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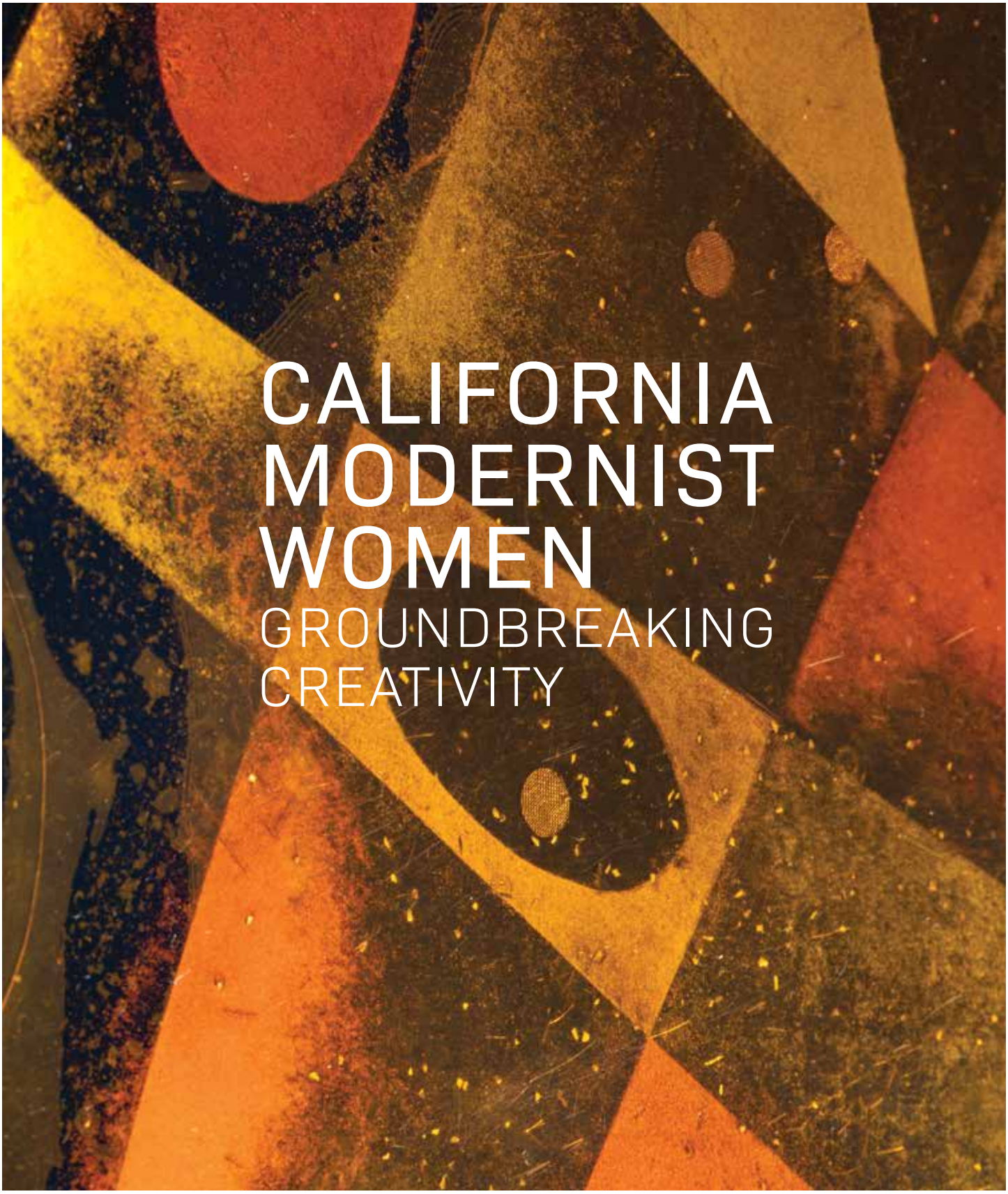


