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PACESETTERS, PLACE SETTINGS, AND DESIGNING FOR THE HOMES OF TODAY

The above words appear typed on a faded, undated sheet of paper found among the many other poems and notes Edith Heath wrote throughout her life. Her assertion that "pace-setters" are social designers shines light on how she saw herself. Not just an artist or designer, she was a "pace-setter." Heath possessed an almost prescient ability to identify societal shifts and to design for niche subcultures before they tipped to the mass market. This unique ability helped to build much of Heath Ceramics' early success, as well as to grow and adapt the company's product lines over the course of nearly six decades.

Always curious, Heath constantly experimented, developing new forms and techniques that sometimes would not be added to production until years later when the timing felt right. Many of Heath Ceramics' most memorable products and innovations resulted from this experimentation, helping to set the company's place at America's dinner table.

Perhaps Heath's most significant innovation sprang from a business model that married her studio sensibilities with industrial production. The earliest days of Heath Ceramics relied solely on handcrafted techniques, but as early as 1945 Heath was already envisioning herself less as a potter and more as a designer/ manufacturer. During this period, Heath led a small ceramic studio of four to six potters who hand-produced the ware that would sell under the Heath name. Potters hand-inscribed "Heath" on the bottom of each piece, not as a signature but rather an early form of branding.²

Heath's early hand-thrown ware included dinnerware, coffee and teapots, bowls, vases, and lamp bases.³ While these pieces bore traits that have since become associated with Heath Ceramics—particularly a muted color scheme and a characteristic speckle derived from the inherent materiality of the clay itself—they also bore characteristics that proved too difficult to reproduce once factory production began. Pots and cups often featured organic shapes with bulbous bottoms and subtle waists or necks. Experimental handles exhibited looped and scrolled forms, thumb rests, and methods of attachment. An early leaflet advertising Heath Pottery at Bullock's Wilshire included sketches of these hand-thrown forms, which it described as "made by hand," in "rich earth colors" of "soft-granite blue," "warm beige," and "misty green."⁴

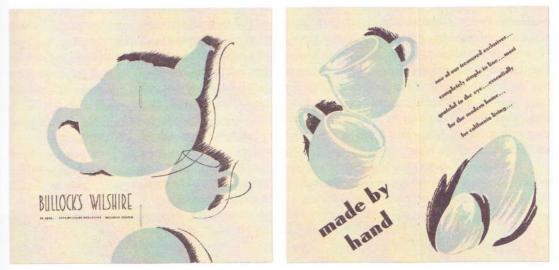
By 1947, foreseeing a need to meet increasing demand, Heath Ceramics gave birth to a new business model, producing dinnerware using a unique combination of industrial and studio techniques. This decision led to profound changes in the design and style of the pieces—changes that placed the company as a leader in modern dinnerware design.

The switch to industrial production meant Heath needed to simplify the organic shapes of her earlier hand-thrown ware. She acknowledged this change in her later writings, admitting, "In designing for mass production the personal quality of spontaneity is sacrificed."⁵ While jiggering seemed the method most akin to hand-throwing, it meant "that all forms are limited to the round, with gentle corners and no undercuts."⁶ Though these changes seemed inevitable, design sketches from this transitional period show how Heath hoped to find ways to reproduce her earlier, more curvaceous style as much as possible. While jiggering could not produce these shapes, slip casting could, allowing Heath Ceramics' early products to retain some of this spontaneity.

A 1947 brochure announced the initial line of Heath California Dinnerware.⁷ With the name "Heath" in a flourishing script font evoking Heath's signature,



Early teapot design sketches, Heath Collection EDA, UCB.



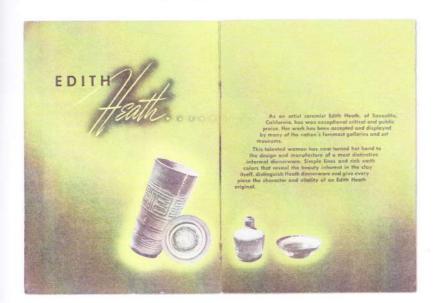
the leaflet characterized Heath Ceramics as a company that blended industrial with hand-crafted studio practices.⁸ Inside, two pages depicted Heath's hand-thrown pieces next to a statement describing the new dinnerware as possessing "the character and vitality of an Edith Heath original." Featuring a color palette strikingly similar to the "soft-granite blue," "warm beige," and "misty green" colors offered at Bullock's Wilshire, the line retained some vestiges of the hand-thrown ware, particularly the organic forms produced with slip casting.⁹ Most notable in this regard was the slip cast creamer and sugar bowl, which, in addition to their bulbous bottoms, also included horizontal ridges akin to throw lines across the exterior surface.

