

**Don Wallance: Changing the Look of American Flatware
Through Craft and Industry**

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Introduction

The design of eating implements has had a special fascination for me. They are the most intimate of all the objects we commonly use. Associated with food, we hold them in our hands and place them in our mouths. Tactile and sensual aspects of design are important, and the forms can be sculpture of the most subtle kind.... I consider this one of the most challenging and demanding areas of design.¹

Don Wallance (1909-1990), who trained at the Design Laboratory in New York, is a significant, but under examined figure in American twentieth-century design. With the success of his flatware designs for the H.E. Lauffer Company, Wallance became the most important American flatware designer in the early post-war period and continued his success throughout the early 1980s. During the 1950s, when most high-grade stainless steel flatware sold in America was manufactured and designed in Europe, Wallance's innovative and well-studied designs allowed him to become the first successful American designer for this market.

British metallurgist Harry Brearly discovered the stainless steel alloy in 1914.² Due to its extreme hardness and corrosion resistance, stainless utensils soon began to be used in food preparation. A handful of European manufacturers, mostly in Scandinavia and Germany, started to design stainless flatware that was deemed appropriate for use at the dining table, but very few of these products were imported successfully into the United States in the 1920s and 30s. In America, early stainless wares were used almost exclusively in the kitchen or in places like inexpensive diners. During the war years,

¹ Don Wallance, *unpublished letter to Charles Hublitz of the H.E. Lauffer Company* (February 6, 1980). The Don Wallance Archive, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York (Wallance Archive).

² Peter Brown, "1900-1950" in *British Cutlery: An Illustrated History of Design, Evolution and Use* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd, 2001), 142.

countries that had been involved with stainless steel manufacture in the 1920s ceased production of civilian goods.³ Although stainless flatware was manufactured and marketed to the public after World War I, and again after World War II, it was still fairly cheaply made in many countries and considered only suitable for utilitarian uses. Countries like Sweden that were not directly affected by World War II were able to keep experimenting with stainless design and production. Sweden's Gense Company produced Folke Arström's high-grade stainless flatware line *Thebe* (Figure 1) in 1944 while most other countries did not produce, much less market or purchase, anything comparable until about ten years later.⁴ In Robert Welch's book, *Hand and Machine*, he states that in the mid-nineteen fifties there were only a handful of retailers selling high quality stainless steel flatware in London.⁵ However, as the practicalities of stainless became better known, more people turned to the well-designed and manufactured wares being produced in Scandinavia and Germany, and the popularity of stainless flatware spread.

In 1954, stainless flatware of various qualities made up ten percent of the American flatware market.⁶ But the majority of these products was still of the poorest grade and only sold through hardware stores and other down market venues. Eventually, good contemporary design and high production standards were applied to stainless flatware production. Stainless flatware began to appear alongside silver flatware in the display cases of the finest of shops in metropolitan areas throughout the United States.

³Robert Welch, *Hand and Machine* (Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, UK: Robert Welch, 1986), 116.

⁴ Brown 2001, 142.

⁵ Welch, 1986, 113.

⁶ "Stainless Flatware" *The Jewelers' Circular-Keystone* (June 1955), 49.

Until the late 1950s and 1960s, however, the majority of the stainless flatware sold in the United States was designed and manufactured in Europe.

In the United States, Russel Wright (1904-1976) is often credited with introducing 'designed' stainless to the American market. His *American Modern* (1951) and *Highlight/Pinch* (1953) patterns were inexpensive, stamped stainless steel wares meant for outdoor or casual dining. Conversely, a number of Europeans were designing stainless flatware that rivaled silver flatware in its quality and widespread use. These included Scandinavians like Henning Koppel (1918-1981) and Kaj Franck (1911-1989); German designers and manufacturers like Carl Hugo Pott (1906-1985); the Italian designer Gio Ponti (1891-1979); and British designer David Mellor (b.1930). These European products initially found their way into the homes of American avant-garde patrons and the design conscious, and eventually became models for the stainless eating utensils that exist in many homes today.

Unlike other American designers at the time, Wallace gave special consideration to the consumer and his or her interests while designing each of his flatware lines. His studies of ergonomics, manufacturing techniques and materials, and contemporary international design resulted in wares perfectly suited to the post-war global market. Additionally, Wallace's attention to the differences between American and European table manners and food resulted in flatware lines that were especially popular throughout the United States. Wallace can further be credited with changing American perceptions of stainless steel flatware as being suitable only for kitchen use and second-class restaurant wares. Through his insistence on the highest quality of manufacturing, he succeeded in making stainless steel a viable alternative to silver flatware.

