

# MONKEY BUSINESS

Former Williams-Sonoma Designer Travels The World For Inspiration

by Greg Sleter

Designing has always been a passion for Liz Ross. From her early days as a young girl changing clothing and hair styles of her dolls, to her current works as a designer of tabletop, giftware, and linens, Ross has always sought to stay on the cutting edge when designing new products.



Ross owns the Monkey and the Peddler, an Oakland, CA-based company she founded in 1995 to design and produce porcelain dessert and cocktail plates. Ross has expanded a few of her designs to include mugs and bowls. Her tabletop designs vary from the use of fruits and vegetables to floral prints and—of course—monkeys in human-like settings. While her company's name may make some wonder how it fits with the design of tabletop items, Ross explained the name was inspired by a 16th century engraving, "The Merchant Robbed by Monkeys."

"The engraving shows monkeys ransacking a traveling peddler who has dozed off," she said. "While the peddler sleeps, the monkeys, which represent a free and unhindered life, inspect the peddler's wares and in the hands of monkeys those wares are shown to be silly, somewhat insignificant items."

Ross continued, "While I believe, as do the monkeys, that we create many ridiculous and hopelessly excessive accouterments, I am a designer and therefore, the peddler as well."

Her tabletop items are sold to the public in limited channels—on her web site and through advertising placed in periodicals such as *New Yorker* magazine. While some have suggested opening a small retail shop, Ross has no plans to do so currently.

"My customer base is pretty loyal," Ross noted. "The fun thing about advertising in the *New Yorker* is that I am able to talk to the people buying my product and get a good feel of what the end user wants."

Ross also sells product to a number of small independent retailers specializing in carrying tabletop items that feature unique designs.

She has stopped dealing with the larger, high-end retailers.

"There tends to be a higher rate of turnover with not only the buyers in those

stores, but the product they display," Ross explained. "The smaller stores tend to have more patience and stay with patterns for a longer period of time."

She equates her enjoyment of designing accessory pieces for tabletop to a chef getting more enjoyment out of creating unusual appetizers versus cooking the main course.

Ross got her first taste of designing products for the home after joining Williams-Sonoma, for which she was in charge of designing and supervising production of dinnerware, glassware, textiles, furniture, and packaging.

"When Williams-Sonoma hired me I was a photo stylist and art director," she recalled. "They called me out of the blue to see if I would be interested in a position with them. While they knew I was not a product designer at that time, they said I was recommended to them as someone who had great taste and an eye for design."

Working at Williams-Sonoma gave Ross the opportunity to travel a great deal, from which she was able to draw inspiration for new product designs while visiting flea markets and outdoor bazaars around the world.

She cited India as a country that has provided her with a host of new design ideas. "The first time I went to India I fell in love with the country. It has always been a wealth of inspiration for me and in recent years we have seen certain looks from India, including paisley and items with beads, gaining in popularity."

Ross said she is disheartened some by the regularity in which designs in the world of tabletop are knocked off.

"I think it shows a clear lack of imagination on the part of some manufacturers and designers. I understand in some ways they need to do it. Manufacturers are under a lot of pressure to sell a hot look and buyers feel pressure to have a certain look in their store," she said.

"It's one of the reasons I stay on the fringe of things and continue to do what I enjoy doing."

