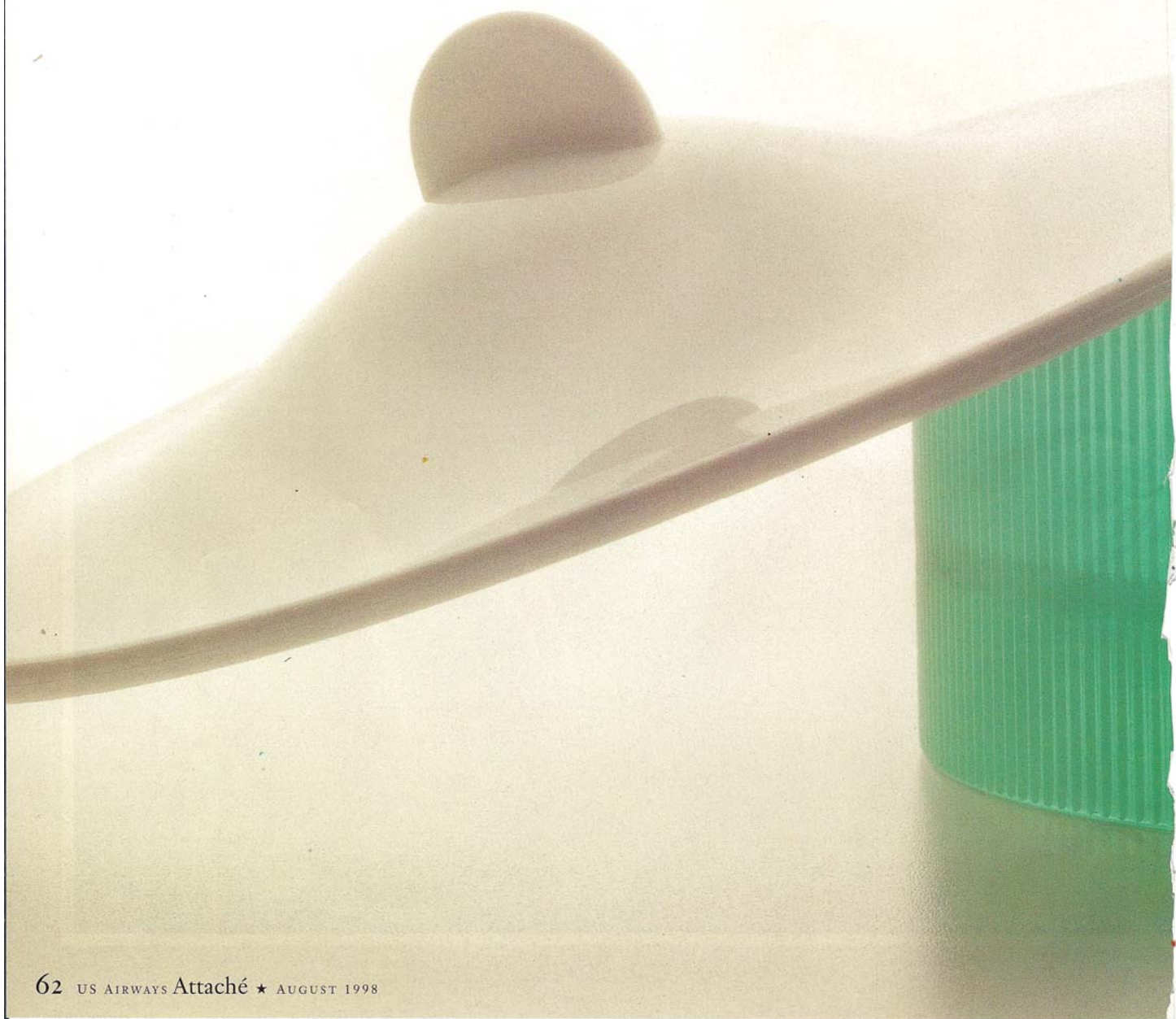


now on display at finer museums:

tuppe



Why is the art world flocking to buy burpable food storage?

