



## **A Vision of Deco Noritake Art Deco Porcelain**

**A selection of period pieces from the  
Schwartz, Kottler and Noritake Museum Collections.**

# A Vision of Deco

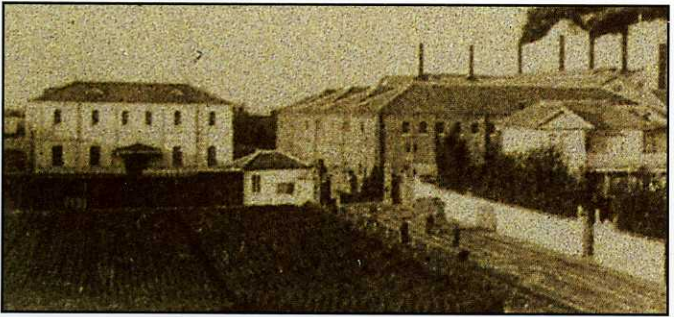
From 1921 through 1931, the Noritake factory in Nagoya, Japan created thousands of porcelain objects inspired in design by the Art Deco movement that was rapidly becoming "the rage" in the United States.

Guided by the vision of Charles Kaiser, the designs represented what was new and appealing and Kaiser realized that the average American woman could own an expression of Art Deco for as little as fifty cents!



Cover: Birch Exotica Landscape, Vase, 7.25" x 5" x 4.5"

Figure 1: The Noritake Factory circa 1910 (below)



The Noritake Company was established in 1904 when the Morimura brothers decided to build a ceramics factory in the tiny port of Noritake, a suburb of Nagoya. Twenty years later the Morimura Brothers were the largest importers of porcelains into America, with a well-established sales force throughout the U.S.

The head of sales was Charles Kaiser, an individual born in Europe with an unerring sense of what in Europe would sell well in America. During the second and third decades of this century he made regularly scheduled trips to the continent to take the pulse of the decorative motifs that appeared after World War I. It was in the early twenties that he began to discern a new modernism, an energetic design foment that culminated in 1925 in Paris with the International Decorative Arts Exposition. Elements from Cubism, Russian Constructivism and Italian Futurism were present in a vibrantly colorful iconography of stylized flowers, slim maidens, geometric patterns, high fashion, Egyptology, the Orient, tribal Africa and the Ballets Russe.

American magazines anticipated the future of deco in the United States by employing French graphic artists to design their covers and feature articles. Kaiser, very conscious of this trend, decided to use the thematic material of these magazines as stimuli for a new form of porcelain decoration. For example, a skier on a tray is derived from a *Vogue* illustration of January 1925 (figure 2).

In 1926, 400 objects from the Paris show traveled to the United States and toured nine major museums. From coast to coast, department stores, influenced by positive reception to the exhibition, arranged their own interpretations of the work. The designs were exciting, exotic, sumptuous and "moderne."

It was clear to Kaiser what to do. He'd use traditional Noritake molds as a canvas on which to paint the new, modern themes. The designs,

most of which were selected from popular media, were reinterpreted by an international team of graphic artists, sent to Nagoya, applied to the porcelain giftware bodies, and exported back to the United States.

Well over 900 Noritake porcelain deco objects have been documented from this period. Yet no records exist. The Noritake factory was destroyed during World War II, and the files from the New York office were confiscated in 1941. However, some information was obtained by the late Dr. Howard Kottler, a long-time collector of Noritake deco, through interviews with retired Noritake executives.

Figure 2: Susy Skier, tray, .375" x 8.25" x 5.75"





The maximum edition of any piece was 3,000; the minimum, 300. An edition was rarely repeated; the design, once executed, was never used again. So many new motifs were introduced each year that formal record keeping was never attempted.

In the United States, the porcelains were sold in department stores and gift shops, as well as through mail-order and premium catalogs. They were of two types: fancy ware and novelties. Fancy wares were traditional forms that had been employed earlier and could simply be redecorated using the new designs. A traditional vase form decorated 12 years earlier with a conventional Victorian landscape now sported a deco floral design (figure 3).

