The Designs of Belle Kogan

America's First Female Industrial Designer

As the creator of the Prismatic, Magnolia, Tropicana and Textura art pottery lines, Belle Kogan was one of Red Wing's most prolific designers. She designed more than 400 pieces for Red Wing between 1938 and 1964. But, she just wasn't limited to ceramics. Her career actually began with silver and jewelry, and she also worked with glass, wood and plastics. From flatware and dinnerware to electronics like clocks, radios and toasters, her designs were manufactured by the likes of Reed & Barton, Bausch & Lomb Optical, Dow Chemical, Federal Glass Co., Hull Pottery and Haviland China during her illustrious career. She even designed a few Zippo lighters and her own line of doll furniture – all made possible because she moved to the land of promise at age 4.

Known then as Bella Cohen, she immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1906 with her mother, Witte, and sister, Sarah. (Her father, Bernhard, moved to the U.S. two years earlier to establish his jewelry business.) Her artistry skills were observed early on by one of her teachers in Bethlehem, Penn. In high school, her art teacher encouraged her to take a mechanical drawing course, which was created to help boys find jobs with the Bethlehem Steel Co. She was the first and only girl to take the class, and she loved it.

Kogan passed up a scholarship to the Pennsylvania Academy of Art upon graduation, instead opting to study for a brief time at Pratt Institute in New York, where she decided to become a portrait painter. While that remained her objective for the next eight years, she was the oldest of eight siblings and her father needed her help in running the family jewelry business in Bethlehem and then New York City. There she gained valuable experience in accounting and marketing, and developed an appreciation for form, color and material. She even assisted some of her father's suppliers in creating new products.

But it was a chance meeting in 1929 that truly changed her life. When dining with some girlfriends in a New York City restaurant one evening, a man sitting at a nearby table noticed that Kogan was carrying a sketchbook. She let him look at it; he complimented her work and asked if she had ever tried designing anything. Then he revealed that he was James Jennings, owner of Quaker Silver Co., and he was looking for someone to help him with some silverware designs. "Oh my God," Kogan recalled saying, "I've sold so many of your salt shakers in our store!"

Days later Jennings came by the store and asked Kogan to design a line of pewter. She wasn't particularly interested until he offered her $15 per sketch. She made 30 drawings; that $450 in 1929 was equivalent to about $4,800 in buying power today. Soon he invited her to move up to Massachusetts to work at one of Quaker Silver's factories where she learned about the manufacturing and packaging processes and incorporated that knowledge when she created new designs. Then Quaker sent her on a 15-month trip to Europe where she studied at a German silver and jewelry design school and visited various manufacturers.

Kogan returned to the U.S. and continued working for Quaker for $60/week, but she now realized her potential and got bored. As a freelance designer, she'd have the luxury of designing in different mediums for a wide variety of manufactures. She convinced Quaker to keep her on retainer for $20 a week and opened her first studio in New York City, where she changed her name back to Kogan – the Russian version of Cohen. Her client list grew and she made a good living working on retainer and occasional royalties.

Kogan hired her first design-trained employee in 1933 and soon she was one of the most-prominent industrial designers in the country – the only woman in a field of men. She often wrote articles for trade publications and magazines to educate the manufacturer and consumer about the importance of good design. She also presented her belief that thanks to mass production, a well-designed object didn't need to be costly. In the process, she boosted the need for good designers like herself.
The Red Wing Potteries first commissioned Kogan in 1938, shortly after dissolving its partnership with George Rumrill. The company was in need of fresh new designs and Kogan didn't disappoint, coming through with about 150 shapes, from which 100 of both modern and classical styling were selected for production. The “Belle Kogan 100” increased Red Wing’s volume from $100,000 to $500,000 in a few years. In the Oct 1938 issue of *China, Glass and Lamps*, she described her approach to designing vases for Red Wing:

“Every piece in the line was created with thought for its decorative value independent of flowers... One more factor was strictly observed in working out the various shapes - a factor of importance from both the visual and the utilitarian points of view. This is the complete absence of any naturalistic flower forms in the modeling of the vases. In my opinion, such forms are definitely bad, competing as they do with the lovely colors and shapes of the real flowers.”

