

## DECO COLLECTOR: KENSINGTON

BY JIM LINZ

In 1934, the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) introduced a new giftware line under the tradename "Kensington." Unlike aluminum giftware previously produced by ALCOA and other manufacturers, Kensington was made of an aluminum alloy, overcoming some of the more troubling limitations of pure aluminum. Further distinguishing Kensington from previous aluminum giftware was ALCOA's decision to hire famed industrial designer Lurelle Guild to design the entire line of giftware introduced in 1934. The result was a giftware line capable of competing head-to-head against the chromium giftware produced by Chase, Revere, and Manning Bowman., all of which embraced the Art Deco style in their giftware lines.

Aluminum, a lightweight malleable metal with a bluish, silver-white color, occurs in nature only in combination with bauxite. The process for separating aluminum from bauxite ore was developed in 1888 by Charles Martin Hall of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He founded the Pittsburgh Reduction Company which, in 1907, changed its name to the Aluminum Company of America. The company's manufacturing facilities were moved from Pittsburgh to nearby New Kensington, Pennsylvania around 1891.



The Stratford Compote

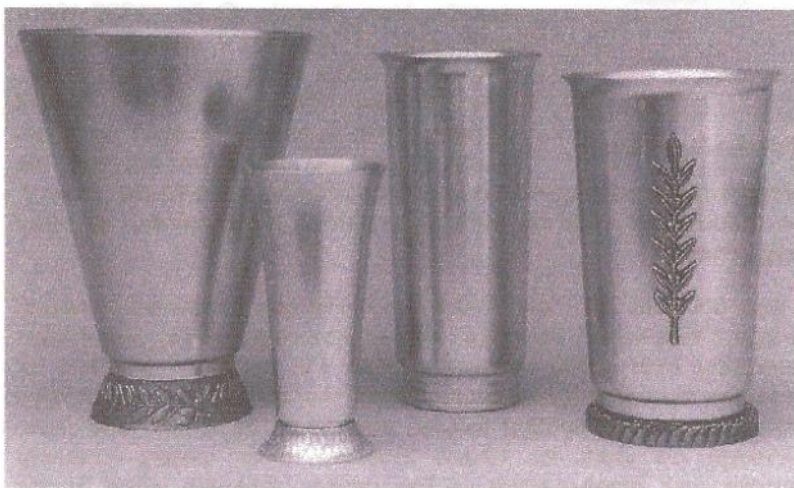
Initially, ALCOA focused strictly on the production of raw aluminum to be sold to other companies for use in a wide range of products. Faced with difficulty in convincing other companies of the potential uses of aluminum, ALCOA set up the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Company, Inc. in 1901 to

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market cooking utensils. The company was renamed "Wear-Ever™" two years later. Initially, Wear-Ever pots and pans were sold door-to-door by company sales personnel.

Aluminum offered several advantages over other metals because of its resistance to corrosion. It simply does not rust. Aluminum is not, however, the ideal metal. Because it is a soft metal, aluminum scratches easily. In addition, while it does not rust, it quickly oxidizes, forming a chalky white surface.

Despite these drawbacks, aluminum became a popular metal for use in cooking utensils and various household items. In 1930,



Left to right: *Marlborough, Kingston, Sherwood, and Laurel* vases

American designer./manufacturer Warren McArthur patented the use of aluminum in the manufacture of furniture. Among the industrial designers incorporating aluminum in furniture design was Donald Deskey. Aluminum was also used extensively in the design and layout of the Hindenburg.

