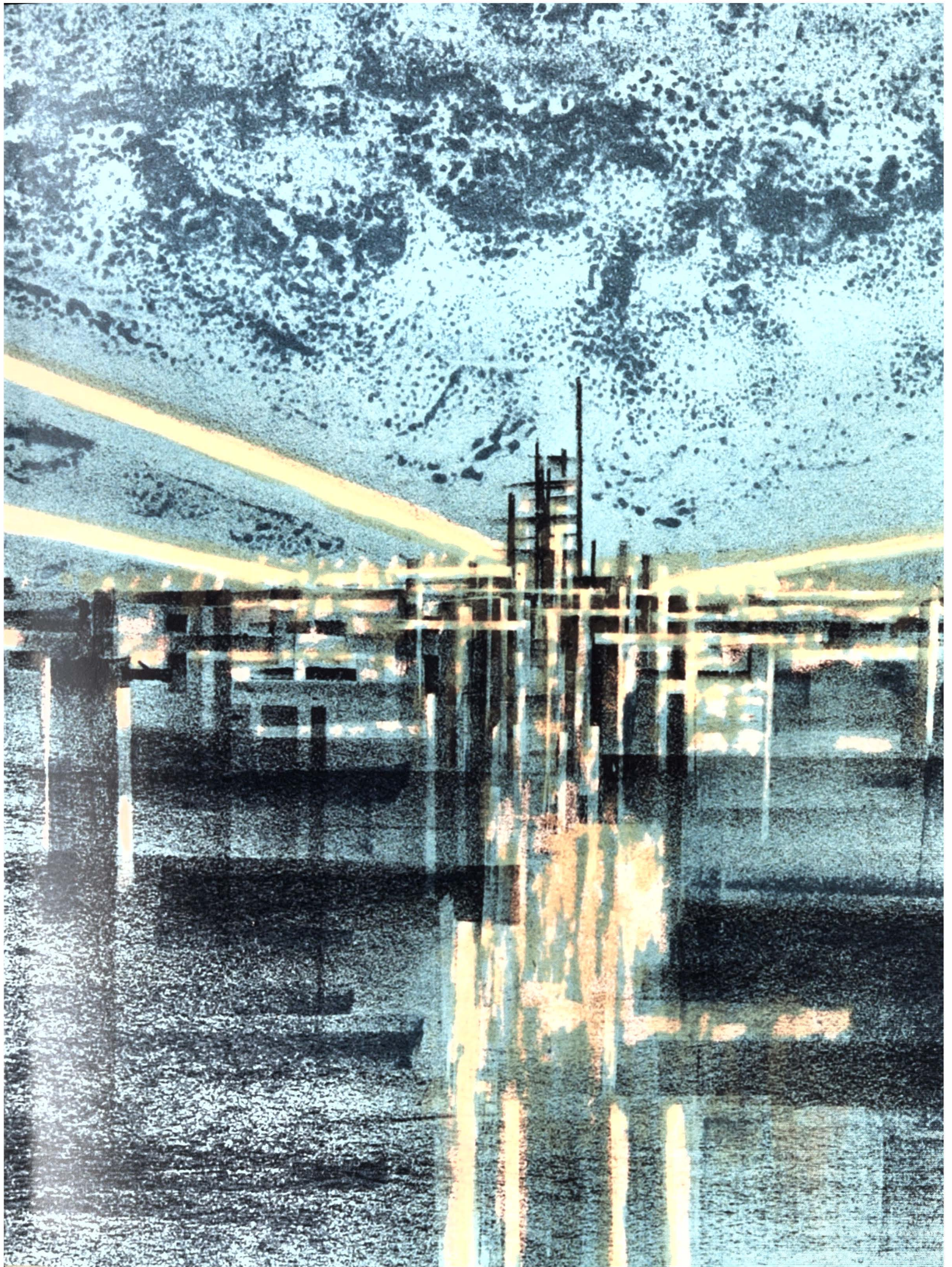


A collection of colorful buttons scattered across a white background. The buttons are in various colors, including red, green, and blue, and are arranged in a seemingly random pattern. The text "Art for Every Home" is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image.

Art for Every Home







# Art for Every Home

## *Associated American Artists*

1934–2000

*Edited by*

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## “CERAMIC PIECES IN THE MODE OF OUR DAY”

Stonelain and Decorative  
Taste in the American  
Home, 1950–54

*Kristina Wilson*

Detail of Carl Walters, *Strutting Rooster* (vase),  
1949, stoneware, glazed (see fig. 12.18)

Associated American Artists introduced its own line of artist-designed and house-manufactured ceramics in 1950. After a surprisingly brief run the line was discontinued, in 1954. Given the impressive longevity of the AAA organization as a whole—it successfully sold low-priced prints to a broad consumer audience for over sixty years—why were its ceramic products so short-lived? This essay examines AAA’s ceramic wares from the perspective of postwar suburban consumer culture, and interrogates how these products signified taste and status for those who bought them.

AAA made its first foray into tableware in the 1940s, through brief collaborations with Steuben Glass (1940) and Castleton China (1942 and 1949). In 1950 the organization announced the debut of “Original Creations from the Ceramic Collection.”<sup>1</sup> This line of decorative and functional ceramics, designed and painted by AAA artists and manufactured in potteries run by AAA, was soon given the name Stonelain. “Stonelain” was itself a manufactured word, created for marketing purposes; as AAA’s publicity materials and hundreds of advertisements and promotional pieces explained throughout 1950 and 1951, the name was meant to evoke both “stoneware’s durability and porcelain’s texture.” (Its pronunciation was, however, somewhat less intuitive: “Stone-lin,” directed the company’s publicity manual.)<sup>2</sup> Yet by 1954, weak sales prompted AAA to phase out Stonelain entirely.

Stonelain’s short life demonstrates the complicated nexus of taste and social status in postwar American culture. The products sat somewhat awkwardly among many well-defined categories in consumer society: they targeted the market as both fine art and decorative collectible; they were designed to respond to both traditional and modern decorating styles; they were promoted as an eccentric decorative accent in an era when non-Western folk objects often occupied that role; and they were positioned as both feminine accessory and serious object of masculine collecting. It is possible that AAA’s attempt to have Stonelain ceramics achieve all of these apparently dichotomous categories—and their consequent inability to achieve any of them—can help us to understand its commercial failure. What creates commercial failure can yield a rich art historical study.

Suburban growth in the years between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s witnessed two notable

trends: first, a dramatic increase in sales of home furnishings and appliances; and second, a boom in sociological studies that examined the culture of the suburbs. By some accounts, sales in products for the home more than doubled from 1945 to 1950.<sup>3</sup> This new sense of materialism shaped every aspect of suburban living. Families moving from cities into more spacious houses wanted new furniture, or at the very least more furniture than they had owned previously.<sup>4</sup> Magazines featured pages of appealing, gleaming new housewares and then offered countless articles addressing the “storage problems” that arose when trying to accommodate so many new commodities.

