



Courtesy Harry Giambrone

Discovering Hidden Histories of Women Designers

DESIGN DETECTIVE

Have you ever found an old family photograph album and wondered, “Who are these people? When was this photo taken and why?” I’ve learned over the years that IDSA is like a family, and a single photo can tell many stories. Those stories must be gathered. It’s exciting detective work!

An Unexpected Photo Connects People & Places

The Winter 2015 issue of INNOVATION triggered a hunt that combined lucky breaks, personal interviews, internet research, old-fashioned page-by-page research in libraries and the kind help of university archivists to discover women who earned degrees in industrial design in the 1940s. Their varied experiences reveal the choices available to women during wartime and the changing roles of women in postwar conditions.

That issue included the final article by Carroll Gantz, FIDSA, and a farewell written by Bret Smith, IDSA, and me for our dear friend who had passed away during the issue’s preparation. In January 2016, Harry Giambrone, living in Dayton, OH, emailed Bret to comment on Gantz’s article. Giambrone, L/IDSA, had worked at Jack Morgan and Associates after graduating from the University of Dayton’s industrial design program in 1951. Upon learning of my interest in Chicago’s design history, he sent me a staff photo, probably taken in early 1952, which included two women:

Asako Takusagawa and Margaret McCauley.

In various interviews I’ve conducted over the years, I had heard stories about Takusagawa and McCauley, but had never seen photos of either. Giambrone told me that he worked with Takusagawa to draw styling interpretations and renderings and that McCauley worked with Chester Wojtowicz on mechanical drawing.

Asako Takusagawa: From California to Arizona to Chicago

During the summer of 2016 while researching the history of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), I looked for familiar names among the students and faculty; Takusagawa’s name jumped off a page. One of five June 1947 graduates in product design, she also was listed with students completing concentrations in ceramics, architectural sculpture and volume design. SAIC industrial design students not only studied the artwork held at the museum; they mingled with fine arts, photography, commercial design and theater classmates. Takusagawa’s teachers included Joseph Palma and Henry Glass, FIDSA, both practicing designers who would have assisted her in a job search.

Internet research sketched out Takusagawa’s life. Born in California in 1920 and a resident of Reedley in the Central Valley agricultural region, Takusagawa was a member of the Delta Phi Delta national honorary art society and one of 40

Above: Staff at Jack Morgan and Associates, Chicago, c. 1952. Jack Morgan, with mustache; Mel Boldt to his left; Asako Takusagawa, standing beside the lamp; Margaret McCauley, with glasses; Harry Giambrone, seated second from left; Chester Wojtowicz, seated to the left of Giambrone.



Courtesy Kay Hicks Waltman

Staff of C.E. Waltman and Associates, Chicago, c. 1946. C.E. (Chic) Waltman at center, Kay Hicks in white, Charles “Chub” Waltman looking over his father’s shoulder, Jackie Pieper to the right of Chub.

graduates from the California College of Arts and Crafts in May 1942. In 2011, nearly 70 years after her graduation, Asako donated to the school’s scholarship fund.

The daughter of immigrants who toiled as farmers, Takusagawa had never visited Japan. After Japan’s December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, in May 1942 the US government introduced one of the most shameful laws in the country’s history. Japanese-American residents, many of them citizens who mostly lived on the West Coast, were collected and incarcerated in camps set in desolate areas in Western states. In addition to enduring dehumanizing treatment, these 120,000 people lost their businesses and property. Released at war’s end, many suffered more indignities and hardship. Takusagawa and her family were among those sent to the Colorado River Relocation Center in Poston, AZ, where by 1944 she taught art in the camp high school. After 1945, Takusagawa and her parents found their way to Chicago, whose Japanese-American community numbered about 400 in 1940 and swelled to 30,000 by 1950.

After graduating from the School of the Art Institute, Takusagawa began work at Jack Morgan and Associates. In 1952 she was one of the many Morgan employees who joined Mel Boldt when he split off to form his own firm. The designers I interviewed who had worked at Mel Boldt and Associates remembered her as a strong office manager and Boldt’s personal assistant. As Boldt’s eyes and ears, she made sure the day’s production was ready for his review. She served on staff after Boldt’s death until the firm’s closing in the late 1980s. Little has been uncovered about her since that point.

In September 2017, I interviewed Bill Cesaroni, IDSA, who got his first job at Mel Boldt and Associates in 1971.

