemmed from a wide assortment of monochromatic colors; one molding compound, Plaskon, came in 11,500 hues.) In 1954, a joint envoy from the United States Potters’ Association (USPA) and the National Brotherhood of Operative Potters begged Congress to raise tariffs and put quotas on ceramics. A year later Homer Laughlin’s Joseph M. Wells, testifying before the Senate Finance Committee, blamed huge industrywide losses on cheap Japanese porcelain. Between 1947 and 1961, the output of the American pottery industry declined by 50 percent, and fifteen factories in the East Liverpool district of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia filed for bankruptcy. The Steubenville Pottery, the maker of Wright’s American Modern, counted among these failures. Manufacturers of pressed glass faced comparable conditions; by 1961, fifteen of the thirty-nine companies operating in 1950 shut down, with little relief in sight.7

While lobbying for protectionism, managers in batch production firms dealt with diminishing sales on a day-to-day basis, sometimes turning to highfalutin advisors for designs and publicity—often with regrets. Working through dealer-importers like Justin Tharaud & Son on Fifth Avenue, Russel Wright secured consultancies with potteries and glassworks tottering on the edge. Anxious to retain wartime advantages among department stores and gift shops, West Virginia’s Paden City Glass Company signed a 1949 contract to produce Highlight, a complement to Steubenville’s American Modern. Finding Wright’s design proposals incompatible with existing setups, the faltering factory scrambled to construct a special fabrication unit before going belly-up in 1953. Similarly, managers at New Jersey’s Appleman Art Glass Works, bankrupt by 1952, pulled their hair when Wright demanded textures, colors, and shapes beyond the purview of the bent glass medium. More financially stable factories in the Midwest lodged similar grievances. Indiana Glass Company’s engineers tired of explaining to Wright why this or that would not fly on the shop floor. Evaluating a sketch for an hourglass tumbler with a tightly crimped waist, Indiana’s Arthur Harshman reiterated the basics: “To reshape the article, it must be thrust into the fire edge first, and by the time the heavy bottom of this glass was plastic, the thin edge would have passed the liquid stage.” In some instances, Wright navigated around his technical deficiencies by stationing subject specialists like the potter Doris Coutant
at factories; more often, he depended on fast talk and pizzazz to save his day.\(^8\)

Overall, industrial design offered temporary relief at best. At Imperial Glass Corporation in Ohio, Wright’s Flare, Pinch, and Flame tumblers, introduced in 1950, brought the prestige associated with signature lines and masked rocky balance sheets. Similarly infected by design mania, the glassmaker A. H. Heisey & Company asked its tastemaking consultant Eva Zeisel to update handmade lines, adding Cocktail Party, Crystal Buds, and Leaf; and the Edwin M. Knowles China Company paid the California-based Virginia Hamill to create some “sure-fire Lady Bait.” In contrast, more prescient managers at the Salem China Company, Homer Laughlin, and the Fostoria Glass Company steered clear of simple design solutions offered by big names and instead modified proven methods to pioneer new market niches. Some broadened the scope of scheme ware, others tapped institutional markets, and still others capitalized on love and marriage. When design fit into these factories’ game plans, it played into the hands of trusted consultants and art directors who knew the technological ropes.\(^9\)

The Sebring empire emerged from the Depression and the war with deep wounds; only its Limoges and Salem companies survived. A clan member by marriage to Frank A. Sebring’s granddaughter, J. Harrison Keller joined Limoges’s management in 1936. When this factory closed thirteen years later, he became Salem’s president, installing labor-saving equipment to increase output by about 40 percent. For the 1950 Pittsburgh exhibit, Keller supported an industrywide initiative to battle imports with the great cure-all: casual styling. Ironically, Salem’s long-standing part-time designer, Viktor Schreckengost, looked to Asian art for inspiration, creating a show-stopping lotus shape with Water Lily, Cherry Blossom, and Poppy patterns. The next year, the salesman George Weigl collaborated with Harold Krauss, the crockery man at Bamberger’s department store in Newark, New Jersey, to feature Schreckengost dishes alongside matching linens and glass, all “ranch house” styled. So the story went, well into the fifties. With one eye on the competition, Keller even brought personal talents into the picture, working with the buyer from Sears, Roebuck & Company on a Harmony House exclusive, Symphony dinnerware.\(^10\)

Yet the best casual styling, whether Keller’s mail-order brainstorms or Schreckengost sensations like his Free Form shape, failed to prop up the last Sebring pottery. When Salem lost Sears’s orders to Japan in the early 1950s, Keller initially relied on the family’s premium heritage to keep kilns running. Since the late 1930s, East Liverpool potteries had ventured into a new giveaway field: supermarkets. New wave scheming, complete with elaborate display units
oriented toward tapping feminine susceptibility to “Pretty Dishes,” sustained Salem until the mid-1950s, when competition from East Liverpool rivals eroded profitability. Next, bank giveaways exhausted their course, forcing the mild-mannered Keller to take the bull by its horns: If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em. By 1967, however, Salem’s kilns lay idle, as the firm turned away from manufacturing and began importing flatware, silverplate, and china from Europe and Asia for resale.11

