The year was 1956. American makers of consumer goods were struggling to reinvigorate markets decimated by the rationing of materials and foodstuffs during World War II and the shortages resulting from the Korean War. During World War II, Gorham Manufacturing Co. (est. 1831), the second largest American silver firm, had cut its hollowware production by seventy percent in accord with the War Production Board’s restrictions on silver used for civilian goods, and most of the firm’s silver workers were transferred to the company’s war work initiative. Instead of creating fine tea sets and other silver luxury goods, these artisans began to fabricate 40mm steel cartridge cases, tank bearings, and torpedo components.1 Following the wars, to reestablish and rejuvenate business in the silver trade, Gorham not only looked to the acquisition of other silver firms to expand their lines and diversify their business, but they also sought new design talent to add a more contemporary dimension to their wares. The young Cleveland-born designer Donald Colflesh (b. 1932), a recent graduate of Pratt University, was one of these new talents.2 Colflesh designed the tea and coffee service shown here in 1958, just two years after his hire. Introduced in 1960, it was arguably his most significant design for Gorham. So forward-looking in design, the line that it anchored was titled “Circa ’70.”

Below: Donald Colflesh, “Circa ’70” tea and coffee service by Gorham Manufacturing Co., Providence, Rhode Island. Silver, ebony and Formica.

It is no surprise that Colflesh looked to the excitement of the future and the Space Age to breathe new life into Gorham and its wares. Colflesh’s design is a masterpiece, but it is also a telling artifact of its time. Considering the world events of Colflesh’s formative years, one can easily see how he came to this end. Like others in his generation, Colflesh would have been introduced as a young boy to the notion of space exploration through the adventures of space cowboys Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon.3 A teenager when World War II came to an end, Colflesh would have known the American societal sense of optimism and the push for forward-moving change that was, in a large way, translated into dreams of the future and a Space Age utopia. This excitement about space and the future soon evolved from comic strip fantasies to real science, as Cold War tension between the United States and Russia played out in a race to conquer space.

Arthur C. Clarke’s The Exploration of Space (1951) was instrumental to this evolution and to establishing the look of the Space Age. Clarke (1917–2008) was a science fiction author, inventor, futurist, and chairman of the British Interplanetary Society. His book outlined how space travel would come to be and evolve over the next several decades.4 In the preface, he writes, “I have tried to give concrete answers to questions such as ‘What would a spaceship look like?’, ‘What may we expect to find on the planets?’, and, above all, ‘What will we do when we get there?’” His text and, especially, the accompanying illustrations by R.A. Smith popularized the ongoing work of scientists and captured the imagination of artists and designers, effectively becoming the first pattern book for the Space Age.

As the Russians worked feverishly to reach space, the United States did the same. Both countries had captured German rocket technology at the end of World War II. The United States moved forward under the leadership of German rocket scientist Werhner von Braun (1912–1977), who had led the development of Hitler’s feared V2 missile that carried bombs as far as London. Werhner quickly became a celebrity in the United States. He appeared on the cover of Time magazine as “Missileman von Braun,” and he contributed a series of articles to the popular magazine Collier’s. The headline for his first article in March of 1952 proclaimed, “Man Will Conquer Space Soon.”5

Excitement was mounting about this new frontier, and while scientists worked feverishly toward the goal of space travel, others, like Walt Disney, generated further enthusiasm and support within the American public. Disney’s fifty-minute television broadcasts about the mysteries and possibilities of space travel combined lectures by experts like von Braun with animation. In 1955 Disney dedicated the Disneyland attraction Tomorrowland, also developed in consultation with von Braun, stating, “Tomorrow can be a wonderful age. Our scientists today are opening the doors of the Space Age to achievements that will benefit our children and generations to come. The Tomorrowland attractions have been designed to give you an opportunity to participate in adventures that are a living blueprint of our future.”7 There, Americans were exposed to attractions like Rocket to the Moon, which simulated a flight into space, and Astro-Jets that allowed passengers to pilot their own rocket, adjusting its altitude while it orbited around the ride’s central tower. All of this continued to set the stage for Colflesh’s designs.

The year before Colflesh created the “Circa ’70” line, the Russians made the first move, officially marking the beginning of the Space Age with their October 4, 1957 launch of the spherical satellite Sputnik 1. The U.S. satellites Explorer 1 and Vanguard 1 followed in February and March of 1958. The real Space Age mania had begun.

Space-inspired goods of all varieties began to inundate the market and the home. While children continued to be wooed with Space Age comic strips, radio broadcasts, and television shows, satellite-inspired toys began to appear in stores and cereal boxes.8 But Space Age marketing did not just target kids. The thrill and hope for the future was also sold to adults through new designs for architecture, cars, clothes, furniture, and housewares—including silver.

