

1957

Search for Creative Living

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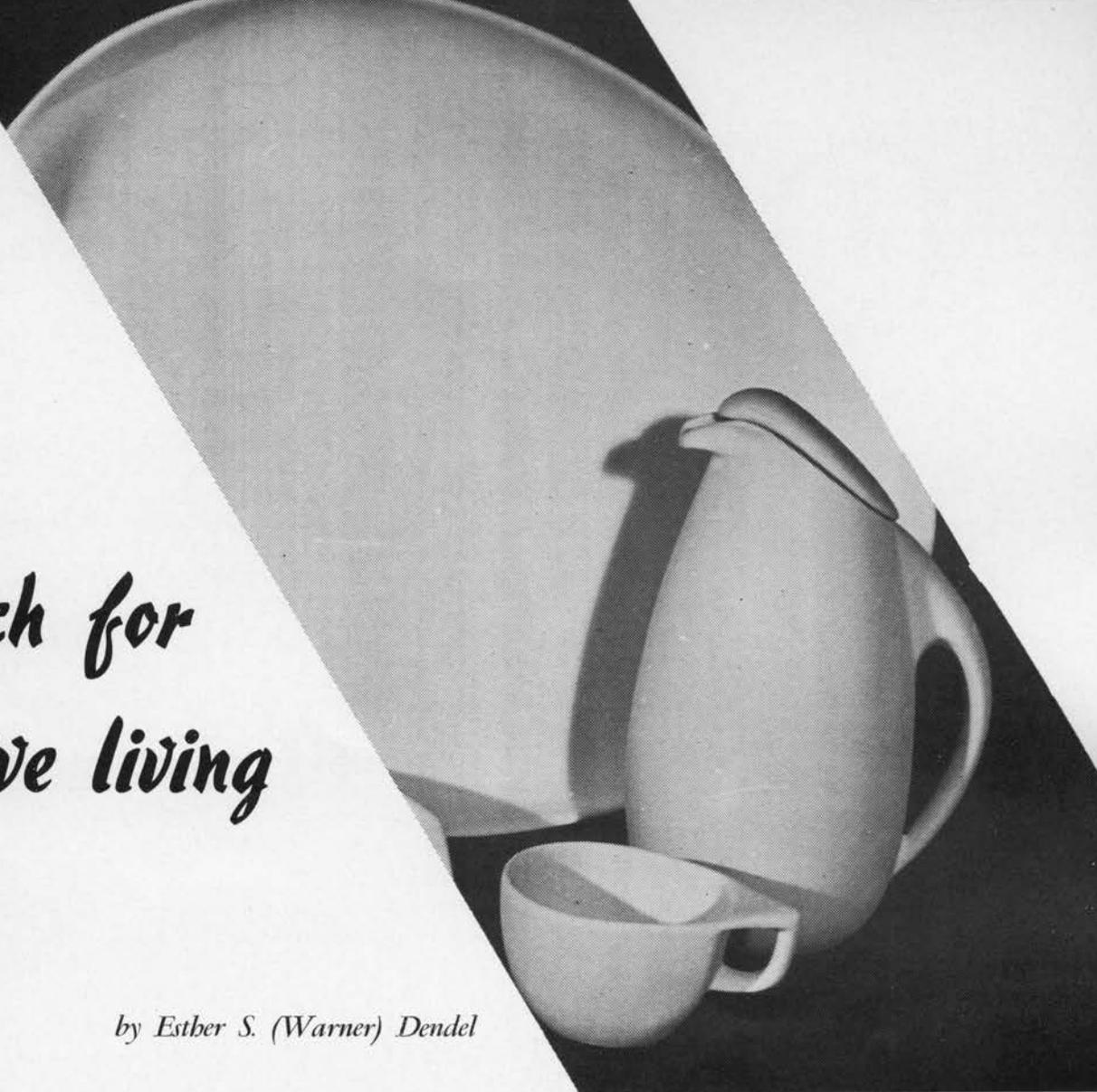
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Recommended Citation

Warner Dendel, Esther S. (1957) "Search for Creative Living," *The Iowa Homemaker*: Vol. 37 : No. 4 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker/vol37/iss4/3>