Postwar American society also demonstrated a preoccupation with status and community formation, as evidenced in numerous pop-sociology books and articles by authors such as Russell Lynes, William H. Whyte, and Harry Henderson.<sup>5</sup> Their writings, which spanned both the popular and academic fronts, ranged from descriptions of contemporary society and diagnoses of its faults to more open-ended debates over whether and how class and social stratification existed in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The evidence suggests a culture obsessed with defining itself: readers were continually asked to measure themselves—against abstract standards, against the personality types profiled in the sociological studies, against their neighbors. Unsurprisingly, in this culture of both materialism and sociological reflection, the objects consumed by a family and put on display in a home acquired special significance.<sup>7</sup> Home furnishings and accessories became symbols of self-definition and agents of identity formation. It is in the context of this culture that Stonelain’s brief existence must be considered.

## Stonelain: The Product as Modern Art

Throughout its history, AAA promoted its accessible prints by “famous American artists” as an opportunity to own an elite art object. The implication was that the purchaser, as a consequence of finances or personal background, was a novice in the world of the fine art market yet could appreciate the aesthetics and values associated with fine art; through the affordable prices offered by AAA, the patron was empowered to join the high-status group of fine art

collectors. Likewise, AAA marketed Stonelain with numerous overt associations with the venerable institutions of the fine art world. One early advertisement boasted of “the rare opportunity to own limited ‘first editions’ of Stonelain,” evoking the upper echelons of print and rare book collecting. It assured consumers that the “rare beauty” of a single Stonelain object would “lend a wealth of interest” to the home and would “become a treasured heirloom as its usefulness and great originality is admired from generation to generation.”<sup>8</sup> Another ad presented the new line as the heir to “that ancient art of ceramics” and explained that the “ox-blood red” glaze was “unknown since the early Chinese.” Such historical references fostered associations with the acknowledged masterpieces found in museums. The ad concluded by informing the consumer that each Stonelain product “carries a thought-provoking title and an identifying booklet with the artist’s biography,” which further referenced the establishment classifications presented on museum labels.<sup>9</sup> Advertisements like these, placed in local newspapers by individual department stores, usually borrowed their language directly from AAA’s own publicity materials. The Stonelain product catalogues themselves feature even more imaginative immersions into this elite art world fantasy:

Have you ever stood before a protected case of ceramic objects in a museum and marvelled at their beautiful shapes and deep, brilliant glazes? You knew instinctively that these were priceless objects that museums and connoisseurs scoured the world for, and that each cost a small fortune. Yet, these pieces too were created originally as simple utilitarian or decorative objects to serve in the home. They cost little at the time of their creation—but today, they are priceless treasures.

What if we were to say to you: we believe that the talented members of the Associated American Artists have created a number of ceramic pieces in the mode of our day that are every bit as magnificent in their own way as the ancient pieces that now take our breath? And, what if we added that you can own these collector’s items at prices ranging from \$3.50 to \$50.00?<sup>10</sup>

For all of the references to traditional ceramics in the marketing verbiage, the Stonelain objects themselves did not readily evoke historical associations. Instead, they seem to have explicitly engaged

12.1 William Gropper, *Equestrienne* (vase)

1950, stoneware, glazed, 13 × 10 in. diam. Stonelain, Associated American Artists. Private collection

several trends in modernist art practice. In the initial collection of 1950, many objects were decorated with expressive vignettes that showcased the painterly skill of the artist or with surrealist figures and pictograms. William Gropper's large *Equestrienne* vase exemplifies a painterly approach to decoration: with fluid, sketchy brushwork, the artist captured a dancer, arms held aloft, balancing precariously on one leg on the back of a galloping horse (fig. 12.1). The horse, with its head tucked down and hooves gathered inward, is a bundle of potential energy, anchoring the bottom of the vase, while the flamboyant gesture of the dancer's outstretched limbs echoes the object's upward expanding contour. Indeed, Gropper manages to convey the disorienting blur of a heated, chaotic circus ring, a scene that seems fully at odds with the massive solidity of the tall ceramic form.

A more surrealist, decorative approach is evident in Julio de Diego's monumental platter, *River Patterns* (fig. 12.2). Its organic, irregular form is enhanced by the assortment of playful, squiggle-like water creatures sprinkled across its broad bowl; they recall the whimsical two-dimensionality of paintings by Joan Miró. The topmost, clear glaze was allowed to crack



12.2 Julio de Diego, *River Patterns* (platter)

1950, stoneware, glazed, 2¼ × 19¼ × 12¼ in. Stonelain, Associated American Artists. Private collection





12.3 Nathaniel Kaz, *Johnny Appleseed*  
1950, stoneware, glazed, 9¾ × 5 × 5¼ in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists. Private collection



12.4 William Gropper, *Paul Bunyan*  
1939, lithograph, 13½ × 8 in. Associated American  
Artists. Ackland Art Museum, The University of North  
Carolina at Chapel Hill, gift of W. P. Jacocks, 58.2.150

and rupture in firing, furthering the effect one sees when gazing at the constantly shifting, occasionally inscrutable environs of a riverbed or tidal pool.<sup>11</sup>

Additional objects in the 1950 Stonelain collection reference still other trends in modern art. Robert Cronbach's *Repose* cigarette box features a voluptuous, reclining nude, rendered in calligraphic, interlocking arcs (fig. 12.6). The simple profile of the woman's face and the strong lines of her figure just beyond reach—instead of touching her body, we touch the contours of the box as we lift its top—recall the erotic simplicity that infuses Picasso's drawings of nudes from the 1920s onward. Nathaniel Kaz created a sculptural figurine of Johnny Appleseed as part of a small group of American folklore characters (fig. 12.3). The attenuated angles of his head, torso, and limbs transform the figure into a type of three-dimensional caricature, simplified and distorted into a pattern of angular exaggerations reminiscent of

Gropper's cartoonish AAA lithograph *Paul Bunyan* of 1939 (fig. 12.4). Nura Woodson Ulrich, known professionally by just her first name, contributed *Seven Seas*, a pitcher, the bold geometric design of which seems indebted to Bauhausian abstractions: a tall, wide cylindrical body is covered with a graphic pattern in which rectangular forms alternate with loose, painterly squiggles (fig. 12.7). Finally, the collection included numerous pieces that featured animal decorations: for example, a zebra on a Georges Schreiber square ashtray, horses on an Adolf Dehn plate, and a bovine scene on a Nura ashtray titled *Contented Cow* (fig. 12.5). All of these diverse objects share not only the bright colors of Stonelain's proprietary glazes but also a lighthearted and almost playful air. The animated brushwork is clear evidence of the artist's presence—well understood in this age of so-called action painting—but for the most part that presence seems buoyant, casual, and carefree rather than pensive or

brooding as in the practice of a Franz Kline or Willem de Kooning. At times, indeed, the carefree quality is almost careless, as imprecise gestures and loose washes of color veer toward messiness.

