

Freda Diamond (1905-1998)

Designer for Everybody

Named the “Designer for Everybody” by Life magazine in 1954, Freda Diamond enjoyed a highly successful, fifty-year career as a home furnishings consultant. From the 1930s through the 1980s, Diamond helped firms in many American industries to design affordable products for the mass market. If someone you know set up housekeeping in the mid-twentieth century, they probably owned something -- cabinets, drapes, kitchen canisters, plastic furniture, tables, lamps, mirrors, rugs, drinking glasses, or window shades -- designed by Freda Diamond.

Born in New York City in 1905, Freda Diamond and her sister Lillian were raised by their widowed mother, Ida Diamond, a theatrical costume designer. Planning to follow in her mother’s footsteps, the artistic Freda Diamond attended the Women’s Art School of the Cooper Union, where she majored in design. After graduation, this tall, dark, soft-spoken woman taught at Cooper Union for a few years before going to Europe, where she continued her studies in design.

When she returned to New York, Diamond accepted a series of positions in retailing, which was booming during the prosperous 1920s. Initially, she worked at William Baumgarten, a high-end furniture store on fashionable Fifth Avenue. Feeling stifled by the rarified atmosphere, Diamond soon moved to Stern Brothers, a well-established department store on Fifth Avenue. There, she became, in succession, furniture buyer, stylist, and assistant merchandise manager. These positions familiarized Diamond with the ins-and-outs of mass retailing and provided her with important contacts among American manufacturers of furniture and household accessories.

By the late 1930s, Diamond had left her full-time job at Stern Brothers and launched her own business as a design consultant. At this time, the industrial design profession was relatively new. Most of its practitioners were men trained in theater and set design. Diamond’s intimate knowledge of home furnishings, honed during her tenure at Baumgarten and Stern Brothers, gave her a distinct advantage in the competition for clients during the hard times of the Great Depression.

Diamond ventured into consulting at an opportune moment, and she had a knack for making circumstances work to her benefit. As the Depression waned, department stores looked for new ways to regain their style leadership. These stores embraced a new marketing strategy known as the coordinated merchandising program. Under this plan, designers working in different media collaborated to create furniture, textiles, floor coverings, and even soaps that matched or went together as “coordinates” or “ensembles.” The end result was a packaged collection, much like those promoted by clothing designers such as Ralph Lauren beginning in the 1980s. Diamond had already created the Williamsburg Galleries of American Design, a suite of rooms decorated in modern furniture inspired by the forms, materials, and motifs found in Shaker crafts. From this project, Diamond segued into consultancies with clients who wanted to take advantage of the ensemble idea. The ensemble represented a watershed in the way manufacturers and retailers thought about home furnishings. Diamond’s ideas marked her as a designer on the cutting edge.

Although World War II put a damper on the home furnishings business, many companies fixed their eyes on the postwar promise of peace and prosperity. These manufacturers called on the

expertise of consultant designers to help them think about the economic boom that was just around the corner. In 1942, the Libbey Division of Owens-Illinois, a large glass company in Toledo, Ohio, hired Diamond to survey the consumer market and to outline a plan for new products that would match the postwar lifestyle. One of Diamond's proposals, which drew on data gathered from consumers through market surveys, included packaged sets of drinking glasses decorated with playful pictures and promoted through lively advertisements in national magazines.

Diamond's work for Libbey is significant for several reasons. Her thirty-seven year affiliation with this quantity-production firm solidified her reputation as a designer of tasteful products for the mass market. During the 1950s, several of Diamond's glassware lines earned the prestigious "Good Design" award from the Museum of Modern Art. Most important, Diamond's drinking glasses embodied the essence of her mature design philosophy. Inexpensive, practical, and good-looking, these packaged products had been created with the "total look" of casual living in mind. Diamond's glasses were the ideal mass-market product for young families living on a budget, whether in the city or in the suburbs.

Like other designers of the postwar era, Diamond embraced and promoted the trend toward "easy living" that swept across the nation after the war. To accommodate the new aesthetic, Diamond created furniture and household accessories with an informal twist. These accessories for easy living included hand-textured lamps with pottery bases, washable shaggy rugs, and window shades in colors that matched the rest of the room's decor. Presaging Martha Stewart, Diamond argued that furnishings should be "pretty to look at" and "easy to care for" at every price level. In this way, Diamond's products reflected wider cultural changes that put material abundance within the reach of many more Americans than ever before.

Diamond's work for Libbey went hand-in-hand with other design consultancies. She created rugs and bedspreads for Carter Brothers; plastic furniture for Lincoln Industries; lamps for Daison Manufacturing Company; decorative accessories for Durawood and for Turner Manufacturing Company; and kitchen canisters for Sears, Roebuck & Company. At the same time, Diamond continued to create interiors for the home-furnishings sections at leading department stores, including Famous Barr in St. Louis; Stern & Company in Philadelphia; May-Stern Co. in Pittsburgh; May Company in Cleveland; and SYR in Mexico City. Diamond's ability to balance work as a product designer and a department store stylist made her unique among postwar practitioners of the industrial design profession.

By the postwar era, Diamond had earned an international reputation as America's foremost authority on household furnishings. She made several trips overseas, advising manufacturers in Italy, Japan, and Israel on the tastes of ordinary American consumers, the so called mass market. In 1957, for example, she spent five weeks in Japan as a technical counsel to the Bureau of Small and Medium Industries at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). In this capacity, Diamond advised craft workshops and small factories on ways to adopt traditional designs for the American home. Her knowledge of home furnishings allowed her to provide the Japanese with information that was second nature to American manufacturers but not well known in Asia. These hard facts included the dimensions of an average table, the number of drawers in a bedroom dresser, and the preference for patio parties and informal entertaining. She updated these themes on a second visit to Japan in 1967.

Diamond was among a small group of women who achieved prominence as an industrial designer when this profession was still dominated by men. Diamond's accomplishments rested on her belief in market research to ascertain consumer's needs and desires, and on her ability to translate consumer interests into attractive, saleable products.

Diamond and her husband, the industrial engineer Alfred Baruch, had their offices in their home, a brownstone at 140 East 37th Street, in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan. By 1951, Diamond managed a staff of fourteen artists, craftsmen, and design specialists on one floor of the brownstone; Baruch had an office on another. "I think I can safely say that my marriage and career go well together," Diamond told a reporter for the Sunday News in February 1951. "With a very understanding man to help me, I've combined the two for seventeen years."

Freda Diamond died in 1998. She donated the bulk of her papers to the National Museum of American History's Division of Ceramics and Glass in 1997. *The Freda Diamond Collection, ca. 1945-1984*, is now available for research in the Archives Center of the National Museum of American History.