In the 1950s, Wallace was the only American designing stainless flatware whose work successfully rivaled contemporary European lines. Unfortunately, no American stainless steel manufacturer was willing or able to produce stainless steel flatware of the quality that Wallace and H.E. Lauffer demanded. As a result, all of his lines were made outside the United States. Initially manufactured in Europe and later in Asia, Wallace's designs were often as successful abroad as in the United States.

Wallace created designs for approximately fifteen patterns for the New York-based H.E. Lauffer Company. Among his most noteworthy was the first pattern, named *Design 1* (Figure 2), created in 1953. *Design 1* caused a sensation throughout the design world and won the 1954 Gold Medal at the Milan Triennale. Due to a variety of reasons that will be discussed in the following pages, it was manufactured by the German firm of Pott-Bestecke. Following was *Design 2* (Figure 3) in 1956, Wallace's first forged stainless pattern, which was also quite successful. Other patterns followed that were predominantly stainless. *Palisander* (Figure 4), designed in 1967, was an exception, as it combined rosewood handles with stainless steel blades and bowls. *Design 10* (Figure 5), which began production in 1981, was Wallace's only flatware pattern formed of molded plastic.

Don Wallace's career as a flatware designer represents that of a post-war industrial designer working on a global scale. Each of his finely crafted utensils was approached as a piece of functional, yet sculptural, art and consequently appealed to many. Through comparison with other flatware designers worldwide, this paper will establish Wallace's deservedly important place in twentieth-century flatware design. Primary materials ranging from design sketches, letters, models, and finished pieces

comprising the *Don Wallance Archive* from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, will be used to exemplify Wallance's meticulous attention to detail and craft-based design techniques. His hands-on design process and awareness of the needs of consumers enabled him to create stainless flatware for the American market that was popular enough to alter the look of the twentieth-century dining table. His designs successfully supplanted silver flatware that was expensive, shaped almost precisely as it had been for generations, and difficult to care for. Wallance's stainless flatware was instead relatively inexpensive, of modern design, and dishwasher-safe. The paper will also place Wallance in context as representative of design trends in the second half of the twentieth century as he designed objects for a mass market. Like many objects introduced at this time, each of Wallance's flatware designs was intended to be beautiful yet also created to make its owner's life more pleasurable.

Chapter 1. **Design Laboratory and Beyond: Wallance's Training and Early Design Work**

Donald Aaron Wallance was born September 26, 1909 in Corona, New York. He graduated from New York University with a bachelor's degree in English Literature in 1930. Although interested in various forms of the arts at an early age, Wallance did not seriously consider a career in design until he visited Europe in 1931.⁷ There he witnessed the changes occurring in architecture and other forms of three-dimensional design as modernism was taking form. Upon his return to New York, after briefly working at his father's furniture store, Wallance enrolled at Design Laboratory in New York, the first design school in the United States based on the comprehensive teachings of the Bauhaus. Like the Bauhaus, the seminal design school founded in Weimar Germany in 1919, Design Laboratory used courses founded in craft methodology combined with industry to train students for careers in designing for mass production.

Wallance was a student at Design Laboratory from 1936 until the school's closing due to lack of funds in 1940.⁸ He served as the school's Executive Committee student chairman. During this period, Wallance established his career by winning First Prize in a Museum of Modern Art, New York competition with his design for a stacking chair used in the museum's galleries. This chair, composed of a Lucite seat and back with a tubular metal frame, was considered quite innovative at the time. Wallance often said that his few years at Design Laboratory were some of the most important of his life. Not only did he meet his future wife there, but he was also able to study under some of the most brilliant

⁷Information filled in by Don Wallance in "Interview Guide G#R 71-42-57N" for *The Formative Years of U.S.I.D. 1927-53* by Raymond Spilman (c.1977). Wallance Archive.

