

# Bird Kettle

## *Low Tech, High Fashion*

At the tip of the spout of the Michael Graves kettle for Alessi is—a colorful little bird. When the water boils, the birdie “sings” brightly. Such wittiness is one characteristic of Michael Graves and of postmodern design. It is a reaction against the occasional sterility of modernism.

Michael Graves (b. 1934) is a leading American architect and designer. He and his architectural associates have undertaken a wide range of projects worldwide. He and his design group have also designed a broad array of “objects” and appliances for the home and office. His designs have been big hits for Alessi (the Italian design firm) and Target (the American retailer), among other clients.

In 1979-83, Alessi invited famous architects and designers, such as Michael Graves and Achille Castiglione, to participate in an experimental project called the *Tea and Coffee Piazza*. Their “objects” were exhibited all over the world, like works of art.

Alessi had already done well in 1980-83 with a whistling kettle by the designer Richard Sapper. In 1983, the company asked Graves to design a practical kettle for the American market. Alessi required that the kettle expose as much water as possible to the heat source, and that the handle not be exposed to the heat. Even though the price rose to \$125, as many as 40,000 Bird Kettles were sold in a single year in the 1980s. Altogether, some two million Bird Kettles have now been sold worldwide. Graves followed the Bird Kettle with a whole family of “American-style” tableware for Alessi.

Humor can be a design element. Graves designed a steak knife whose shape and teeth resemble a shark’s. A Graves pepper mill and kitchen timer both have blue-gray twist-handles reminiscent of Mickey Mouse ears. Graves put giant dwarfs on the side of the Disney corporate headquarters near Los Angeles. Nineteen feet high, they look like they are helping to hold up the roof. They thus imitate the gods or heroes or beauties of classical architecture.

Graves enjoys “quoting” famous styles of the past seriously, too. His demitasse holders for Alessi in 1989 were made of stainless steel latticework. They pay respectful tribute to Josef Hoffman and the Wiener Werkstätte of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Vienna.