



The Ackermans have collaborated

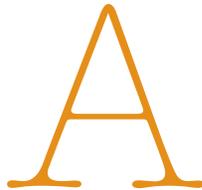
together in their artistic pursuits for

more than 60 years

MEDITATION MOUNT MODERNISTS

Story and Photos
by Elisse DePuydt

REDISCOVERED



A few months ago I found myself amongst an excited throng of people at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles; all there to celebrate the work of a dynamic design team whose multi-media work has influenced the design world for over 50 years. The thread that had led me from Ojai to this reception involves a mystery, an interesting discovery and a newfound appreciation

I stumbled upon the mystery in 2008 while I was researching the Meditation Mount section of my book, *A Photo Guide to Fountains and Sculptures of Ojai: Art, History & Architecture*. Medi-

tation Mount was built in the late 1960s by Florence Garrigue to help promote an enlightened and compassionate world through the power of meditation. Garrigue hired Ojai architect Zelma Wilson to build the hilltop facility in the East End. The elegant Tibetan-style buildings capture the spirit of the group's mission with grace and simplicity. Peace and serenity pervade the 32-acre facility and gardens, which are open to the public. I especially admired the beautiful redwood doors on the meditation hall, with each carved panel representing a sign of the zodiac. But I was unable to discover anything about them. Neither the staff nor the board members knew of their origin, nor could any records be found in the office.

I was disappointed not to find out more about these charming and unique door panels, but decided to include a small picture of them in my book anyway. I'm very glad I did. This led to my meeting a wonderful couple and being introduced to their life's work.

Shortly after publication of my book, I received an email from

“At the heart of their collaboration is a love story.”

Joyce Lovelace, *American Craft Magazine*



The grounds of Meditation Mount

Bruce Chernof, an adjunct professor of medicine at UCLA and president and CEO of the SCAN Foundation. Chernof was a newcomer to the valley, having built a house in Upper Ojai a few years ago. He had seen that picture in my book, and he had some news for me. He revealed that the zodiac door panels at Meditation Mount were designed by Culver City artist Evelyn Ackerman. Evelyn and her husband Jerome (known as Jerry) are considered key artists in an aesthetic called “California Mid-Century Modernism.” Chernof has known the Ackermans for about 10 years, having met them at a pottery show at the Los Angeles Arboretum where Jerry was showing his ceramics. Since then, Chernof has become a fan of their work and also a friend. The zodiac doors, he said, “are incredible, and really fit the Meditation Mount architecture well.”

“At the heart of their collaboration is a love story,” said Joyce Lovelace, *American Craft Magazine*, June/July, 2009

Although Jerry and Evelyn went to the same Detroit area schools while growing up, they didn’t know each before being introduced through a mutual friend in 1948. They married later that same year.

Evelyn, now 87, is four years younger than Jerry. She completed her bachelor’s degree in fine arts at Wayne University (now Wayne State) in 1945 and continued on to complete a Master of Fine Arts degree at the same school. As for Jerry, after serving in World War II he returned to Wayne to complete an art major he had started before the war. Jerry took his first pottery class at this time and fell in love with it.

Later he received a Master of Fine Arts degree in ceramics from Alfred University, the same school that renowned Ojai

potter Vivika Heino attended.

A 1949 exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts called “For Modern Living” had a tremendous influence on the two young art students. It showcased the work of several innovative contemporary designers, including Ray and Charles Eames and George Nelson. Jerry recalls how it opened their eyes to an entirely new way of thinking and design expression. This is when the seed was planted that they too could become designers.

After moving to California and eventually settling in Los

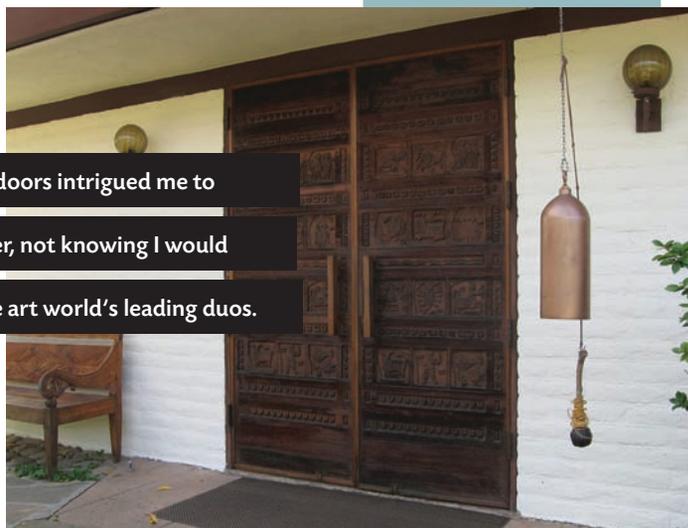
Angeles, the Ackermans met Beatrice Wood, Wood’s teachers Gertrud and Otto Natzler, and Otto and Vivika Heino. Both Wood and the Heinos eventually settled in the Ojai Valley, while the Ackermans thrived in the Los Angeles art and design community.