Meanwhile, Homer Laughlin’s style-minded vice president Louis K. Friedman searched for an art director following Rhead’s death in 1942. A Sebring native who had worked in local potteries throughout high school, Don Schreckengost, Viktor’s sibling, filled the slot from 1945 through 1960. After studying industrial design at the Cleveland Institute of Art, “Schreck” spent the early thirties at Salem, where Tode Sebring’s quest for “a different look” excited the young man’s creativity. His Tricorne shape, accented with bright orange bands, presented a dramatic alternative to the decal aesthetic, paralleling Rhead’s movement toward a monochrome palette. By 1935, however, Schreck moved on, accepting a design professorship at Alfred University’s clay-working school. Ten years later, aggravated by the hubris of postwar consultants, he returned to the pottery district ready to wage an offensive against the notion of a single American taste. For the 1950 Pittsburgh show, Schreck embellished his new Debutante shape with eleven unique patterns—to make a point. Whereas Homer Laughlin had produced three dinnerware shapes in 1914, it made twenty-seven shapes in three clay bodies and nineteen glazes in 1953. Decorating options boggled the mind: decalcomania, underglaze transfer printing, banding, hand lining, machine lining, stamping, spray tinting, silk screening, and stenciling. Under the new art director’s guidance, America’s ceramics leviathan confronted consensus with what it knew best: variety.12

Though keeping a stiff upper lip, Homer Laughlin also suffered problems that pushed it to the brink of collapse. Once responsible for a third of USPA output, the company made 23 percent of American tableware in 1949; a decade later, 20 percent. Accompanied by an overall 50 percent reduction in USPA output, the dish colossus received “a smaller slice of a smaller pie.” Many of the troubles stemmed from Japanese imports, plastics, and power shifts among American potteries. As marginal firms closed, aggressive firms like the Royal China Company in Sebring, Ohio, and Taylor, Smith & Taylor in Chester, West Virginia, attracted crockery buyers’ attentions with innovative sales pitches and merchandising deals. California upstarts like Vernon Kilns became the standard-bearers of the casual
The stylistic variety that characterized Homer Laughlin's output during Don Schreckengost's tenure as art director. Promotional leaflet, 1957, Homer Laughlin China Company

mode. When Ball Stores in Muncie, Indiana, stocked Vernon's Tickled Pink, the buyer, Kathryn Petro, reported that Middletown shoppers deemed it the perfect "fit" with "their relaxed, informal way of life." To volume producers in the East Liverpool district, scheme ware looked better than ever, and desperate potteries jostled with makers of pots, pans, toys, cutlery, glass, luggage, and jewelry for shares of the $2 billion premium market. In 1949, Homer Laughlin relied on five-and-tens for 31 percent of sales. Ten years later, business fell precipitously, and premium vendors gobbled up 40 percent of the firm's products.¹³

As losses mounted, Homer Laughlin's decision makers reevaluated their century-old approach to the pottery business; in 1959, the firm began slowly converting from consumer products to institutional china for hotels, restaurants,
and cafeterias. This shift, combined with a major managerial reorganization, ensured the firm's survival. Appointed art director in 1962, Vincent Broomhall, a hometown boy with a broad range of pottery experience, marched to a different drummer than Schreck. Coming of age after the demise of apprenticeships, he nevertheless combined artistic talent and technical facility in ways that would have pleased the best practical men, including Jesse Dean and Rhead. Working as a decal designer for Palm, Fechteler & Company during the early 1930s, Broomhall shied away from detailed patterns—from “roses that you could almost smell”—and pursued bold styling. Whether as art director at Knowles, proprietor of Continental Kilns, or freelancer for several midwestern potteries, Broomhall's propensity for “loose” designs served him well.  

At Homer Laughlin, Broomhall articulated a strategy that combined a respect for tried-and-true market-driven aesthetics with an imperative for technological innovation. In his worldview, the shopper, rather than the tastemaker, told the factory what to make. “Good design is what appeals to the public today, and the designer must always adjust to the present-day market.” As consumers divided into discrete taste groups, importers capitalized on these differences with traditional, colonial, provincial, and contemporary styling. Broomhall's talent for easy-going designs enabled Homer Laughlin to capitalize on the emerging “bolder, more modern look.” Just as important, decades of factory work enabled him to back up design recommendations with plans for the requisite equipment. Under his aegis, Homer Laughlin streamlined embellishing processes in ways that cut costs yet revolutionized the appearance of the product. Whether making consumer lines for A&P and Montgomery Ward or institutional wares for hotel chains like Howard Johnson, the industry leader extended up-to-date informality to the masses.