There he learned how a design firm operated and how to draw in the signature Boldt style, which defined the firm’s approach to product visualization. Viewing Giambrone’s photo, Cesaroni remembered Takusagawa as one of the most devoted of the firm’s employees—she was first in and last out at the office. He also said, “Margaret [McCauley] was a ‘detail designer.’ She translated the designers’ perspective view renderings into realistic models to provide engineers with a starting point. Detailers were mechanically talented and worked with pencils in full scale on vellum.”

A Lunch Tip Opens a Trail

During a lunch with long-time friends in April 2017, one of them suggested I meet Annie Moldafsky, whose husband, Bob Moldafsky, had been one of the creators of Unimark. I was thrilled to meet someone connected with the early days of the first global design firm, founded in Chicago in 1964.

Bob Moldafsky began his studies at University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign in 1939 and graduated in industrial design in 1943, along with his friend Ralph Eckerstrom. Two decades later after varied other jobs, they hatched the idea to form Unimark and worked together for 10 years.

Annie told of a memorable party she and Bob hosted at their home in October 1988: the 45th reunion of the 1943 class; graduates from 1940–1945 were also invited. Her party file contained letters from the event organizers, lists of invitees, a list of graduates (compiled by Professor James Shipley, who began teaching ID at Illinois in 1939 and retired in 1978 as the dean of the art department), and autobiographies written by the party attendees. Annie gave me some of Bob’s papers and showed me his

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—Bill Cesaroni, IDSA

Illini yearbooks. Photos of Margaret McCauley and Bob Moldafsky appeared side by side on a page of seniors in the College of Fine and Applied Arts; McCauley was a member of the Society of Illustrators.

The 1943 class included 16 students, many of whom forged notable design careers. Shipley’s list noted Tom Steinbach, whose varied work included time with Raymond Loewy, FIDSA; Wayne Champion, who would establish the San Jose State ID program; and Jacqueline Pieper and Margaret McCauley. His list included 1940 painting graduate Nettie Hart, who designed packaging and airline interiors while at Loewy’s Chicago office and ascended to vice president of Loewy/Snaith, Inc. in New York in 1960. The list also included 1942 student Herbert Zeller, who headed design at Motorola beginning in the mid-1950s, and 1944 graduate Martha Kay Hicks.

After graduating, Jackie Pieper served as the hub for alumni news and with the help of other alums in Chicago, including Nettie Hart, produced a newsletter from 1944 through the early 1950s. Her newsletters reported Illinois grads (men and women) working from California, Seattle, New York, and beyond, operating their own design offices, working on design staffs of major manufacturers and establishing ID education programs. Some worked in theater and art, a few devoted their lives to ministries, and others went into advertising or sales. The 1988 party had propelled the idea of a reunion book of autobiographies, which Pieper circulated in 1991. She donated this manuscript and the newsletters to the university library in 2001. Those papers were the buried treasure that revealed the lives of dozens of Illinois grads and Shipley’s career.

Margaret McCauley, Kay Hicks and Jackie Pieper: Wartime Classmates

Women industrial designers enjoyed a unique window of opportunity during the years before, during and immediately after World War II. Patriotic enthusiasm and the pressure of conscription caused men to leave school before completion or enter the military immediately after graduation. Many of the University of Illinois female ID students came from small Midwestern towns and jumped into exciting work and life experiences in Chicago and New York. The University of Illinois provided a pipeline for job prospects that became a coast-to-coast network over the next decades.

Margaret McCauley (born in Rock Island, IL, in 1919) stated that in 1943 “two weeks after graduation, in a fit of patriotism, I went to work at the Curtiss-Wright airplane plant in Columbus, OH.” She found drawing airplane parts boring and headed for Chicago, where she designed products for Dave Chapman’s office for six years and then for Jack Morgan and Associates for two years. When Mel Boldt opened his own design office, she worked for him for 23 years. Retiring in 1975, she moved back to Rock Island to the family home she inherited and worked in a commercial art studio until 1984. She dove into community activities, took up painting, designed traveling exhibits about birds for the National Audubon Society and tutored children. She died in 2011.

