

K&B SHOW:

NEW PRODUCTS PUT ON THE GLITZ

BY PATRICK GALVIN



Eljer's Carte Blanche collection in solid cast bronze reflected every light in the '89. It retails at a hefty \$26,000, setting the tone for the 1989 show.

EXOTIC MATERIAL, THE EURO LOOK, AND DOUBLE WHIRLPOOLS STOLE THE SHOW, BUT AMONG THE FLASH WERE SOME PRACTICAL ADVANCES

Would any of your customers stand still for a new tub, bidet, and toilet for \$26,000? If so, the folks at Eljer Plumbingware would appreciate hearing from you.

For those who have the cash, Eljer's Carte Blanche Collection may be worth the astronomical price. It is solid cast bronze, made and finished by hand. And it set the tone for 1989's new kitchen and bath products: upscale in the extreme, with both domestic and foreign products contributing to variety that approaches the infinite.

The set was one of thousands of new products put on view by more than 600 exhibitors at this year's Kitchen/Bath Industry Show (K/BIS) in Dallas. Some of these were introduced earlier in the

year at the NAHB convention in Atlanta, but much of the kitchen/bath industry has shifted to K/BIS.

Both in these shows and in other new product introductions this year, designers have rediscovered the simple beauty of white and gray, but always with the accent on sophistication. With the sky-high prices, one wonders what the regular folks are going to do for a new kitchen or bathroom.

Golden Throne Leads the Way for Bathrooms

American Standard's new Roma Suite line of bath fixtures, for example, is loaded with gold (yes, real gold). The precious stuff is fired at full temperature into the vitreous china and weighs in at

22K to 24K after firing, the process ensures that the gold is preserved in the glaze regardless of wear and aging (see Figure 1).

At U.S. Brass, which, like Eljer Plumbingware, is a separate division of Eljer Industries, wood is about as good as gold. The Cambrian Collection features a luxurious whirlpool for two made of henoki, antique and exotic wood found only in Japan (see Figure 2). It is also available in teak. For wood lovers, by mid-1989 Eljer had added wood tank covers and toilet seats to the collection, in teak or several other species.

As the '80s fade into the '90s, bath designers have been trying to move away from the standard look of the long-time standard bath. Manufacturers have responded with more corner

tubs and whirlpools, such as Jacuzzi's Fiore, another tub for two, this one with adjustable whirlpool jets and dual waterfall fill spouts (see Figure 3). The Fiore model also sports a lighted accessory area with hand-held shower and vanity mirror.

Another development in the bathroom fixture field is that toilet tanks continue to get smaller. This trend is accompanied by warnings that, despite local code revisions requiring them, small tanks can't do the job and often require two flushes where one would do before.

Even Stock Kitchens Get Custom Looks

In kitchens too, the trend has been to more sophistication—a five-syllable way of saying expensive. This is

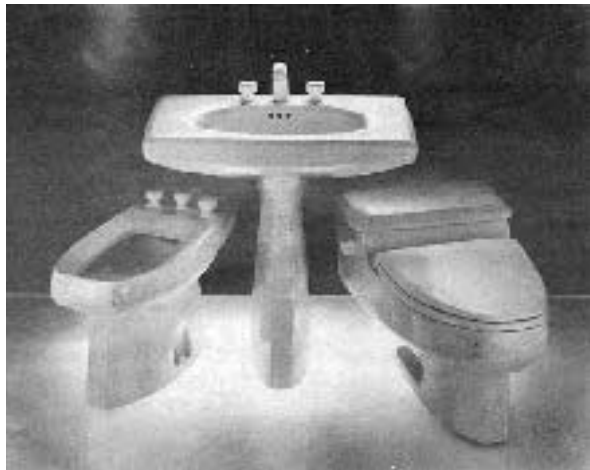


Figure 1. Specs of real gold are fired into the glaze of American Standard's Roma Suite.

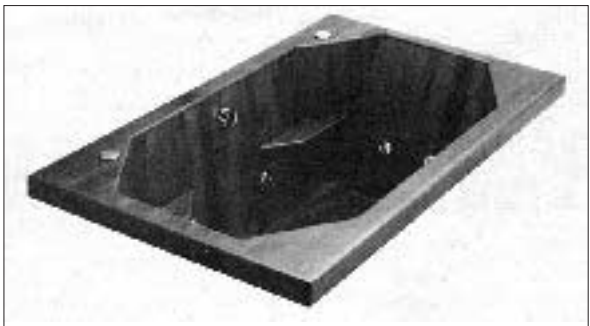


Figure 2. U.S. Brass went all the way to Japan for the henoki wood in this whirlpool for two.