By early 1949 Heath Ceramics had expanded its line to include thirty pieces of dinnerware available in eight colors. The majority of the collection was presented in a newly designed brochure using photographs taken by Dean Stone and Hugo Steccati the year before. This brochure marked a turning point in Heath Ceramics' stylistic presentation, moving the company further



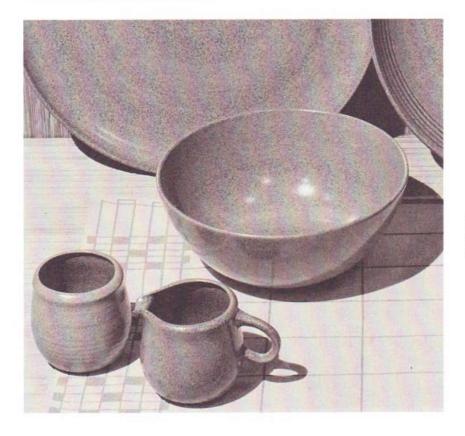


Cover and interior pages of Heath California Dinnerware brochure, 1947, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB.



away from the organic, handcrafted aesthetic to the simplified elegance of modernist design. Gone was the Heath name presented in a stylized script.¹⁰ Gone also were the images of hand-thrown pieces next to a description of Heath's artisan origins. In their place, Heath presented a bolded sans-serif font declaring dinnerware designed "for homes of today," industrially made, but "with all the charm of the handmade."¹¹ Still, while this brochure marked a turning point, it did not completely close the door on Heath's more curvaceous style, as evidenced in a beer mug, added to the line in late 1948, and an amphora-styled pitcher, which debuted in 1950.¹² Even these, however, were short-lived additions. Heath Ceramics had become modern.

With its new, modern aesthetic firmly in place, Heath Ceramics set forth to fulfill America's entertaining needs. Restricted Depression-era budgets brought the classic dinner party back to middle-class American homes, a trend that increased in popularity postwar.13 As home entertaining became a social standard, so too did the popularity of "California-style" dining-a style defined by the state's leisurely, indoor-outdoor lifestyle.14 While dinner parties were typically more formal on the East Coast, California's relaxed lifestyle encouraged al fresco dining and buffet-style service. By early 1951, the company released an updated version of the 1949 "Homes of Today" brochure, adding six new service pieces and increasing the line to thirty-five pieces.¹⁵ In addition to an extra-large 5-quart casserole, new pieces included a large 8-quart "party" bowl, larger salt and pepper shakers, a set of demitasse cups and saucers, and a jumbo version of its best-selling ashtray.16 Both "Homes of Today" brochures presented the dinnerware in styled groupings with boldfaced headings like "luncheon," "parties," and "after dinner" suggesting various dining and entertaining uses.



Vegetable bowl, creamer and sugar bowl from the initial photograph by Dean Store Hugo Steccati, 1947, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB. Home entertaining was very likely much on Heath's mind during this time as she began planning what would become her future residence. In July 1948, she and her husband, Brian Heath, purchased an old barge, the *Dorothea*, with friends Eral and Kenny Leek and quickly started construction to convert it into a home. After moving the *Dorothea* to Tiburon in 1951, Edith Heath and Eral Leek began an ongoing collaboration with landscape architect Robert Royston, converting their four-acre property into outdoor living spaces suitable for entertaining.¹⁷

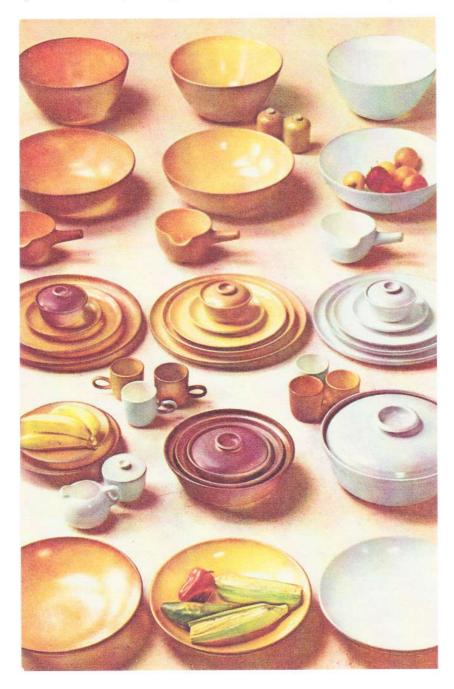
Entertain they did. Hosting crab bakes, waffle parties, and other functions for upward of 50 guests at a time, Heath understood a hostess's needs for service pieces. Her dinnerware had already attracted the attention of lifestyle editors who featured it frequently in their editorial spreads on home



