

Eva Zeisel Talks to O's Lisa Kogan

Where do you go when you're in need of a little inspiration? Our ever-resourceful columnist turned to an artist who's been a creative force for the past 100 years.

By Lisa Kogan



Photo Illustration: John Ritter

Mary H. Krell needs a place to live. Who, you may be wondering, is Mary H. Krell? I asked that very same question at ten after five this morning when my daughter woke me with the Krell bulletin.

"Mary H. Krell is my wooden spoon doll," she informs me. "Every first-grader makes one, only the boys call them pocket people instead of spoon dolls because boys feel funny about saying they have a doll." Julia explains this in a way that suggests she loves me...despite the fact that I might be the stupidest human being on the face of the planet.

"Yep, boys are funny all right," I mumble.

"Mommy," Julia shouts directly into my left eardrum, "I need to bring a shoebox to school today, so I can build a house for Mary H. Krell!" My understanding is that all kids occasionally forget to mention their shoebox requirements in a timely fashion. My hope is that at least a few other 6-year-olds feel compelled to give their dolls a middle initial and last name. My prayer is that there is something in my ridiculously small closet that'll make a decent split-level ranch for Mary H. Krell. What I'm looking for is a creative solution, some sweet inspiration, and a modicum of wisdom. But at this particular moment, what I've got is bubkes.

I know that there are some women out there who are making their way through life with wit and courage, even on days when life refuses to play fair and provide them with a shoebox. And I know there are people in this world who get up every morning and, through magic and talent and sheer force of will, manage to turn nothing into something. I once witnessed my friend Karen go into her pantry, take out a jar of grape jelly, a pine-scented Air Wick solid, a can of cream of celery soup, a box of lasagna noodles, and whip up a feast. And yes, I'm exaggerating to make a point—there was no soup involved—but you get the idea. These women are improvising their way through complicated lives, raising children up, holding jobs down, sculpting a palace from an empty Adidas box. How do they do it? How do they acknowledge their limitations, and then find the bravado and perseverance and imagination to rise above them? Everyone I know is looking for the secret code that will unlock her creativity, but I can think of only one woman who has not only found it but somehow manages to tap into it daily.

I was familiar with Eva Zeisel's work long before I was familiar with her name: the teakettle she designed for Chantal, the line of dinnerware she created for Royal Stafford, the brass candlesticks, the blown-glass goblets, the ceramic vases, the porcelain pitchers. Voluptuous yet restrained, playful yet pragmatic, Eva's stuff is sexy. You want to caress it, sip from it, watch it catch the light.

Zeisel recalls her childhood in Budapest and what first sparked her interest in creating art

The sign on the front door of her prewar apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side instructs visitors to wash their hands before greeting Eva. Cold and flu season has not officially ended and nobody is taking any chances. This is because Eva Zeisel, who in 1946 became the first female designer in history to be given a one-woman show at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, is now 103 years old.

The Zeisel family genes must be Herculean; Eva's daughter, Jean Richards, could pass for 50-something, though a quick check of the dates proves that impossible. She brings me into the living room, where her mother sits at a small table. "Mom," she says, "this is Lisa." I extend my hand to Eva and she sandwiches it between her own. She traces its shape, skims each vein, and touches it to her cheek. But I'm not fooled by the tenderness of the gesture, or the fragility of the grasp—Eva is as strong as they come. Her hair is a luminous silvery white, her cheekbones are downright aristocratic, and her smile develops like a Polaroid, getting brighter as it comes into focus. Still, she has reached that place in life where, if you're lucky, looking back provides the resilience to look ahead.

I'm hungry for clues about Eva's remarkable talent, so I begin at the beginning. "Eva," I ask, "what can you tell me about growing up in Budapest?" She closes her eyes and, just for a minute, finds her way back home. "We lived in the hills. There was a beautiful orchard, and a pond with a bridge over it, and a small grotto. Then came our flower garden. It was my job to keep cut flowers and fresh fruit around the house," she says, nodding toward a bowl of tangerines. "There was also a vineyard, where we grew grapes to make our own wine." Eva's Merchant Ivory memories are pretty heady stuff for a girl who was born and raised in Detroit. I picture endless summers and calico cats and white cotton dresses as the sound of rush hour traffic outside Eva's window all but disappears.

She tells me about apprenticing herself while still in her teens to Mr. Karapancik, the last of the master potters in Hungary's medieval guild system. "He taught me everything there was to know about ceramics, from mashing the clay with my feet to firing the pieces in the kiln. Once a week, the master's wife would haul a big wooden cart filled with our wares to market, where she'd sit and sell them. But the world was pulling at me," Eva says, and pauses for a sip of tea. "So I took a job doing design work in a factory, then I placed an ad in the trade papers explaining that I was a qualified journeyman seeking a position. I received several offers, and naturally," she says with a wily smile, "I picked the one that was farthest from where I lived."

