

Modern Dining with California Free Form China

California Free Form china was produced by Metlox Pottery Company. The Metlox Pottery Company was started by T.C. Prouty and his son Willis in 1927 and was located in Hermosa Beach, Ca. The company initially produced outdoor ceramic signs accented by neon lights. T.C. Prouty passed away in 1931 and his son converted the factory to produce dinnerware. The first china pattern produced was called "California Pottery" and was made in several colors similar to those manufactured by Bauer. Metlox even produced dinnerware for Sears during the 1930's. Dinnerware production was very limited during World War II and the company was sold to Evan K. Shaw in 1946. Shaw introduced several new painted patterns that proved to be very popular with the public. By the 1950's the company had over 500 employees and business was growing. Evan Shaw hired Bob Allen and Mel Shaw as his art directors. The hiring of these men turned out to be a real triumph for the company because they brought new ideas to the company. Both men had years of experience working in the cartoon business and were able to make the transition from cartoons to pottery production with little trouble. Mel Shaw even worked on Walt Disney's Bambi and Fantasia films.

Bob Allen and Mel Shaw designed the shapes and distinctive modern pattern used for the "California Free Form" and "California Mobile" lines in 1954. "California Contemporaria" and "Aztec" patterns were produced in 1955. All four lines, "Free Form", "Mobile", "Contemporaria" and "Aztec", share the same shapes. Collectors must learn to tell the patterns apart by looking at the colors used on each piece. "California Free Form" main colors were chartreuse and brown. "California Mobile" colors were purple and an aqua green. "California Contemporaria" used black and gray. There should be no problem identifying "Aztec" because it uses a completely different design on it.

The "Contemporaria" pattern seems to be the easiest of the 4 patterns to find, followed by "Mobile" and then the others. Items to look for are: Ashtray, Bread/Butter plates, Bowls, Butter Dish, Carafe, Cigarette Box/lid, Creamer/Sugar and tray sets, Cups/Saucers, Dinner plates, Gravy Boat, Handled Vegetable bowl with lid, Jawbone dish, Milk pitcher, Open Jam dish, Oval Divided bowls, Salad plates, Salt/Pepper sets, Serving Platters, Twin Vegetable bowl, Water pitcher and perhaps others. Note: the saucer does not have the design on it.

The most desirable pieces are the Carafe, Cigarette box/lid, Creamer/Sugar/Tray set, Jawbone dish, Handled Vegetable bowl/lid and the Pitchers. The lid for the Handled Vegetable bowl has small holes in it for a person to grab it with. For some one with large fingers it must have been extremely tough to do. I would imagine many a lid or perhaps the bottom was broken when one could not hold on to the lid! The sugar bowl is included in this list because finding one with a perfect lid will be difficult. The Jawbone dish is also called a "Boomerang" dish because of the size and shape of it.

Most all pieces of “Free Form”, “Mobile” and “Contempora” will be marked with “POPPYTRAIL BY METLOX MADE IN CALIFORNIA” on the bottom of each piece. I have seen some pieces that do not have the mark on the bottom, but they are clearly part of the line based on the color and pattern design. For some unknown reason, saucers do not carry the mark on the bottom. The mark on the bottom of Metlox patterns is a good way to date an item. There were 10 different marks and 3 paper labels used by the company before it closed its doors in 1989.

A table setting of “California Free Form” will be on display at the Rocky Mountain Glass Society (RMDGS) annual show in Castle Rock next April 26th and 27th. The Kirkland Museum will also be exhibiting part of the museum’s collection during the show. In addition to the Kirkland and Metlox “California Free Form” exhibits, there will be a major display of Cambridge Nudes, 3 very rare art deco Cambridge Mannequin heads and approximately 10-12 other displays featuring Art Deco, modern glass and pottery patterns. Please see below for more information about the show.

The Kirkland Museum in Denver has many examples of the china patterns mentioned in this article on display. The museum also contains hundreds of other fine and decorative art objects ranging from Kirkland paintings, to furniture, pottery, arts/crafts, prints and much more. I highly recommend that you visit the museum. The Kirkland Museum is located at 1311 Pearl St., Denver, Co. 80203 (303) 832-8576.

The next RMDGS glass/pottery show will be in the beautiful Douglas County Event Center in Castle Rock. To get to the show from Interstate 25 take the Plum Creek Parkway exit 181 & turn east. Plum Creek is the most southern exit from Interstate 25 in Castle Rock. Show signs will be posted to help you find the event center location after leaving the interstate. The show hours for the public are Saturday April 26th (10-5) & Sunday April 27th (11-4). As in previous years, the 2014 show has approximately 34 of the most outstanding dealers from across the country. The show will include Early American Pattern Glass from the 1800’s as well as early Carnival Glass.

To find out more about collecting glass and pottery please visit the following local area glass/pottery club websites: Denver: Rocky Mountain Depression Glass Society (www.rmdgs.com) and Colorado Springs: Pikes Peak Depression Glass Club (www.ppdgc.com). The RMDGS meets on the 3rd Tuesday of every month in the basement of the Epiphany Lutheran Church located at 790 South Corona, Denver. The meeting starts at 7:30pm. The PPDGC meets on the 3rd Thursday of every month at the Pikes Peak National Bank located at 2401 W. Colorado Ave, Colorado Springs. The meeting starts at 7 pm.