entertaining.¹⁸ In 1955, after temporarily relocating some of its dinnerware manufacturing to Los Angeles, Heath Ceramics started production on a new buffet service.¹⁹ Making its debut at the de Young Museum's 1955 *California Designed* exhibition, the service marked a growth spurt for the company's product lines, with eleven new pieces and three new dinnerware patterns added to the line.²⁰ The full party service featured oversized bowls and platters, as well as an extra-large dinner plate to satisfy the eyes of hungry buffet guests.

The addition of so many new pieces and glaze patterns may on its face seem sudden considering the line had seen few changes in the previous five years. In reality, these additions were the realization of glazing and product development experiments dating back at least six years. The three new patterns—White/Sand, Gold/Apricot, and Pumpkin/Brown—involved the Brian and Edith Heath with guests in their garden designed by Robert Royston, Robert N. Royston Collection, EDA, UCB. use of a porcelain engobe liner to create two distinct colors from a single glaze, a technique Heath had been developing for some time.²¹ Furthermore, hand-thrown prototypes suggest that many of the larger pieces were conceptualized well before 1950, likely not being added into the product line earlier due to limited staffing.²²

A shift in home entertaining was just one of the many changes at America's dinner tables during this period. The 1950s saw the development of many types of modern conveniences, as frozen dinners, cake mixes, and other prepackaged foods hit the market. While these items promised to reduce time spent in the kitchen, in reality American women were reluctant to adopt these



Heath Ceramics buffet service pieces, 1955, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB. products for everyday consumption.²³ Despite the food industry's efforts to promote new "time-saving" products, homemakers saw cooking and baking as an outward expression of love for their families.²⁴ Instead of looking for ways to get out of the kitchen, many explored ways to stay in it, experimenting with gourmet recipes and exotic world cuisines. Magazines such as *Living for Young Homemakers*, *House Beautiful, Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Life* portrayed an American ideal of "gracious living" through articles, images, and recipes—many of which excluded or limited the use of packaged ingredients altogether.²⁵ What is more, *Gourmet* magazine, which had started publication in 1941, further promoted the art of fine cooking. While its readership veered more toward the leisure class, the magazine helped spread the concept that making a gourmet dinner was within anyone's reach. As all this simmered quietly in American kitchens through the end of the decade, Heath planned her new line, launching it months before the release of Julia Child's seminal book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, which brought the trend to a full boil.²⁶

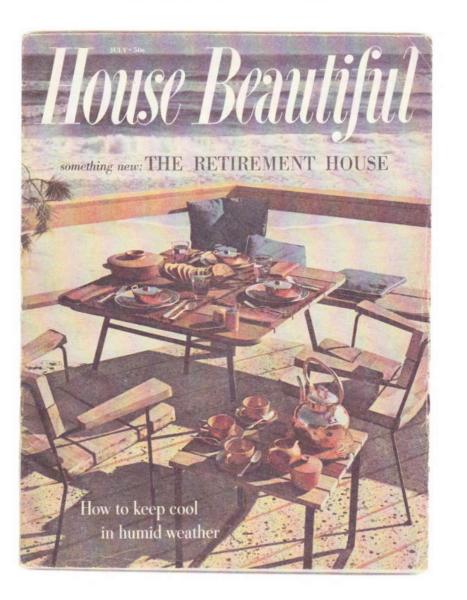
In 1961 Heath released a line of rimmed plates and baking dishes that helped to propel the company into its next era. Naming the line Gourmet, Heath positioned it as an elegant dinnerware set with the workhorse durability and versatility needed for serious home chefs. The line was small but mighty.²⁷ Plates could be inverted and used as lids to the bakers. Pieces moved easily from oven to table without risk of thermal shock. Bakers featured a flat bottom for better heat distribution and 2¹/₄- to 3-inch-high walls that fit between oven racks. A rimmed lip allowed for easy gripping and handling. Even the small bread and butter plate could serve a dual purpose as a saucer.

