

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ROOTS OF ORGANIC FORM

PHIL PATTON

“A fruit growing out of man like the fruit out of the plant, like the child out of the womb.”

Jean (Hans) Arp, quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 127.

The October 1958 issue of *ARTnews* magazine hailed Jean Arp as “the father of the kidney-shaped coffee table and swimming pool” (p. 27). This was a long way from Arp’s role as a leader in both Dada and Surrealism, movements that aimed to shake the sedate notions of the middle class to their core. It was also a measure of just how far the shapes alternately called “biomorphic,” “organic,” and “free-form” had traveled, from being the province of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century to being the signifiers of the post–World War II mass market.

“The bourgeois regarded the Dadaist as the dissolute monster, a revolutionary villain...” Arp wrote. “Dada wished to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned order” [David Britt, *Modern Art: Impressionism to Post-Modernism*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1989, p. 203]. For Dada—a made-up French word—and later for Surrealism, that “unreasoned order” was the unconscious, the realm of desire, the land of the id, whose exuberant, flowing shapes contrasted with the right angles of reasoned engineering and the controlled curves of the classical fine arts.

Arp looked to the “accidental” shapes of nature and found both blobs and blobby patterns. In 1916, he layered blob-shaped wooden cutouts to create the relief sculpture *Forest*, whose organic forms were clearly inspired by the outlines of trees, leaves, and even the cells of plants; the layering of the composition gave it the feel of a topographic map. The organic form, the biomorphic shape—the

Le Berger des Nuages 1953

Jean (Hans) Arp

Plaster

32.5 x 59 x 34.25 in.



flat blob, in short—was a synecdoche for patterns in nature, whether those of the amoeba or the pond. The patterns of nature, it seemed, transcended both size and scale. Leaves and trees shared the same shapes. Further proof came in Alvar Aalto's iconic *Savoy vase* of 1936, a witty play on the many lakes of his native Finland.

The same insight came to the designers of military camouflage, who advanced from the Cubist-inspired angular patterns of World War I ships and tanks (for which Pablo Picasso himself claimed credit) to the blobby motifs still familiar today. The lessons of Arp's *Forest* are visible both in the Marine uniforms worn in the watershed 1943 battle on the Pacific atoll of Tarawa, and in the Army uniforms currently worn by soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Camouflage has endured, and the familiar pattern known to the troops in Iraq as "camel dung" shows that from a distance, a pebble is essentially indistinguishable from a boulder.

Dada and Surrealism aimed to cleanse the art object of craft and purpose, to remove emotion and connotation. Turning to automatic drawing to probe the unconscious, artists unsurprisingly came up with scribbles and doodles whose loops looked blobbish. Whether or not they came from the unconscious—Joan Miró later attributed most of his first blobby drawings to literal hunger; the hunger he felt as an impoverished artist and the hallucinations he experienced as a result—the blobby images of the Surrealists came to symbolize the unconscious.



▲ **The Forest** 1916
Artist Jean (Hans) Arp
Materials Carved and painted wood
Size 12.875 x 7.75 x 3 in.

Artists like Hans Arp, who begin as painters, escape eventually from the prison of the single plane by painting on wood or plaster and using molds ... creat(ing) objects in the round through which they can free their feelings for movement and direction from the increasing ascetic geometry of pure painting.

Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," 1940, quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 559.

◀ **Savoy vase** c. 1936-39
Design Aino Aalto, Alvar Aalto for Karhula Glassworks
Material Blow-molded glass
Size 5.875 x 11.125 x 9.5 in.

I believe in the future resolution of these two antitheses, dream and reality, which are seemingly irreconcilable, into a kind of absolute reality, absolute...

Amedeo Modigliani, "First Manifesto of Surrealism," 1917, quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 436.