⁸ More biographical information concerning Wallance can be found in James Benjamin's, "Biographical Sketch," *Donald Wallance Collection Finding Aid* (June 1997). Wallance Archive.

designers of the time. Innovative furniture designer Gilbert Rohde (1894-1944) was the first director of the program. Other instructors included Paul Rand (1914-1996), a graphic designer who blended European avant-garde design and American wit in each of his works; American glass designer and modernist painter George Sakier (1897-1988); and cubist and surrealist artist Theodore Roszak (1907-1981). Among many visiting lecturers were innovators such as the Bauhaus instructor, artist, and designer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946). Important figures like Albert Mayer (b.1867), an architect and engineer concerned with social equality through creative design, and a member of the team that developed the plan for the U.S. Housing Authority, served on its Advisory Board. The school's practical curriculum was divided into four fields: product design, interior design, textiles, and display and advertising. As the school strove to combine technical and aesthetic training, courses in tools, materials, and drawing were just some of the offerings. Wallace later wrote in a letter to Judith Pearlman of the *New York Times Magazine*:

The first year foundation course at Design Laboratory was based on the Bauhaus equivalent. The curriculum included drawing, two- and three-dimensional design, materials laboratory, industrial technology, color, social science, and product, interior, textile, graphics and exhibition design.⁹

Consistent throughout the school's teachings was the importance given to consumers and their needs and to their subsequent use of specified objects.¹⁰ This was perhaps one of the most vital concepts Wallace learned, and it influenced all of his designs.

⁹ Don Wallace, *unpublished letter to Judith Pearlman* of The New York Times Magazine (August 20, 1983). Wallace Archive.

¹⁰ Unpublished text, *Laboratory School of Industrial Design: Objectives and General Description* (c.1939). Wallace Archive.

After the close of Design Laboratory, Wallance married fellow student Shula Rapping Cohen (1915-1979) in 1941. The couple moved to Louisiana when Wallance was appointed the state's technical and design director for the National Youth Administration. In 1941 and 1942, Wallance trained young people in this program to become valuable additions to the nation's wartime workforce. Wallance and his students designed and produced a range of furniture and other supplies for various branches of the government.

With the start of World War II, Wallance served with the Alaskan Wing of the Air Force and the Office of the Quartermaster General's Research and Development branch. He designed goods for the Quartermaster General's office that included temporary housing and caskets. Wallance continued this work after the war, designing standardized furniture units that could be used in officers' quarters throughout the world. In 1948, Wallance received a grant from the Museum of Modern Art, New York as part of their International Competition for Low-Cost Furniture Design. In cooperation with the Midwest Research Institute of Kansas City, Missouri, and the Yale School of Forestry, Wallance created a system of frames and panels that enabled him to develop storage pieces that utilized low-cost waste wood panels and aluminum structural elements.

In 1949, the Wallances moved to Croton-on-Hudson, New York. There, Wallance established his independent industrial design practice.¹¹ In this small, at-home office, Wallance produced all of his subsequent work. In 1951, Wallance was approached by Hans Lauffer of the H.E. Lauffer Company, initiating work on the flatware service that

¹¹ Except for employing an assistant for a short time in the early-1960s, Wallance worked completely on his own. In correspondence with the author, David Wallance, Don Wallance's son, wrote that he thought his father's solo career resulted from his design process being "very hands on and intuitive, and I think he found it more difficult to guide someone else than to just do the work himself. The process was inseparable from the product."

eventually became known as *Design 1*. Wallace's avid interest in craft and industrial production became formalized when he began work on "A Study of Design and Craftsmanship in Today's Products," a project sponsored by the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis and the American Craftsmen's Educational Council. The advisory committee of the project included such visionaries as Serge Chermayeff, Henry Dreyfus, and George Nelson. Wallace structured his research around several case studies of contemporary designers working in varying situations. People like George Nakashima, Charles Eames, Marianne Strengell, Raymond Loewy, and companies like Herman Miller Furniture Company and Corning Glass were studied in order to see the relationships between craft, design, and production on varying scales and under different circumstances. This project was initially conceived as an exhibition and film, but it became *Shaping America's Products*, a book published in 1956. In it, Wallace concluded that the role of an artisan or craftsman in contemporary manufacturing rarely existed as it once did. He remarked that this was unfortunate: people's talent for the creation of a design and its integrity remained paramount to the success of a product, and that in modern manufacturing an object's design and form was largely ignored in lieu of cost-saving techniques.

Although the majority of Wallace's designs after the mid-1950s were concerned with tableware, he occasionally worked in the realm of furniture. In 1962, Wallace designed the auditorium seats for the New York Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center, now the Avery Fischer Hall. Wallace's obsession with designing the most comfortable seat led to rumors that he carried a tape measure at all times to measure the posterior of anyone willing to accommodate his study. He produced a range of hospital furniture for

the Hard Manufacturing Company of Buffalo, New York from 1959 until 1964. During the twenty-five years that Wallace worked for H.E. Lauffer, he also completed projects for many other firms including the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), Industrial Designers Society of America, Lehigh Furniture Company, Scarves by Vera (Printex Corporation of America), and Underhill Metal Products Corporation.