Eva headed for Hamburg, Germany, and then Schramberg, where she became one of the first people to apply contemporary mass production techniques to the ceramic arts. But her wanderlust kept her moving; over the next few years, she found a flat in Paris and, later, a studio in Berlin, always searching for the next great adventure. Then, in 1932, she went to Russia. "I just had to see

what was on the other side of the mountain." She got one job and then another, until after nearly four years of impressive promotions, at the age of 29, Eva Zeisel was appointed art director of the porcelain and glass industries for the entire republic.

Surviving solitary confinement with her sanity intact

Nineteen thirty-six turned out to be the wrong time to pursue a career on "the other side of the mountain." Joseph Stalin was purging the USSR of artists, intellectuals, foreigners, and anyone else he perceived as a threat. Eva, who was not the least bit political, was arrested on charges of conspiring to assassinate Stalin and jailed for 16 months in one of the notorious NKVD prisons. Twelve of those months were spent in solitary confinement, where she was left to marinate in the unrelenting knowledge that every day could be her last.

As we sit here more than 60 years later, the only thing I can think to ask is how she survived with her sanity intact. Eva rubs her temples and says that her head hurts, but when I suggest we stop, she ignores the offer, takes a breath, and goes on. "I did whatever I could do in a tiny cell to keep my body in shape. I spent hours repeating leg exercises, I stood on my head—anything. As for my mind, well, I avoided any soft or loving thoughts." She wouldn't allow for even a hint of vulnerability. "Beyond that, I kept very busy. I created projects for myself. I actually came up with a bra design! I thought through every aspect—the width of the straps, the proper amount of padding, exactly where it should hook—then I constructed it. I handstitched the whole thing," she says proudly. "And I did it all in my mind," she adds, as her voice trails off. Then one day, just as suddenly and inexplicably as she'd been arrested, she was released. Eva is still a little stunned as she describes being led from her cell, thinking the time for her execution had finally come. "Instead they just put me on a train to Austria, with nothing but the clothes I was standing in."

Eva had missed 16 months of life and she was not going to miss another minute. She boarded the last train out of Austria before Germany invaded. She married Hans Zeisel and, in 1938, emigrated to America. A year later she spearheaded a ceramics curriculum in the department of industrial design at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where she taught until 1952. Over the years, she's worked in Italy, Japan, England, and India, had two babies, received honorary doctorates, picked up every prestigious award imaginable, and attended a 2006 luncheon at the White House. Her work is in permanent collections everywhere from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the British Museum. There have been retrospectives all over the world and fresh releases of old designs, always approved by Eva herself.

But it's her new designs that astonish me. Her pieces are scattered all over the apartment—a collection of exquisite Christmas ornaments, a series of ceramic tiles coming out later this year, a group of light fixtures also in development. Every piece is witty, chic, utterly original, much like the woman behind them. I ask Eva where she finds beauty. "I look at a pressed red maple leaf from the tree in my garden upstate, I study the flowers people bring me. My eyesight only allows me to see very close-up, so when I design, I visualize the image in my mind and then I draw it like this—" Eva becomes instantly animated, her hands dancing in the space between us until I can see a perfect Zeisel pitcher, literally plucked from thin air. "I make a rough sketch. My design assistant, Olivia Barry, refines it; she uses thick lines and makes cutouts and models for me to feel. I'll say, 'This curve needs to be deeper, I want this wall to be angled, let's get this part really slender,' until it feels exactly right. My designs are meant to attract the hand as well as the eye."

She seems so sure of herself. I wonder how many years it'll take me to get so clear about how I want something to look or feel or be. I ask her if there is anything she regrets—something she'd go back and do differently if she could. She thinks for a minute, watches as her daughter enters the room again, glances at a sketch she's working on, and finally replies, "I regret nothing. I'd do it all again and I'd do it all the exact same way." Jean is genuinely startled. "Mother! What about Stalin? What about the prison—you'd do *that* again?" Eva's back straightens, and for a split second, she is absolutely defiant. "I *never* put myself in a prison," she says. "They did that to me."

Tired now, she asks if there's anything else I need to know. What I need to know is how you live more than a century—is it about diet, or heredity, or having a passion that goes the distance? But, feeling unusually energized after spending the afternoon with a genius, I also need to get back to finding a proper home for Mary H. Krell. "Just one last thing, Eva: What surprises you? I mean, at 103, is there anything that can still fill you with a sense of wonder?" Eva doesn't have to think to answer this question. "My dear," she says, "everything surprises me."

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