Figure 3. Jacuzzi's Fiore sports a waterfall spout; the front skirt removes for servicing.

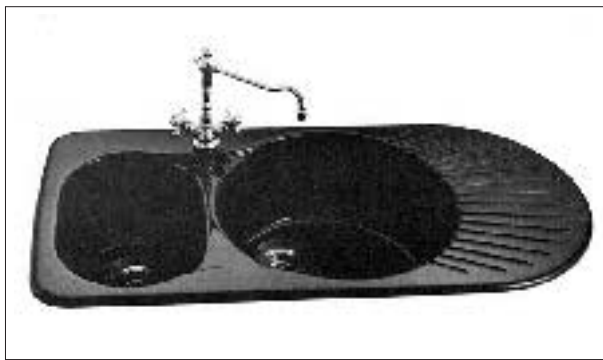


Figure 4. U.S. Brass's Cambrian Collection sink carries a definite Euro look and comes in 11 colors; a teak cutting board is optional.

evident in cabinets, in appliances, in new materials, and most definitely in more of the Euro-style look. But in many cases these upscale models are options or add-ons that still leave the builder the choice of plain vanilla. What follow are a few "picks of the glitter."

Sinks. In an industry battered by foreign invasion, U.S. Brass responded with a definite Euro-style look in its Cambrian Collection sink (see Figure 4). It has two Euro-style rounded bowls and a drain board. But it shows its heritage in size—larger bowls such as are preferred in the U.S.—and in its Americanized spelling of the model name: Fontanbleau. It fits a standard 33-inch cutout, can be fitted with a teak cutting board, and is available in 1-, 2-, 3-, or 4-hole punch.

Representative of several new kitchen sink materials is the new Mirolin model by Moen. This is injection-molded quartz and resin in four styles and six homogeneous colors. There have been several similar materials for sinks in the last two years, mostly made of natural and/or petrochemical combinations.

Cabinets. Visitors to the 1989 show quickly saw that kitchen cabinets are not what they used to be. Stock cabinets have become customized, and custom cabinets have become spectacular.

For example, one of the hits at K/BIS was by Hayman-Chaffey, a newcomer to the show, but a well-established manufacturer. This firm uses its own patented liquid glass finish in colors that can be customized in both form and hue. You might have green mountains fading into a blue sky across the cabinet fronts, or color bars with soft edges merging into each other.

Another showstopper was Rich-Maid, a custom manufacturer long known for design innovation. Rich-Maid created a splash this year with a display of its Matrix line of cabinets with rounded tops. The cabinets mount separately, with space between. They were surfaced in light green Formica with black sculptured lines inlaid upward from the pulls (see Figure 5).

High-gloss polyester finishes are usually seen on imports, but not exclusively. LesCare Kitchens imports its materials from Italy, for instance, but Millbrook Kitchens makes its own in a complicated nine-step process. Millbrook also uses multiple sheets of Formica Colorcore so that the differently colored edges are reflected in polished brass or chrome bands recessed into door and drawer fronts. These are produced on a custom basis. Foreign-made cabinets, though still

much in evidence, have been losing visibility now that most U.S. manufacturers offer the Euro-style look. However, Snaidero of Italy created an exceptionally elegant look with its Contralto line of cabinets made with a pearwood veneer (protected with acrylic finish) and finished tops (see Figure 6). The cabinets can be used as furniture without added countertops, or a counter may be added for kitchen use. The base cabinets sit on leveling legs (as do most European cabinets), but Snaidero sites its legs some 10 inches back from the cabinet front, making the snap-on toe kicks almost invisible.

Nearly all stock cabinetmakers have gone semi-custom by adding the interior fittings and accessories that used to characterize custom units. Representative of this trend is Merillat, which offers all sorts of pull-out shelves, revolving shelves for corners, appliance garages and other special storage units, and even leaded glass cabinet doors (see Figure 7).