Meanwhile, porcelain and glass factories took advantage of American diversity to develop more traditional markets. As cultural conservatism drew sustenance from Cold War fears, conventional institutions—marriage, family, and home—comforted Americans seeking safe haven after despondent decades. In the twenty years after the Great Depression, the nuptial rate increased by 6 percent; 60 percent of the population was married in 1940, 66 percent in 1950, and 68 percent in 1960. As the number of weddings soared, so did sales of homemaking necessities, both casual and formal. Manufacturers, retailers, and publishers tutored the prospective homemaker, steering womanly attentions toward the bridal registry as a “clearing house through which her dreams for a perfect home” might come true. During the mid-1930s, managers at Lenox China and
Wells Drorbaugh, founder of Bride's Magazine, pioneered the gift registry as a merchandising device. After the war, Lenox targeted teenagers as a distinctive group; by the 1950s, advertisements in Seventeen tempted wishful Cinderellas with the snappy, seductive slogan, “You get the license, I’ll get the Lenox.” The firm also introduced a system of named patterns, making it easier for shoppers to remember and identify their favorites. West Virginia’s ever adaptable Fostoria Glass Company followed New Jersey’s porcelain piper, using bridal registries and mass advertising to became the nation’s leading manufacturer of wedding present glassware.16

Situated primarily in high-end department stores and china shops, registries operated on simple principles. As magazines promoted hope chests and bridal showers, women learned to assemble household accessories piecemeal, taking advantage of others’ generosity. Before her wedding shower, a bride visited a retailer, selected favorite china and glass patterns, and listed preferences with the bridal secretary, so that friends and family might buy place settings for her. At Hochschild, Kohn & Company in Baltimore, registry consultants kept abreast of home furnishing trends, including interior decorating schemes, to assist customers with tableware selections. Besides facilitating distribution, registries performed key cultural functions. Selecting from a panoply of china, glass, and silver patterns, a bride assembled a tabletop outfit that testified to her individuality, much like Cinderella’s form-fitting slipper. By providing older relatives with formal gift solutions, registries also bridged the generation gap.17

Readers of Seventeen voted Fostoria the glass of choice for teenagers’ hope chests, prompting the Moundsville managers to seek even more advice from a new breed of fashion intermediary: the bridal secretary. From J. L. Hudson Company, Alice Bayse reported that few Detroit brides, however sophisticated in stylistic matters, really understood the pillars of formal living, including etiquette. She encouraged tutoring. Already, Fostoria circulated classroom films such as Crystal Clear to expose high school home economics students to glassware’s beauty and durability as well as to its utility in courtship and marriage. The film’s protagonist, Mary Lee, used glassware to ensnare “the boy next door,” teaching high school girls about well-appointed tables as material adjuncts to family values. Fostoria’s message also reached audiences through point-of-sale aids like a 1949 countertop bridal display, which beckoned women of all ages to partake in the timeless act of enjoying fine glassware and formal meals.18

America’s enduring batch production factories dealt with tough competition in numerous ways, but few turned to the new multimedia consultants. Especially
if broaching novel product areas, they preferred to rely on well-established consumer feedback loops. When Salem pioneered supermarket premiums in 1952, its sales manager, J. A. Armstrong, relied on the Indiana grocer Henry J. Eavey to conduct a bit of research—the old-fashioned way. Setting up factory samples on a dining room table in one supermarket, Eavey’s managers asked passersby to choose their favorite dishes. When customers selected Woodhue, Eavey stocked thirty-five of its supermarkets with this Salem pattern and sold more than $40,000 worth of nine-cent plates within six months. The New Ideas Committee at the Federal Glass Company in Columbus also took salesmen and retail buyers seriously, whether planning refrigerator jars or highball glasses. When the consultant designer Eva Zeisel submitted some tumbler proposals, Federal’s committee decided that only one of the nine suited the factory’s needs and that most of the others “did not lend themselves to decorating” or to a “volume market.” Enmeshed in a production-distribution matrix with a clear-cut way of doing things, Salem’s Keller and other managers in batch production firms found Madison Avenue glitter no substitute for well-established methods.19

Why Marketing?