Kogan also designed a new pattern for Red Wing’s Gypsy Trail dinnerware line in 1938. Produced in 1939, ‘Fondoso’ included five fruit-shaped cookie jars: apple, pear, bananas, pineapple and grapes. (A cabbage cookie jar not designed by Kogan was added later, but was discontinued shortly after its introduction. As stated in *Red Wing Art Pottery I*, it’s known as one of Red Wing’s rarest cookie jars.)

Kogan designed the Magnolia line of art pottery for Red Wing in 1940. While it’s popular with collectors, it wasn’t one of her favorites says her nephew, RWCS Member Bernie Banet.

“(Magnolia) was too traditional for her,” he says. “She liked more modern, contemporary design, but Red Wing needed her to design something that fit with the Rumrill (Georgia Rose) designs that were still being produced.”

Kogan designed shapes #975 through #1032 for the Magnolia line, but the #1200 series introduced in 1946 was not hers, Banet notes. In fact, Kogan didn’t design for Red Wing during much of the 1940s, as the Potteries hired Charles Murphy as its director of design in 1940. But when Murphy left the company in 1949 due to disagreements with President H.H. Varney, Red Wing called upon Kogan once again. She designed a number of new art pottery lines in the early 1950s, including Tropicana, Textura, Classical and DeLuxe; most of these shape numbers carried a new “B” prefix, as she wanted her designs to be more easily attributed to her.

Kogan also added to Red Wing’s dinnerware portfolio in the early 50s, designing the Fancy Free and Dynasty lines and their respective patterns, Desert and Caprice (one of her personal favorites, according to Banet), and Plum Blossom. She also designed several patterns for the existing Concord line, such as Lanterns, Iris, Zinnia and the Buds pattern, which is highly valued by collectors due to its rarity. Only samples exist; it was never put into production because it drew little interest at a trade show.

Charles Murphy returned to Red Wing in 1953, so there wasn’t a need for new Kogan designs. But her existing designs were still produced into the mid 50s.

Kogan was retained again in 1962, however, as Red Wing wanted something groundbreaking. She came through again, this time with Prismatique – a geometrical array of 15 different shapes in 5 glaze colors. According to the Minnesota Historical Society’s website, the line was inspired by a trip to the dentist’s office, where she was “struck by the faceted geometry of a tooth’s roots.” It quickly became one of Red Wing’s best sellers and was sold until 1965, with two shapes continuing on to 1967. Across all the mediums she designed in, Banet says Prismatique was one of Kogan’s personal favorites. She used the geometric look again in 1966, when she designed line of plastic pendant light shades for Synder Mfg. Corp.

Kogan’s final Red Wing designs were commissioned in 1964, when she created the Belle Line, which was inspired by Scandinavian pottery of the period.

Kogan closed her NYC design studio in 1970 and moved to Israel with her husband, Nathaniel Watman, after being invited by a conglomerate of hundred factories to set up a design studio there. She was honored with the Industrial Designers Society of America’s Personal Recognition Award in 1994. The RWCS invited her to speak at a Convention in the late 1990s, but the long trip from Israel prohibited her from attending. She lived out her days in Israel and died in 2000 at the age of 98.

In an upcoming issue of the RWCS Newsletter, Kogan’s nephew, Bernie Banet, will share some of his favorite memories of his Aunt Belle and discuss his enthusiasm for collecting the shapes she designed for Red Wing.

Some of Kogan’s most recognized non-Red Wing designs include (from left) the Telechron “Quacker” children’s alarm clock, a silver serving tray for Reed & Barton and bracelets and other jewelry for Bakelite.