The Gourmet line marked a new direction for Heath Ceramics, which had previously built its reputation on the clean silhouettes of its unrimmed dinnerware. Up to this point, the Coupe line existed but not in name. With no other line from which to distinguish it, all products marketed before 1961 were referred to simply as Heath Dinnerware. With the launch of Gourmet, a distinction was required. At first, collateral materials put Gourmet in a separate section, apart from the other dinnerware. By 1965, however, the two lines were distinguished with the descriptors "coupe" and "rimmed."²⁸

These descriptions remained just that—simple descriptors—as evidenced by the consistent use of lower-case letters on collateral materials through the 1960s. Coupe and Rimmed finally became line names in 1971, the same year a short-lived third line was developed—Deep Coupe.²⁹

Deep Coupe consisted of a small place setting of three basic pieces—a dinner plate, a salad plate, and a cup. The plates featured deep, curved walls that allowed them to double as shallow bowls for use with soups, stews, or pasta.³⁰ A newly designed brochure featured Deep Coupe in 1971, but for unknown reasons the new line was discontinued the following year.³¹ This might have marked the end of Deep Coupe if not for a number of simultaneous cultural events—the growing use of plastic in consumer housewares coupled with the surging popularity of hiking in the United States and the growing counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

Plastic saw many new developments in the 1950s, allowing the material to become cheaper and more versatile. By the late 1950s, plastics had invaded the kitchen, replacing other materials such as wood, glass, and metal. The 1950s housewife could prepare meals on Formica countertops, serve them on melamine plates, and store leftovers in Tupperware and Saran Wrap. Plastic was convenient, affordable, easy to clean, durable, and available in bright colors that resonated with the period.³²





At the same time, spurred by multiple factors, including popular books, the increased influence of the Sierra Club, and the 1968 National Trail Systems Act, Americans were taking to the great outdoors.³³ While outdoor enthusiasts at first welcomed this new interest in the environment, by the early 1970s a backlash ensued. "The woods are overrun," Colin Fletcher famously quipped, "and sons of bitches like me are half the problem."³⁴ In their enthusiasm to embrace the outdoors, visitors to these fragile wilderness areas threatened to destroy them, often leaving behind their own trail of "scattered tin cans, paper plates, cups, forks, spoons, scraps of food, assorted plastic containers, and wrappers."³⁵

By the mid-1970s, Heath envisioned an alternative. Returning to the Deep Coupe forms, she rebranded the line as Heath Basic—three basic pieces, sold in sets of two, priced at a cost affordable to students. Hoping Heath Basic would appeal to the younger generation—"student + friend...travelers...young in heart...ecological in mind...happy with small...or less"—she packaged and sold the line in specially branded boxes.³⁶ Heath was determined to prove a point: even those who wanted to travel light could still eat off nice ceramic dinnerware. "It was the beginning of lightweight stuff, you know plastic and all these things for camping," remembered former employee Bill Palmer. "She thought you could go out with [Heath Basic in] a picnic basket....It was one of those things where she felt everyone was against her, but she was going to do it."³⁷

Ultimately, though perhaps not surprisingly, Heath Basic failed to be a hit. While the pieces may have been acceptable for casual day-trippers and picnickers, avid hikers trekked deep into America's wilderness for days or weeks at a time, seeking to escape crowded urban life.³⁸ Traversing steep and rocky trails for upward of 15 miles each day, every ounce counted; Heath Basic could never compete with the lightweight convenience of its plastic counterparts.³⁹ What is more, though Heath likely sympathized with the environmental activists and the youthful counterculture, the generational divide led to her failure to truly understand them. Unable to attract retailer interest, the line primarily sold in the Sausalito showroom, eventually fading away.⁴⁰

Despite this, Heath's experiments and determination with Heath Basic demonstrate her commitment to environmental causes—a subject she would frequently return to throughout her life.⁴¹ In the 1970s, Americans were just starting to understand the impacts their consumer habits had on the planet. Books such as Rachel Carson's 1962 groundbreaking *Silent Spring* foretold a frightening future, while novelist/activist Norman Mailer became an outspoken critic of plastics, comparing them to a cancer in American society. Concerned citizens began questioning the use of these synthetic materials, which they encountered daily. Still, it would be decades before nascent environmental groups would understand the full impact of plastics on the planet—a topic Heath showed concern for as early as 1971.