As before, Corning Glass Works did things differently. Entering World War II as a mixed-output glassmaker, the firm used automatic processes to manufacture moderately priced, standardized electrical components and batch production practices to make expensive, highly differentiated technical and consumer lines. Industrial research facilities attracted military contracts, which accounted for 75 percent of wartime output. In 1941, Amory Houghton became chairman of the board; Houghton’s brother-in-law, Glen W. Cole, assumed CGW’s presidency until he was succeeded by William C. Decker in 1946 (figure 5). Gearing up for peacetime exploitation of its research and development laboratories, Corning had reorganized its divisions in 1943 and became a publicly traded company two years later. Under vice president Charles D. LaFollette, the Sales Department expanded its research function, providing the three product divisions with forecasts, industry analysis, and other services applicable to design and development. Meanwhile, the new Consumer Products Division, which replaced the Pyrex division of the Sales Department, devoted its full energies to Pyrex.20

The company’s reorganization especially benefited Lucy Maltby, whose “girls” had advanced wartime development projects in ways that impressed top man-
agiers. Executives long suspected that the heat-resistant opal glass used to make lighting products at Corning’s MacBeth-Evans factory in Charleroi had broader applications. As mobilization sped up after Pearl Harbor, approximately 35 percent of the nation’s war industry workers started eating meals at factory cafeterias. In response, East Liverpool potteries like Homer Laughlin churned out thousands of dozens of plain and sturdy dishes daily. Still, even tough hotel china chipped, crazed, and cracked during mass feeding. Maltby deployed test kitchen staffers Esther Rhodes and Esther K. McMurray to determine the immediate and long-term concerns of food service managers. With space at a premium, Rhodes discovered, mess halls often stacked china plates seventy-five high, and the dishes broke from the weight. Factory, school, and government cafeterias
needed enormous quantities of cups, saucers, bowls, and plates that could take such treatment, that were impervious to food stains and knife marks, and that were able to tolerate speedy handling and dishwasher compounds. When specially tempered, the Charleroi factory's white glass became the material of the hour. Cooperating with the product engineering chief John B. Ward, a wartime appointee, home economists made sure that Corning tableware met practical design requirements, providing specifications on dimensions, weight, depth, shape, surface, color, texture, finish, opacity, and stability. Through colleagues working as government procurement officers, Maltby further abetted the Opal tableware project by securing substantial military and civilian orders. 21

Newly credentialed with a Ph.D. from Syracuse University, Maltby took charge of an enlarged Home Economics Department. Military assignments honed her understanding of how entrepreneurial spirit mattered at Smokestack University, as locals dubbed Corning. To complement LaFollette's growing market research empire, Maltby devised ways that home economics, still dedicated to the woman's viewpoint, might contribute to corporate growth. The Rhodes and McMurry wartime investigations showed that face-to-face exchanges between household experts and other professionals yielded valuable product development data. A champion schmoozer who solicited advice from colleagues by telephone or at conferences, stores, and shows, Maltby made networking a core departmental operation. Corning's home economists still saw themselves as consumer liaisons, but they also assumed primary responsibility for promoting Pyrex among "key personnel" in manufacturing, retailing, education, and the media and among the people who had direct contact with homemakers. To advance this second aim, in 1944 Maltby hired a team of field service, or traveling, home economists, whose jobs entailed creating "a feeling-of-need" for Pyrex lines. 22

Corning's field representatives adopted public relations models developed by agricultural extension workers and spokeswomen for utilities, food packagers, and other consumer products firms—but with one major difference: "Lucy's girls" never amused shoppers with cooking spectacles. By the late 1940s, two factors mitigated against this decades-old mainstay among business home economists. In some cities, organized workers demanded a "union card" for anyone showcasing food. Additionally, fair trade policies initiated during the Great Depression to uphold prices required equal treatment for distributors; if Corning provided one store with demonstrators, it would have to extend the service to all stores. Maltby, instead, directed her field representatives to train depart-
ment store staff to conduct Pyrex demonstrations. This allowed Lucy's girls to focus on the highly professional tasks at hand: promoting products and building goodwill. The strategy worked brilliantly. Avoiding the cookie dough, so to speak, raised the travelers' status among housewares buyers, who, in turn, provided introductions to advertising, merchandise, and sales managers.²³

While Maltby revved up her promotional machine, the Consumer Products Division remained Corning's woeful performer. Although in 1946, Pyrex sales soared (accounting for 33 percent of net sales), they fell to 22 percent in 1947 and to 12 percent in 1950 (figure 6). Using its expertise in bulb blowing, the glassworks introduced television picture tubes in 1945: within five years, contracts with TV manufacturers accounted for 44 percent of sales. As household glassware again paled next to its “high-tech” siblings, the Consumer Products Division moved to reconceptualize.²⁴

Corning housewares rested on three lines marketed under the Pyrex name: Ovenware, Flameware, and Opal. Created when scientific housekeeping ruled the roost, the items still lacked casual good looks. Decades earlier, J. Walter Thompson had recommended a stylistic face-lift, but the Depression and the war postponed any action. Finally, the test kitchen work of Lilla Cortright served as a focusing device, showing how home economics ingenuity might enhance design.²⁵

