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(Photographed by James Matson)



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Casual China By Russel Wright, Sugar White Carafe and Tea Cup
1951-1967
Iroquois China Company

Russel Wright designed the *Casual China* line of porcelain dinnerware, which was produced by the Iroquois China Company in Syracuse, New York from 1946 to 1967. Consumer demand for increased durability of tableware motivated the stylization and construction of this new ceramic product. The shape and form of the porcelain dinnerware that came as a result, was reflective and representative of post-war modernism in the United States. Within the line of Iroquois *Casual China*, the carafe and tea cup in sugar white coloring, provide a fair representation of this simple, and pragmatic style. Russel Wright, as an individual, had a highly influential role on the aesthetic of interior design in the United States. He, together with the Iroquois China Company, designed modern ceramics for a rapidly modernizing country.

With Japan's formal surrender to the United States of America on September 2, 1945, World War II, the deadliest conflict in human history, came to a close. Soldiers returning home to America were given jobs, and the women who had made up the workforce during the war were, for the most part, expected to return to the home. Increased industrialization and economic growth, which had come as results of the war, gave birth to a large domestic market for new consumer products in the United States. Across the country, there was ample demand for artists to create new styles and forms for household products. Russel Wright is one designer who was well positioned to take advantage of this space, and he became quite successful in the field of modern design for the American home.

Wright began his design career creating sets for theater productions in New York City. Using the knowledge and ability that he gained during this career as an engineer of industrial materials, Wright then began his forays into more commercial product design. His first ventures

included spun aluminum kitchenware and wooden furniture.¹ He had his first massive success with *American Modern* dinnerware, a line of earthenware ceramics that Wright designed for the Steubenville Pottery Company in Ohio. In creating the designs for the *American Modern* line, Russel Wright established an aesthetic for the modern American kitchen. The very title of this product line is indicative of its goal to establish a new, contemporary style of dinnerware in the United States. His pieces utilized smooth and sleek forms, and they were simple in nature, with only solid monochrome glazes in a selection of colors for decoration. *American Modern* would become the most widely sold American line of ceramic dinnerware in history. However, despite all of its success, there was still at least one criticism users had for these ceramics, and it was about their lack of durability.²

The earthenware that was being made in Steubenville was subject to constant chipping and cracking. Electronic dishwashers, which were becoming more widely available in post-war American homes, increased the likelihood for this damage to occur. When he partnered with the Iroquois China Company to produce *Casual China*, Russel Wright was motivated to make this line of ceramic dinnerware more durable. Special clay was imported from England and fired in the kiln at an increased temperature of 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit in order to obtain a more durable porcelain.³ The increased firing temperature also made the porcelain more usable as cookware, moving in and out of ovens. Wright catered his designs to be thicker than traditional porcelain, with shallow curves and minimal rims. These features allowed for safer dish stacking

¹ William J. Hennessey, *Russel Wright: American Designer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 15-19.

² Lindsay Stam Shapiro, "Russel Wright: Setting the American Table," *Modernism Magazine*, Winter 2001, 18-22.

³ Ann Kerr. *The Collector's Encyclopedia of Russel Wright*. (Collector Books, 1990), 85.

and use in dishwashers, with the objective being that when in close contact the porcelain pieces would “bounce” off of each other rather than chipping or cracking.⁴ The marketing and advertising for the *Casual China* line of dinnerware heavily emphasized these increased features of durability.

Sales of Iroquois *Casual China* came with a warranty to replace the items should they become chipped or broken in any way through regular use. This guaranteed one-year policy was underwritten by the Mercantile Insurance Company, and this was heavily marketed in advertisements for the porcelain.⁵ Wright felt that providing a guarantee and warranty for *Casual China* was highly useful in the way that this formed an immediate relationship with the customer. Print advertising for Iroquois Casual China made constant mention of the benefits of the durable porcelain, including the added ability to move it quickly from a hot oven to the table without endangering the ceramic. A 1961 advertisement for Bloomingdales department store in the *New York Times* features “Iroquois” casual china, being “Made of the finest English clay, this versatile china goes from oven to table, to dishwasher” (Figure 1). At the same time that this advertisement marketed the material as the “finest English clay,” it also attested to the practical benefits of its being able to go “from oven to table, to dishwasher.”⁶

Beyond the print advertisements that consistently reiterated *Casual China*’s guaranteed durability, Russel Wright and his wife Mary publicly demonstrated its resilience against damage (Figure 2). A *New York Times* column dating to 1946 describes one such occasion at which the

⁴ Hennessy, *Russel Wright*, 57-58.

⁵ "China Company Offers Insurance with Pieces," *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1951, ProQuest.

⁶ “Display Ad 31 -- no Title." *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1961, ProQuest.

Figure 1:

All 5 Bloomingdale stores closed Monday, Labor Day, open Tuesday night, September 5th

Set a gracious table—and save



"Erasable" essential china in 8 solid colors by famed Russel Wright

45-pc. service for 8 **39.95**
If sold separately \$67

Made of the finest English clay, this versatile china goes from oven to table, to dishwasher. It's composed, dishwasher and detergent safe. Any piece that chips or breaks will be replaced*. In lettuce green, charcoal, ice blue, apricot, white, pink, cantaloupe, lemon.