In 1951 several new kinds of objects were introduced to the Stonelain line, and the character of the collection began to change. Whereas the first year featured a variety of plates and small, low bowls that could be used as either snack dishes or ashtrays, the new additions tended to be taller and more sculptural. The greater variety of forms may have been offered as a result of market research, which AAA claimed to have done in preparation for the 1951 line.<sup>12</sup> Arvi Tynys contributed multiple items, and it was largely in response to his bold, sculptural, “amusing” forms that the *New York Times* described the entire line as possessing “touches of whimsy.”<sup>13</sup> A small pitcher, entitled *Baby Tusk*, made a powerful statement through its three-dimensional form and was offered in four monochrome glazes (fig. 12.8). The body of the pitcher forms a continuous arc through the spout; its bold, concave line is balanced by the

sharp angle of the handle protruding from the opposite side. The object seems to maintain a vibrant potential energy, as if it has drawn all of its force backward into the handle and plans to launch forward in the next instant. Tynys also designed three candleholders, including *Moonlit Shadows*, which has a rectangular base for three candles flanked on one side by the angular silhouettes of two cloaked figures, arms upraised; when the candles are lit, the forms cast dramatic shadows across a dining table (fig. 12.9). In general, fewer items in the 1951 collection had painted decorations; this, in addition to the heavier, more sculptural forms, meant that the animated, gestural, carefree quality of the 1950 collection was diluted. *Retailing Daily* responded with a critical eye, noting that “A more commercial, less arty feeling is in strong evidence in the new line, as compared with the earlier offerings.”<sup>14</sup>

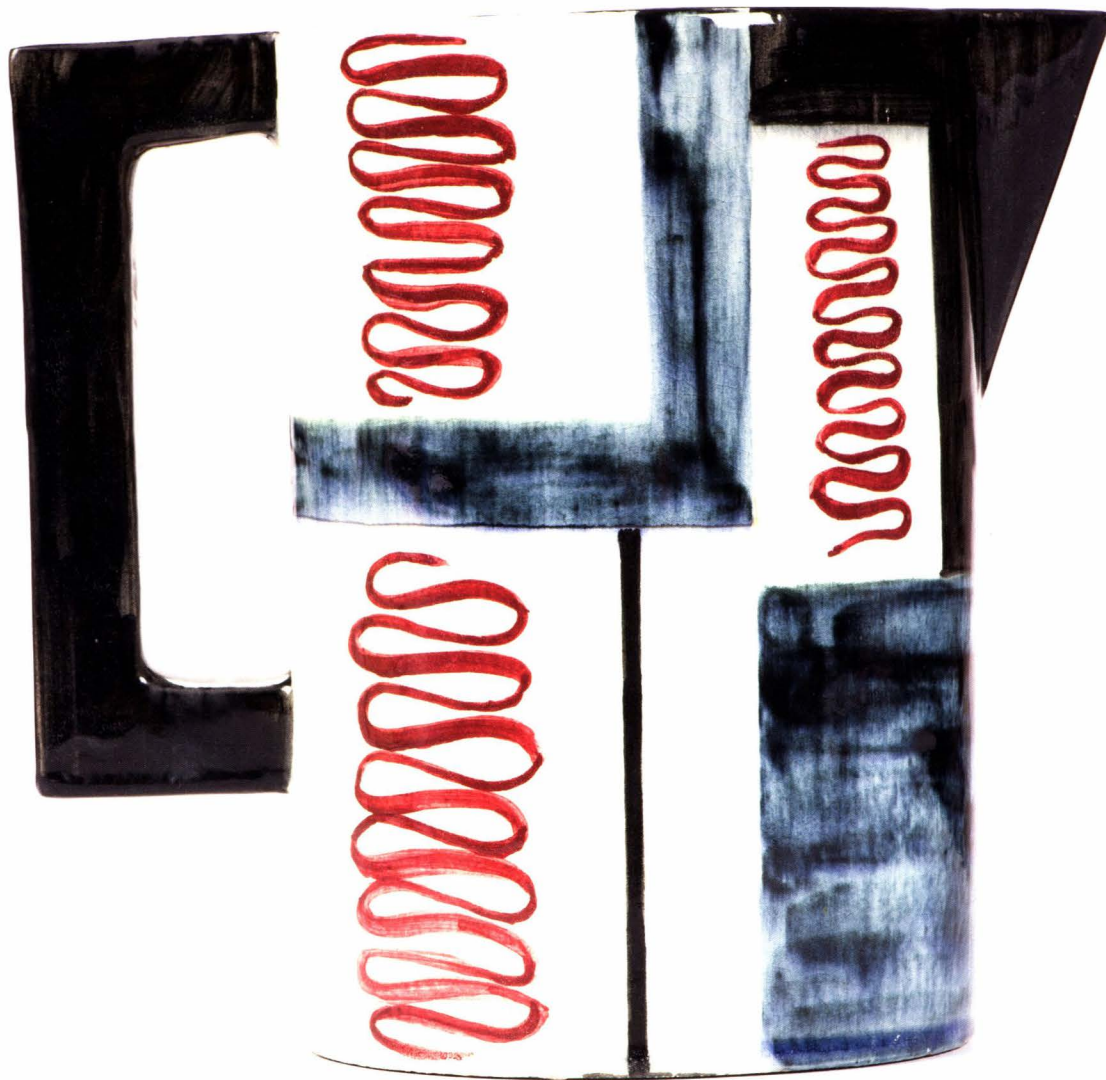
In 1952 AAA coordinated the new additions to the Stonelain line with the launch of its textile designs for Riverdale Fabrics. Small plates, bowls, and vases in forms that carried no special distinction were



12.5 Nura (Nura Woodson Ulreich), *Contented Cow* (ashtray)  
1949, stoneware, glazed,  
6½ × 7 in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists.  
Private collection



12.6 Robert Cronbach, *Repose* (cigarette box)  
1949, stoneware, glazed, 3 × 7 × 4½ in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists. Private collection