In developing Kensington metal, ALCOA addressed the two primary limitations of pure aluminum. By alloying aluminum with other metals, ALCOA was able to produce a harder metal which resists scratching and does not oxidize. Like chrome, it cleans with soap and water without the need for metal polish. Kensington metal is



*Gainsborough vase*

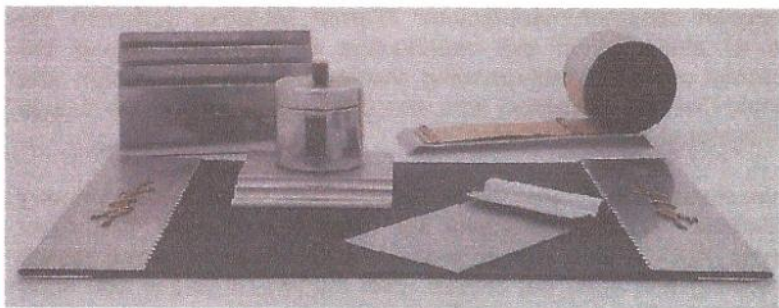
also heavier than pure aluminum, giving it a more substantial feel.

Although ALCOA noted that Lurelle Guild's designs for Kensington are not tied to any one period, the overall thrust of the product line is decidedly Art Deco. Although Guild did not use extensive ornamentation, many items in the Kensington line have brass accents. Typically, Guild chose the use of laurel leaves as a design motif.

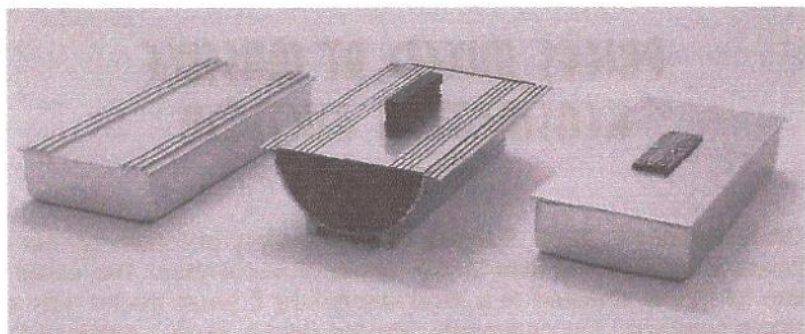
Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild (1898-1985) was one of America's preminent and prolific industrial designers of the 1930s. Like Norman Bel Geddes and Russel Wright, Guild began his career as a set designer for the stage. In addition, he

designed cover art for *House and Garden* and *Ladies Home Journal*. He collaborated with his wife on drawings for a number of other magazines.

It was not until 1927 that Guild turned his talents toward industrial design. Once he did, however, he was amazingly prolific, sometimes producing over 1,000 designs a year. For example, in 1934 he designed the entire Kensington giftware line as well as the extensive line of lamps and lighting fixtures introduced by Chase that year. Although his work for Chase involved other metals—primarily chrome and brass—many of the design elements used in his Kensington designs, such as laurel leaves and arrows, appear in his Chase designs.



Desk accessories by Kensington



*Manor, Penthouse, and Carolinian* cigarette boxes.

Kensington added new giftware designs throughout the remainder of the 1930s, most of which were designed by Guild. Like other metal giftware manufacturers, Kensington stopped production during World War II, turning its attention to war production.

Unlike most of its giftware competitors, however, the Kensington line was resumed after the war with new products. For example, Kensington introduced a line of furniture in 1947 based on designs by Lurelle Guild. Perhaps the most successful of its post war efforts, Kensington sold over 400,000 chairs under the Kensington and Wear-Ever brands before the line was discontinued in 1952.

Kensington also introduced a new "Moiré" line with shiny surfaces of aluminum and gold covered in a duller moiré pattern. Unlike the more bold, modern shapes introduced by Kensington in the 1930s, the postwar designs are uninspiring and avoided by most collectors.

Kensington even ventured outside its core business, introducing a line of Kensington bent glass for a brief period.

By 1970, the Kensington Ware line consisted of fewer than 20 items.