Shortly after joining Maltby's staff in 1946, Cortright collaborated with a team seeking household applications for Opal. Two years earlier, Corning had crafted Pyrex Color Bowls, a four-piece nesting set in hues reminiscent of “Spring Flowers,” selected by Maltby from a McCall's interior decorating survey. Building on this success, the Consumer Products Division determined that Army-Navy glass was ideal for stacking refrigerator dishes. Since the 1930s, West Virginia's Hazel Atlas Glass Company had sold such sets to mail-order houses, and East Liverpool potteries supplied them to appliance companies. Corning targeted a larger audience: newlyweds setting up their dream houses on the GI Bill. Perhaps tinted Opal space savers, able to go from fridge-to-oven-to-table, might appeal to brides searching for dining accessories befitting the casual lifestyle of suburbia.²⁶

The project exemplified Maltby's vision of what home economics could do for Corning during peace and prosperity. As she wrote in a memo to John B. Ward, the product engineering chief: “An understanding of the importance of design changes relating to function, from the standpoint of the housewife, should not be underestimated.” Revered by colleagues for her engineering bent, Maltby allowed scientific management principles to inform her wish list. The perfect kitchen glass would feature the mechanical tolerance of stainless steel, the
heat resistance of fused quartz, and the clarity of fine crystal; and it would boast "functional qualities so scientifically considered that it will be possible to prove through time and motion studies that Pyrex dishes meet the needs of the American homemaker." If this sounded like Mildred Maddocks revisited, Maltby gave progressive rhetoric a forties twist by adding "artistic designs comparable to the best china and glass tableware."

As Cortright facilitated Opal's adaptation to housewares, she cannily followed her boss's outline, step by step. Consulting with other staff, she imagined consumers and responded to their needs. When a test panel in Williamsport, an industrial city in central Pennsylvania, described their product preferences to LaFollette's team, Cortright adjusted her prototypes accordingly. She sized the butter dish to hold a pound of dairy spread while being held by an average female hand; and she created invertible covers that provided nonslip stacking and tight seals for cold storage. The new line emerged: a four-piece set in bright colors selected by Williamsport women. Cortright's work so impressed managers that they made Maltby's staff integral to other Pyrex makeovers.

Corning managers admitted their fashion inadequacies by acceding to board member Arthur A. Houghton Jr.'s dream for putting design atop the corporate pedestal. A gentleman scholar with a collector's eye, Houghton—the son of Arthur A. Houghton and a fourth-generation Corning manager—had directed Steuben Glass, the firm's wayward art-glass subsidiary since the Depression. Using highbrow connections, he put Steuben Crystal in the public eye if not in the black. As his 1948 pet project, Houghton established the Corning-Steuben Design Department, a Fifth Avenue office presided over jointly by two ex-
architects: Ward, who received the title Director of Corning Design, and Steuben
general manager John Montieth Gates. Houghton recruited young staffers
through a trainee summer camp cosponsored by Boston’s Institute of Contem-
porary Art. By autumn, three bright-eyed, bushy-tailed designers worked under
Ward in Manhattan. Their focus on visuals had an enormous effect on the Con-
sumer Products Division.

The division started upgrading its kitchen trinity, and Maltby quickly discov-
ered that the young designers in New York remained incapable of understand-
ing her department’s full capabilities. Market research revealed that home bak-
ing and roasting had lost much of their appeal: women of the 1950s preferred to
purchase commercial pastries and frozen foods and did 80–85 percent of their
cooking on range tops rather than in ovens. The shift prompted Ward’s staff to
reevaluate Flameware, virtually unchanged since its 1936 introduction. Having
had little input on Flameware’s first design, Maltby gloated when the Fifth Ave-
nue office initially asked why women disliked the line. No other Corning prod-
uct, she explained, featured so many of the “annoyance factors” that drove cooks
crazy. Customers’ letters and remarks to her field-workers revealed a “consistent
consumer demand” for percolators with capacity markings and saucepans that
did not scorch food. The designers read these critiques and sent sketches for
evaluation. “Looking at a drawing,” Maltby patiently explained in 1951, “it is im-
possible for me to tell whether the spout on a Flameware dish will pour, whether
the double boiler has sufficient capacity in the lower bowl,” or “whether a han-
dle is easily grasped.” Clearly, New Yorkers perceived upstate as a faraway wilder-
ness and the test kitchen as a place for baking brownies. Two years later, little
had changed. When Joseph S. Knapp solicited advice on Pyrex casseroles, Maltby
reminded him that she needed “actual models” for testing. From her perspec-
tive, Arthur Houghton’s top-down initiative had backfired; the firm’s designers
considered home economics an afterthought, if at all.

