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**‘FAB’**  
*is for fabulous*



**B**eside my desk I keep a large plastic serving tray. It sports a layer of colourful fabric within a clear poly resin: an array of gloriously bright red flowers. I would mount it on the wall but my girlfriend won't let me. She thinks it's hideous. She has a point, of course, but I find its wide girth of colour to be quite amazing, even mesmerizing.

"A Fab Product," the label on the back explains, "Fab is for Fabric." But take one look at the splash of colour—straight out of the 70s—and there's no denying that Fab also stands for Fabulous.

I've grown attached to this tray. I keep it partly for its kitsch value, partly as a reminder of how I got it (a beefy man in an undershirt

kept his guard dogs at bay long enough to rip it from his fence with a hammer and hand it over, no questions asked), but mostly I keep it because it was made by Lester Bertsch, a relative of mine who I would like to have met.

When I was young, I was fascinated by a work of Lester's that hangs to this day in my parents' bathroom—a thick rectangle of resin containing amorphous, luminescent blue/green swirls, like conjoined amoeba, framed by an opaque darkness.

There were other pieces, too, most of them in my grandparents' home. Ceramic bowls tinted with a cracked gold finish, a porcelain eagle swooping down from on top of the piano, and a long, smooth vase that shimmered with various shades of orange, like a giant drip of

lava. But for me the most endearing pieces are still the Fab trays.

Born in 1926, Lester grew up on a prairie farm near Carbon, Alberta. He was a creative, artistic child who also played the violin and the piano (a lover of Chopin, he would later own a grand piano that he would move with him wherever he went).

But this was not a community known for producing artists. These were hard-working homesteaders, and since Lester was the only son he would have been expected to work the family farm and eventually take it over. It would not have been an easy life for him.

Then in 1941 his father passed away. The farm was sold and the family moved to the city, first Calgary, then Vancouver, then



Toronto. By the 1950s he had set himself up in Keswick, Ontario, converting an old brick school house into a pottery workshop.

He often had one or two other people working with him, including another restless cousin named Frances, who for a time lived in a trailer beside the school house. He was a generous man, giving away pieces to those who liked them—such as the blue/green amoebas that he gave my parents when they visited him in 1975.

Money was often tight, Lester's younger sister Trish tells me. "As far as I know, Les never had an outside job. Somehow he managed to get along on what he made with his trays, etc., but it was often touch and go, working all night to finish an order so that a little money could come in to buy new supplies. He was an artist, not a businessman."

Thankfully, Lester would eventually meet some businessmen, namely Ron Hardy and George 'Bud' Thomas, who made and sold handcrafted wood products. Together, Ron, Bud, and Lester began working with poly resins. Before long Lester had developed the Fab tray, and soon they were producing them commercially under the name Hardy-Glenwood.

It was a fairly simple process. To make the

Fab tray, liquid polyester was poured onto a double layer of felted matting and the designer (usually floral) fabric, then cured under pressure for 24 hours. Once hardened, the product was cut into a circular shape (Lester used a machine typically used for cutting shoes), then softened through a brief dipping in boiling water, and finally placed in a mold for an hour. The final product, with its wavy edge, was not unlike a pressed jellyfish inlaid with your grandmother's kitchen drapes.

They were a huge hit. The Fab tray became such a popular item that the three men took out a patent and hired a dozen employees. Orders came in from Eaton's, the Hudson's Bay Company, Birks, Bowring, Simpson's, Peoples, and Woodward's, all the major high-end retail chains across Canada and into the United States. By 1973 they were producing up to 1,000 trays a day, all with little mechanization.

Business was good until the mid-70s, when an oil crisis pushed up the price of poly resin. Fab trays jumped from \$7.95 each to \$12.95. When Hardy-Glenwood stopped producing the trays, Lester packed up and moved to Long Island, New York. Always interested in improvised spaces, he converted an old barn into a studio and continued with his art.

"My brother was a restless soul who rarely stayed in one place for very long," says Trish. In 1984 he moved to Florida, where he died in 1985, shortly before his 59th birthday.

"Les' work with resin was quite innovative at the time," says Trish, herself gifted both musically and artistically. "He spent a lot of time experimenting. At first he produced a great variety of trays, but I think that he really enjoyed experimenting with forms and colours."

It was an era that inspired flamboyant design—surrealist shapes and questionable colour choices—and Lester's experiments were anything but tame. If much of his work seems a product of the times, it was because it was an era to which he responded so well.

Throughout his career, Lester routinely sent shipments of his art back to Carbon, where his aunt kept a showroom in her basement to display his strange but always eye-catching pottery, ceramics, and resin pieces.

Family, friends, and neighbours routinely lined up to view the latest arrivals, some likely bemused by his art, others befuddled, others enamoured with it. Regardless, they all left having purchased ornaments, candle holders, and candy dishes. And of course, always a Fab tray.