45-pc. service for 8 includes: 8 each dinner plates, bread/butter, cereal, cup/saucers; 1 each creamer, sugar bowl, round vegetable dish, 1 1/2" plate.

16-pc. starter set includes: 4 each dinner plates, cereal, teacup/saucer.

If sold separately \$24. 14.95

Open stock available in all colors:

Partial listing of open stock:	
Fish dish, 1.99	Butter dish, 3.95
Dinnerware bowl, 1.99	Platter, 6.95
12" plate, 3.95	Set, dishes even, 9.95
14" plate, 4.95	2 1/2" teacup, 6.95
Set, ceramic, 7.50	2 1/2" saucer, 7.95
Teapot, 9.95	Sipper and set, 12.95
Sauce plate, 1.15	Set, 12.95

Bloomingdale's China, 4th Floor
*As per warranty.

Sale! Gorham's stainless steel in a handsome 30-pc. set for \$39.95
Usually \$69.95

The elegant simplicity of "Colonial Tips" fits in beautifully with any table setting. Each piece is extra finished and stamped with the Gorham name, your assurance of quality. 8 each dinner forks, dinner knives, salad forks, soup spoons; 10 teaspoons and 2 tablespoons.

Set of 4 serving pieces: sugar spoon, butter knife, cold meat fork, glassed tablespoon, \$16

Open stock available.
Bloomingdale's Silverware, 4th Floor

in, see text.

Everything on page at all 5 Bloomingdale stores

Not all items shown. Call or visit us near you for the full selection. Details subject to change without notice. ©1961 Bloomingdale's, Inc. All rights reserved. Bloomingdale's, Inc. 1100 Avenue of the Americas, New York 28, N. Y.

"Display Ad 31 -- no Title." *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1961, ProQuest.

Figure 2:



William J. Hennessey, *Russel Wright: American designer*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 8.

couple presented the new line from Iroquois China. They exhibited speedily washing and stacking the porcelain, and finally ended by dumping a basketful of the *Casual China* onto the table, as an extreme display of its resilience.⁷ The Wrights took part in this type of product display on many occasions. These demonstrations exemplified the notion that Russel Wright had designed his Iroquois China line for practical use in contemporary middle-class American homes.

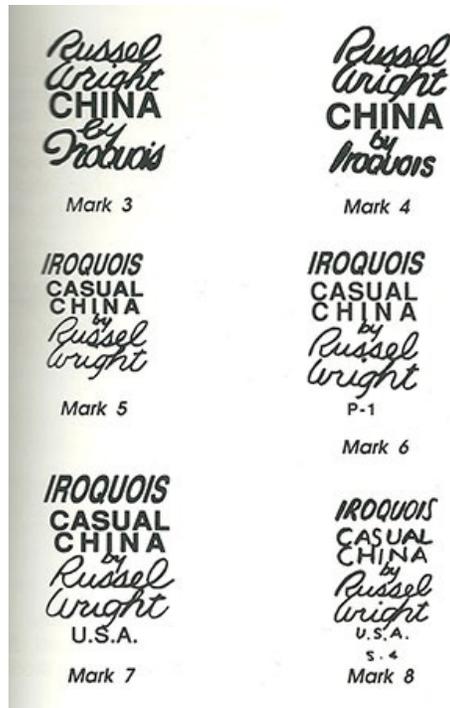
Over the course of its production, *Casual China* was designed, and continually redesigned, in such a way that each of its pieces could be aesthetically paired with all of the others in the line. For this reason, the collection was often mixed and matched in different ways by consumers and department stores in the purchase and sale of the items respectively. This interchangeability, while beneficial to the consumer, has made the practice of dating the different variations of pieces in the collection rather convoluted. *The Collector's Encyclopedia of Russel Wright* outlines an approximate linear progression for some of the base marks used on the pieces in *Casual China*. The base marks seen on the carafe and tea cup in the Cooperstown Graduate Program's collection are most akin to "Mark 5" and "Mark 7" respectively as shown in Figure 3. Given this reference, we can assume that these pieces of *Casual China* were made in the later part of the line's production.⁸ Furthermore, we can tentatively date the tea cup as having been made at a later date than the carafe.

This assertion is also supported by the design of the tea cup being that which the encyclopedia identifies as a later redesign of *Casual China*. In Figure 4 (Also from Kerr's

⁷ Mary R. By, "New Wright China is Hard to Break," *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 1946, ProQuest.