Welcome to the plastic world of taste and design.

rware

by cynthia hanson

photography by mark wagoner



**PLASTIC
CULTURE**
*Thanks to
design guru
Morison
Cousins, art
critics rave
about the
Microserver
Dip Bowl.*

THIS WAS NOT your mother's Tupperware party. Last May, more than 1,000 designers, artists, and fashion mavens gathered in New York's SoHo district. The host was Murray Moss, who held the event at his shop, MOSS, the nation's premiere decorative arts store. This crowd barely eats, let alone cooks, and yet in three hours they spent \$4,500 on a smorgasbord of plastic—canisters, bowls, and platters—all displayed in track-light-ed glass vitrines that usually exhibit pricey Alvar Aalto vases and Philippe Starck lamps. They were not asking smart-consumer questions about the drying ability of the Tupperware Double Colander (\$14.99). Not one attempted to burp the One Touch Canister Set (\$24.99). They were buying art.

And they weren't the only ones. Tupperware has become a hot item among the curatorial set. More than a dozen art museums have acquired the One Touch since it came out in 1992. They have joined the rest of us—people who eat and cook—who spend \$240 million on Tupperware every year.

Granted, this is great plastic. It protects food like nothing else. But why the sudden attention from *le monde d'art*? For that you can credit the design genius Morison S. Cousins.

Cousins, the guest of honor at the MOSS soirée, is a world-renowned industrial designer. His previous megahits—the Dixie Cup Dispenser and the Gillette Promax hair dryer—made him a household presence, if not a household name, in the 1970s. By 1984 Cousins, who ran Manhattan-based Cousins Design with his younger brother Michael, became the second industrial designer ever to receive the American Academy's coveted Rome Prize for Industrial Design.

It was in 1990 that Tupperware offered Cousins the ultimate challenge: Direct the design revolution of an American icon. "Our sales were flat in the United States," admits Rick Goings, chairman and CEO of the Orlando-based Tupperware Corporation, with worldwide net annual sales of \$1.2 billion. "In market studies, consumers told us that what differentiates Tupperware from other food-storage systems is its superb functionality and timeless design. But that timeless design had some

BRIGHT FUTURE
Cousins' introduction of color to Tupperware's traditional beige and white scheme took the lid off stagnant sales.

Food storage
artist Morison
Cousins



"People want lovely things. The only barrier to getting them is if they're not on the market," says Cousins.

dust on it. We needed to make Tupperware more fashionable." In other words, Tupperware's timelessness had become a bit dated. (This is design we're talking. Oxymorons are fashionable.)

Besides, people had grown used to seeing fashion in their kitchens. Since the late 1970s, sleek "Eurostyle" products had been capturing the public's imagination and transforming its aesthetic sensibility. Alongside the no-frills housewares from Braun and Krups, burpable food storage seemed at once stodgy and kitschy. It no longer satisfied Baby Boomers who wanted to surround themselves with beautiful but streamlined objects. "People are much more conscious of design today than they were in the past," says Cousins, now 64, a soft-spoken, blue-eyed gentleman. "People travel more, so they see nifty objects from all over the world. Plus, well-designed, affordable housewares are more available now, through retailers like Crate & Barrel, Pottery Barn, and Conran's. Overall, styles are getting better."

Cousins should know. He designed in the European tradition when it was still avant-garde. The Brooklyn-born son of a Macy's carpet salesman and homemaker, he was interested in art practically from infancy. In kindergarten, he sculpted a white ceramic sailor with the elegant simplicity that would become his hallmark. As a teenager reading *Fortune*, Cousins realized he could merge his drawing and sculpting skills as an industrial designer, then an emerging profession. So he enrolled in the Pratt Institute, and by age 20

To update Tupperware's look, Cousins introduced pure



set an ambitious goal: to create museum-quality products for the masses.

"My classmates laughed when I told them," recalls Cousins. "They believed that you could design at the museum level only if you were designing very expensive things. But what I believed then, and what I still believe, is that people want lovely things. The only barrier to getting

them is if they're not on the market."