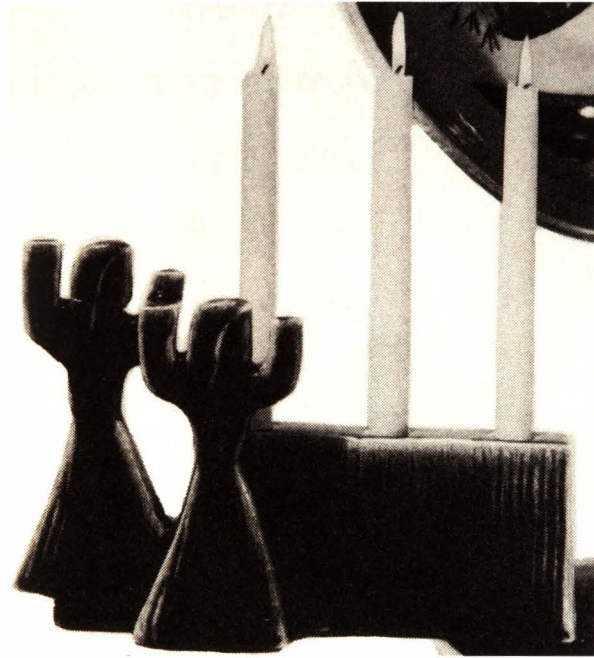
12.7 Nura (Nura Woodson Ulreich), *Seven Seas* (pitcher)

1949, stoneware, glazed,  $9\frac{3}{8} \times 9\frac{7}{8} \times 6\frac{1}{8}$  in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists. Private collection



12.8 Arvi Tynys, *Baby Tusk* (pitcher)  
1951, stoneware, glazed, 7 × 8½ × 3⅞ in.  
Stonelain, Associated American Artists.  
Private collection





12.9 Arvi Tynys, *Moonlit Shadows* (candle holder)

1951, stoneware, glazed, 7 × 11 in. (depth unknown). Stonelain, Associated American Artists. Illustrated in *This Is Stonelain: Presenting the New 1951 Collection of Fabulously Beautiful Ceramic Pieces in Rich, Brilliant Glazes Designed and Signed by Great American Artists* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1951). Private collection

decorated with illustrations that complemented the patterns in the fabrics. These decorations were not as idiosyncratic or emphatically gestural as those that appeared on the earlier objects. As a result, the overall character of the Stonelain line seemed diminished, reduced to a supporting role next to the fabrics and, with a few exceptions, such as Witold Gordon's synthetic cubist *Shell Chest* pattern and plate (figs. 14.7–8), unable to command interest on its own. By 1953 new additions to Stonelain consisted almost entirely of small dishes decorated with cartoon animals drawn by Alfonso Shum and Laura Jean Allen; a few designs could even be personalized by the purchaser. These items had no pretensions—admirable or otherwise—to the world of fine art, and fairly can be described as kitsch.

Given the multiple aesthetic connections to modern art examples, stylistically Stonelain could be classified as modernist. However, it is worth noting that its marketing rhetoric differed substantially from that used to promote many other modernist house-

hold wares. Modern furniture, for example, was often advertised with language that emphasized its newness, rather than any ties to history: adjectives such as “clean, crisp,” “fresh, free, and exciting,” “bright,” and “simple” appear repeatedly in marketing materials from the period.<sup>15</sup> In addition to newness, both modern furnishings and modern tablewares were promoted for their functionality, durability, and “versatility.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of claiming their worth as future heirlooms that would rightfully reside in a museum vitrine, marketing rhetoric placed emphasis on their practicality and the promise of fostering an atmosphere that was “fresh and spontaneous,” or that presented “a new informality” in everyday life.<sup>17</sup> The difference between Stonelain’s promotional language and the dominant rhetorical frames for modernist wares exposes a fundamental contradiction: formally, Stonelain appears akin to modernism, but its advertising ensconced it firmly in a world of tradition and history.

## Stonelain, Associated American Artists, and the Question of Taste

The creativity and artistic content of Stonelain declined between 1950 and 1953, but the lowbrow quality of the final products should not be blamed for the lack of success of the line as a whole. Indeed, it might have been the failure of the early objects to achieve sustainable sales that contributed to the overall aesthetic deterioration of the collection: although the initial objects sold, they clearly did not create enough demand to inspire Reeves Lewenthal to invest in the ceramic facilities and expand production. An analysis of Stonelain’s commercial failure is a frankly speculative project, as it is impossible to know definitively why postwar shoppers did not buy more items from the collection. However, from the perspective of a vibrant consuming culture, where the products brought into the home were clearly invested with the power to broadcast a consumer’s sense of identity, some clues may reside in how the objects engaged such pillars of self-fashioning as style, race, gender, and class.

Sociologist Harry Henderson’s 1953 study of American suburbia proposed that the interior decoration of most homes could be broadly categorized as either “early American” or “modern.”<sup>18</sup> Although Henderson undoubtedly oversimplified his findings,



- 12.10 **Frederic Taubes, *Bouquet* (plate)**  
 1949, stoneware, glazed, 10 in. diam. Associated American Artists

- 12.11 **Nicolai Cikovsky, *Still Life* (vase)**  
 1949, stoneware, glazed, 11½ × 3½ × 5 in. Stonelain, Associated American Artists

Both objects are illustrated in *And Now . . . We Bring You the Unprecedented Opportunity to Be Among the First Art Lovers and Home Decorators in the World to Own Original, Signed Ceramics Created by Leading American Artists* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1949). Private collection



he referred to a well-understood trend in twentieth-century interior decorating: the practice of decorating rooms in a singular coherent style. Shelter magazines typically boasted a range of different historical periods in their featured homes (Tudor, Empire, and early American among them) and usually contrasted these against a single example of a “modern” room. Stonelain objects may not have resonated effectively within this interior decorating context. Although many of the ceramic pieces were emphatically modernist, a few demonstrated a more conflicted decorative style. Both Frederic Taubes and Nicolai Cikovsky, for example, produced objects decorated with flowers (figs. 12.10–11). These objects do not fit readily into either a “modern” interior decorating scheme or a period-revival decorating scheme (whether “early American” or some other generalized historical reference). Taubes’s and Cikovsky’s objects have some characteristics that link them to the modernist tradition, such as the loose, impressionistic brushwork of their decoration that provides a vivid record of the artist’s process. However, the floral subject matter of the decoration is fundamentally traditional, even conservative: these ceramics seem to bear transplanted still life paintings.