Appliances. Appliance manufacturers continue to grow in size and shrink in number. Most of the top 26 brands are now owned by just five companies, and one of the biggest of these is foreign-owned. Nevertheless, the brands continue to have their differences.

One big change has been the move by bigger firms toward built-in refrigeration. This means units that are only 24 inches deep, allowing them to stand flush with base cabinets rather than jut out into the room. It also gives consumers the privilege of paying 300% over the price of an ordinary free-standing model. Only KitchenAid keeps it down—to just 100% more.

But for innovation you again have to go to the small independent, Defiance. This firm makes more models of built-in refrigerators, freezers, and combos than several others combined, in sizes ranging from 18 to 42 inches wide. This year Defiance came out with the only side-by-side in the world that conforms to the kitchen design principle that all doors should open into the work triangle (see Figure 8). Defiance's dual doors can hinge on the left, the right, at the center, or at the outside corners, as you wish. All other makes hinge both doors at opposite corners so they both open to the middle. Defiance is also the only manufacturer that offers variable proportioning of refrigerator and freezer space, so you can increase freezer space when you shop, and then increase refrigerator space as frozen foods are eaten.

Ranges and cooktops are also going more to the Euro-style look, with smooth sculpturing and sealed solid-

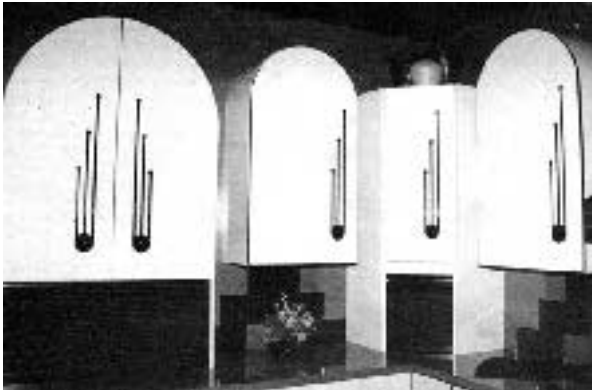


Figure 5. Rich-Maid's Matrix cabinet line, with pale green cabinets mounted separately, turned a few heads.



Figure 6. Snaidero of Italy introduced an elegant line of cabinets finished in pearwood veneer. Optional finished tops let them stand alone as furniture.



Figure 7. All stock cabinet lines moved to semi-custom in 1989. Typical are these accessories by Merillat—a leaded glass door and appliance garage (top) and rotating corner shelves (bottom).



Figure 8. Defiance introduced the world's only side-by-side refrigerator with both doors opening the same way. A three-door model is also available.



Figure 9. Miele's Combiset can mix gas and electric modules. All the modules are the same size.

disk elements on electric models. Caloric goes this trend one better, providing plug-in solid disks so a homeowner can choose between the fashionable solid element and the faster coil.

Dacor typifies the trend to convertibility as well as smooth sculpturing. Its convertible range offers a barbecue module with either two or four burners. And Miele offers the Combiset, a modular system featuring two-burner modules that can be put together in various numbers and combinations. You can even combine gas, electric, and a barbecue module (see Figure 9).

Even dishwashers get a new twist. Miele introduced its Super Electronic dishwasher, the first with a separate fitted rack for silverware and cutlery. This is a full-size shelf in width and length suspended over the other two shelves. Most dishwasher makers now

offer models with full electronic touch controls, many with heater boosters to bring water up to 140°F, but all of the U.S. makers also range simpler models to sell in the \$300 range.

All of the laminate makers have come out with new families of wood-grains, patterns, and colors. One new product by Wilsonart might be of special interest to builders. It is Craftwood, a real wood veneer with a phenolic backing. This makes it much more durable in handling. It can be worked much like a decorative laminate and can be formed, with the grain, to a 5/8-inch radius at about 320°F. (This is best done at a special shop.) There are 19 species that come in 4x8-foot sheets, plus rolls for edge banding.

Laminate makers are creating a wide range of grays, so these show up on many cabinets. The solid-counter-sur-

face makers have also added grays as well as granites. And you can still find a lot of almonds and yellow-gold-beige variations.

For kitchen and bath designers and carpenters, there were many new products and materials, and some definite trends in colors. Across the board, however, the emphasis was on the high-end market. So, mostly, what it takes to buy this year's kitchen and bath introductions is a lot of green. ■

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