Further reading:

Linz, Jim. *Art Deco Chrome*. Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 1999

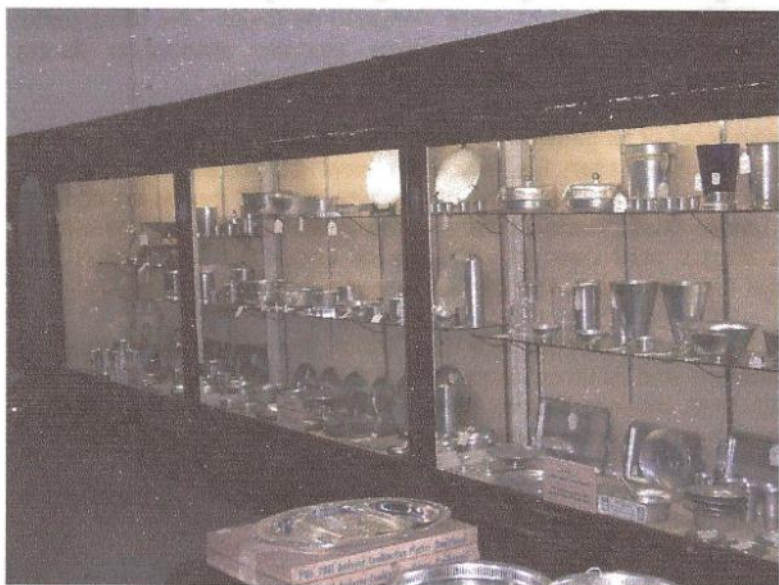
Ockner, Paula and Leslie Piña. *Art Deco Aluminum: Kensington*. Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 1997.

All photos are from *Art Deco Chrome*.

## PRICES MIXED AT MASSIVE KENSINGTON AUCTION

By Jim Linz

On November 6, 2004, Dargate Auction Gallery of Pittsburgh auctioned a collection of over 2,000 pieces of Kensington. The collection had been donated to a local community 5 years earlier with a single condition. The community was required to build a museum to house the collection. When the community failed to construct the museum, the collector reclaimed the collection and sent it to auction.



About 50 people were present for the auction with an unknown number signed on through Ebay's Live Auction. I decided to attend in person rather than rely on my dial-up Internet connection. Besides, it provided a rare opportunity to see (and bid on) Kensington items I had never encountered in 25 years of collecting. It was well worth the trip.

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With such a large auction, multiple copies of many items were auctioned. Generally, prices dropped the second, third, or fourth time an item came up for bid. For example, there were about 10 desk sets



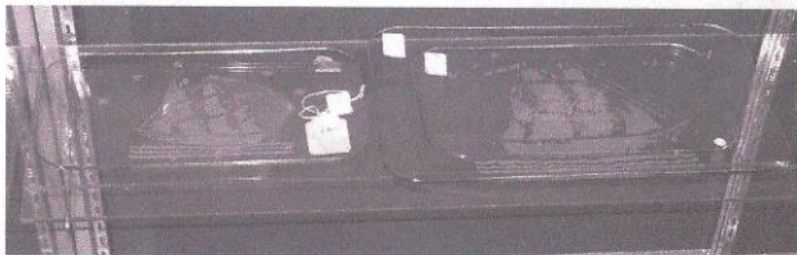
auctioned, the first selling for \$600 plus an 18% buyer fee. By the end of the day, sets were selling for about \$125. Some items, however, seemed to hold their value throughout the day. Each pair of Gainsborough vases sold for about \$300 despite the fact that at least 5 pairs were included in the auction. Similarly, a wide array of Kensington picture frames were offered. With the exception of a few damaged frames, each seemed to sell for \$100-\$150.



The top price at the auction was for the small Art Deco aluminum plaque shown at the left, which sold for \$2,500 plus the 18% buyers commission.

There were, however, many bargains, particularly near the end of the auction as the crowd thinned out and Internet bidders appeared to sign off after a long day.

I came away from the auction with a number of new pieces for my personal collection, including the Kensington bent glass pieces shown below.



All photos by Jim Linz