Despite the conservative aspect, the objects do not actually recall the aesthetics of “early American” ceramics (or any other period-revival style), which might be characterized by monochromatic transfer printing, molded decorative elements, repeating patterns, or an emphasis on symmetry. Embodying a modernized update of the tradition of floral decorations on ceramics, they sit uncomfortably between period-revival and modern decorations. It is possible that the presence of such an object in a period-revival room would have been interpreted as a “touch of creativity” on the homemaker’s part, as AAA encouraged.<sup>19</sup> However, it is just as possible that these modern objects would have been seen as an eccentric, mismatched choice. And, as cultural critic Russell Lynes reminded his readers, “Eccentricity [in home decoration] . . . is not admired.”<sup>20</sup> Taubes’s plate, featured in an AAA catalogue in 1949 prior to the Stonelain launch, was apparently never produced after that initial offering, perhaps a victim of its conflicted stylistic affiliations.<sup>21</sup>

Within the world of modern domestic interiors as presented in magazines, how might the Stonelain objects have resonated? In a marketing environment where modernism was routinely described

with terms such as “clean,” “bright,” and “simple,” the Stonelain objects may have seemed surprisingly messy: the expressive, painted decorations just a bit too casual and occasionally sloppy, the molded forms a bit soft and therefore hard to read in the details, the monochromatic glazes a bit uneven in their application. Of course, not everything in a modern interior had to be crisp and clean-cut. One decorator’s advice column from the early 1950s noted that modernist interiors had “foibles” that were just as problematic as the decorative “knickknacks” frequently found in period-revival interiors; these foibles included “warty ceramics,” “a chunk of driftwood,” or “vast, squatty vases.”<sup>22</sup> Her account aptly describes a few model interiors in a modernist style that featured Stonelain objects in the early 1950s. In 1950 *House Beautiful* published a short article on the appeal of “furnishings in the Contemporary American style.”<sup>23</sup> The article is accompanied by a photograph of a living room featuring an unornamented, squared sofa and a coffee table with tapered, vaguely neoclassical legs



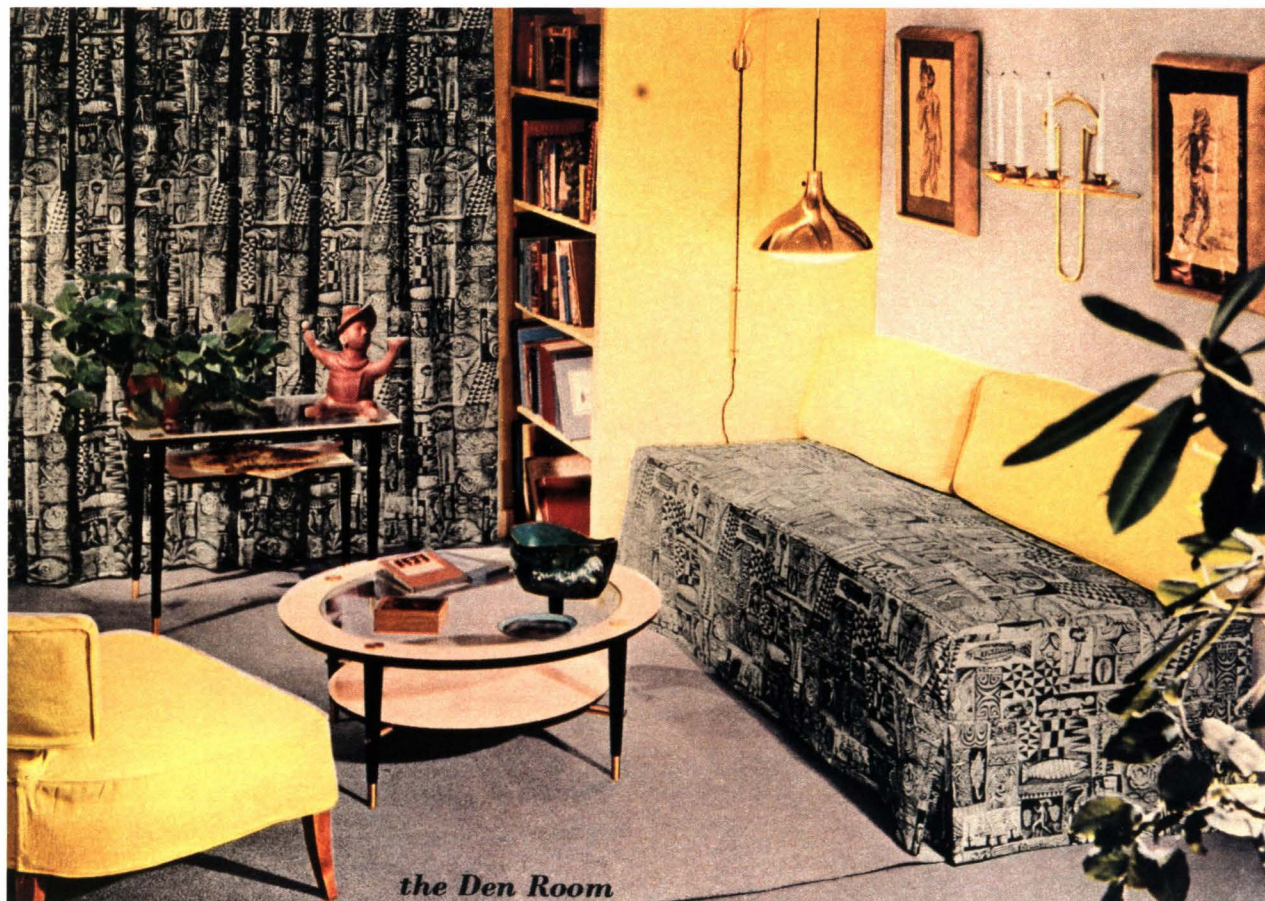
12.12 Arnold Blanch's Stonelain cigarette box *Fruit Hearts* shown in the December 1950 issue of *House Beautiful*

(fig. 12.12). While the table itself was not modernist, the simple lines of the sofa, table, and horizontal mullions along the back wall were meant to evoke the streamlined spareness of modernist design. The coffee table is accessorized with a massive piece of driftwood, a wooden folk sculpture of a pair of birds that is similar to Oaxacan figurines, a simple undecorated dish, and a Stonelain cigarette box (*Fruit Hearts*) by Arnold Blanch. A Spiegel Company catalogue from 1955 shows a modernist den decorated with Aaron Bohrod's *Pagan Magic* fabric (figs. 12.13, 14.15). The gleaming, circular pendant lamp and the simple, tapered lines of the side and coffee tables were again meant to signify modernist interior decorating. The coffee table displays an object that could be considered "vast" and "squatty," Julio de Diego's *Milky-Way* bowl (fig. 12.14). On the side table, an obvi-

ously non-Western figurine, possibly pre-Columbian, holds pride of place (the catalogue explains "Happy Feaster Sculpture: Original is in a famous Southwest Museum—this authentic reproduction is of brown and red terracotta. Unusual.")<sup>24</sup>

Architectural historian Dianne Harris has argued that the rhetoric of modern architecture in the post-war suburbs was deeply embedded in a discourse of racial whiteness, where spaciousness, openness, and crisp, clean interiors were implicitly contrasted against nonwhite urban environments of congestion, claustrophobia, and dirt.<sup>25</sup> Modern furniture advertisements shared this racializing tendency with their rhetorical emphasis on "clean" lines and "bright" colors; the implied counterexamples were dirtiness and dinginess, qualities associated with a stereotypical urban, nonwhite interior. Against the presumed whiteness of these furniture pieces, the smaller warty ceramics and chunk of driftwood in the model modern interior provided not simply a decorative accent but also an accent of tactile irregularity and allegedly primitive authenticity. When we consider that the

