

TABLEWARE

THE TABLEWARE SOURCE

TODAY

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Moving in...

• *What's on your mind?*

Designer for Hire

By Julie Burbridge

I entered the tabletop design field five years ago in a rather roundabout way. I began a career in interior design and developed a specialty in model home merchandising, eventually establishing Burbridge Design Group in Laguna Beach, California. Over the course of designing hundreds of model homes and residences, I became fascinated by the impact table settings create. My imagination was engaged. I always loved cooking and entertaining, so my interest in tabletop was personal as well as professional. That's why it surprises me that I had never seriously considered a career in product design.

That changed when I met Ubaldo Grazia, owner of the Grazia ceramics factory in Deruta, Italy, through a mutual friend for whom Mr. Grazia was producing ware. After our meeting, I told Mr. Grazia that I could design the ware. The result was *We Miss You, Carmen Miranda* (right), one of my first produced designs. A new path was set.

I set out to learn as much as I could about the industry and how my design style might fit. The more involved I became, the more interested I became. I spoke to a local retailer who suggested I take my portfolio to the New York Tabletop Show. I haven't looked back since. Approaching major manufacturers as a novice outside designer is a daunting task, but

it's paid off; working for different companies allows me to create a wide variety of design work within the context of different requirements.

My success in working for multiple clients has a lot to do with what I call the "hustle factor." Making the most of opportunities is key, as is determi-

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nation and perseverance. During my first New York trip, for example, I met with a Royal Doulton developer who agreed to see me based on my Grazia work. "You know, we don't often work with outside designers," he said, but rather than retreat, I decided not to leave until he saw my portfolio. He did, he liked what he saw, and I had my first sale. I was ecstatic.

Making the sale is always exhilarating, but so is having people recognized my work. A college roommate was shopping at Bloomingdale's when she saw a dinnerware pattern she liked. She saw my name on the backstamp and was so amazed she knew me, she ran through the department telling people who I was. I love that story. Being an

independent designer is exciting, but it also means learning as much as you can about each client and their marketing philosophies, target markets, and manufacturing requirements. The time I have with each client is limited, so I have to make the most of each meeting



by asking the right questions. Even when a client turns down a design, I use it as an opportunity to grow from in the future.

Having no formal training in product design has actually worked to my advantage more often than not. Manufacturers look to outside designers for an injection of fresh ideas. One thing manufacturers like about my work is that I have no learned limitations. I have no pre-set ideas about tabletop design. I just do it. Of course, I've had to familiarize myself with industry standards along the way, but I value my ability to keep a fresh approach.

I work hard not to edit myself in designing, and I find that just about anything can inspire a concept. I draw on my interior design background a great deal, and I've found inspiration in everything from classical architecture, fashion, jewelry, and textiles to nature and travel. I like to vary moods and themes as much as possible; it keeps me interesting, and it keeps my work fresh.

As with any collaborative enterprise, there are some compromises involved in working for manufacturers as an independent designer. One of the more frustrating tasks is having no control if a design gets produced. With market-

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driven patterns, as mine tend to be, timing is critical. If a manufacturer buys a design and then doesn't produce it for some time or doesn't produce it at all, the design simply *expires*. This, of course, is disappointing; but I've decided to be as fashion-forward in my thinking as possible. I stay on top of the market; I am, for instance, a member of the Color Marketing Group. By staying far ahead of the curve, I have a better chance of being on target when my work is produced.

Not everything I design ends up a part of a new collection. Some of my designs are geared to niche markets. Yet, these designs are valid as part of my creative output and there's a place for them in the homes of people outside of the bell curve. That's why I've decided to produce my own designs; a perfect outlet for some of my quirkier motifs and still provide the creative freedom I need



Two of Burbridge's designs: left, *Celeste* for Christian Dior and (right) *Tanzania* for Sasaki.

without compromising existing clients' needs. And therein lies a major reason I am attracted to the table-

ware industry: there are so few restrictions to what you create. And that appeals to me greatly. □