Combining their names, Jerry and Evelyn opened Jenev Design Studio in West Lost Angeles in the early 1950s. (It later became ERA Industries.) Through artistic talent, ingenuity and hard work, they developed, produced and marketed their designs. Their first line was ceramics designed

by Jerry that eventually were marketed nationally. Their work started to appear in the *Los Angeles Times* Home magazine, *House and Garden* and other publications.

In 1955 Evelyn began designing mosaics for tables and wall panels. Soon there was great demand for their mosaic products and they opened a workshop in Mexico. Evelyn focused on the designs and Mexican artisans produced the pieces. One of her mosaic murals, “Sea, Land and Sky,” can be seen today in Santa Barbara at 112 East Victoria Street on a law office building designed by Santa Barbara architect and artist Louis Mazzetti.

The Ackermans’ exploration into other media continued to grow. Evelyn had an interest in weaving, and so woven tapestries were added to their product line. They worked with a family of skilled weavers in Mexico who executed Evelyn’s designs. Her first one, “Hot Bird,” was featured on the cover of the *Los Angeles Times* Home magazine



The carved doors intrigued me to explore further, not knowing I would meet one of the art world’s leading duos.

in 1957. As time went on they added products made of metal and wood. Their designs made their way into major department stores such as Bloomingdale's and Macy's, as well as being specified by interior designers and architects.

The Ackermans' goal was to keep the production runs small and the quality high. They adhered to the Bauhaus philosophy of combining fine art, craft and industry to produce useful, well-made things. They wanted their products to maintain a handcrafted look but to also be affordable.

The zodiac door panels designed by Evelyn were made using the furniture manufacturing technique of multiple spindle carving where the design was first roughed out of the wood and then hand finished by a carver.

"The life they built for themselves, the idea of them being a team, together and sharing, and caring how they went about their craft, draws people to the Ackermans." — Gerard O'Brien, owner of Reform Gallery, Los Angeles.

In the late 1980s, Jerry and Evelyn cut back on developing and manufacturing new designs and returned to working in their home studio on individual projects. Jerry resumed throwing pots. Evelyn created a 40-piece series of cloisonné enamels, *Stories from the Bible*, which is now in the permanent collection of the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

The couple exhibited in all 12 California Design shows that ran from 1954 to 1976 at the now-defunct Pasadena Museum of Art. The highlights of these shows are chronicled in a book called *California Design: The Legacy of West Coast Craft and Style* by Chronicle Books, 2005.

In September 2008, the Museum of California Design honored Jerry and Evelyn for their contribution to American design.

Then in January 2011, the Craft and Folk Art Museum mounted a retrospective exhibit called "A Marriage of Craft and Design: The Work of Evelyn & Jerome Ackerman." It was at the opening reception for this exhibit that I finally met Evelyn and Jerry – and also Bruce Chernof, the man who had alerted me to the Ackermans' connection with the Meditation Mount doors.

That exhibit completed its run in May, but some of the Ackermans' designs will be displayed at an upcoming exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art called "California Design, 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way." (It's scheduled to run from October 1, 2011 to March 25, 2012. Watch for details at www.lacma.org, and meanwhile visit the Ackermans' website at www.ackermanmodern.com.)



The Ackermans are among the earliest modern art designers in Los Angeles.

Their last showroom was in the Pacific Design Center in West Los Angeles.

They designed the doors at Meditation Mount.

The Ackermans' creative and charming work has given me a newfound appreciation and interest in the modern design period. I've certainly enjoyed meeting them and taking this little artistic journey. Jerry and Evelyn, never having been to Meditation Mount, were thrilled when we contacted them last year.

They are hoping to make the trip one day soon to see their beautiful handiwork in this spectacular setting.

Elise DePuydt works for the Ojai Film Society and the Ojai Valley Museum. She is the author of a guide book featuring the art and history of Ojai called: "A Photo Guide to Fountains and Sculptures of Ojai: Art, History & Architecture." She is one of the museum docents giving Historical Walking Tours of Ojai on Saturday mornings. She can be reached at redepuydt@att.net