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Good

Adam and Eva: A design great and her grandson build a beautiful business

by Cheryl Fenton | May 30, 2011



When Grandma has a legacy to share, it's usually a cure-all chicken-soup recipe or the secret-filled story behind a family heirloom. But 28-year-old Adam Zeisel is poised to build a design empire based on his nana's creations. With **Eva Zeisel Originals** (evazeiseloriginals.com), this Boston native is working to make his grandmother's designs available to all.

Now 104 years old, Eva doesn't regard herself as extraordinary. "I enjoy that my work and I are well known. It gives me pleasure when I see my designs in a museum or get an award, but I don't feel like a celebrity," she says.

But a celebrity she is. Dubbed "the grande dame of organic modernism" by celebrated designer Jonathan Adler, she has had her work exhibited at Atlanta's High Museum of Art, London's British Museum, New York's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. KleinReid shoppers have enjoyed her designs for years, and Crate and Barrel carries Eva Zeisel dinnerware. At the age of 99, she even earned a National Design Award for lifetime achievement that landed her a lunch at the White House. And today, this world-renowned centenarian remains anything but frail.

But that shouldn't be so surprising, given her history, which reads like an engrossing page-turner (and she has, in fact, been the subject of several books). Born in Budapest to intellectual parents, she's lived a life that has seen as many ups and downs as her designs' signature curves: she was even accused of participating in a plot to kill Stalin, a charge that led to 15 months in prison (from which she was mysteriously released, no explanation given). She survived two world wars and moved from artistic center to artistic center, from Hungary to Germany, the Soviet Union, and, in the late 1930s, NYC, which she still calls home today.

"I've always lived life in the present," she says. "I understand that one has to be careful that this present moment isn't destroyed by unkindness or ugliness."

So she engages in what she calls "a playful search for beauty." Inspired by the human body (think belly buttons and babies' bottoms), natural forms, and Hungarian folk art, her designs have whimsical curves that beg to be touched. She says she wants people "to feel the love that I put into [every piece.]"

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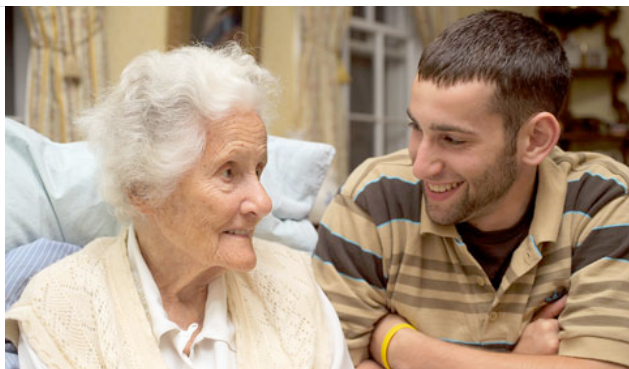


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"Her designs are emotions in function and form. I have learned so much about beauty and appreciation in everyday things because of her designs," adds Adam, who grew up making crafts with Eva and receiving her creations as gifts. Today, he works with her on new designs. And while her work is currently carried at spots like **Patch NYC** (46 Waltham Street, Boston, 917.292.2640) and **Design Within Reach** (1030 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, 617.576.3690), Adam aims to take Eva Zeisel Originals global so his grandmother can continue to inspire people long after she has passed.

"I explained to Eva that her designs would be sold over the Internet," Adam says, recalling the start of their collaboration. "She said, 'Dear, I am pre-radio. I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about.' It hadn't occurred to me that 'Internet' and 'computer' would be hard for her to understand."

After a good laugh, Eva granted Adam access to her designs. Armed with his 2006 degree in business administration from Northeastern, he runs Eva Zeisel Originals from his Boston home, making frequent trips to visit his grandmother in New York.

Borrowing from past designs and adding new treasures, the collection includes goblets, candlesticks, a jewelry tree, a coffee table, and the Mother & Daughter Trestle Table (a work of art that Eva uses in her own apartment), among other pieces. Adam hopes to release one new design every year; a new table is set to debut this fall. "The trick is compiling enough designs, so that I'm able to release new ones for the next 50 years," he explains.

Having his grandmother for a business partner isn't as tricky a balancing act as you might expect. Adam and Eva enjoy time together, while still getting the job done when appropriate.

"I don't speak about my business unless she asks," says Adam. But there are times when all Eva wants to do is show him new designs and talk about their story until the sun comes up. And he's happy to oblige.

"The thing that makes me happiest is when so many people enjoy my work," says Eva. "The other thing that makes me happiest is my children and grandchildren." Now the two are one.

Cheryl Fenton is a freelance writer who also blogs at EasyPeasyBlog.com.

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