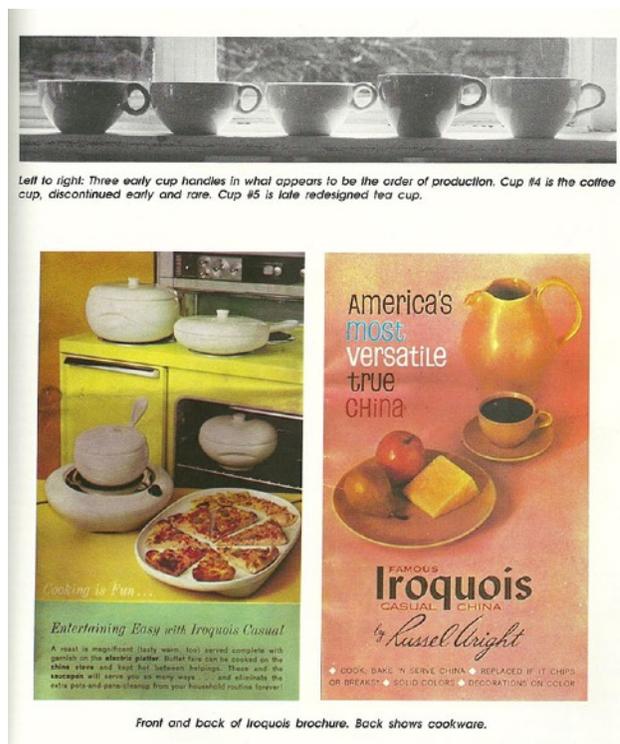
⁸ Kerr, *Collectors Encyclopedia*, 18-19.

Figure 3:



Ann Kerr, *The Collector's Encyclopedia of Russel Wright*. (Collector Books, 1990), 19.

Figure 4:



Ann Kerr, *The Collector's Encyclopedia of Russel Wright*. (Collector Books, 1990), 93.

Encyclopedia), five *Casual China* tea and coffee cups are displayed in what the author has approximated to be a linear order of their production years, from oldest to most recent, from left to right. The tea cup in the Cooperstown Graduate Program's collection is nearly identical to "Cup #5 [...] late redesigned tea cup".⁹ Given the comparable nature of the markings and aesthetic forms of the carafe and tea cup, it is appropriate to date these pieces to the years of 1951-1967, in the second part of *Casual China*'s production following its first major redesign.¹⁰

Wright's designs symbolize the shifting norms of American home life in mid-twentieth century America. *Casual China* was marketed as a practical and contemporary dinnerware for purchase at a reasonable price.¹¹ These marketing points were targeted for a middle-class culture that was constantly moving to improve itself and modernize technologically. Many of the advertised features of *Casual China*, including its durability under intense temperatures, were directly correlated to technological advancements in the kitchen. The invention and increased availability of dishwashers lead to greater efficiency in the kitchen, and the American home needed new dinnerware to match. *Casual China*'s design intentionally lacked deep grooves or rims so it would be easier to wash and clean.

In her book *More work for Mother*, Ruth Cowan discusses the irony that when labor saving devices such as electric dishwashers were introduced, the standard for house work rose exponentially. With the ability to easily clean dishes, homes would now have the expectation to

⁹ Kerr, *Collectors Encyclopedia*, 93.

¹⁰ Kerr, *Collectors Encyclopedia*, 85-88.

¹¹ "Display Ad 9 -- no Title." *New York Times*, Dec 05, 1948, ProQuest.

keep multiple kinds of dinnerware (for different table settings etc.).¹² The consumer culture and economy that exploded in America during the years following World War II only added to this phenomenon, with new inventions and a constant flow of products being developed for middle-class homes. When the men, who had been soldiers, returned to take back their jobs after the war, the women in middle-class society were expected to return to work in the home. Unmistakably, these housewives were the target market for Russel Wright's line of *Casual China*. It was a product that offered contemporary style, at an affordable price, with a promise of durability that it would survive in the modern kitchen. The economic and social factors that created such an expansive market for consumer goods is what would allow for the success of Russel Wright's ceramic business and aesthetic influence in America.

Russel Wright not only influenced the aesthetic nature of design in America; he also helped pave the way in the budding industry of name-branded designers. Russel Wright capitalized on his own success, and he began employing his name as a marketing strategy. The popularity of his modern designs in America allowed him to use this new and lucrative strategy of branded designing. The *Casual China* line that he produced with the Iroquois China Company is certainly an example of this type of name branded exploit; Wright was able to capitalize on the success of his *American Modern* dinnerware with Steubenville. This same sort of individual capitalism in design would later be employed by such current household names as Martha Stewart and Ralph Lauren.¹³ Each of the *Casual China* pieces was given a mark on the bottom

¹² Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, (New York, NY, Basic Books, 1983), 88-101.

¹³ Grace Gueck. "The Man Who Was Martha Stewart Back Before She Was." *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2001, Gale.

that included the name “Russel Wright” in prominent form. The practice of marking his pieces with his name was a form of self affirmation for the value of Wright’s contribution to design.

Pieces of *Casual China*, such as the carafe and tea cup in the Cooperstown Graduate Program’s collection, satisfied Americans’ practical needs at the same time as they advanced the United States’ cultural identity. The material makeup, and form of *Casual China*’s design was inspired by a commercial need for ceramic dinnerware that would be durable enough to function in the modernized American kitchen. The smooth and simple nature of form that was created for this practical purpose became a staple of the mid-century modern style. In this way, the modernization of domestic technology occurring in the United States was directly linked to the aesthetic design that found success in the evolving American home. The *Casual China* carafe and tea cup in sugar white are emblematic of the post-war, mid-century modern style that developed in the United States.

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