CALIFORNIA MODERNIST WOMEN

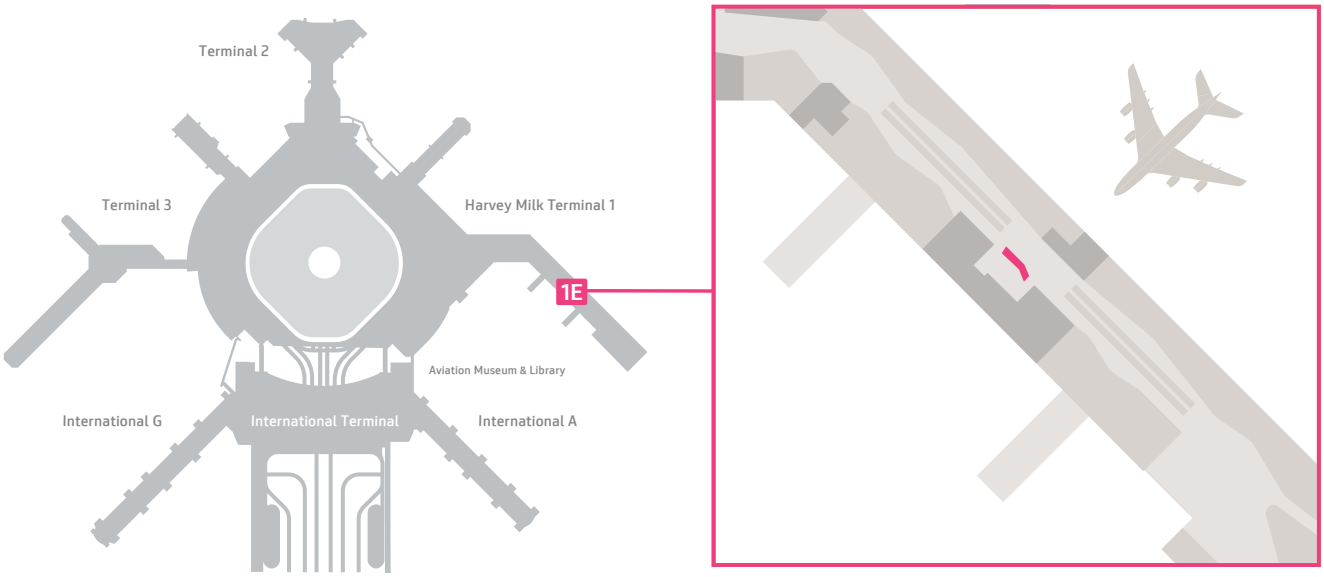
GROUNDBREAKING CREATIVITY

CALIFORNIA MODERNIST WOMEN
GROUNDBREAKING CREATIVITY

Self-Guided Tour and Supplemental K-12 Teaching Materials

Thank you for visiting our exhibition, *California Modernist Women: Groundbreaking Creativity,* located in Harvey Milk Terminal 1, Gallery B–12, Level 2 Departures

This PDF provides parents, teachers, and students with a self-guided tour of the exhibition.



California Modernist Women: Groundbreaking Creativity

California played an important role in forming a modern American style during the mid-twentieth century. During this time, decorative arts and design reflected exciting new technologies and forms of expression. As modernist artists and designers looked towards the future, some also found inspiration in the traditional, handmade qualities of crafts.

Many of the Golden State's most innovative artists and designers were women who faced challenges due to gender discrimination. The most determined women pushed forward, driven by enthusiasm, strength, and creativity. To protect themselves from potential disadvantage due to gender discrimination, some women artists only signed their first initial and last name to their artworks. Rather than shortening her signature, San Francisco artist Doris Hodgson Bothwell (1902–2000) changed her legal first name to Dorr, a nickname from childhood that she preferred.

Ray Eames (1912–88) was an artist and designer who did not receive the full recognition that she deserved. Because of the gender discrimination of their era, her husband Charles Eames (1907–78) was advertised as the designer for all Eames Office products, although the husband-and-wife duo designed together with the rest of their team. Fortunately, in recent years Ray Eames has received the design attribution that she deserves.

At times, artists and designers had to overcome racial discrimination. During the Second World War, Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) escaped extended imprisonment in a Japanese American internment camp with a scholarship to Milwaukee State Teachers College in Wisconsin. However, after training for three years to become an art teacher, Asawa was denied the necessary internship for graduation due to postwar racism. Asawa became a renowned artist and advocate for the arts and art education, and in 1982, she helped establish a public arts high school—renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in 2010.

California Modernist Women: Groundbreaking Creativity introduces these and other artists who worked in California and the San Francisco Bay Area. Ruth Asawa and Ray Eames, along with jeweler Margaret De Patta (1903–64) and potters Edith Heath (1911–2005) and Marguerite Wildenhain (1896–1985), are internationally acclaimed, and appreciation for their work continues to grow. Other equally talented artists including Dorr Bothwell, sculptors Freda Koblick (1920–2011) and Mary Fuller McChesney (1922–2022), potter Eileen Reynolds Curtis (1917–77), artist and designer Zahara Schatz (1916–99), and multidisciplinary artists Esther (1896–1992), Helen (1898–1985), and Margaret Bruton (1894–1983), enjoyed success in their time, yet have been overlooked in subsequent years.

Modernism:

- A modern style or movement that is different from classical or traditional forms, Modernism is based on modern, or new and innovative, types of thought, expression, and technique.

Discussion question:

Modernist women artists, like most women in the mid-1900s, faced even greater challenges than they do today. What were two major roadblocks for women during the mid-twentieth century?

- **Gender discrimination:** women were not seen as equal to men in the arts and workforce. Gender discrimination made it much more difficult for women to achieve the same success as men. Most women had to work harder than their male counterparts to succeed. Only recently has this started to change.
- **Racial discrimination:** like gender discrimination, racial discrimination is another problem in modern society that many people are still fighting against. Women of color had to be even more creative than their white counterparts and work harder to succeed.

A very special thank you to Steve Cabella and the Modern i Shop for making this exhibition possible, with many thanks to The Estate of Ruth Asawa and Eames Institute for their contributions.