Meanwhile, Maltby’s four to nine field representatives waved the public rela-
tions flag to stimulate interest in Corning housewares. Stationed in the West,
Josephine Blanch visited Hollywood producers with Pyrex props; in the central
states, Jessie Johnston supplied bake ware to home economists at Hotpoint,
Norge, and other appliance companies. Starting in 1953, Ann Mikell logged in
forty-five thousand air miles annually while serving the South and the Midwest.
This graduate of Mississippi Southern College in Hattiesburg had spent six years
as a food management specialist at the United States Department of Agriculture
and seven as a home economist for General Motors’ Frigidaire Division in Bal-
timore. Articulate and impeccably groomed, Mikell repeatedly explained the theme that Pyrex was a time-saving, sanitary product capable of building “a higher standard of living for mankind.” On the road, she gave seminars at stores and public utilities, lectured to school groups, and hobnobbed with state extension agents, magazine editors, teachers, and other corporate home economists. In Dallas, she presented Mary Carter with a “wonderful assortment of Pyrex oven and flame ware,” which the TV cook promised to use “every day” on her show. Through Mikell’s contacts in St. Louis, Pyrex dishes graced the covers of 250,000 Pet Milk cookbooks and appeared on Red Skelton’s variety show.  

Regardless, Pyrex sales stayed unremarkable; between 1950 and 1955, the Consumer Products Division averaged $14 million, or 11 percent of net sales annually (figure 6). Corning housewares made progress at a snail’s pace. Primarily, the division suffered from lack of steady leadership, for the top guard had changed several times since the war. Almost ready to give baking dishes the boot, Corning executives found their housewares savior in a physics major turned retailing executive: R. Lee Waterman. Under his direction, the venture came full
circle, for Pyrex's new caretaker possessed the same vision as his predecessor of two generations ago, William Churchill. Waterman, like Churchill, succeeded partially due to circumstances beyond his control. Postwar housekeepers were ready, willing, and able to buy glass cookware—but for different reasons than their Progressive Era counterparts. By 1955, the demand for stove-top utensils, dominated by the housewares sections of department stores, exceeded the market for oven ware fourfold, but Corning's consumer durables remained lodged in hardware shops, which stacked baking dishes sky high. Waterman set two related tasks for his division: capitalize on the American penchant for easy eating and convince department stores—"the bullies of the retail business"—to treat Corning glassware as a premier line.32

Waterman came to Corning in October 1955 with a sophisticated understanding of merchandising, product planning, and market planning, three managerial modes that gained currency in postwar American business. He identified most with marketing, still a broadly defined field encompassing everything from product design to placement. After attending Bates College in Maine, Waterman worked for W. T. Grant Company, advancing between 1926 to 1933 from floor man to general manager in the variety chain's largest stores. He spent the rest of the thirties as a regional and national merchandise manager for Montgomery Ward & Company, returning to Grant in 1941, where he held a top post for a decade. Next, Waterman became president of Sloan-Blabon Corporation, a subsidiary of the Philadelphia carpet manufacturer Alexander Smith. Through this experience, he learned to appreciate how fluid communications among experts in all fields, from materials science to advertising, advanced creative thinking. Most important, his years at Grant infused Waterman with an indelible respect for consumers. Just as the dime store buyers Clinton Pierce Case and William F. Newberry paid close attention to Woolworth shoppers, Waterman took his cues from the marketplace, allowing the contours of demand to weigh heavily in his assessment of Corning's kitchenwares. "It is marketing's job," he stated, "to identify and satisfy wants in a creative way."33

Waterman's glassworks tenure coincided with a burst of antimaterialist criticism by Vance Packard, whose trilogy of best-sellers portrayed a profligate consumer culture manipulated by manufacturers, market researchers, and advertising agencies. By Packard's estimation, businesses convinced Americans to buy goods they neither needed nor wanted; market researchers developed methods for creating wasteful, compulsive consumers; and manufacturers promoted "planned obsolescence" with shoddy merchandise and outlandish styles. Water-
man found Packard's diatribe so out of touch with reality that he publicly took issue. Nowhere in the housewares trade did managers collude, deliberately designing products that would soon become outdated. Rather, obsolescence arose when firms neglected to keep up with consumers' desires in terms of color, size, shape, utility, price, and packaging. "Products fail because we go out and peddle something that does not satisfy a want—or doesn't do it as well as some other product." Waterman knew this well; he had just inherited an obsolete line—Pyrex.34

