

The teapot that created an empire

By Pia de Jong - December 26, 2018



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

One day he appeared, standing pontifically on our stovetop. The gleaming Alessi Whistling Kettle that belonged to my roommate. She could not stop talking about it. We finally would have modern design in our humble student dorm. And affordable, too. Of course, it was a lot more expensive than the HEMA Whistling Kettle we already had, but, she said, well worth the money.

I could not share her enthusiasm. I thought it was odd, with its cone-shaped shiny belly. And then that red bird that whistled when the water came to a boil. It was funny the first time, but would I have to endure this every time I heated up water for tea?

It was 1985. I've seen the stainless steel Alessi kettle shine even more brightly since then. The Alessi kettle turned out to be the postmodern answer to the desire of many households to make something special out of the ordinary. Since its

debut more than 2 million have been sold.

It all came full circle last month when I walked through the house of the teapot's celebrity designer, Princeton architecture professor Michael Graves, who died in 2015. Well, some house. The low building in Tuscan vernacular style was built around 1920 as a warehouse by the Italian stonemasons who crafted the fake gothic buildings of the university. It stands tucked among the backyards on a modest residential block in Princeton, invisible from the street.

Graves was immediately sold when he saw the dilapidated building. He turned every nook, ceiling, table, and bookcase into a unique expression of his most individual tastes. He was not a man to buy something in a store. He made his house into his designer's studio, where he lived and worked most of his 80 years of life. He designed around 350 buildings around the world, including the groundbreaking Portland, Oregon, Municipal Building and the boldly fanciful buildings at the Walt Disney entertainment parks.

Walking through his house, which has not changed since the day of his death, it becomes clear to me where his inspiration came from. His postmodern style borrowed freely from antiquity. The Greek statues and amphora, the Roman candlesticks, prints of classical buildings, romantic paintings, modern tiles. The walls of his small personal studio are lined from top to bottom with almost identical watercolors of Italian landscapes in the same terracotta palette.

Graves did not hesitate to design utensils for large chains, such as Target, so that sophisticated design would be available to the general public. In his designs he always went out of his way to think about the end user, no matter whether he was making a skyscraper or a lemon press.

When Graves suddenly became paralyzed by a virus in 2003,

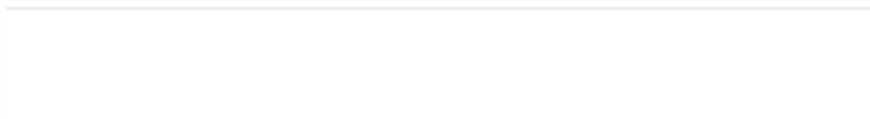
he started designing wheelchairs, furniture for hospitals, and handles for doors and showers in bathrooms. His foldable walking stick became a hit. President Obama honored him for his many contributions to people with disabilities.

Finally I end up in the kitchen, surprisingly modern and familiar. Ikea, I thought for a moment. On the top of the stove, at the height of a wheelchair, there is a whistling kettle. Not with the annoying bird at the sprout, but with the fanciful dragon that he invented for the 30th anniversary of his most successful design.

I want this “Tea Rex” in my kitchen. It’s a lot easier to live with a mischievous dragon than an annoying bird. It seems to wink at me. Something I missed 30 years ago.

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