For novelties new molds were created that reflected contemporary themes. For example, a clown-shaped, including ruffled collar, covered candy dish shows the influence of the New York revival of the commedia dell'arte during the mid-1920's (figure 4).

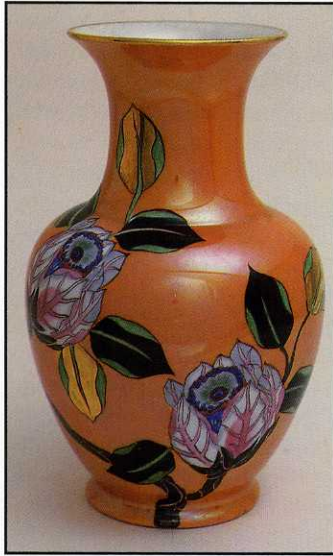


Figure 3: Passion Floral, Vase, 8.125" x 5.125" (above)

Figure 4: Arabella, Covered Candy Dish, 4.75" x 4.5" (below)

A number of approaches have been taken to organize Noritake porcelains. The work can be segmented by function (ashtrays, baskets, bowls, dishes, plates, vases, wall pockets etc.); theme (events, design ideas etc.); or by the five decorative categories defined by Dr. Kottler: figurals, florals, animals, scapes and geometrics. Within each broad category are many individual themes.

Figural pieces capture the glamour of the Roaring Twenties and the rage for parties and balls, including the interest in lavish, 18th century costume balls. For example, in 1925 Homer Conant created posters for the Shubert production of *Madame Pompadour*. Some of these were reproduced as lithographs, and one was reinterpreted by the Noritake artists as a design motif for a plate (figure 5).

Floral pieces represented the most numerous of the five deco categories. Many were derived from earlier Art Nouveau fabrics, which, in turn, were inspired by 19th century Japanese wood-block prints and kimonos. A floral vase, *Birch Exotica Landscape* (cover photo) shows a perfect example of the use of a classical form wedded to a highly stylized portrayal of leaves in a forest setting. The vivid colors of the leaves and their size in relation to the birch trees reinforce the attention-arresting and surreal aspects of this category.

Figure 5: Antoinette, Plate, 3.75" x 5.25" x 5"





True to Japanese tradition, birds and fish dominate the animal category. A plate shows a flying fish darting above the crest of a wave (figure 6). Fish, wave and background are highly simplified abstractions rendered in bright, primary colors.

A serving tray represents the treatment of scapes, the fourth Noritake category (figure 7). The outstanding features of the tray are its bold use of color and highly stylized pictorialization to add vitality to an otherwise conventional subject.

Geometric pieces were influenced by the Cubist movement, foreshadowing the deco interest in linearity, a revolt, in part, against the sensuous, curvilinear forms of Art Nouveau. *Jewels* (figure 8) shows a group of faceted gemstones applied to the gold-lustered interior of a bowl. The luster provides a floating space for the stones, and the shading of each facet suggests three-dimensionality.

Figure 6: White Cap, Plate, 3.25" x 6.25" (below, top)

Figure 7: Dutch Sunrise Landscape, Tray, 2" x 9" x 7.5" (below, bottom)



Figure 8: Jewels, bowl, 2.25" x 11.5" x 8.5"

It's rare for popular period artworks to remain fresh and exciting some 60 to 70 years after their production. In the case of Noritake art deco porcelain, there are three reasons for the continued appeal. First, the craftsmanship is superb. Although there were many manufacturers of lusterware during the period, only Noritake consistently made use of high quality porcelain, required careful attention to execution of form, and

insisted on masterly application of decoration. Second, the porcelains enliven our spirits with their robustness of color, their use of luster to impart a gemlike quality, and their total absence of reluctance or uncertainty in the execution of often outrageous and always unpredictable designs. And, just as important, the ware is quite literally a visual record of the boisterous lifestyle of the Twenties in America.

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