Marguerite Wildenhain

Marguerite Wildenhain (1896–1985) was an internationally renowned studio potter who influenced generations of ceramicists. Born in Lyons, France, of English, German, and Jewish descent, she briefly studied drawing and sculpture at the Berlin School of Fine and Applied Arts. Dissatisfied with school, Wildenhain left and designed ceramics for a porcelain company in Rudolstadt, Germany, where she was fascinated by the factory's potters. In 1919, Wildenhain enrolled in the first year of instruction at the legendary Bauhaus in nearby Weimar. She studied sculpture under master potters Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981) and Max Krehan (1875–1925), and after a seven-year apprenticeship-in-residence, she became the first woman in Germany to achieve master potter status.

In 1933, Marguerite and her husband Frans Wildenhain (1905–1980) moved to Putten in the Netherlands and opened a pottery they named Het Kruikje, or The Little Jug. When the German army invaded the Netherlands in 1940, she immigrated to the United States and taught at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts) in Oakland. Two years later, she was the first resident at Pond Farm, an art colony and refuge for European artists near Guerneville in the Russian River Valley of Northern California. While other émigré artists including metalworker Victor Ries (1907–2011) and weaver Trude Guermonprez (1910–76) joined Wildenhain, the Pond Farm collaborative ended during the 1950s. Marguerite Wildenhain continued at Pond Farm, where she made studio ceramics and held annual summer workshops, teaching select students to master wheel-thrown pottery.

Studio Potter:

- Someone who makes studio ceramics, or items such as pots, bowls, plates, cups, tile, and sculpture. Studio ceramics are made by hand in a small studio setting, rather than by multiple people working in a larger factory. Made completely by hand, studio ceramics are unique and often considered works of art.

Discussion question:

What amazing first accomplishment did Marguerite Wildenhain achieve in Germany?

- After studying at the legendary Bauhaus school, in 1925 Marguerite Wildenhain became the first woman in Germany awarded with the status of master potter.

Marguerite Wildenhain working in her studio c. 1950
Guerneville, California
Courtesy of Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
R2022.0605.001

Vase c. 1950s
Marguerite Wildenhain (1896–1985)
Guerneville, California
stoneware, glaze
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.005

Vessel c. 1950s
Marguerite Wildenhain (1896–1985)
Guerneville, California
stoneware, glaze
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.008

Mary Fuller McChesney

Mary Fuller McChesney (1922–2022) was a largely self-taught sculptor and art historian. After studying philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, she decided to pursue something more dexterous with her hands and apprenticed with potter William Bragdon (1884–1959) at California Faience, a famous pottery studio nearby in Berkeley. During the Second World War, Fuller worked as a "Rosie the Riveter" welder at the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, California. By 1949, she lived in Point Richmond with her husband, Abstract Expressionist painter Robert McChesney (1913–2008), and Fuller made ceramic sculpture with a kiln that she constructed at their home. When the couple moved to Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1951 to join a group of Bay Area and New York artists, Fuller was greatly inspired by Pre-Columbian sculpture that she saw in museums.

In 1952, Fuller and McChesney hand-built a small home and two studios on two acres atop Sonoma Mountain near Petaluma, California. Their plot was the first in a planned artist's colony that never materialized because of the remote location. Fuller sculpted, wrote for art magazines, and in the mid-1960s, she worked for the Archives of American Art on an oral history project to document San Francisco artists who participated in the Works Progress Administration's 1935–43 Federal Art Project. Fuller also interviewed postwar Abstract Expressionist artists from the Bay Area, which evolved into her book *A Period of Exploration: San Francisco 1945–1950* and the accompanying exhibition at the Oakland Museum in 1973. That decade, Mary Fuller began work on larger, publicly commissioned sculptures, carving forms from a mixture of cement, sand, vermiculite, and water as they slowly dried.

Works Progress Administration (WPA):

- A federally funded program created in 1935 that put unemployed people to work during the Great Depression. WPA workers constructed schools, hospitals, airports, and bridges, re-paved roads, and planted millions of trees. The WPA also employed artists, who painted murals and made sculptures for display at public buildings and places across the country.

Discussion question:

How did Mary Fuller learn to make art?

- Mary Fuller did not go to art school—she learned to make art on her own. Fuller received some training as a pottery apprentice at California Faience in Berkeley, where she learned about shaping and firing clay into ceramics. Using this basic knowledge, Fuller then taught herself how to make art sculpture. She even made her own kiln, which is a type of oven that is used to fire, or heat, soft clay into hardened ceramics.

Portrait of Mary Fuller McChesney May 1955
Arthur Knight (active mid-20th century)
Sonoma Mountain, California
Courtesy of Dennis Calabi
R2022.0602.001

Two embracing figures 1949
Mary Fuller McChesney (1922-2022)
Point Richmond, California
terracotta
Collection of Steve Cabella
L2022.0601.003a–b

Edith Heath

Edith Heath (1911–2005) created ceramics that combined modern design with the hand-made look of studio pottery. Initially, Heath aspired to teach and completed her credential in art education at Chicago Teachers College. She moved west in the early 1940s and took classes in ceramics at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) and the University of California, Berkeley. Heath converted the laundry room of her Filbert Street residence into a pottery studio, and by 1944, she exhibited at the Legion of Honor museum and sold to the high-end San Francisco retailer Gump's. When national department stores including Marshall Field's and Neiman Marcus carried Heath Ceramics, production moved to a factory in Sausalito, California, that incorporated manufacturing equipment designed by Edith's husband Brian Heath (1913–2001).

