

DESIGN PARAGON

RUSSEL WRIGHT

by Marissa Hermanson

American Craftsman and industrial designer Russel Wright revolutionized the domestic lifestyle for couples during the mid-century through his philosophy of "easier living," which is seen in his contemporary and informal designs. He believed in bringing people together with style and function, and this is seen in his dinnerware, decorative accessories, appliances, textiles and furniture.



"... What I've been struck with is the great diversity in what they do. They designed house furniture and tableware – and all different kinds, too." Maya Wright - The Kirkland Museum



In 1935 Russel Wright developed American Modern, a line of maple furniture with Conant Ball Company, which became an instant hit nationwide. The furniture was offered in two finishes, a natural, unstained finish dubbed "blonde" and a reddish stained maple. Wright's American Modern line was the first solid maple, blonde finished furniture of modern design to be produced. From left to right: Modern Mates dining chair, hutch, and nightstand, all produced by Conant Ball. These pieces date from 1949 and are typical of the 1950s when it was primarily produced. Images: Paul Winner. Furniture courtesy of Brent Jones.

WRIGHT was born in Lebanon, Ohio and raised by Quaker parents. He attended Princeton University with the intention of studying law, but left after his first summer out of college, which he spent at an art colony in Woodstock, New York, where he met his wife, Mary Small Einstein, who had a profound impact on Wright's design philosophy throughout his life. After leaving Princeton, Wright worked as a set designer for Norman Bel Geddes, an American theatrical and industrial designer. He then went on to study at Columbia School of Architecture (1923), and New York University School of Architecture (1938-1939).

Wright's designs are heavily influenced by his Quaker upbringing, using streamlined organic forms, traditional shapes and simple lines, revealing the restraint that came along with his upbringing. The seven serving pieces in his Oceana wood line

(1935) use raw, organic shapes – some taking on the form of seashells.

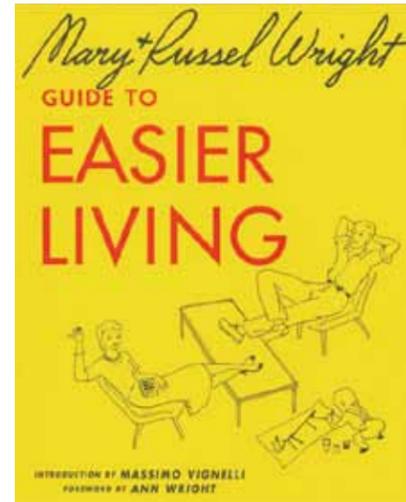
His Quaker background also shows up in his American Craftsman designs, such as the American Modern Furniture line, a set of boxy wooden bedroom furniture. He worked in furniture design for the company Heywood-Wakefield, and on a collection of solid maple "blonde" furniture for Conant Ball Company.

He is also known for his light linen tablecloths with bright, colorful checks, silver flatware, spun aluminum cocktail set and serving pieces, as well as his Easier Living furniture line.

"I first learned of Russel Wright through one of my all time favorite companies that started in the first part of the 20th Century – Chase Brass & Copper Company," says

Mod Livin's Beth Gottlieb, who deals in mid-century furniture and accessories. "Chase was one of the first companies to put a designer name behind their product, much like Target and Sears does today. Wright designed quite a few things for them, mostly tableware pieces as his philosophy was that everything should center around the table."

"In tableware, he is best known for his American Modern line of dishes, which are still popular and quite collectable today," Beth Gottlieb says. Wright started producing this line in 1940 (until 1961). He started designing the collection in 1938, but he and his wife, Mary, couldn't find a manufacturer until they convinced authorities to re-open the bankrupt Steubenville Pottery factory in Steubenville, Ohio.



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: Harkerware Clock (1951-55), manufactured by Harker Pottery Co. (1889-1972); American Modern Pitcher (1937-38) in rare Steubenville blue glaze, manufactured by Steubenville Pottery Co. (1879-1959); Oceana Starfish Relish (1935-76), manufactured by Klise Manufacturing Co. (1910-present).

MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT: Table Lamp (1945-46), manufactured by J.A. Bauer Pottery Co. (1910-1962); Harkerware White Clover Covered Dish (1951-55), manufactured by Harker Pottery Co. (1889-1972); Esquire Solar Teapot (1955), manufactured by Edwin M. Knowles China Co. (1900-1963); Spun Aluminum Punch Bowl Set (1930s), manufactured by Russel Wright.

BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: Theme Formal Opaline Drinkware (1957), manufactured by Bartlett-Collins Glass Co. (1914-present); Eclipse Drinkware (1957), manufactured by Bartlett-Collins Glass Co. (1914-present).

All pieces; Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver.

"With Russel Wright, we have a whole shelf of American Modern. We show all 11 colors and every design," says Maya Wright, of Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art. "Within one shelf, you can compare it to other design styles and designers of that time." The Kirkland Museum also carries some of Wright's lesser-known designs - his Theme Formal and Theme Informal. They are two lines of Japanese-inspired tableware - one informal and one formal, as their namesake suggests - that Wright designed at the end of his career.

Wright was also influenced by the drastic changes that were occurring in the 1920s. He saw Americans live a life of luxury and excess in the roaring 20s and then with the crash of 1929 and the Depression, he saw Americans reevaluate their way of life. He realized life needed to be simplified and streamlined and he sought to make products and designs that improved people's everyday lives. While creating his designs between the two World Wars, Wright set a precedent for mid-century modern design and the inexpensive, mass produced designs that came after World War II.

"They are simple, but they are designed with function in mind - and they are also beautiful," Maya Wright says. "They wanted something more sturdy and useful for young families that were also beautiful and useful for entertaining and the kind of lifestyle they wanted."

He and his wife co-wrote the book, *Guide to Easier Living*, where they state, "Good informal living substitutes a little headwork for a lot of legwork. It doesn't need wealth, but it does take thought, some ingenuity and resourcefulness, and more than a little loving care to create a home that is really yours."

Beth Gottlieb with Mod Livin' says working with his wife Mary "was extremely rare for his time period," and that the book they co-wrote "focused on increasing leisure time through efficient design and management of your household."

Mary was the marketing wizard behind the products, helping him turn his signature into a recognizable "brand name," and creating lifestyle - and domestic-centered marketing, which set precedent for later domestic personalities such as Martha Stewart.

"They partnered on almost everything they did and they were a great team - and, she was a great marketer," Maya Wright says. "... What I've been struck with is the great diversity in what they do. They designed house furniture and tableware - and all different kinds, too."

After Mary's death in 1952, Wright retired to his estate, Manitoga, in Garrison, New York. He restored the 75 acres of the estate that were damaged from quarrying and logging, also building his studio, Dragon Rock on the property. Manitoga is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is home to the Russel Wright Design Center, which is managed by Mary and Russel's daughter, Annie.

Sources: Russel Wright Studios, The Russel Wright Design Center, Syracuse University Russel Wright Papers, Mod Livin', Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art.

EVENT: Blonde Furniture | Designers of the 50s

As a part of their **Modern Design Series**, Mod Livin' will be hosting an event featuring a range of works by Russel Wright, Paul McCobb, and the Heywood-Wakefield Company.

The exhibition begins on **Friday, June 22nd 6pm** with an opening reception.

For more info: moderninddenver.com/wright