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FOR A BRIEF TIME BETWEEN WARS, SUNNY, STENCILED CERAMICS PERKED UP KITCHENS ACROSS EUROPE. NOW COLLECTIBLES, THESE MASS-PRODUCED MARVELS ARE FINDING A PLACE IN AMERICAN HOMES, TOO.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCAS ALLEN
TEXT BY KATE BOLICK



APPLIED ARTS

Called Spritzdekor because it was produced with stencils and spray (or "spritz") guns, this mainly German-made kitchenware of the 1920s and '30s was influenced by the era's avant-garde art movements but meant for the masses. Factories made an astonishing array of patterns—dots, bull's-eyes, flowers—with graduated shading. These cake plates, which were popular in their day and are now sought after by collectors, show off the range of designs.

AT FIRST

glance—and even second—the pieces on these pages might be mistaken for 1940s dinnerware. The simple shapes and cheery colors call to mind America's optimistic postwar kitchens, when families actually sat down together for breakfast each morning. But look more closely and the patterns reveal an abstract quality that is a world apart from that era's floral and atomic motifs.

The mostly German kitchenware known as Spritzdekor was influenced by the avant-garde art movements of early-20th-century Europe. With stencils and spray guns (thus the *spritz* in Spritzdekor), manufacturers airbrushed earthenware in nuanced designs that evoked both the graphic innovations of the Bauhaus and the abstracted geometries of Constructivism.

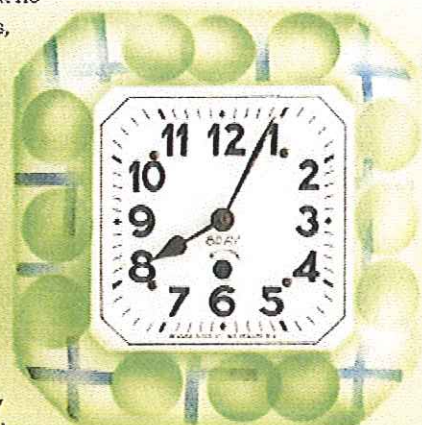
The heyday of these stenciled ceramics was brief in Germany: Production began in the late 1910s, peaked in the 1920s, and stopped in 1933, when Hitler came to power and launched a campaign to abolish modern art. It might have been mere kitchenware, but to Nazi eyes it was as “un-German” and “degenerate” as an abstract canvas. Production continued for the next few decades in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, and even Japan, where the technique caught on. But except for the few pieces brought over by wartime immigrants, this type of stencilware was rarely seen in the United States.

Margo Mulholland, a ceramics dealer, was amazed to discover Spritzdekor when she moved to Germany from New York City 15 years ago. “It’s so bright and upbeat that it doesn’t even seem German,” she says. It wasn’t until a decade

or so ago, when eBay and online merchants entered the international marketplace, that dealers like Mulholland were able to peddle their wares across the globe.

As for the designs, it can seem that no two are alike: zigzags, polka dots, half-moons, teardrops. Factories teemed with unknown Klees and Kandinskys wielding airbrushes instead of paintbrushes. Thanks to these invisible talents, the humble china went a long way toward realizing the Bauhaus School’s most influential philosophy: that art could and should be brought to the people via functional objects. As if to drive this point home, production was concentrated on ordinary items found in every German kitchen—cake plates and cookie jars, milk and coffee pitchers, even clocks and light fixtures.

This emphasis on accessibility is good news for collectors. Although it’s hard to pinpoint exactly how much of this stencilware was produced, plenty of it still can be found (for buying tips, see page 161). Whether grouped together on a console or set off against all-white dinnerware, Spritzdekor introduces color and patterns to contemporary rooms, fulfilling its original mission to make art an everyday matter.



QUOTIDIAN CHARM

After World War I, economically devastated Germany needed hope wherever it could be found, and Spritzdekor offered a modest way to brighten things up. Teapots, dessert plates, tumblers, clocks—it was the rare kitchen item that went untouched. The more specialized the tool, such as the juice reamer, center, the more valued it is today. The same goes for two-part pieces, such as the butter dish with a domed lid, which were more liable to get separated or chipped.



CULTURE THEORY

Given Europeans' love of hot cocoa, coffee, and tea, it's not surprising that copious pitchers, jugs, and creamers were produced with Spritzdekor. The wares are fairly easy to find, and therefore a fun entry point for new collectors. The sturdy vessels can be put to all sorts of uses in and out of the kitchen.



FAMILY STYLE

Durable white ceramics in classic shapes provided a clean canvas for the Spritzdekor designs. Café au lait bowls—the European equivalent of our coffee mugs—came in various sizes, small enough for children (filled with cherries) and larger for adults (with eggs and oranges). They can still be snapped up in

vintage shops and from online dealers. Nested mixing bowls are also common. The black-striped one is part of a set, as is the one holding kumquats. The bright fruit is a fitting match for the tableware's broad palette, which ranges from muted pastels to true reds and blues. Some decorations, such as crisp dots in a single hue, have timeless appeal. Other designs, like that on the

orange-and-purple tumbler, seem more of the moment. The piece's large, subtly shaded circles show the depth of form that airbrushing can create. The cake server, too, owes its energy to the dissolving pink and yellow stripes zooming diagonally across the surface.





SWEET AND LIGHT

Cookies were brought to the table in these ceramic covered boxes, which are prized by collectors. Pieces that feature graduated surfaces and unusual profiles are especially valuable. Finding one without chips and with an intact lid is no easy feat. Light fixtures are also coveted; they're proof enough that decoration was applied to nearly every surface.

Created by Stephen Johnson, Fritz Karch, and Quy Nguyen

SEE GUIDE FOR MORE INFORMATION

HOW TO FIND SPRITZDEKOR

GO ONLINE The best place to start is eBay (eBay.com). Type *spritzdekor* into the search bar. Then, under "Preferences" on the left side of the screen, select "Worldwide"; this will expand your search to include international sellers willing to ship overseas. If your *Deutsch* is up to par, you can try German eBay (eBay.de); there are generally more pieces, and vendors might consider a cross-Atlantic sale.

FIND A DEALER Individual sellers are another option: Our collecting editors borrowed several of these pieces from Margo Mulholland of Kastel Antiques (kastel-antiques.com or mm@exlibrisart.com).

WHAT YOU'LL PAY Cake plates, a common find, can go for as little as \$25, pitchers often run from \$40 to \$100, and unusual covered boxes can cost \$100 or more.