Innovative combinations of natural materials were important to Heath Ceramics' success. Edith Heath was not impressed with lightly colored, commercially made clays, so she formulated her own clay from rich deposits left by a prehistoric inland sea near Lincoln, California, in the Sierra Nevada Mountains foothills. Glazes that contained metallic oxides were perfected to chemically react at low temperatures. Some of her distinctive finishes created speckled effects when fired in the kiln, such as the two-toned "Sea and Sand." Heath introduced *Coupe* in 1948, which is still in production and was their first original dinnerware line. *Coupe* pioneered manufacturing at Heath Ceramics. Plates and shallow bowls were formed on mechanized jigger wheels developed by Brian, while Edith and her artisans used slip casting and other traditional methods for more complex shapes.

Ceramic Glaze:

- A type of coating, like a thick paint, that is applied to clay before it is fired, or heated, into a hardened ceramic. Glazes come in many colors and textures and will fuse, or become part of, the ceramics they are applied to.

Discussion question:

What made Edith Heath's clays and glazes unique?

- Edith Heath did not use pre-made clays and glazes—she made her own. After countless hours of testing and searching for materials, she created unique recipes for clays and glazes. Heath liked to use natural, reddish-brown clays from Northern California. Sometimes she added metallic oxides to her glazes, which created speckled effects when her ceramics were heated in the kiln.

Edith Heath at a potter's wheel c. late 1940s–50s
Courtesy of Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
R2022.0605.002

***Coupe* salad plate** c. 1950s
Designed by Edith Heath (1911–2005)
Heath Ceramics | Sausalito, California
ceramic, glaze
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.012–.013

Vase 1950
Edith Heath (1911–2005)
Sausalito, California
ceramic, glaze
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.014

Dorr Bothwell

Dorr Bothwell (1902–2000) was a painter, printmaker, and art teacher who translated her travels into artistic expression. Born Doris Hodgson Bothwell in San Francisco, she moved to San Diego with her family as a young girl and took art lessons with their neighbor, the painter and sculptor Anna Marie Valentien (1862–1947). In the early 1920s, Bothwell returned to San Francisco and studied at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) with Rudolph Schaeffer (1886-1988). After her first exhibition entry was rejected in 1924, female colleagues suggested that Bothwell not sign her full first name on artworks to avoid gender discrimination from male reviewers. Instead, Bothwell legally changed her first name to Dorr, a nickname from childhood that she preferred.

In 1925, Dorr Bothwell became a charter member of the San Francisco Society of Women Artists. Three years later, Bothwell sailed for Pago Pago, Samoa, where she lived on the island of Ta`ū as the adopted daughter of a local chief and sketched, painted, and made linocut prints. Bothwell shipped her art back to California to sell and fund travels in Australia and Europe. During the late 1930s, Bothwell worked as a designer and muralist for modernist painter Lorser Feitelson (1898–1978) under the Works Progress Administration in Los Angeles. In the 1940s, Bothwell was one of the first West Coast artists to exhibit serigraph prints. She taught at the California School of Fine Arts from 1944 until 1961, when Bothwell changed her trajectory and moved to Mendocino, California, where she established a studio and taught at the Mendocino Art Center until 1997.

Printmaker:

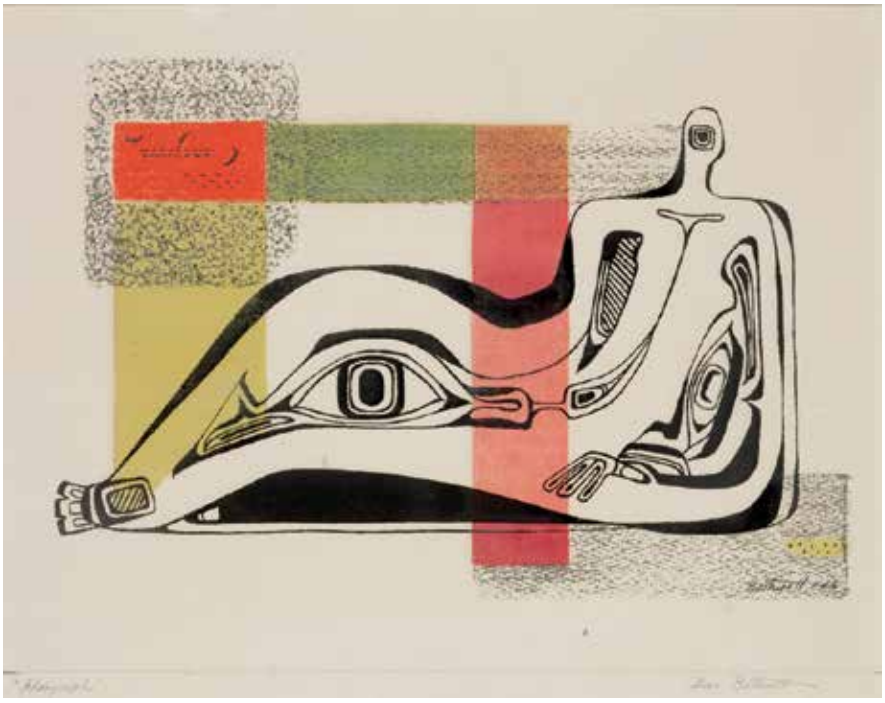
- In art terms, a printmaker is someone who makes art from various printing processes. In Samoa during the late 1920s, Dorr Bothwell made linocut prints by carving images into linoleum printing blocks and using black ink to transfer copies of the image onto paper. During the 1940s, Bothwell was among the first fine artists to make serigraph prints, which use multicolored inks applied through silk screens over stencils and paper to make colorful prints.