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Search for creative living



by *Esther S. (Warner) Dendel*

SOMEWHERE along the path toward graduation from Iowa State College, the idea came to me that the ideal life would be one in which creative activity is both a means of livelihood and a way of life. The way to achieve this was not immediately clear to me, but I thought about it a great deal in the years between 1941 and 1943 when I was living in West Africa and spending most of my time in tribal villages in the hinterland of Liberia. I saw that in this primitive culture there was no separation between art and life. I saw that when the women spread their wares at the markets, they made little patterns of their produce as they arranged it on straw mats. I saw that when one person had to wait for another along a path, he would mark off a little square in the dust with a stick and divide the space into an exciting design. Sometimes the care taken to "make fine" was carried to amusing lengths. In certain circumstances it is a man's clear duty to beat his wife before the village people. A "don't care" man will beat his wife with just any old stick, but a respected man will be sure that his wife-beater is an object of beauty, and he will spend many days constructing it and weaving the handle with colored grasses.

As I trekked on foot from village to village, collecting handicrafts and making friends with the people, I was the only white person and the only woman. This circumstance provided enough solitude so that I could think about what I saw and learned. It seemed to me that in these forest villages the craftsmen were enjoying the dream I had held for myself in a different setting. Would it work in the more complicated environment in the United States? I must find out, I decided.

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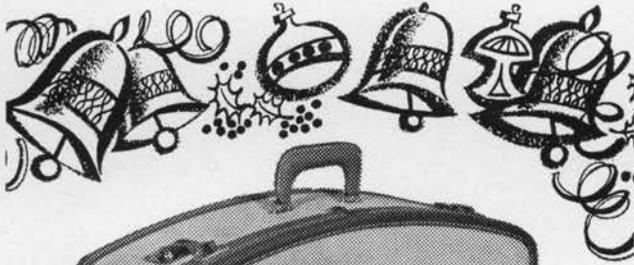
Mrs. Dendel, 1938 graduate in Applied Art, has written two books about her experiences in Africa. She now produces a line of dinnerware under the name of Denwar Ceramics in Costa Mesa, California.

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Creative Living (Continued from Page 7)

An old wood carver spoke to me of the beauty of the shape of an egg. He told me that it was the most perfect shape the Creator had made. The ritual bowls and spoons he carved were formed in the egg-oval. From our talks together, the idea grew in me that after I arrived back in the United States, I would like to produce a dinnerware based on the egg shape. This was the step that led to Denwar Ceramics in Costa Mesa, California.

Learns Good Design

I cannot say that I actually learned to make pottery in the Art Department at Iowa State. What I *did* learn there was an appreciation of good design. This appreciation was what spurred me to trek through the jungle to see the design of another and different people. One might truthfully say that those treks began in the home economics building at Iowa State, circled through West Africa, and for the past 11 years have paused, not stopped, in California. I feel that home economics is before everything else, a creative way of looking at life. The facts and techniques one learns may change and progress with further research in every facet of the field, but the idea behind the search is valid and does not change.

House Planning Leads to Home Building

My husband and I decided five years ago that it would be a fine experience to build the house we wanted to live in. This building process has been necessarily slow because we wanted to do all of the work ourselves in our spare time. We wanted to quarry the rock we would use, design every detail ourselves, build our furniture, weave the fabrics, plant the garden, as well as do all of the construction. The house is not yet finished but we have been living in it since the first of the year, and it seems, even with the long time interval of the construction, to be a great and satisfying adventure. When we moved into the house, I found in the files my work in house planning at Iowa State. Although style trends have changed since then and the house we have actually built has little in common with the drawings I made these years ago, I felt when I saw them that they really were the beginnings of this present house. They were spiritually related rather than physically alike.

When I learned to do batik in Miss O'Bryan's class, I certainly never dreamed that knowing that particular process would help me make friends with tribal women bent over indigo vats on the edge of the jungle. When I learned to weave in Mabel Fisher's lab, I did not know that this was my membership into a sacred African guild. When I sat in Miss Hogrefe's creative writing class I did not know that I would have the opportunity to gather material for two personal experience books about Africa. No one can have foreknowledge of all of the adventures in store for the future. But one can know that not one thing learned is ever lost provided it is learned with the heart.