Chapter 2. The Changing Table: American Dining Habits in the 1950s

In prosperous homes of the nineteenth century, dining was a formal activity, with cooking and table service attended to by household staff. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, however, more women in Western European countries and the U.S. began to work outside the house, and many families could no longer afford the large staff of servants they may have once employed.¹² By 1950, approximately one fifth of wives and mothers were employed outside the home.¹³ The departure of auxiliary household staff and the lack of stay-at-home mothers and wives resulted in the disappearance of non-essential household services and items.¹⁴ Consequently, dining patterns became much more informal. Convenience and practicality increased in importance for all aspects of household life.¹⁵ As the world recovered from the aftermath of World War II, people's lives became markedly different from that which they experienced before the war. Not only were there great innovations in art, architecture, and design, but changing economic situations brought about new levels of consumerism. New markets were subsequently created to cater to the new consumer class.¹⁶

As previously noted, stainless wares were initially viewed as suitable only for kitchen use. However, when more attention was paid to its design and quality, stainless

¹² Ronald C. Allinder, *The Eating Tool: Its Development and Suitability to American Dining* (master's thesis, Illinois Institute of Technology: Chicago, 1960), 8.

¹³ Allinder 1960, 32.

¹⁴ Allinder 1960, 33.

¹⁵ Catherine McDermott, *Book of 20th Century Design* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1998), 164.

¹⁶ Lesley Jackson, *The New Look: Design in the Fifties* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1991), 8.

flatware began to rival silver for formal dining activities.¹⁷ Shifts in the household dynamic made an object's utility a factor in its perceived beauty, and stainless was, and remains, unrivalled in its easy care and sturdiness.¹⁸ Stainless is not as suitable a metal for the ornate decorative motifs traditionally used for silver, but it was well suited to the sleek and streamlined look that was coming into fashion.¹⁹ Well-designed stainless flatware was successful because consumers were willing to purchase a contemporary flatware set with a modern and innovative look if priced below the average silver set.

Stainless flatware was also often bought as a second set of flatware. It appeared alongside silver flatware in displays at many high-end stores and sold for everyday use. In a 1955 *Jeweler's Circular-Keystone* article, Miss Perier, a manager at Friedlander's silver department says: "It is as a 'second set' that we usually present stainless to our customers, and that is the approach that has been most sales-productive for us. The need for a second set is partly an outgrowth of the trend toward outdoor living and cooking...."²⁰ This statement is logical, as those who already owned silver flatware services were often not willing to part with their treasured patterns. These people were, however, attracted to the minimum amount of care needed by stainless flatware and often bought stainless utensils to use for everyday dining. Furthermore, as American dining habits became increasingly informal, it was more practical to use stainless flatware at one's patio table or during a casual dinner than to use a more formal silver set.

¹⁷ Arthur J. Pulos, *The American Design Adventure* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 161.

¹⁸ Allinder 1960, 38.

¹⁹ Allinder 1960, 41.

²⁰ "Stainless Flatware" 1955, 47.

As a result of stainless flatware's rise in popularity, silver companies like Reed & Barton and International Silver, as well as museums like the Museum of Contemporary Craft organized exhibitions for silver flatware design in an attempt to boost sales. This led to new silver flatware designs that more often than not mimicked the look of their less-expensive stainless counterparts. Additionally, in the 1950s, advertisements for stainless flatware did exist, but not as often as silver flatware advertisements appeared. By the 1960s, there was approximately the same number of advertisements featuring flatware in the two materials in publications geared toward buyers of household products.

In the mid-1950s, consumers stopped buying items that they expected to be permanent fixtures in their and their families' lives and instead bought an item because it pleased them at that moment in time.²¹ For the first time in modern history, consumers generally came to the conclusion that it was acceptable to purchase an appliance that they may not permanently keep and the idea of planned obsolescence entered Western society.²² This attitude applied to all consumer purchases at the time, including flatware. The rise in an American consumerist society has been partially attributed to the increasing number of women working outside their homes. Many middleclass women started working during the world wars and continued to work afterwards because they enjoyed the benefits that came with extra income.²³ This led to the beginning of the double-income family. And with the introduction of the credit card in 1950,²⁴ it became

²¹ George Marcus, *Design in the Fifties: When Everyone Went Modern* (New York: Prestel, 1998), 134.

²² Marcus 1998, 134.

²³ Pulos 1988, 41.

²⁴ Nigel Whitely, "Throw-Away Culture in the 1950's and 1960's," *Oxford Art Journal* (v.10, no.2 1987), 5.