Discussion question:

In 1924, Dorr Bothwell submitted her first painting for exhibition and was rejected. How did she react?

- She changed her name to avoid gender discrimination. Bothwell's fellow artists suggested that she simply sign her first initial and last name to her paintings as they did. Instead, she changed her legal first name to Dorr, a nickname from childhood that she went by and preferred.

Dorr Bothwell displays artists' works September 1945
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center,
San Francisco Public Library
MOR–0928
R2022.0606.001



Ideograph 1946
Dorr Bothwell (1902–2000)
San Francisco
serigraph
Collection of Steve Cabella
L2022.0601.044

Ray Eames

Ray Eames (1912–88) was an artist and designer who shaped public awareness of modern design. Along with her husband, Charles Eames (1907–78), they formed the Eames Office, a mid-century design company whose work is still world renowned. Their ideas were practical and personal, and they worked to bring good design and artfully modern products into every household and public space. For over forty years, the Eames Office designed furniture made from innovative materials such as molded plywood, fiberglass, aluminum, and steel wire, in addition to graphics, toys, and exhibitions. Eames Office marketing and packaging attributed its products to Charles, although Ray was critical to their success. Only in recent years has Ray Eames received the design credit that she deserves.

Ray Eames' background in modern art guided everything the Eames Office produced. In the 1930s, she studied at the Art Students League in New York with the avant-garde German émigré painter Hans Hoffman (1880–1966) and exhibited with the American Abstract Artists. After meeting Charles at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1940, they moved to Southern California and focused on design. The S2–1790 Leg Splint, their first mass-produced, molded-plywood product, originated with Ray's plywood sculptures, which she featured on the cover of California Arts & Architecture in September 1942. Most Eames Office items were designed from scratch by Ray, Charles, and their team. Certain pieces were influenced by found objects, such as the *Time Life* stool that Ray Eames based on a traditional African stool she had at home.

Molded plywood:

- A strong and lightweight material that Ray and Charles Eames used in their revolutionary furniture designs. By gluing thin strips of wood together and placing them into a mold under heat and pressure, they experimented with sculpture and then made thousands of leg splints for the U.S. Navy. Ray and Charles Eames applied the molded plywood technique to chairs and tables in the late 1940s, and these items are still in production today.

Discussion question:

Why was Ray Eames not listed as a designer for the Eames Office when their furniture was produced during the 1940s–80s?

- Bias against women, especially women in the workforce, was very strong in the mid-twentieth century. Likely because of preferences for male designers at the time, Charles Eames was listed as the designer of all Eames products, even though Ray Eames and other members of the Eames Office team worked on the designs. Only recently has Ray Eames received the credit that she deserves.

Ray Eames with her art c. early 1940s
Courtesy of Eames Office LLC
© Eames Office LLC
L2022.0607.001

Model S2–1790 Leg Splint 1944
Designed by Ray (1912–88) and Charles Eames (1907–78)
Evans Products, Molded Plywood Division | Venice, California
Douglas fir, birch veneer, plastic resin
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.019

Ruth Asawa

Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) formed semi-transparent metal sculptures from looped or tied metal wire, and created public art and fountains from bronze, stainless steel, and other materials. Initially, Asawa studied drawing and painting while imprisoned in Japanese American internment camps during the Second World War. She took art lessons from Tom Okamoto (1916–78), a Disney animator also confined at the Santa Anita racetrack in Southern California. Asawa continued her artistic practice after transfer to the Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas. In 1943, she received a scholarship to Milwaukee State Teachers College in Wisconsin (now University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee). However, after three years of training to become an art teacher, Asawa was denied an internship that she needed to graduate because of postwar racism against Japanese Americans.