12.13 Stonelain objects and Aaron Bohrod's *Pagan Magic* fabric illustrated in the fall and winter 1955 Spiegel Home Shopping Book



12.14 **Julio de Diego, *Milky-Way* (bowl)**

1950, stoneware, glazed,  
6 × 11¾ × 7¼ in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists.  
Private collection



warty ceramics and driftwood were often paired with folk artifacts of apparently non-Western origin—such as the wooden and terra-cotta figurines in these two model interiors—then we can begin to hypothesize a racialized connotation to the accessories in general. If the unadorned, industrially simplified modernist furniture carries associations of whiteness, then the handcrafted irregular forms and natural materials of the accessories might signify nonwhite racial identities. In the model modernist interior, the relative balance between racially coded white furniture and racially coded nonwhite accessories is significant. The furniture defines and dominates the room, and thoroughly frames, or contains, the accents; the accents provide variety and even a touch of curiosity, in the mode of a colonialist tourist, but they are always clearly secondary to the dominant aesthetic of simplicity and severity.

In the context of these subtle racial politics—where modernist design is associated with white racial identity, partly through the aesthetic contrast of indigenous folk artifacts used as accessories—Stonelain ceramics were ultimately an awkward fit. The brown glaze of de Diego's *Milky-Way* bowl (similar to brown terra-cotta), in addition to its incised geometric markings, may have encouraged viewers to read it as a non-Western, nonwhite object, and thus it may have fit into the overall racialized scheme of midcentury modernist interiors. Bohrod's *Pagan Magic* textile perhaps resonated in a similar fashion: the curtains and daybed cover in the Spiegel cata-

logue feature a pattern of repeating, self-consciously primitivist motifs evocative of Native American art and Mexican folk art. The title of the fabric design (given by its white designer and white commercial producers) furthered the association to non-Western cultural traditions.

However, many other Stonelain products possessed decorative qualities that coded them, implicitly, as racially white. The figurines of Paul Bunyan, Ichabod Crane, and Johnny Appleseed (fig. 12.3) make overt reference to a tradition of white American folklore. Doris Lee's *Winter Train* also references the folk painting tradition of the white American Anna Mary Robertson "Grandma" Moses in its rural, snowy landscape (fig. 12.15). Marion Greenwood's vase, entitled *China Memory*, stands out for its self-conscious colonialism: the sentimental sketch that decorates the vase, done in an expressive, mostly Western style, was inspired, as the catalogue explained, by "the artist's trip to China. Several coolies circle the vase in the endless procession of this mystical Oriental land" (fig. 12.16).<sup>26</sup> While modern interiors such as the previously discussed examples may have incorporated indigenous non-Western artifacts, those accent pieces were embraced because they were the products of racial others, demonstrating an enlightened aesthetic awareness on the part of the Cold War citizen/consumer. Indeed, handwrought expression was acceptable in modern interiors in either a decorative object made by a racially distinct group or in a painting made by a white American fine artist.<sup>27</sup>



12.15 **Doris Lee, *Winter Train* (plate)**  
 1949, stoneware, glazed, 2¾ × 10½ × 8 in. Stonelain,  
 Associated American Artists. Private collection

Expressiveness in a racially white decorative object, however, fit into neither of these categories and was perhaps problematic. Instead of being authentically primitive or evidence of a serious philosophical struggle, the bowl or cigarette box risked being diminutive or irrelevant.

Judging from contemporary publicity, the most popular pieces in the Stonelain line tended to avoid the stylistic confusions just noted, such as modernism that was overly expressive and not “clean” and restrained, or conservative objects with a mildly modernist update (such as the Taubes plate). Some of the more successful items had simple contours and correspondingly minimal decorations. Gwen Lux’s *Ubangi* vase has a bold, unusual profile and was finished in a single monochrome glaze (fig. 12.17); it became the icon for the entire line when AAA used its profile in the mark that appeared on the bottom

of most Stonelain objects by 1950 (fig. 11.7). Nura’s *Seven Seas* pitcher was another early success, garnering an individual photograph in the *New York Times* (fig. 12.7).<sup>28</sup> Conversely, one popular vase designed by sculptor Carl Walters, entitled *Strutting Rooster*, was very closely related in form and decoration to eighteenth-century Pennsylvania German ceramics, which were highly collectible at the time (fig. 12.18). Rather than articulating a twentieth-century identity, Walters’s vase readily subsumed itself to a well-understood model of early American artifacts. Indeed, it so effectively imitated historical objects that it was used to accessorize the colonial revival furniture products of the Stickley company of Fayetteville, New York (fig. 12.19). The fact that the more successful objects in the Stonelain collection conformed to modern and period-revival interior design aesthetics lends some weight to the proposition that many items simply did not fit into contemporary decorative practices, and this contributed to an overall lack of sales success.

Stonelain objects were also difficult to categorize in terms of gender. The name “Stonelain” itself

embodied a certain gender hybridity. “Stone” referred to the strength of the material and prompted allusions to the stereotypically masculine traits of durability and solidity. The “lain” part of the name alluded to the porcelain quality of its finish, thus evoking such stereotypically feminine qualities as delicacy, translucence, and smoothness. The marketing material evidenced a similar identity split. Stonelain objects were, on the one hand, presented as close kin to works of fine art and objects collected in museums. In this period, the gender associated with collecting and with an establishment institution such as a museum might have been masculine; moreover, many of the print collectors featured in AAA’s catalogues throughout the 1940s were men.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Stonelain objects were something to “‘stock up’ [on] now . . . for your own home.” Stonelain was sold to the public through department stores across the country, often in the “gift” depart-



12.16 Marion Greenwood, *China Memory* (vase)  
1949, stoneware, glazed, 11½ × 5 × 3 in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists. Private collection

ment, and AAA especially promoted the objects as gifts: “exceptional, distinctive presents in unexcelled good taste.”<sup>30</sup> Objects for the home, or for gifting to someone else for her home, tended to be understood as feminine: something that would be bought by, and given to, the woman of the house. By claiming that Stonelain could be both a museum-quality work of art for the ambitious (male) collector and a tasteful gift for the socially obligated housewife, the marketing campaign blurred the gendered identity of the product. This ultimately compromised its ability to find its consumer audience and perhaps also contributed to its lack of commercial success.

In addition to engaging identity through style, race, and gender, the Stonelain collection also participated in a culture that defined identity through class. Rather than propose a direct affiliation between a consuming class and the Stonelain pieces, it is more instructive to analyze the many different ways that these objects engaged questions of social status. Perhaps the most obvious reference to class in the Stonelain line can be found in the repeated allusions to museums and fine art collecting culture. These statements were a clear attempt to associate Stonelain with an elite cultural position. Whether such an identity was achieved—whether a housewife aspiring to highbrow taste would feel that she had attained that status through the purchase of a Stonelain ashtray—is not the issue. Rather, it is the overt call to a readily recognized class and taste position that is remarkable in the Stonelain line.

