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# Consumer Commodities in the Museum: Design as Art

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By Harry J. Wirth

THE ART OF

Design

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AN EXHIBITION OF AMERICAN DESIGN

# CONSUMER COMMODITIES IN THE MUSEUM: DESIGN AS ART

**CURTIS L. CARTER, MUSEUM DIRECTOR**

THE POWER AND PRIVILEGED STATUS OF MUSEUM ART HAVE TYPICALLY DEPENDED ON AESTHETIC FEATURES INCLUDING ORIGINALITY, UNIQUENESS, INTRINSIC WORTH, AND COGNITIVE APPRECIATION. MUSEUM ART PRESUPPOSES AN EDUCATED AUDIENCE, OR AT LEAST ONE ASPIRING TO BECOME EDUCATED TO A LIFESTYLE THAT EMBRACES SUCH VALUES. ARTISTS PROVIDE IMAGES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGINATION AND IN PART RESPOND TO EMOTIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL NEEDS FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND CONTEMPLATION. ART MUSEUMS BOTH PRIVATE AND PUBLIC HAVE BEEN SUPPORTED ON THE PRESUMPTION THAT SUCH VALUES AND ATTENDING LIFESTYLES WERE WORTHY OF SUPPORT.

*At some point during the industrial age the consumer products shaped by the art of industrial designers began to compete with the museum as a source of imagery and objects intended to satisfy the*

desires and needs of a broad range of lifestyles serving the 'elite' as well as mass populations. Industrial designers, who often receive the same training as other artists, provide the creative designs for the industrial products that are mass produced by the manufacturers. Offering far greater accessibility than the art museum, outlets for consumer products in the department store, the shopping mall, and a myriad of automobile, audio, video, computer and other specialty centers have had substantial success in capturing the minds of people in virtually all lifestyles. The range of objects available includes 'designer' products which, though functional, are acquired primarily for their aesthetic features, as well as those acquired primarily for functional purposes which also have interesting design features that make them more attractive.

*For the most part there has been relatively little interaction between the art museum and these products of industry, although there are museums specializing in industrial design.*

Consumer products do not typically appear in the art museums except perhaps in the museum shop. On the other hand, the very same works of art that may end up in the museum often function as consumer products in commercial galleries. Occasionally department stores or commercial malls will incorporate museum art into their promotional efforts by presenting art in the department store or the shopping mall. This split between the products of industry and art museum perhaps began when public taste embraced mass produced machine made products and relegated original art to a smaller isolated part of life.<sup>1</sup>

There are notable exceptions where art museums have sponsored the occasional industrial design show, and some have established design departments. In Great Britain, the British Institute

of Industrial Art, founded in 1914, organized exhibitions and established a modest permanent collection of industrial products at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Philip Johnson's exhibition, *The Machine Art* in 1934 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was the first major exhibition of industrial design products in an American museum. There have been subsequent exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in Milwaukee, and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless nearly 60 years after Johnson's pioneering exhibition, few art museums are willing to open their galleries to the display of industrial products.

There is support for such exhibitions among the art movements of the twentieth century from the time of the Futurist, Dadaist and Surrealist artists of the early twentieth century to the present.

The Italian Futurist Balla and the French artist Picabia introduced machine elements and their own interpretations of power and space suggested by machines into their art. Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* 1915-1923; Man Ray's *Perpetual Motif*, 1922 (originally *The Object to be Destroyed*, 1923); and Jean Tinguely's *Homage to Duchamp*, 1960, all incorporate into their works industrial products and machine imagery. In the practice of art today one finds many examples of art that resemble industrial products. Anthony Caro, Rosemarie Trockel, Andrea Zittel, Chris Burden and other contemporary artists regularly employ artifacts that reveal the influences of industrial products. There is one important difference: these objects are non-utilitarian and are valued essentially for contemplative purposes, while most industrial design products are directed to more practical purposes. On the other hand, the Bauhaus school of applied arts provided a laboratory for developing a close relationship between artist-designers and industry, thereby weakening any sharp division of art and industrial products.

