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Paul Lobel

A Greenwich Village jeweler with a design background was **Paul Lobel** (1899-1983). Lobel studied commercial art at Pratt Institute and illustration at the Art Students League, but a visit to the 1925 Paris Exposition stimulated an interest in metalwork. Returning to New York City, he set up shop to produce items like doorstops and andirons. He worked as a freelance designer, too. He typically designed blocky geometric forms in the manner of the Art Deco silversmith Jean Puiforcat. A tea service for Wilcox Silver Plate Company was shown in the 1934 “Contemporary American Industrial Art” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum. The teapot, creamer and sugar are perfect spheres with cylindrical metal handles. They sit on a flat metal tray, and everything is polished to a mirror finish. It is a marvelous display of machine-age *luxe*.

Throughout the ‘30s Lobel worked as designer and fabricator. His company took commissions for interiors and produced a line of interior accessories. Like many decorators of the day, he favored industrial materials such as steel, bronze, glass, nickel and asbestos. In the late 1930s, he developed a process for bending glass that he called “Benduro,” which he used to fabricate prize-winning furniture.

However, when the war began, the industrial metals Lobel favored were restricted. He turned to silver jewelry, which was not as tightly regulated, and opened a shop in Greenwich Village in 1944. Compared to the rough-hewn improvisations of Calder and Kramer, Lobel’s designs are cool and calculated. He started with simple shapes in an abstracted (but still recognizable) image, much as Rebajes did. Lobel’s designs are more sophisticated, though.

During the war, he designed pieces that had no waste: every part that was cut off was reoriented and put back in the construction. Frequently he added a strip of metal soldered on edge. This simple relief element would become a bright line in the composition as well as creating depth. In addition, Lobel often included openings in his designs, so that when the jewelry was worn, skin or clothing would show through the gaps, enlivening the effect.

While Lobel reproduced designs, he didn't use dies for cutting and forming, so his works were never conspicuously mechanical. His *Stradivarius* brooch is typical of his 1940s work: at once deceptively plain and sophisticated. A piece of sheet silver turned on edge describes a strong vertical axis. But then Lobel violated the expected symmetry: most of the right side of the violin is missing, and he bent the top edges of its body. The left side is bent forward, creating a deep shadow, and the right side is bent back, where it could reflect light. Dark and light balance the asymmetry of the outline. It's a very clever composition, done with only five parts.

In the late 1940s, Lobel made a series of small animal and figure sculptures from silver that were as carefully designed and constructed as his jewelry. They were shown at the American Museum of Natural History in 1949. He continued to make jewelry through the 1950s, finally closing his shop in 1965.