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*Edith Heath: A Life in Clay*

I own seven items from Heath Ceramics: a serving bowl, two bud vases, and four clay buttons made by company founder Edith Heath herself. The bowl was a gift and the rest are the cheapest products they make, but I can say that I own pieces by a brand that Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson, who both worked to integrate architecture, interiors, and nature, commissioned for their own projects. My fledgling collection signifies my desire for a midcentury modern lifestyle, something the company has promoted since its inception.

"Lifestyle" is an apt word to sum up *Edith Heath: A Life in Clay*, an exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California that runs through October 30, 2022. The show looks at Heath and the educational, environmental, and cultural conditions that inspired her iconic ceramics. Heath, born in 1911 in Iowa, studied and taught art in Chicago, where she also became interested in the Bauhaus. After moving to San Francisco with her husband Brian, she took ceramics classes and a formative ceramic chemistry class, which gave her skills to develop Heath's distinctive colorful ceramics. She found an audience for her work incredibly fast, used technology to speed production, and targeted a new class of consumers by offering "good design for everyone."

The exhibition reinforces this view of Edith Heath as populist tastemaker through its materials, messaging, and visual design. Jennifer Volland, a Heath historian who has contributed most recently to *Edith Heath: Philosophies*, and Drew Johnson, OMCA's curator of photography and visual culture, drew heavily on material from the Brian and Edith Heath Collection within UC Berkeley's Environmental Design Archives. The show is understated and spare, enhanced with vibrant shades of persimmon, acid green, and ocean blue that mimic Heath's signature glazes and serve as lush backdrops for the work.

The exhibition begins by highlighting the natural resources of Northern California through survey maps and chunks of minerals. Heath believed that working with native materials would lead to ceramics that were stylistically indicative of the region. She was right; the brown clay from the Sierra Nevada foothills resulted in strong, simple forms that are used to this day. Looking closely at a side-by-side display of a clay sewer pipe and a covered casserole dish

reveals similarities in their smooth curves and chunky bodies, as if to prove Heath's point that form follows material properties as well as function. The curators also used this relational tactic by positioning the display near Heath's mother's delicate white "Sunday best" porcelain dishware, which she kept even as the family sank into poverty. Heath became scornful of the upper-class lifestyle it represented and vowed to make work that was the opposite: durable, everyday, and attainable by everyone.

The second part of the exhibition features the company's move from handmade to manufactured goods. Despite comments by studio potters about selling out, Heath firmly believed that "good design is not required by hand" and utilized factory efficiencies to eventually produce 100,000 pieces a year. The curators placed hand-thrown bowls and plates in the same case as their factory-made counterparts so visitors can evaluate for themselves whether "good design" has been achieved. (Spoiler: the production versions have smoother bodies and glossier glazes but overall fidelity to the originals is very good.)

The company's success came from combining midcentury design with postwar optimism. This narrative is shown powerfully in an abstract way through oversized photographs, perhaps due to the involvement of Johnson, a photography curator who admitted to knowing nothing about Heath before the project. Depicted are scenes that recall myths about the Golden State: dinner parties in sunny backyards and rows of suburban houses. Even a portrait of Edith daydreaming in her home atop a renovated barge in Sausalito sets the tone for a way of life that families might someday achieve. Including these images turns the show into a paean to 1950s consumerism, a lifestyle predicated on buying new products for the home.

That is the irony that Heath had to contend with. Did Heath Ceramics really create "good design for everyone?" Heath made functional items for the middle-class but for the proletariat, they were aspirational in the same manner that porcelain dishes were for her mother.

Overall, Johnson and Volland's curatorial goals of highlighting Heath's synergistic relationship to nature, California's postwar industry, and modernism were met but the curators only briefly touch upon the divide that still exists between "good design" and affordable design. Shedding light on the promises and failures of the Good Design movement would have been an instructive coda but one complicated by the fact that Heath Ceramics is still operational and aspirational; the design remains "good" but the word "affordable" is no longer part of their marketing.