

•Spotlight on creator



LIZ ROSS



Below: GRAPES, two varieties, a set of four cocktail plates, \$37; top, GRANDVILLE dessert plates where people morph into fauna based 19th century etchings, \$80, a set of four.

BY Amy Stavis

As the former design director for Williams-Sonoma, Liz Ross helped establish a new genre for the San Francisco-based retailer. The dessert plates Ross produced during her two-year tenure were phenomenal hits and created a lucrative Williams-Sonoma category. It was a vast learning period for Ross, overseeing all tableware-related production, working with suppliers around the globe. While she helped develop myriad merchandise including giftware, earthenware, textiles, and furniture, what really turned Ross on were the small plate suites which, "allowed for complete expression of an idea apart from the ponderous quality of an entire dinnerware set."

So when Ross decided to leave her Williams-Sonoma post, it was, perhaps, inevi-

table she would venture solo, creating new expressions on her dessert plate palette. In 1995, Ross founded The Monkey and the Peddler, her San Francisco-based business to produce and distribute dessert and accessory plate sets, a concept, she says, "specific enough to make a beginning seem possible."

In these days of niche marketing, Ross has found her niche. Making this beginning possible is only because Ross has spent the better part of three decades developing and honing a style. The ambitious designer found her calling early on; she was barely five when she recalls being awestruck by a clerk's gift wrapping prowess and thought it'd be a neat job. She was the class artist who struggled with how to turn a calling into a career.

But turn she did. After earning her master's degree in



fashion from New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, Ross worked as a banquet designer, costume designer, photo stylist, and art director, a constantly craving creator, working for Nike, Levi's, Apple, IBM, and Gump's. "I've always had this incredible need to make things," the effusive Ross relates. "It is who I am."

In 1990, Ross was hired as Williams-Sonoma's first director of product design by a V.P. looking for someone with "a good eye". Over the next two years Ross traveled the world, sourcing and developing product. "It was a great match," Ross avers. "We accomplished a lot, adding new categories to their assortments." Ross' designs boldly

went where few had gone before: she placed quotes on plates, spurring a movement of "me too" quotes. Her Williams-Sonoma designs were charming, witty, in step with the casualization of the marketplace, and, most importantly, successful.

Ross left the retailer after two years with dozens of design ideas whirling through

her brain, anxious to produce and market the designs through her own company. She dubbed the new business The Monkey and the Peddler, inspired by a 16th century engraving of a sleeping merchant being robbed by a band of unruly monkeys. The engraving is a metaphor for a civilization gone amok

Continued on page 97

LIZ ROSS

Continued from page 65

with the acquisition of material possessions which fall into the hands of impulsive animals. In pursuit of accoutrements—testimony to successful lives—we become trapped. Add irony to the mix: Ross represents both the monkey and the peddler, the creator who peddles her wares to a society saturated with stuff. "It's a perfect take on my view of the world," Ross laughs. "There is way too much product and I'm a contributor."

Armed with a clever name, first-rate factory contacts, and a pocketful of designs, Ross set up shop, starting with upscale gourmetware: hors d'oeuvres and dessert plates. "I enjoy the form," Ross says. "No one else had specifically addressed the

need for smaller plates. I've always viewed these plates as wonderful accents, meant to be the apostrophe on the table, like short stories rather than novels." These best-selling novellas teem with signs of Ross' ingenuity, intelligence, and playfulness. GRANDVILLE—where people morph into fauna—is inspired by a 19th century etching; WEEDS TO FLOWERS sports quotes by James Russell Lowell; MINOU is a pet line sporting cat and dog witticisms by famed thinkers including Leonardo DaVinci; VILLA bears garden and architectural themes; Oriental birdcages adorn LIBERTÉ; MISCHIEF brings Ross' monkeys to the forefront in a variety of scenes replete with "insider jokes" including Vermeer windows

and Caravaggio fruit baskets.

Arguably Ross' finest contribution to the tableware industry are her discard boxes. For anyone who has ever wondered what to do with the olive pits, peanut shells, shrimp tails, tea bags, or strawberry stems during a cocktail party, Ross has the solution. She's designed a line of plates and small boxes decorated with the food to be served and then discarded. "No one ever knows what to do with these leftover pieces," Ross says. "Now they will." Sets retail for \$50.

Ross is such a font of tableware ideas that The Monkey and the Peddler isn't her only diversion. In fact, much of her time is spent designing merchandise for other compa-

nies. "It's a wonderful opportunity for me to expand and design for other media," Ross says. "Everything I design enhances my other designs." That's probably the case; Ross' products have been the focus of flattering press pieces in dozens of newspapers and magazines across the U.S. The publicity hasn't hurt. "The biggest challenge is getting product out for people to see," Ross concludes, "especially when I'm competing with the big boys, and it's tricky and difficult to get buyers to feel comfortable enough with products that aren't everywhere." And that in a nutshell (to be discarded, preferably, in a Ross box) is precisely the appeal of Ross and The Monkey and the Peddler. □