There is a recognized evolution of machine and consumer product aesthetics which was recently documented in *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941*, an exhibition organized by the Brooklyn

Museum.<sup>3</sup> During this period design aesthetics embraced several styles including machine-inspired decorative geometry of Art Deco, a 'pure' machine centering on the Bauhaus, the streamline era of Norman Bel Geddes and the biomorphic phase of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen who attempted to create forms more in harmony with nature. The Brooklyn exhibition attempts to bridge the gap between industrial arts and the art of the museum.

Rudolf Arnheim finds in design products functions corresponding to those of other works of art. He contends that, 'In good design, the object not only serves its practical function but also

expresses in its visual appearance the way of life that invented it.'<sup>4</sup> According to Arnheim, design must represent and interpret its objects as well as satisfy any practical conditions for its use. The key to good design thus is meaningful expression, as it is for all art. Given these assumptions, industrial designers join painters and sculptors in producing works that share a common aesthetic base and the common task of providing symbols that enable people to cope with the challenges of life.

Despite these lines of support for bringing industrial design objects into the museum, there remain substantial questions and concerns. Practitioners on both sides object to the inclusion

of consumer products in the art museum. The painter Ad Reinhardt argued, for instance, that the exclusive purpose of the art museum is to present and preserve visual fine art.<sup>5</sup> Others have questioned whether industrial design can be considered an art worthy of being presented in spaces where fine art is shown. Victor Papanek charges, for instance, that 'design at present operates only as a marketing tool of big business.'<sup>6</sup>

Of considerable importance to the discourse over the place of industrial objects in the art museum is the question of possible incompatibilities between the aesthetics of museum

art and the seemingly opposed aesthetics of consumer products. Alternative to the aesthetics of uniqueness, originality, and contemplation often associated with museum art is an aesthetic of consumption based on mass production, desire, sensation, and immediate gratification, according to a commonly held view advanced by Bourdieu and others.<sup>7</sup> Purists operating from a perspective based upon an aesthetics of contemplation might propose criteria for exhibitable artifacts in the art museum that exclude design products based on a consumer aesthetic. Such distinctions become increasingly difficult to sustain, however, when museum art also functions in many instances as a consumer product and may to some degree incorporate mass production techniques. Moreover, design products available in consumer outlets are often admired for the formal and expressive qualities that contribute to the appreciation of paintings, sculptures and other visual arts.

It is necessary to address such questions in the context of current debates on the very nature and function of the art museum. It is safe to say that the art museum today is under attack

from many sides. Charges of elitism in the face of a growing demand for openness and receptivity to a variety of multicultural aesthetic perspectives offer substantial challenges to adherence to a single aesthetic point of view. Dissolving boundaries that previously separated popular culture and the arts now enable artists to draw upon a wider range of materials and means. Economic necessities mandate that the museum undertake drastic measures to attract a wider segment of the population.

Theorists such as Bourdieu view the art museum as a means of perpetuating distinctions of social status among the 'cultured' and the 'uncultured,' thereby differentiating among those who

dominate society economically and politically and those who are dominated. The primary function of the art museum then would be to reinforce feelings of belonging and exclusion among the various segments of society.<sup>8</sup> My own view is more optimistic. I view the art museum as a laboratory for exploring and experiencing a broad range of creative achievements centering on visual expression in a wide range of media from painting and sculpture to video and film and encompassing such areas as industrial design products. The museum also embraces collaborative efforts encompassing music, performance art, poetry, theater and dance. It is the task of the museum, working with the artists, to select and present the finest representations of imagination in all these areas.