Early in his career, Cousins designed everything from lawn sprinklers and dental equipment to baby carriages and toasters—and used the less-is-more approach that would make him an industry leader. By the 1980s, he was proving the skeptics wrong, as museums began acquiring his products, including the Space Tel tele-

phone (Atari) and a convection oven (Maxim).

Given this pedigree, industry insiders were surprised when Cousins decided to go corporate through a company that epitomized middle America, and seemed about as exciting as leftover meatloaf. But to Cousins, the move made perfect sense. "By joining Tupperware, I could create mass-

geometric shapes, bright white surfaces, and elegant lines.



GREAT SHAKES

The Double Colander is one of many Cousins-designed items that have brought Tupperware back to prominence in the household products market.

produced products that would end up in millions of homes," explains Cousins, whose current title is vice president of design for Tupperware North and South America.

"It was the same idea I had in college. But my colleagues saw things differently. They believe a designer produces wonderful products because the client is a won-

derful company. But it's got nothing to do with the client—and everything to do with the skill of the designer. And that's what my colleagues missed. The minute I got to Tupperware, Tupperware's image would change."

At Tupperware, Cousins inherited a product line that had expanded yet been largely untouched since Earl Tupper in-

troduced Tupper Plastics in 1946 and launched a revolution in food storage. Tupper's straight-edged containers and plain round bowls charmed experts and homemakers. "Critics liked Tupperware for its science—the way Earl Tupper refined polyethylene, a sturdy but flexible plastic that became popular after World War II," explains Kathryn B. Hiesinger, curator of

THESE ARE A FEW OF HIS FAVORITE THINGS

We asked top designer Morison S. Cousins to list a few of his favorite designs. They include a chair, a car, and a few millennia worth of architecture.

SEAGRAM'S BUILDING, New York City
(architect: Mies van der Rohe).

"It's wonderfully precise and direct. There's a certain rigor about its design—the ultimate 'form follows function.'"

HANS WEGNER CHAIR (1949).

"It's one of the finest pieces of furniture ever designed. It's very sculptural, elegant and sparse. Because wood is a scarce resource, Wegner told me that he used as little wood as possible to keep it structurally sound. It's wonderfully comfortable."

BIRD IN SPACE

(sculptor: Constantin Brancusi).

"Even though I've seen it hundreds of times, I'm always taken by it. The sculpture was done in two forms, marble and polished bronze. Both forms are spectacular."

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, Bilbao, Spain
(architect: Frank Gehry).

"It's a magnificent structure which will emerge as one of the greatest pieces of architecture of all time. It's the opposite end from Mies van der Rohe, who believed in preciseness. Gehry's work has an outgoing feeling to it. It's very much a piece of sculpture. There's a voluptuousness about it."

BLACK TALBOT (a British car, circa 1949, that Cousins saw in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1950s).

"Its envelope design makes this an incredible, sculptural automobile. I like the way the front fenders are separate and actually sit in pods. The body is very flowing, so it's a very sensuous design."

NOTRE DAME DE CHARTRES, France.

"A Gothic building, supported by the flying buttress, and yet there's a certain elegance to it. It's so French in that way—and so magnificent."

Cousins took the
camp out of Tupperware
and inspired a new
company slogan,
"Extraordinary design
for everyday living."





**STACKING
THE ODDS**
*Cousins improved
Tupperware's
bestselling
Wonderlier bowls
by giving them
a fuller shape.*

decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and co-author of *Landmarks of Twentieth-Century Design* (Abbeville). "The American public liked Tupperware because it was so functional and durable. It didn't crack, it had air-tight lids, and it was easy to clean. In Tupperware, food maintained its flavor and freshness."

Recognizing this innovation, the Museum of Modern Art acquired Tupper's early pieces. Tupperware also received glowing reviews in the design press: A 1947 article in *House Beautiful* likened Tupperware to art and compared its translucent plastic with alabaster and jade.

But when Cousins arrived in Orlando, no one confused Tupperware with art. "The products were functional without being graceful," says Cousins, who looks for inspiration in fashion, architecture, and museum decorative-arts collections. "From a design standpoint, the forms were too harsh, so they lacked warmth. I believe that form follows function—until the form gets boring. A product must be lovely if it is to function really well."

