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A taste for the unconventional

DESIGN DISPATCH

A raiding of the pantry

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 At Ambiente show, tableware firms recycle classics with new colors and shapes.
 By Janet Esstman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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LLADRÓ, Waterford, Villeroy & Boch -- they're venerable companies whose names evoke images of fussy figurines, classic crystal and traditional china.

PHOTO GALLERY

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So then what's this? A teacup with a horse-leg handle? A goblet with Indian etchings? A soup bowl shaped like some modernist sculpture? Convention-defying surprises set the mood at Ambiente, the tabletop-heavy design show that ended Tuesday at the Frankfurt Fair and Exhibition Centre. If the home furnishings exhibitions in Paris and Milan are known for showcasing the world's top designers in glamorous style, Ambiente is defined by its sheer size: 4,600 exhibitors and 145,000 attendees, making it the largest consumer goods show in the world. Whereas the crowds in Paris and Milan look to be inspired, the crowds in Frankfurt look to buy, sourcing the designs that soon will land in stores -- and homes.

The newsmakers this year: old purveyors of tabletop finery looking for ways to stay young. These companies have hired top designers to dig deep into the archives and build contemporary new designs around bits of the past.

Royal Copenhagen, which was founded in 1775 to serve the queen of Denmark, introduced Elements, its first new tableware set of the 21st century. The chrysanthemums that have been immortalized on dainty saucers for centuries are now sprinkled helter-skelter onto the edges of jugs, mugs and cheese boards. Danish designer Louise Campbell even called for a departure from the company's classic blue. In its place: tangerine, turquoise and midnight black.

"It's evolutionary, a reinvention within our cultural heritage," spokeswoman Fikriye Selen-Okatan said while standing underneath a chandelier made of the new line's broken plates. "It's more modern, more casual, younger."

Lladró of Spain, best known to many for its cherub figurines, has been the most radical in recycling its archives. For its Re-Cyclos series, designer Bodo Sperlein hunted around the factory and found a horse figurine to use as the basis for his new Ascot collection. A leg and hoof formed the handle for a teapot, cup and sugar bowl; he linked two together to form a napkin ring, and three horse heads served as the base of a large pedestal bowl.

The 127-year-old firm Rosenthal brought designer Patricia Urquiola onboard to tone down the florals and spotlight the luminescence of high-quality porcelain. With Landscape, she applied lace-like handles, soft patterns and graceful irregular borders to a pure white surface.

Villeroy & Boch, which started in Germany in 1748, introduced a modern country style of tableware called Urban Nature. Plates and cups took unconventional, rectangular shapes, and the bowls looked like arching bridges. The line will be sold open stock, so it can be mixed and matched, a style promoted by many manufacturers to attract free-thinkers who don't want to dress a table as their mothers did.

Waterford hired Michael Aram to create Garland Romance, a line of etched crystal vases, flared bowls, flutes and wine glasses. The silhouettes and design were not a big departure for the crystal company, but Aram, who has lived in India for 20 years, also introduced a line called Jaipur, inspired by screen carvings and the architectural detailing that shapes India's ancient skylines. An ice bucket and votive holders were made of pierced nickel-plated brass, and shapely finials topped napkin rings, cocktail shakers and sugar bowls.

"It's all very exciting that these companies are inventing new designs, some based on their archives," said Nicolette Naumaun, vice president of show producer Messe Frankfurt. "They will reach out to a new generation that way."

There were, however, a few holdouts.

The Meissen Porcelain Manufactory of Germany, which claims to be the first factory to make china outside of China, didn't move far from its roots. At Ambiente, the company introduced an exact reproduction of a vase created in the mid-1700s with molded roses and fruits. Only 50 will be made -- two of them ordered by TableArt of Los Angeles -- and are priced around \$25,000.

But buyers who attended the five-day annual show placed orders for workhorse items too: knives, trash cans, bathroom scales and waffle makers. ***Even the nitty-gritty stuff can shine: BerghOFF of Belgium introduced three steel pots with strainer holes smartly built into the lids, which also could be used as trivets. (The pots, as with most of the items introduced at the show, won't be seen in the U.S. until spring.)***

Koziol displayed its Josephine lamps, whimsical pieces that continued the company's run of affordable products that only look expensive. For fun, Stöckel of Germany showcased scoopers that serve up ice cream shaped like hearts, flowers or cubes. OXO International of New York premiered a hand-held herb mincer, and a few aisles away, Handpresso unveiled its 1-pound hand-held espresso maker. Pour 1 1/2 ounces of hot water into the round reservoir, pop in a pre-measured espresso pod, press the handle, and the hot water is forced through the grounds into a single-serving cup.

The nomadic espresso maker, which will sell for less than \$150 in the U.S. this spring, came about because espresso machines have become increasingly complicated and expensive, said French inventor Henrik Nielsen in between his 10-second demonstrations. "We decided to go the opposite way and look for simplicity."

With so much to be gained in a housewares industry that rakes in \$90 billion a year in the U.S. alone, the copying of designs is a big issue. At the Ambiente's prominent Plagiarus exhibit, original designs were held up on pedestals while their knockoffs appeared on the ground -- an effort to shame copycats, who are sent a gnome with a golden nose.

Michael Peters of show producer Messe Frankfurt said cases of patent infringement have decreased this year by half, to 500.

"Every exhibitor has to sign an agreement that their products are original," Peters said. "Those who violate this are not invited back."

Better then to borrow from your own archive.



BerghOFF of Belgium introduced three steel pots designed by Frederick Aerts that won't be seen in the U.S. until spring, as with most of the items introduced at Ambiente. The lids have built-in strainer holes and also can double as trivets.