Stonelain also engaged the issue of status through the social and hospitality functions of its various objects. As noted above, in its first year, the collection featured a large number of plates and small bowls. This may have been a consequence of the artists’ approach to the new line: since many of them were painters, they gravitated toward forms that would provide them a flat surface on which to paint. However, the low forms are also significant for how they function in the house. Many of the medium and large plates in the first collection seem to have been made to hang on the wall (several have holes for affixing a hanger), and three photographs in the first Stonelain catalogue illustrate plates hung on the wall and propped upright on a side table as works of art—that is, items of display (fig. 12.20). The many small dishes and ashtrays were not intended to be hung but, rather, are items that are firmly entrenched in a culture of entertaining: they hold finger snacks



12.17 **Gwen Lux, *Ubangi* (pitcher)**  
1949, stoneware, glazed, 9½ × 7 × 3½ in.  
Stonelain, Associated American Artists. Private  
collection

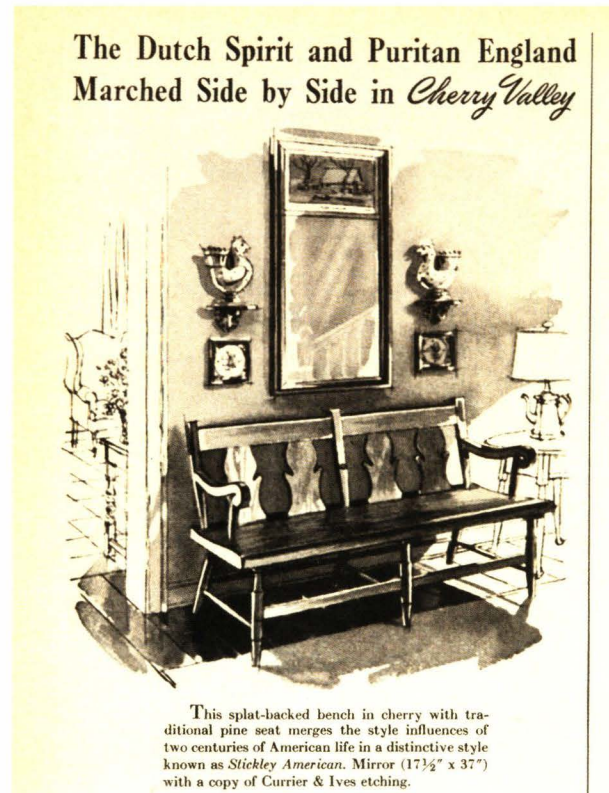




12.18 **Carl Walters, *Strutting Rooster* (vase)**  
1949, stoneware, glazed, 10¾ × 8 × 4⅝ in. Stonelain,  
Associated American Artists. Private collection

such as nuts and candies, or are meant for guests to tip their cigarettes into. They are objects that not only illustrate the owner's tasteful appreciation for fine art but also demonstrate the owner's generosity in tending to the needs of her guests. Indeed, these objects help to establish a hospitable atmosphere in the home, and they affirm that the owner is a part of a community that enjoys her entertainments. In short, they are a tool for articulating social status by representing belonging to a social group.

One final sign of status anxiety in AAA's promotional materials can be found in its continual references to the gift-giving economy. AAA had always positioned its prints as excellent gifts, but it promoted the gift-appropriateness of Stonelain with particular enthusiasm. Stonelain catalogues repeatedly reminded consumers that giving a Stonelain object as a gift would reflect well upon themselves: "What gift could be more appropriate, welcome, and appreciated than that gift that is distinctive and original in character—is in good taste—is unique in that



12.19 **Advertisement for the Cherry Valley Workshops of Stickley of Fayetteville, New York, in the September 1951 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens***

it is not readily obtainable—is useful—and, above all—is bound to become a cherished personal possession of timeless quality!"<sup>31</sup> The gift-giving relationship is one of complexity: a gift is not merely given from one to benefit the other; rather, it is selected to express the relative importance of the recipient to the giver and to express the giver's sense of self. AAA alluded to these nuances by assuring consumers that in giving Stonelain, they would not only give a gift that would be appreciated, but also give a gift that embodied their own good taste. If gift giving is one way that a person can assert her belonging in a social group—by giving gifts that express properly understood status positions and that reflect appropriate values to the group—then AAA again assured its customers that a Stonelain gift would help them achieve a certain kind of social status. As another ad reminded readers, "No well-appointed table should be without AAA's unusual Free-Form Hot Plate. Marvelous gift for your weekend hostess—better buy one for yourself, too."<sup>32</sup>

Aside from utilitarian service, the 12" plates, **FROLIC** by Adolf Dehn (\$27.50) and **TOREADOR** by Fletcher Martin (\$27.50) make wonderful hanging decorations. Plate hangers (available in any department store) will hold the plates securely. These colorful notes used in this fashion will do wonders for your home.

The Marion Greenwood vase, **CHINA MEMORY** (\$22.50) and the Gwen Lux cigarette box **RECLINING FIGURE** (\$17.50) will add charm to your coffee or end tables.

**UBANGI**, the beautifully designed pitcher-vase by Gwen Lux (\$14.50) can be used with or without flowers. It is as charming on the bedroom dresser as in the living room. **REPOSE** by Robert Cronbach (\$10.00) doubles as a cigarette box or a catch-all for men's studs, cufflinks or for women's jewels.

**STRUTTING ROOSTER** by Carl Walters (\$19.50). As a vase it is magnificent; as a decoration it will catch the eye of all. Two of these roosters on your dining table, buffet or mantle will measurably cheer your home.

The Arnold Blanch cigarette box and ashtray **FRUIT HEARTS** (\$15.00 each) will contribute lively notes to your decor. This is a truly handsome combination unit for the coffee or lamp tables.

Here is another use for the beautiful 12" plate **FROLIC** by Adolf Dehn (\$27.50). A small table easel (readily procurable in department stores) can hold the plate, when not in use for other purposes, to make difficult spots in your home sing with life.

Nura's **SEVEN SEAS** pitcher (\$25.00) can do yeoman service for you. It can be used as a pitcher; a vase; or a decorative object. The Carl Walters' **STately DUCKS** (\$12.50 each) will enrich many, many spots in your home . . . on end tables; as dining table decoration; on your mantle; on your coffee table; etc.