To ease Tupperware into the 1990s, Cousins introduced pure geometric shapes, bright white surfaces, and elegant lines—designs that curators praise for being simultaneously simple and sophisticated. Using the tools of geometry—four triangles and a compass—he updated some of Tupperware's best sellers, including the Wonderlier Bowl Sets (\$16.99), the workhorse of kitchen storage. Cousins produced a fuller shape for the Wonderlier by transforming it into a hemisphere with its base cut off, and added large tabs to increase leverage for easy opening. He created new items, such as the circular BagKeeper (\$12.99); Peeler Plus (\$5.99), a vegetable peeler featuring whimsical cut-outs on its handle; and Meals in Minutes Microsteamer (\$19.99), a fluidly contoured steamer-colander with arc-shaped handles.

Recently, Cousins took his cues from Earl Tupper: He used cutting-edge technology to develop a microwave cooking system that can move from freezer to microwave to table and back to the refrigerator. As the Tupperware catalog boasts, Rock 'N Serve (\$59.99 for a six-piece set)

containers are “virtually unbreakable and stain-resistant because they’re made from Lexan polycarbonate, the same material used to make bullet-resistant windows and canopies of F-16 fighter jets.”

“I cook, so I understand what works in the kitchen and what doesn’t,” says Cousins. “Like most people, I want something that’s easy to use. But it’s got to look good, too.”

So Cousins also dumped Tupperware’s monochromatic palette. Today, most products are glossy white or translucent; seals are a rainbow of bold shades, ranging from raspberry (“Fiesta Red”) to jade (“Gusto! Green”). For Tupperware’s sales force, the color change seemed almost blasphemous.

“Nobody knew quite what to make of it,” says Cousins. “They were accustomed to beige canisters with beige lids. But when I explained why I was changing the colors, they were very supportive. I traced the use of white and blue together all the way back to the Ming dynasty and explained that it moved to Europe as trade picked up between Europe and Asia. So it wasn’t as strange as they thought.”

Overnight, Cousins took the camp out of Tupperware and inspired a new company slogan, “Extraordinary design for everyday living.” The makeover sweetened the bottom line: Not only did Tupperware’s domestic sales

rise 10 percent within a year, but today, new products account for 25 percent of all sales—an impressive 15 percent increase from the

early 1990s. Cousins’ sturdy Thatsa Bowl (\$14.99), which has a hole in the handle for easy gripping, is Tupperware’s top-selling bowl in the United States. His Double Colander, with its five semi-circular feet and perforated cover, is among the manufacturer’s leading products worldwide.

It is also the curators’ choice. Eight museums have acquired the Double Colander, including the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Musée des Arts Decoratifs de Montréal. Aaron Betsky, curator of architecture and design at the San Francisco Museum of Art, added Cousins’ Tupperware to the museum’s permanent collection after seeing it at MOSS. “I’d heard about the revamp of Tupperware, but I was surprised