The June 1944 class graduated two industrial design students—both female: Kay Hicks and Emily Christopher, who reported to the 1944 alum newsletter, “instead of designing new products for the market, I’m redesigning slightly shattered bodies and tired minds to fit them for the rugged civilian world” at an army hospital in Memphis. After having five daughters, Christopher earned a master’s degree in special education and taught disabled children for 20 years. She died in 2002.

Kay Hicks (born in 1923 in Tallaquah, OK) grew up in Tulsa. She attended a women’s junior college in Mississippi, finishing in May 1941, and entered the University of Illinois that fall. An artist since her youth, she enrolled in the art department and found her niche when she heard Professor Shipley explain the work of industrial designers.

Graduating in the class before Hicks and Christopher, Jackie Pieper (born 1919 in Urbana) worked at C. E. Waltman and Associates, formed in Chicago by Chauncey (C.E.) Waltman (known as “Chic”) in the late 1920s. Pieper shared an apartment with Margaret McCauley. She encouraged Kay Hicks to join her at Waltman after her graduation instead of working for a manufacturer or retailer, advising that working for a consultancy would be more varied and challenging. During wartime, finding a job was easy but housing was scarce, and the three became roommates—two sharing a double bed and the third on a Murphy bed. Once employed at Waltman, Hicks reported to classmates that she had a few accounts of her own and added, “I love my job, have no husband or prospect for that matter, but have an apartment and nylons, so can’t complain.”

Postwar Directions for Women Designers

Hicks recalled the excitement of designing fashionable women's accessories—handbags, compacts, jewelry, cigarette cases—in the new plastic materials, as well as all types of consumer products. At war's end, pilot Charles "Chub" Waltman settled in Chicago and joined the staff at his father's firm. Chub and Hicks married in 1947 and went to Sweden to learn about glassware and ceramics and found client work. A gifted artist and witty cartoonist, Chub had not been educated to be a designer and had worked in theater. Living in Stockholm and working through translators, they created product designs for companies eager for American styling. Back in the US and after having two sons, Hicks worked briefly for the Waltman studio. Later she turned to painting and interior design while raising three children. Waltman Associates continued into the 1970s. Still active today, in 2016 Hicks had a solo exhibition of her paintings.

Pieper worked at Waltman for three years and then operated her independent design office for nine years, a bold step for a single woman in the 1950s. Her services included retail interiors and packaging. After a dozen years designing appliances, furniture, outboard motors, toys and shoe stores, she grew tired of a freelancer's diet of peanut butter and switched careers in 1956 to speech therapy. Earning a master's degree, she worked in a suburban Chicago school district for several years, and in 1962 she moved to Battle Creek, MI. There she was a speech and language pathologist for 22 years and became a local legend for her generous philanthropic work with children. She died in 2009.

The Waltman office and the Pieper-McCauley apartment served as Chicago landing spots for Urbana female classmates. For example, Barbara Kelly worked for Waltman during the 1944 summer and roomed with Pieper and McCauley until Kay Hicks replaced her. Kelly left to spend two and a half years in New York as a designer at Donald Deskey Associates, where she designed packaging, flooring and radios. In 1991 she recalled, "It was a very exciting time to be in the city. Social life was great too! Soldiers were arriving and departing with lots of money and a desire to see the bright lights, and I joined the fun." After the war, she married and raised seven children in Pittsburgh and "became a full-time mother and corporate wife with civic and volunteer projects."



Courtesy Kay Hicks Waltman

Kay Hicks at a drafting table, c. 1946

Ambitious women remained single and continued their careers after the 1950s. Some women married and soon became mothers, redirecting their energies and talents. Because of society's norms and expectations, the rigors and rivalries of the male-dominated industrial design practice, as well as the absence of reliable birth control prior to 1960, women rarely combined a full-time design career and parenting. Some women left the demanding industrial design profession to work in allied fields such as teaching, graphic design or interior design, even while raising multiple children; others returned to their artistic roots and engaged in creative pursuits.

Thanks to the generosity of Harry Giambrone, Annie Moldafsky and Kay Hicks Waltman, one photo led to countless stories. But more stories need to be unearthed. Design schools should reach out to retired teachers and alums. Invite them to classes to share their stories; students will learn life lessons as well as technical skills from past masters of the pen. And train students in the art of recording oral histories. Urge your school to maintain records of its alums. A little digging can uncover hidden histories that will enrich the lives of industrial design students and practitioners.

—Vicki Matranga, H/IDSA
Co-Chair, IDSA Design History Section