Colflesh’s “Circa ’70” line was conceived and produced during the height of the space race. It was one of the first luxury Space Age–styled lines for the home to hit the market. Forms in the line included tri-pronged candelabrum; a pitcher-mixer with mixer spoon; a shallow, footed “Delta”
bowl; and a deeper, footed “Contour” bowl. The tea and coffee service was the most impressive and possibly the first element designed in the line. Its upward lines and attenuated ebony finials visually allude to the rise and frenzy of the space race. The low-slung bodies of its elements echo the fictional forms of flying saucers—the tray and the sugar bowl most overtly. Many Space Age products mirrored the styling of satellites, spacecraft, orbit patterns, or astronaut helmets, but none as gracefully as these.

Although Colflesh’s design elegantly captures the essence of its time in line and form, it bears noting that it does not do so by means of the new materials or design objectives (economy of space, time, or weight) that developed out of the race to send man into space. Like John Lautner’s 1958 “Chemosphere,” the flying saucer–shaped home that hovers over Los Angeles, it was built using traditional methods and materials. These designs were less about revolution in construction and material than a revolution in style. Perhaps the choice to forgo new materials and methods was a conscious one, made to keep the work, despite its Space Age appeal, as timeless as possible. Gorham certainly impressed this desire in the promotion of the “Circa ’70” tea and coffee service in an ad appearing in the April 8, 1961 issue of the New Yorker, which noted the piece’s “inspiring design” of “timeless quality that makes it a joy to own today, tomorrow, forever.”

While production of the service was continued as late as 1968, there are no records to indicate how many “Circa ’70” tea and coffee services were produced. Notes from the Gorham archive indicate that the complex shapes of the teapot and coffeepot spouts, which cut back in a swift, curve just before meeting the body of the pot, were difficult and time-consuming to produce. Considering this, the waning demand for modern sterling, and the knowledge of so few extant examples today, it is believed that fewer than one hundred were produced.

Initially, the service was sold with a round, galleried sterling tray available in two sizes. It was not until 1963 that the service was offered with a Formica-bottomed tray. This later tray echoes the form of the sugar bowl in its shape and in the sculpting of its handles. The combination of Formica, a synthetic flat laminate introduced in 1914, and sterling silver enhances its modern feel. While Colflesh was not responsible for the design (he left Gorham in 1962 for a post with the industrial design firm of Walter Dorwin Teague), he later endorsed the tray’s addition to the service.

Considering the rich history and zeitgeist of the Space Age, and the range of products that it produced, it is amusing to consider the ideal setting in which this iconic service might have been used. I delight in picturing it atop one of Eero Saarinen’s tulip tables (1956) in a room with expansive views. Our hostess models an ensemble from André Courrèges’s 1964 Moon Girl line, complete with go-go boots. She pours black coffee from the tall, elegant coffeepot and serves it with a selection of Pillsbury’s Space Food Sticks (1969), chewy “energy sticks” enjoyed by the crew of Apollo 11 and later marketed to the public in caramel, chocolate, malt, mint, orange, and peanut butter. Or, perhaps our coffee is accompanied by a slice of Tang pie, a no-bake delicacy made with “the astronauts’ drink” Tang (1957), sweetened condensed milk, sour cream, and boxed whipped topping. Maybe this is a Jetson-esque fantasy, but I prefer it to the less adventurous late-breakfast menu and buffet arrangement suggested by food writer Poppy Cannon in her December 1960 article for Town & Country, which includes an image of the “Circa ’70” service atop a traditional lace table cloth and the svelte “Delta” and “Contour” bowls filled with gray and grits.

NOTES
2. Gorham began to recruit Colflesh while he was finishing his studies at Pratt University. He joined the firm a year after receiving his bachelor’s degree in industrial design. Colflesh also studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art and the Hart Hofmann School of Fine Arts in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Jewel Stern, Modernism in American Silver: 20th Century Design (New York, London: Yale University Press, 2005), 334.
3. As the first science fiction comic strip, Buck Rogers debuted January 7, 1929. Buck Rogers eventually became the subject of movies, radio, and television shows. The Flash Gordon comic strip first appeared on January 7, 1934, inspired by and created to compete with the popular Buck Rogers.
4. Arthur C. Clarke is popularly remembered as the author of 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), written in tandem with the script for the film (1968) of the same title co-written, produced, and directed by Stanley Kubrick.
9. The pitcher-mixer with mixer spoon was executed by a Gorham staff designer based on a design by Colflesh.
10. Advertisement, New Yorker, April 8, 1961, 27. In 1961 the coffeepot, teapot, sugar bowl, and creamer sold for $650.
12. After viewing his “Circa ’70” service displayed with the large two-handled, Formica-bottomed tray in 2007 at the Dallas Museum of Art’s Modernism in American Silver exhibition, Colflesh relayed his approval to Dallas Museum of Art curator Kevin Tucker.