Heath's ability to sense societal trends fed her lifelong need to experiment and create. Though her innovations expanded beyond just ceramics into scientific and architectural disciplines, driven by her passion and creativity, she remained in her heart an artist. "It's like in cooking," she described of her experimental approach. "When we're just experimenting with things..., they are works of art, just simply because they are what they are."⁴² Cover of <u>House Beautiful</u> featuring Heath dinnerware, July 1952, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB.

Advertisement for Heath Ceramics Gourmet line, March 26, 1961, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB.

Heath Basic packaging logo, ca. 1975, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB.



- Edith Heath, "Pace-Setters Are Designers," The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. I am indebted to Rosa Novak for bringing this poem to my attention.
- 2. As each inscription was unique to the inscriber, their looks vary widely. The frequency with which the potters inscribed the name "Heath" lent these inscriptions a fluidity that mimics that of a signature, further blurring the line between studio and factory production.
- Emilia Hodel, "Edith Heath's New Method of 'Throwing' Tableware Wins Acclaim of Ceramics Industry," San Francisco News, December 21, 1945. Also "Complete Dinnerware Sets Thrown on the Wheel," Ceramic Industry 46, no. 5 (May 1946): 86.
- 4. "Bullock's Wilshire," brochure, The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- Edith Heath, "Some Thoughts about Ceramic Production," The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 6. Edith Heath, "What Makes Heath Different," The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 7. Though the initial line had no official name, its pieces later were called the Coupe line.
- 8. Even after factory production began, Edith Heath still produced some hand-thrown accessories to accompany the jiggered tableware. Many of these objects likely became prototypes for pieces added to the line at later dates. Edith Heath to F. Carlton Ball, June 19, 1947, The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 9. "Heath California Dinnerware," brochure, The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 10. While the 1949 brochure included the name "Heath" in a script font on the front, the new font was not as ornate as the previous and does not try to replicate the look of a signature. In 1955, a newly designed brochure presented the name in a clean, unbolded sans-serif font. "Heath Stoneware," The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 11. "For Homes of Today," brochure, The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 12. Even though the water pitcher did not explicitly replicate this bombé form, its traditional amphora shape suggests a clinging to this past style. While the beer mugs were short-lived (being discontinued by 1955), the water pitcher remained available at the factory store at least through the mid-1960s. Its rarity on the secondary market and absence from later period photos and brochures, however, suggests the traditional design was not as popular with Heath Ceramics customers, who preferred the more modern shapes.
- 13. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "Two Washes in the Morning and a Bridge Party at Night: The American Housewife between the Wars," *Women's Studies* 3, no. 2 (1976), 154–156. The idea of entertaining business associates at home was a frequent topic of magazines of the period. A lifestyle article in *Life* went so far as to proclaim the trend "has turned the new U.S. man into an excellent host and bartender." "The New American Domesticated Male," *Life* 36, no. 1 (January 4, 1954): 42–44.
- 14. The concept of "California living" was popularized by magazines such as *Life* and *Sunset*, which often featured large color images of gracious al fresco entertaining. In addition, etiquette books such as *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette* described how to serve salads "California-style" (as an appetizer in individual wooden bowls).
- 15. By 1949, Heath had added to the dinnerware line a 12-cup teapot that was discontinued by early 1951.
- 16. Heath Ceramics released the jumbo ashtray in 1949.
- 17. For more information on Edith Heath's relationship with Robert Royston, see JC Miller's essay, "Making a Place for Art," in this volume.
- 18. Examples of such articles include Ethel McCall Head, "Modern Gifts for Modern Brides," American Home 42, no. 7 (June 1950): 46-47, and Mary Roche, "Dishes that SAVE You Dishes," House Beautiful 92, no. 1 (January 1951): 76. In addition, the cover of the July 1952 House Beautiful, as well as an interior article, "Props that Set the Stage Outdoors" (78-79), featured Heath Ceramics.
- 19. Edith Heath to Mrs. Eleanor Bitterman, March 9, 1955, The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 20. California Designed, de Young Museum, San Francisco, California, July 15-December 5, 1955.
- 21. A letter from Liliane Kaufmann to Edith Heath, April 20, 1949, discusses some plate samples Heath sent using porcelain engobe. The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 22. Between May and December 1954, Heath Ceramics workers went on strike demanding a seven-hour workday. See Edith Heath, *Tableware and Tile for the World: Heath Ceramics*, 1944-1994, transcript of oral history interviews conducted by Rosalie Ross, 1990-1992, 1994, California Craft Artists Oral History Series, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1995, pages 181-183. During this period dinnerware production was relocated to the Los Angeles-based Grant Ceramics Company, allowing Heath Ceramics to go into production on the new buffet service (Edith Heath to Mrs. Eleanor Bitterman, March 9, 1955). A June 12, 1955, trade fair advertisement announced the new availability of Heath Stoneware, which had been "in short supply for some time." See "Trade Fair Heath Stoneware, 'San Francisco Examiner, June 12, 1955.
- 23. While the emergence of postwar convenience foods has become a truism of American social history, their acceptance into American culture was much more gradual and nuanced. In fact, it took a concerted marketing effort by the food industry to convince homemakers that using packaged food need not be shameful. This effort involved tactics such as incorporating promoted convenience foods into marketed recipes, as well as the introduction of fresh eggs into cake mixes, which had previously contained powdered eggs. For a more detailed account of the change in postwar cooking and dining habits, see Laura Shapiro, Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America (New York: Penguin, 2004).
- 24. Many scholars have written about the link between love and cooking and the real impact of postwar convenience food. This sentiment was especially voiced by Wendy K. Cooper in the foreword to her mother's 1959 book, *Cook, My Darling Daughter*, when she wrote, "Love and food? Are they allied?