Undeterred, Asawa studied with former Bauhaus instructor Josef Albers (1888–1976) at the experimental Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina. During the summer of 1947, Asawa taught art in Toluca, Mexico, where she learned to make baskets from looped, metal wire. She applied the looped-wire technique to sculpture and remarked, "what I was excited by was I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time." By 1960, Asawa exhibited locally at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) and the de Young Museum, and at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York. She has since exhibited throughout the United States and abroad. Ruth Asawa was a lifelong advocate for the arts and art education, and in 1982, she helped found a public arts high school, renamed Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in 2010.

Looped wire:

- A technique that uses metal wire to form sculptures, baskets, and other forms. As Ruth Asawa explained, "You begin by looping a wire around a wooden dowel, then making a string of 'e's, always making the same 'e' loop. You can make different sized loops depending on the weight of the wire and the size of the dowel. You can loop tight and narrow, or more open and loose. The materials are simple. You can use bailing wire, copper wire, brass wire. We used whatever we had. It's an amazing technique." —*The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air.*

Discussion question:

As a teenager, Ruth Asawa studied to become an art teacher. However, she became a famous sculptor instead. What challenge did she face at school that sent her on a different path?

- Racial discrimination. Like thousands of other Japanese Americans, Asawa was unjustly confined in an internment camp during the Second World War. She left the camp early on a teaching scholarship, and to graduate with her credential, Asawa needed to practice teaching herself. However, no schools near her college would hire Asawa due to wartime racism against Japanese Americans. She shifted her focus to art school and became a famous sculptor who taught art classes and founded a public arts high school.

Ruth Asawa making wire sculpture 1956
Paul Hassel (1906–64)
Courtesy of the Estate of Paul Hassel and Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc.
Photograph © Estate of Paul Hassel
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Courtesy David Zwirner
R2022.0603.003

Untitled (S.847, Freestanding Basket) c. 1953
Ruth Asawa (1926-2013)
San Francisco
enameled copper wire
Private Collection
© 2022 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.
Courtesy David Zwirner
S.847; L2022.0603.001

Untitled (S.859, Freestanding Basket)
c. early 1950s
Ruth Asawa (1926-2013)
San Francisco
copper wire
Private Collection
© 2022 Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.
Courtesy David Zwirner
S.859; L2022.0603.002

The Bruton Sisters

The Bruton sisters—Margaret (1894–1983), Esther (1896–1992), and Helen Bruton (1898–1985)—were multidisciplinary artists who worked primarily in painting, printmaking, mosaic, terrazzo, and bas-relief. The Brutons regularly shared major commissions with each other and collaborated closely, no matter who was charged with the project. Raised in Alameda, California, all three sisters attended The Art Students League of New York, where Margaret painted and Helen sculpted, while Esther transferred to the New York School of Fine and Applied Art to study commercial art. During the 1920s, the Bruton sisters were part of the Monterey Group and exhibited paintings and prints throughout Northern California. Margaret and Esther travelled to Taos, New Mexico, in 1929, to join a community of modern artists, while Helen took a job with Gladding, McBean Company in Glendale, California, as a ceramics designer.

From 1934–36, Helen completed Works Progress Administration mosaic murals at the San Francisco Zoo and the University of California, Berkeley. In 1935, Esther painted murals for the Cirque Room lounge at the Fairmont Hotel. The Bruton sisters' largest commission was at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. Titled *The Peacemakers,* the bas-relief mural spanned 144 feet by fifty-seven feet, painted on carved and layered Masonite panels applied to 270 plywood boards. At the fair's second season in 1940, Helen organized *Art in Action,* a live exhibition of artists at work in the Fine Arts Palace that included Diego Rivera (1886–1957) painting the mural *Pan American Unity.* During the 1950s, Margaret and her sisters completed a monumental installation of mosaic maps for the Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines.

Bas-relief:

- A sculptural image or block of text that looks relatively flat but is three-dimensional. Murals and decorative architectural designs are often done in bas-relief concrete or plaster. Coins are a good example of small items that are done in bas-relief. If you look at a coin closely, you will see that images and text are raised up from a flat surface.

Terrazzo:

- Terrazzo is a type of flooring that was developed in Italy during the 16th century and popularized in the United States during the 1920s. Terrazzo incorporates colorful chips of marble and other stone into poured concrete, which is polished flat to a brilliant finish. Artists have also created decorative pieces from terrazzo such as tabletops, countertops, and wall art.

Discussion question:

What did the Bruton sisters have in common?

- They were all artists. All three sisters studied at The Art Students League, a famous art school in New York City. They worked in a variety of mediums and often created murals together for large public projects. For example, although Margaret Bruton was awarded a major mural commission for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, she could not have completed the work alone and relied on help from her sisters. The Bruton sisters often collaborated on their projects.

Esther, Margaret, and Helen Bruton, pictured from left to right, work on a rendering for *The Peacemakers* mural 1938
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library
AAC–8855; R2022.0606.002

Untitled c. 1950
Margaret Bruton (1894–1983)
Northern California
terrazzo, copper
Collection of Steve Cabella

Eileen Reynolds Curtis

Eileen Reynolds Curtis (1915–77) was a San Francisco Bay Area studio potter who was known for hand-thrown ceramics with unique and distinctive glazes. She studied at Mills College in Oakland with F. Carlton Ball (1911–92), who encouraged Eileen and her husband Rossi Reynolds (1909–48) to evolve from amateur potters to professional ceramicists. By 1945, the Reynolds had established a pottery studio on Russian Hill in San Francisco and were producing ceramics full-time. Their work was inspired by the graceful forms of classical Chinese ceramics, along with the simple lines of traditional, stoneware jugs and bowls from the Ohio River Valley in Indiana where Eileen was raised.