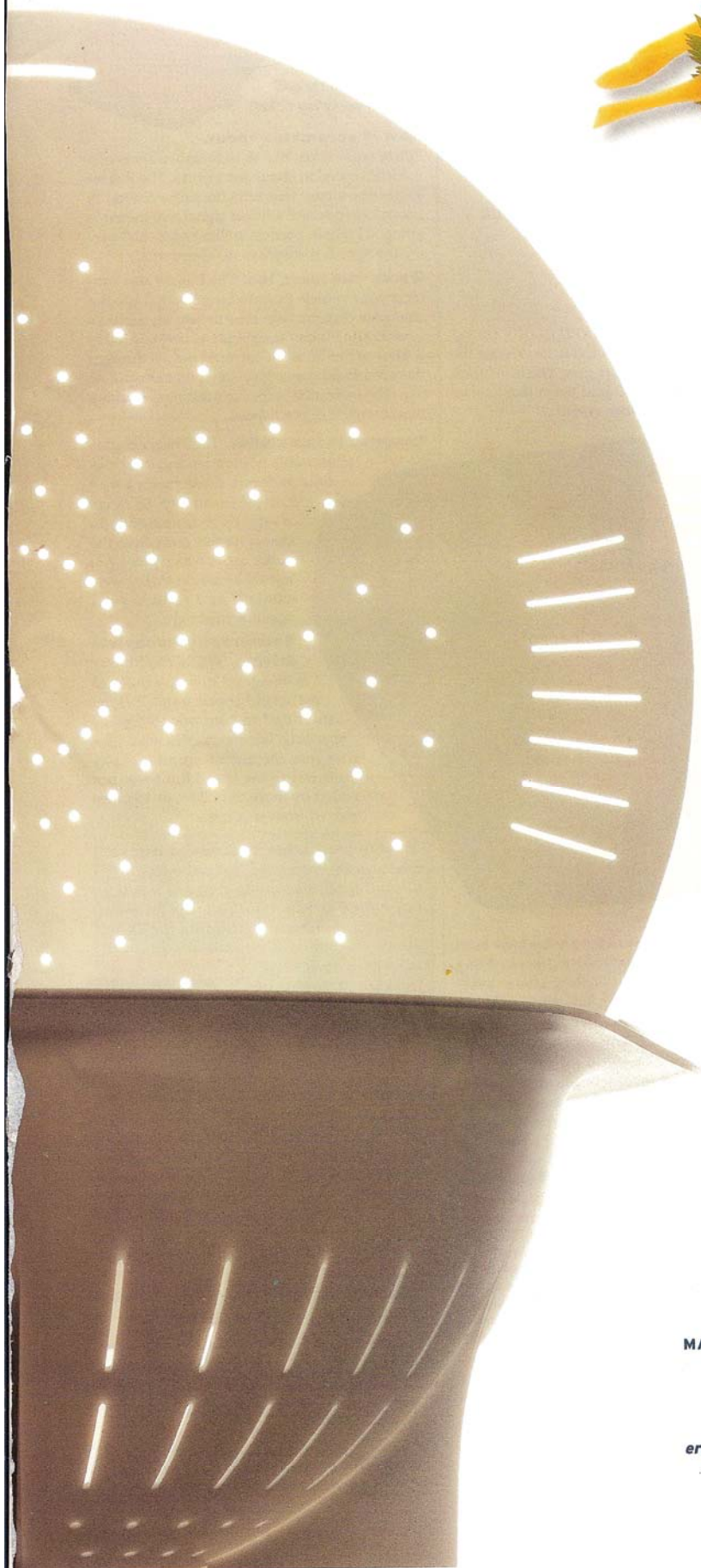
SALAD DAYS

The Large Double Colander proves that Cousins can design inexpensive products at what he calls “the museum level.”

THE TICKET

Visit Tupperware’s Web site for product info and a tour of company headquarters: www.tupperware.com.





at how good it looked in real life," Betsky says. "If plastic could ever have presence, then Morison Cousins has figured out how to do it."

Hiesinger, of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, agrees. "In his best work for Tupperware, Morison Cousins has turned the efficient into the beautiful. He has used plastic with great originality, creating a decorative effect that's more consistent with European design than the pragmatic American design."

That contemporary Tupperware is turning up in museum displays hasn't hurt business, either. "Our sales force is proud of the new line," says Tupperware CEO Goings. "Morison has raised the image of our products to the point where our sales reps aren't just selling plastic products. They're selling Tupperware."

Though Goings never expected fanfare from curators, at least one company man believed the revitalized line would be a critical success. "Tupperware is spectacular-looking today," Cousins says in an objective tone. "After eight years, the same people who were amazed that I went to Tupperware now understand why I did—and what we've been able to accomplish. My vision always has been to design wonderful things—things that are easy to use and look good, whether they're in the cabinet or on the counter. I've done that."

And more. Under Morison Cousins, Tupperware has come full circle. ★

MASS APPEAL
The Peeler
Plus (above)
combines
ergonomics and
whimsy.

CYNTHIA HANSON is a contributing editor for *Chicago Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan*. Her taste is impeccable.