Ithink so, especially if you cook with care and serve with affection... Love of family. Love of friends. Love of food and all the pleasant ways in which it may be cooked, served, and eaten." Mildred O. Knopf, *Cook, My Darling Daughter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), ix.

- It should be noted that while many newspapers and magazines published industry-supported recipes directing the use of these packaged ingredients, those that specifically promoted a gracious living lifestyle avoided it, "lest they lower the tone of the magazine." Shapiro, Something from the Oven, 29.
- For more information on the increased interest in gourmet cooking before Julia Child, see David Strauss, Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934-1961 (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). See also Shapiro, Something from the Oven.
- The main line included only four plates and four bakers. Accessories to the line included a covered jar in three sizes, a mug, and a lazy Susan.
- In the term coupe derives from the French word couper, meaning "to chop" or "to cut." In dinnerware, the word typically refers to a dessert bowl but can also be applied to any plate lacking a rim or compartmental sections.
- 29. Collateral price lists continued to refer to the line as Rimmed until 1984 when its name was shortened to Rim.
- 30. The inclusion of a low bowl/plate was not new. Heath added one to the dinnerware line in 1949, but the form disappeared from collateral material after 1957.
- See Heath Ceramics 1971 brochure and "DIRECTIVE, February 1972," The Brian and Edith Heath/ Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- 32. For more information on the history of plastics in American culture, see Stephen Fenichell, Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), and Susan Freinkel, Plastic: A Toxic Love Story (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).
- 33. For more information on the history of hiking in America, see Silas Chamberlain, On the Trail: A History of American Hiking (Ph.D. diss., Lehigh University, 2014).
- Quoted in Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 5th ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 316. Avid walker and author Colin Fletcher wrote a series of books chronicling his adventures walking the California eastern border and the entire length of the Grand Canyon. His passionate descriptions of deep wilderness areas helped ignite the desire of many Americans to experience the wilderness for themselves. While a formidable influence, Fletcher's impact came at the end of a vibrant period for local hiking clubs, which also contributed to the popularity of the pastime. Chamberlain, On the Trail, 254.
- 35- William Kersley, "How the 1970s Backpacking Boom Burst upon Us," Appalachia (Winter-Spring 2007): 29-32.
- 36. In an interview and subsequent email correspondence with former Heath Ceramics employee Bill Palmer, he confirmed that Heath was indeed referring to hikers and backpackers when she included the word "travelers" in this poem. However, it is also possible she may have been thinking of the counterculture movement that induced thousands of young adults to travel to San Francisco during the 1967 Summer of Love. In a different version of the poem, the phrase read "logical in mind...glad to carry." Heath Basic drawings, The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.
- gr. Bill Palmer, interview by Julie M. Muñiz and Rosa Novak, May 18, 2019.
- Susan Sand, "Backpacking: I Go to the Wilderness to Kick the Man-World Out of Me," New York Times, May 9, 1971.
- 39. Heath Basic pieces are in fact heavier than their Coupe counterparts.
- 40. Heath Ceramics design sketches show tooling changes to the plates, suggesting that the line continued in production until at least the mid-1980s, but it remains unclear how many pieces were actually sold during this period.
- 41. See Rosa Novak's essay, "Use the Earth to Save the Earth," in this volume.
- 42. Heath, Tableware and Tile for the World, 222-223.