Eileen and Rossi Reynolds worked with native materials such as California red and yellow clays. They developed unique glazes and kept their formulations as closely guarded secrets. Their semi-translucent glazes accentuated the natural qualities of clay. Perhaps the most striking was "Pebble White," a textured glaze that bubbled in the kiln and created lava-like effects. The Reynolds' work was exhibited at museums including the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) and sold through local retailers such as Gump's. After Rossi's untimely passing, Eileen relocated her studio to Sausalito in 1961. She continued to make pottery and co-founded the Teahouse Group of artists with her second husband, the painter and ceramicist Ross Curtis (1918–2007).

Hand-thrown pottery:

- Also known as wheel-thrown pottery, this technique involves hand-shaping pottery from soft clay that is placed on a spinning potter's wheel. Once the shape of the hand-thrown form is complete, it may be glazed or decorated and is then placed in a heated kiln to harden and dry.

Discussion question:

What are some of the characteristics of Eileen and Rossi Reynolds' pottery?

- The Reynolds' pottery was made from native California red and yellow clays, rather than lightly colored, commercial clays, which gave their pieces a more natural look. The Reynolds also used innovative glazes that they kept secret from others, including transparent glazes that accentuated the color of clay rather than hid it, or glazes that bubbled in the kiln and created dramatic effects.

Eileen Reynolds Curtis c. 1950s
Courtesy of Lost Art Salon
R2022.0608.001

Bowl 1945
Eileen (1915–77) and Rossi (1909–48) Reynolds
San Francisco
ceramic, glaze
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.028

Margaret De Patta

Margaret De Patta (1903–64) was one of the first modernist American jewelers. During the 1920s, she trained as an avant-garde painter at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) and the Art Students League in New York City. After an unsuccessful search for a modern wedding band, De Patta resolved to make her own ring—which ignited an interest in jewelry design that changed her trajectory as an artist. De Patta apprenticed as a jeweler for two months in 1929 and then set out on her own, studying books on jewelry-making and experimenting with unconventional metals and gemstones.

In the early 1940s, De Patta studied at Mills College in Oakland, and at the School of Design in Chicago under Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) who encouraged her to "catch your stones in the air. Make them float in space. Don't enclose them." De Patta's work was an exciting departure from traditional jewelry that focused simply on mounting precious gemstones. Captivated by the effects of light and motion, she balanced sculptural compositions with quartz, pearls, or polished pebbles in a distinctly harmonious style. Working with San Francisco lapidarist Francis Sperisen (1900–86), De Patta pioneered modern gemstone cutting techniques to achieve exciting visual effects. She also crafted handmade flatware and was a founder and president of the San Francisco Metal Arts Guild.

Avant-garde:

- Innovative, unusual, and experimental approaches and ideas, or the people who apply them, usually in art. Avant-garde art and artists often challenge tradition and may be controversial.

Discussion question:

What made Margaret De Patta's jewelry different and more modern than traditional jewelry designs?

- Traditional jewelry focused simply on mounting gemstones. De Patta's jewelry was far more sculptural and reflected the effects that light and motion could have when wearing the item. De Patta often used non-traditional stones such as quartz and polished pebbles rather than diamonds and other precious gemstones. De Patta also experimented with cutting techniques that made the stones in her jewelry reflect in unique ways.

Margaret De Patta at her workbench November 1937
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library
MOR–0929; R2022.0606.003

Flatware 1950
Margaret De Patta (1903–64)
San Francisco
copper, silver
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.031.01-.04

Freda Koblick

Freda Koblick (1920–2011) was a native of San Francisco who pioneered cast-acrylic plastic sculpture. The first woman to graduate from the Plastic Industries Technical Institute in Los Angeles, she envisioned plastic as a fine arts medium that could provide exciting possibilities beyond the material's traditional, industrial applications. Koblick found that the control of curvature, plane, and texture was far more precise to accomplish in plastic than with other transparent media such as glass. According to the artist, she was fascinated by "the promise and the mystery of transparency" of plastic as art, specifically when the internal structure of a piece played a dynamic counterpart to reflections on the surface.

At first, Koblick produced functional items such as doorknobs, lighting fixtures, serving trays, and other decorative objects. She also made large, site-specific architectural elements. By the 1960s, Koblick shifted focus to cast-acrylic sculpture, striving to elevate plastic as a fine art. In November 1968, she was honored with a solo exhibition titled *Plastic Forms by Freda Koblick* at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York. Koblick was awarded a prestigious fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation two years later. One of Freda Koblick's monumental projects was *Night Sky,* a 1500-pound, cast-acrylic, hanging sculpture that was commissioned in 1980 for the central hub of Terminal 3 at the San Francisco International Airport.