As an expression of identity through class or taste, Stonelain is ultimately (and maybe intentionally) somewhat inscrutable: it was perhaps marketed to an aspiring middlebrow, middle-class consumer or perhaps intended for a more conservative upper-middle-class audience. What seems evident is the concern with fitting in, and an overall cautious character. These are products that are safe enough to be museum-worthy, and will acquit the customer without blame in her social positions of hostess or gift giver. Moreover, the careful social concern was reflected in the aesthetics of the objects. Associated American Artists had long reminded consumers that the prints available in their catalogues were "varied enough to meet any decorative purpose," and assuaged anxieties about decoration with this claim: "Whether your furnishings are of the English, French, Regency or Modern period, these originals will aid your decoration."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the Stonelain objects were somewhat modern but never avant-garde. They expressed individual artistry according to twentieth-century tropes, but reduced that expression to the nonthreatening scale of decorative accessories. They conformed to the white consumer culture of postwar interior decorating by expressing a racially white point of view, even as their role as decorative accessory was one occasionally occupied by non-white artifacts. Perhaps, ultimately, the short life of the Stonelain line can be explained by its very cautiousness and carefulness: so keen to please everyone, it stirred the acquisitive passions of very few.

12.20 *And Now . . . We Bring You the Unprecedented Opportunity to Be Among the First Art Lovers and Home Decorators in the World to Own Original, Signed Ceramics Created by Leading American Artists in Our Own Studios and Fired in Our Own Kilns*

1949. Associated American Artists. Private collection

## Notes

I would like to thank Gail Windisch, Jane Myers, Liz Seaton, and Karen Herbaugh for generously sharing their extensive knowledge of and research on Associated American Artists with me. In addition, I thank Jane Myers and Liz Seaton for their astute comments on early drafts of this essay.

1. *Available Now to Our Patrons Before Public Presentation—and at Very Reasonable Prices: Original Creations from the Ceramic Collection Designed and Signed by the Famous Members of Associated American Artists* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1950). The earliest Stonelain ceramics date to 1949. The works were first marketed with the Stonelain name in 1950.

2. *With Stonelain in Your Department You Hold a Winning Sales Hand!* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1950). Associated American Artists Records, ca. 1934–81, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as AAA Records, AAA-SI), reel D256, frame 308.

3. This includes furnishings, accessories, and appliances. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 157–58.

4. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (1949; repr. New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1954), chap. 14; Harry Henderson, “The Mass-Produced Suburbs: Part I,” *Harper’s* 207, no. 1242 (November 1953): 26–27; and Jack Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956), 45.

5. Lynes, *Tastemakers*, chap. 14; Henderson, “Mass-Produced Suburbs,” 26–27; and William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956; repr. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

6. Two examples of more academic studies are Walter Goldschmidt, “Social Class in America: A Critical Review,” *American Anthropologist* 52, no. 4 (October–December 1950): 483–98; and Gideon Sjöberg, “Are Social Classes in America Becoming More Rigid?” *American Sociological Review* 16, no. 6 (December 1951): 775–83.

7. “The jealously guarded privacy in financial matters requires this to be further symbolized; hence the importance of occupation (source of income) and expenditures (its public display).” Goldschmidt, “Social Class in America,” 493.

8. Advertisement for Hudson’s department store, *Detroit News*, October 8, 1950. AAA Records, AAA-SI, reel D256, frame 259.

9. Advertisement for Rich’s department store, *(Atlanta) Journal and Constitution*, September 17, 1950. AAA Records, AAA-SI, reel D256, frame 261.

10. *And Now . . . We Bring You the Unprecedented Opportunity to Be Among the First Art Lovers and Home Decorators in the World to Own Original, Signed Ceramics Created by Leading American*

*Artists in Our Own Studios and Fired in Our Own Kilns* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1949).

11. My thanks to Ellen Denker for explaining the technical aspects of de Diego’s ceramic construction.

12. “Fall 1951 Collection: Stonelain,” AAA press release, July 1951. 2. AAA Records, AAA-SI, reel D256, frame 328 (hereafter cited as 1951 Stonelain Press Release).

13. “Ceramics Marked by Note of Whimsy,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1951, 19.

14. “Stonelain Fall Ceramics,” *Retailing Daily*, August 27, 1951. AAA Records, AAA-SI, reel D256, frame 326.

15. Advertisements for Hudson’s, *Detroit News*; for Kent-Coffey Manufacturing Company, *Better Homes & Gardens* 33, no. 4 (April 1955): 149; for Mengel Furniture Company, *American Home* 50, no. 5 (October 1953): 109; and for Heywood-Wakefield Furniture, *House & Garden* 105 (April 1954): 36.

16. Advertisements for Melmac, the Harker Pottery Company, and Selig Manufacturing Company, *House & Garden* 105 (May 1954): 173, 175, 192.

17. Advertisements for Rosenthal-Block China Corp., *House & Garden* 105 (May 1954): 3; and for Hudson’s, *Detroit News*. See also Florence Byerly, “How to Get a Home that Lets You Take It Easy,” *Better Homes & Gardens* 30, no. 4 (April 1952): 57–59ff.

18. Henderson, “The Mass-Produced Suburbs,” 26–27.

19. 1951 Stonelain Press Release, 2.

20. Lynes, *Tastemakers*, 308.

21. Correspondence with Gail Windisch, Liz Seaton, and Jane Myers, July and October 2014.

22. Marian Castle, “I’ll Take My Modern in Moderation,” *Better Homes & Gardens* 30, no. 4 (April 1952): 325.

23. “The American Marriage of Elegance and Easy Upkeep,” *House Beautiful* 92, no. 12 (December 1950): 142–45.

24. *Spiegel Home Shopping Book, Fall & Winter 1955*, 124.

25. Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), esp. chaps. 1 and 3.

26. *And Now . . . We Bring You the Unprecedented Opportunity*. Another example of a Stonelain object that clearly appropriates the identity of a nonwhite is a ca. 1952 martini pitcher by Aaron Bohrod, intended to accompany his *Country Auction* textile design (see fig. 14.6). The pitcher features a painting of an African-American lawn jockey on one side.

27. For a discussion of the construction and presentation of the concept of “self” in Abstract Expressionist painting, see Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); and Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

28. “Useful Work of Artist,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1950, 12.

29. See, for example, the four men profiled in *Catalogue: Signed, Original Etchings and Lithographs Contributed by Leading American Artists* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1940), 60. See also Windisch, this volume, n44.

30. *And Now . . . We Bring You the Unprecedented Opportunity*.

31. *Available Now to Our Patrons*.

32. Advertisement for Associated American Artists, *New York Times*, November 28, 1952, 20. Occasionally the gift-giving culture went even further. One article that featured Stonelain exhorted its readers, “When writing out a gift-shopping list be sure to include the house.” Joan O’Sullivan, “Merry Christmas to . . . the House!” *Home Magazine* (December 9, 1950). AAA Records, AAA-SI, reel D256, frame 300.

33. *Catalogue of Signed, Original Etchings and Lithographs Contributed by Leading American Artists* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1944), 59.