Corning housewares needed a dramatic new look to capture two department store growth areas: range-top cookware and tableware; however, chromatic experiments aside, the glassworks tenaciously clung to the aesthetics of efficiency that fit so comfortably with its science-oriented culture. Even Maltby failed to see the transparency and colorlessness of Pyrex as a liability. "The first thing he did," recalled one of Waterman's hires, "was to get them to shake their idea that Pyrex was a clear pie plate and a measuring cup." When Pyroceram, a new family of supertough materials under study since 1952, emerged from the firm's research laboratories in 1956–57, Waterman recognized its enormous potential. The brainchild of the physical chemist S. Donald Stookey, these glass-ceramic compositions, perfected for radomes on the navy's high-speed guided missiles, withstood thermal shock far better than the borosilicate and aluminosilicate formulas used for, respectively, Pyrex and Flameware. More important, pure white Pyroceram resembled one of the household's most treasured materials: fine porcelain. Waterman advocated molding this miraculous stuff into cookware and promoting the pseudochina with all the fanfare that a top-notch advertising agency offered. If announced as a space-age material that tolerated any temperature, he hedged, consumers might appreciate glass ceramics as the embodiment of United States technical superiority over the Soviets. Zeroing in, Waterman coordinated parallel projects in technology, design, and marketing, using simultaneous programs as checks and balances.35

While scientists perfected compositions and engineers experimented with million-dollar melting tanks, Waterman asked Corning's home economists to contribute their two cents to space-age cookware. Blaming the gender gap between designers and consumers for innumerable product failures, he solicited Maltby's ideas. She responded by urging him to develop Pyroceram "for cooking and serving." Impressed, Waterman quickly added the test kitchen as an integral part of the design and development loop. As Corning Ware materialized in 1957–58, home economists planned its signature shape and determined specifi-
cations for the four-item line: three covered saucepans and a skillet. The “round-square” form, carefully calibrated to hold packages of Bird’s Eye peas and other frozen foods, took inspiration from a competitor: stainless steel Revere Ware pans sold by Sears, Roebuck & Company. Cutting edge for its time, the curved form emphasized Pyroceram’s newness, dramatized its whiteness, and highlighted its cornflower motif; the overall effect enhanced the product’s tabletop appeal. Maltby’s practical suggestions buttressed data gathered at the Corning Glass Center, which the firm had used as a consumer research laboratory for several years. By early 1958, polls in this ad hoc preference unit, trials from local homes, and sales experiments in Rochester, N.Y., stores determined that the target audience—urban, middle-class women, ages eighteen to thirty-four—found the line very appealing.36

As Waterman planned regional tests, he uncannily walked in Churchill’s footsteps, initially trying out Corning Ware on conservative shoppers in Boston, Providence, Hartford, and Springfield. In Rochester, he had learned a good deal about television’s ability to spread the word—and stimulate desire. Produced by N. W. Ayer & Son in Philadelphia, newsy television commercials that equated Corning’s product launch with a Cape Canaveral takeoff excited so many shoppers that department store stocks vanished before newspapers even printed the follow-up ads. Waterman prepped New England wholesalers with a “person-to-person information campaign”; during the summer of 1958, a team of salesmen and home economists knocked on doors, spreading the cookware gospel. In early September, Corning Ware made its East Coast debut—accompanied by TV promotions—and sold out. In the Midatlantic and the Midwest, Waterman employed the same tactics—with enormous success. By Christmas, Corning Ware was the best-selling houseware in test markets across the country.37

For the 1959 national launch, Waterman hired sixteen new salesmen to promote Corning Ware with fabulous “Fire & Ice” shows. Ayer advertisements in the Ladies’ Home Journal, Reader’s Digest, and the Saturday Evening Post told Mrs. Consumer that Corning Ware was “Rocketing into your life!” TV commercials announced the “Cookware from the Moon” as indestructible, whether heated by flames or cooled in the freezer. Frank Fenno, a freshly minted MBA assigned to northern California, traipsed around his territory with a blowtorch, miniature refrigerator, and other paraphernalia, ready to put on demonstrations. Yet even before Corning perfected its Barnumesque tactics, Fenno found that Corning Ware had big fans. In San Francisco, he was startled when Irv Kaufmann, the buyer for Weinstein’s hardware shop, submitted a $6,500 order. Siz-
Home economist Ann Mikell (right) publicizing Corning Ware on TV, 1958. Corning Incorporated

ing up the store’s narrow aisles and ceiling-high displays, Fenno protested, wondering where thousands of saucepans would fit. A seasoned housewares buyer from Manhattan, Kaufmann silenced the Harvard greenhorn; the previous fall, he had been in New York and witnessed the Corning Ware shopping frenzy firsthand. In September, young Fenno and his boss nervously eyed Weinstein’s windows, where other dusty cookware mountains sat. But as the Ayer-designed space ship campaign blasted across TV screens in October, Weinstein’s pans sold like hotcakes. Everywhere else, the same thing happened. The subsequent Fire & Ice demonstrations gave material form to TV’s black-and-white promises. Corning Ware embodied the moment’s many new frontiers. “We were chasing the stars,” Fenno remembered. “People grasped it,” and they wanted to share in the excitement.38