Cast acrylic:

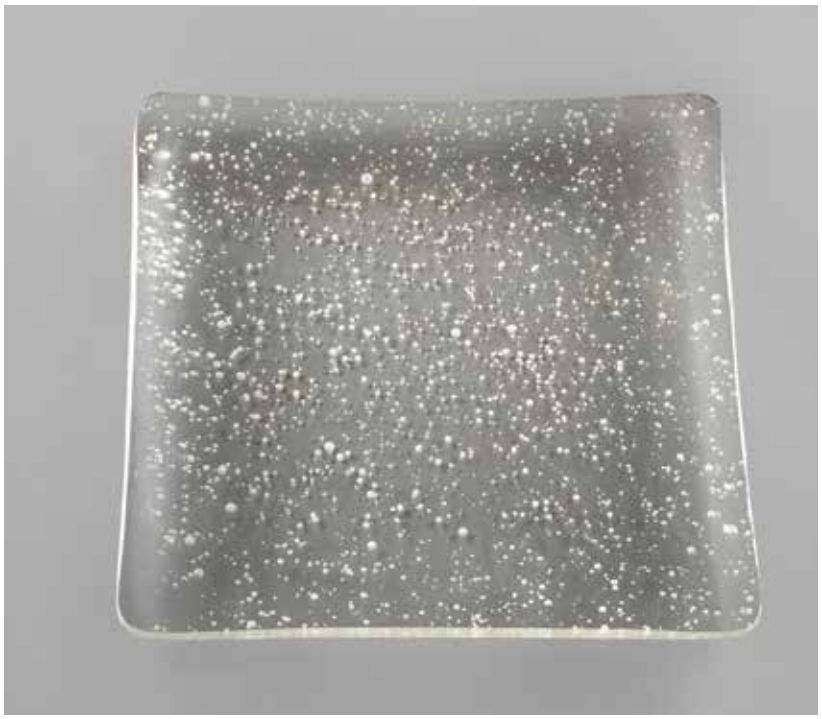
- A type of plastic that is formed from a liquid plastic resin, which is poured into a mold and allowed to solidify. Often the solidified, cast acrylic piece is polished to a high gloss and transparency that resembles glass.

Discussion question:

Why did Freda Koblick prefer working with plastic over other clear media such as glass?

- Koblick developed a great deal of creative control in cast acrylic, plastic forms. She was able to sculpt almost any form imaginable, and then cast that form into plastic without the need for the high heat and specialty equipment associated with glass casting.

Freda Koblick with one of her sculptures 1968
Peter B. George (active mid-20th century)
Courtesy of Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
R2022.0605.003



Tray 1952
Freda Koblick (1920–2011)
San Francisco
acrylic
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.043

Zahara Schatz

Zahara Schatz (1916–99) created modern decorative arts from metal and laminated plastic. Born in Jerusalem, she was the daughter of Boris Schatz (1867–1932), a distinguished Israeli artist who founded the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. Zahara Schatz studied at the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris and worked from studios in New York and Northern California. In 1950, she was awarded for a tubular metal desk lamp shown in the Lamp Design Competition at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. The following year, she founded an arts and crafts workshop in Jerusalem with her brother, the painter Bezalel Schatz (1912–78).

From the 1940s–70s, Zahara Schatz experimented with Plexiglas, an aircraft-grade plastic that offered fantastic optical clarity and opportunities to explore color and reflection. Working in her Berkeley, California, studio, she arranged "inclusions"—or pieces of wire, screen, bright metal, and tinted plastic—between two sheets of Plexiglas softened by heat or solvent. To add color, she painted background layers in translucent, opaque, or metallic pigments. Some of her lamps conducted electrical current through copper wire imbedded in Plexiglas; the example on display utilizes a spiral-shaped copper tube as a base and channel for the lamp cord. Zahara Schatz also created two-dimensional artwork that she called "planar layered paintings," in addition to molded sculpture, decorated plates, jewelry, and architectural elements—all in translucent Plexiglas.

Laminated plastic:

- More than one sheet of plastic that is fused together. Zahara Schatz laminated plastic sheets by softening them with heat or in solvent, and then pressing them together until they hardened.

Discussion question:

What did laminated plastic allow Zahara Schatz to do in art?

- Laminated plastic allowed for exciting possibilities that other materials did not offer. Zahara Schatz placed small, thin, metal items such as bright copper washers or aluminum screen between sheets of plastic to add interesting, three-dimensional qualities to two-dimensional art. Sometimes, she also placed pieces of thin, reflective metal sheet under tinted plastic to add bright colors and depth.

Zahara Schatz with her acrylic art 1950
Courtesy of The Schatz House
R2022.0609.001

Table lamp 1950
Zahara Schatz (1916–99)
Berkeley, California
Plexiglas, brass tubing, copper, aluminum, screen, straw
Courtesy of the Modern i Shop
L2022.0601.045a–b