The question remains: What happens to industrial design products intended to serve consumer needs when they enter the art museum? Any answer must recognize the changing nature of

the art museum in the late twentieth century, from a repository or treasure house of past and present examples of art to an institution that actively courts greater public participation. Where the art museums of the past have emphasized conservation, as cultural systems of the present and future they will increasingly emphasize interpretation. This means that the museum has a primary role in communicating the meaning of the artifacts that shape the lives of its constituencies. As consumer products such as those represented in *The Art of Design 2* are presented in an art museum they undergo certain transformations imposed by the cultural context in which they are placed. The museum itself is a complex cultural machine whose function is to provide a place where people can encounter important cultural symbols that assist them in understanding their own and other cultures and in formulating their own self-understanding.

While the symbolic character of a painting may be more obvious because it is not required to serve other functions, a consumer product typically performs some other tangible function which is

integral to its being. A stereo speaker, however imaginative its design, must deliver the expected level of sound reproduction. In the art museum we are led to focus upon the stereo speaker as a cultural symbol and to contemplate its meaning, which necessarily extends beyond its ability to provide good sound. Formal and expressive as well as function and other value considerations enter into its interpretation.

It may well be that the presumed opposition between an aesthetics of contemplation and the aesthetics of consumption, as it has been applied to designer-shaped consumer products,

has been overstated. I prefer to think of contemplation and desire, creative idea and sensation, form and function, and the perception of uniqueness or mass produced features as a continuum of responses to objects. The art museum context with its particular sets of interpretive devices including a special architectural setting, curatorship, installation and lighting design, catalogue essays and visual documentation, lectures, and other pedagogical and promotional means heightens our awareness of all of these qualities and their relationships.

Given these considerations, it would appear that an exhibition of industrial design based consumer products has a place in the art museums of today. Such works may differ in important

respects from the more traditional paintings, sculptures and other works associated with the museum. They do not necessarily address as wide a range of human concerns and experiences as one finds in the history of paintings or even of contemporary paintings. Human tragedy, spirituality, love, moral goodness, as well as greed and lust are perhaps missing from the range of concerns that one expects in an exhibition of industrial design based consumer products. On the other hand, such an exhibition demonstrates a broad range of human creativity which has enhanced considerably the scope and depth of human achievement. It also invites further reexamination of the role of the art museum in contemporary society.

1 K.G. PONTUS HULTEN, *THE MACHINE AS SEEN IN THE MECHANICAL AGE*, (NEW YORK: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, 1968), 11.

2 IN 1979 CURTIS L. CARTER AND INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER BROOKS STEVENS JOINTLY CURATED "ART AND INDUSTRY: THE ART OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN", AT MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY. IN 1988 HARRY J. WIRTH CURATED "THE ART OF DESIGN", AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MILWAUKEE.

3 RICHARD GUY WILSON, DIANNE H. PILGRIM, DICKRAN TASHJIAN, *THE MACHINE AGE IN AMERICA, 1918-1941*, (NEW YORK: THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM IN ASSOCIATION WITH HARRY ABRAMS, INC. 1986).

4 RUDOLF ARNHEIM, *THOUGHTS ON ART EDUCATION* (LOS ANGELES: THE GETTY CENTER FOR EDUCATION IN THE ARTS, 1989), 53.

5 AD REINHARDT, "ART AS ART", IN RICHARD KOSTELANETZ, EDITOR, *ESTHETICS CONTEMPORARY* (BUFFALO: PROMETHEUS BOOKS, 1978), 213.

6 VICTOR PAPANEK, *DESIGN FOR THE REAL WORLD: HUMAN ECOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE* (NEW YORK: PANTHEON, 1971), 91.

7 PIERRE BOURDIEU, *DISTINCTION: A SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF THE JUDGMENT OF TASTE*. (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 1984).

8 PIERRE BOURDIEU AND ALAIN DARBEL WITH DOMINIQUE SCHNAPPER, *THE LOVE OF ART: EUROPEAN ART MUSEUMS AND THEIR PUBLIC*, TRANSLATED BY CAROLINE BEATTIE AND NICK MERRIMAN (STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1991).