Building on this success, Waterman searched for mechanisms to solidify his market position; a vice president since 1956, he lobbied fellow decision makers to rethink design strategies. For consumer products to succeed, Corning must relocate its design operations on site, rather than rely on ideas from Fifth Avenue. Maybe Maltby bent Waterman’s ear; or perhaps he simply knew what worked.
By late 1958, he had already hired some promising young designers, including Jerry E. Wright, a University of Illinois graduate who had spent two years at Motorola Electronics in Chicago. Eager to escape urban life, Wright felt at ease in the small town of Corning, New York, and in the company’s intimate environment, drawing sustenance from frequent exchanges with other professionals. Introduced in 1959, his ovoid Corning Ware teapot became an all-time best-seller. Fenno ascribed this success to good looks: “It replaced ugly on the stove for boiling water.” More modest, Wright credited collaboration, including his trusting relationship with test kitchen home economists who “brought authenticity to the design process.”

Waterman’s division flourished, expanding its share of net sales from 17 to 29 percent between 1958 and 1964 (figure 6). Sensational Corning Ware carried much of the weight, outpacing Pyrex by more than 100 percent. By the early 1960s, the line had thirty-one products and sold better than any houseware on the market. The enormous success stemmed from Waterman’s ability to match consumer desires with available materials and technology. Two years before its introduction, only 2 percent of American homes had servants, part-time or otherwise. Those who loathed domestic chores welcomed labor-saving products like “boil-in-the-bag” frozen foods and attractive pots for cooking them. With one-step meals, real convenience had come to the kitchen. The home economists’ dream come true, Corning Ware was a product that actually created less work for mother.

The economic and cultural developments of the postwar era eroded the special position enjoyed by the nation’s pottery and glass factories as manufacturers to the American people. Many plants shut down, and survivors weathered hard times by bending tradition or adapting new customs to carve market niches. Batch producers, for the most part, preferred long-standing product development strategies to consultant’s fixes. Doing business as usual, these manufacturers continued to imagine women as their primary consumers. When the Crockery and Glass Journal urged retailers to fill managerial jobs with women, this leading trade magazine argued that the “feminine touch” could “move mountains of merchandise.” Diamond’s voluminous victories and Maltby’s home economics program certainly seemed to substantiate the contention that the ladies, who were “thing-minded” by nature, knew “how to appeal to other women” who had “a passion for possessions.” Men, in contrast, cared more about glory, prestige, and status—or so went conventional industry wisdom.
Yet the age of informality rattled this decades-old gender paradigm; more and
more, men participated in American materialism by collecting, cooking, and con-
suming. No firm understood the masculine penchant for objects better than
Arthur Houghton Jr.'s Steuben Glass, which staffers its exclusive Steuben Shops
with classy saleswomen trained to coddle male customers. “It’s interesting how
many men come in, just because they love Steuben,” exclaimed Yvette Andrews,
who worked as a “Steuben girl” in the flagship Fifth Avenue store: “Their enthu-
siasm is so genuine, it’s fun to show them around.” The droves of men among
New York shoppers startled saleswoman Aloise O’Brien: “Way out west in Cleve-
land,” she reported, they left “all the buying and appreciating to the women.”
Not since Edward Drummond Libbey’s cut glass age had a factory paid such
close attention to men. Modeled after Scandinavian imports, Steuben Crystal
appealed to their modernist masculine tastes, as summarized by one “very cal-
culating and scientific young man.” This glassware, he explained, was “definite,
clean cut, and strong—not too busy.” Steuben Crystal provided the guys, who
had always appreciated fine drinking and smoking accessories, with a means for
enjoying a modicum of mid-twentieth-century luxury.42

The thousands of women who selected Fostoria glassware and the men who
bought Steuben Crystal sent clear messages to American manufacturers. Brides’
choices signaled the strength of the cults of domesticity and formality; men’s
purchases suggested that their exclusion from the consumer paradigm since the
Great War had been unjustified. Overall, consumers’ purchasing patterns re-
vealed that household products that marked personal identity still mattered.
Easy living had permeated American culture piecemeal, with audiences em-
bracing the paradigm as they saw fit.

Similarly, the informality vogue penetrated the postwar pottery and glass
trades and enlarged design possibilities in bits and pieces. Producers hitched
their wagons to the casual modes—but not always as bid by Russel Wright and
Freda Diamond. Wright advocated organic forms, Diamond brighter colors, on
the grounds that Americans afraid of Cold War threats might find solace in mate-
rial conformity. For quantity-production firms, consensual good looks could aug-
ment sales—if those companies, like Owens-Illinois, invested heavily in com-
panion advertising and public relations. Although Diamond's designs helped
Libbey, consultant recommendations were not prerequisites to success. Noth-
ing demonstrated this more than Corning Ware’s conquest of the market for
casual housewares.