Carnival of Harlequin

1924–25

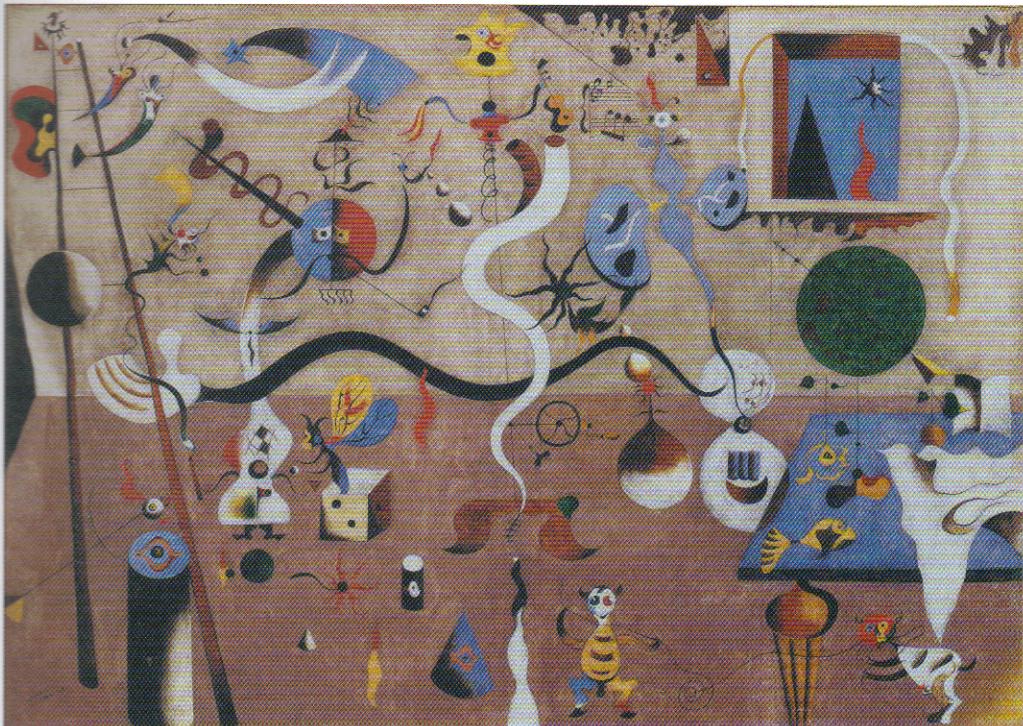
Jean Miró

Oil on canvas

26 x 35.625 in.

To a generation fascinated with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the unconscious figured as an interior space filled with hallucinatory objects, as in Miró's paintings, Yves Tanguy's infinite planetary landscapes strewn with boulder-like blobs, or Salvador Dalí's sexually charged interaction between ambiguous blob bodies. Dalí's famous imagery for the dream scenes in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*—derived from his paintings—was well known to the public. Even Pablo Picasso's dip into Surrealist imagery exercised the eminent domain of genius in appropriating such shapes for his paintings of seaside bathers.

There was another sort of unconscious where the blob ruled. The microscope and the camera revealed new images that were inaccessible to the conscious (and ordinary) eye. Rosalind Krauss called such imagery the "optical unconscious" in her 1993 book of the same name. And the world of images beyond the visible turned out to be dominated by softer shapes. Balancing physics was biology, whose innermost shapes were rounded and blobby. Even the captured movements of people and things, too, were more fluid than they appeared in real-life experience.



As tracked by the cameras of efficiency experts, the motions of workers in factories where the machine shape was dominant seemed plastic and liquid. According to Siegfried Giedion, the work of industrial engineers Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (whose family life was the basis for the story *Cheaper by the Dozen*) and other human-factors experts showed that human motion is really a collection of flowing, looping patterns [Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1948]. And the teardrop, cast as the ideal streamlined form for things that moved, came to look different when captured in Harold Edgerton's stroboscopic photographs, becoming as versatile and seductive as a drop of mercury.

Consensus history locates a turning point in the 1940 Museum of Modern Art design competition *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*, curated by Eliot Noyes. It figured as a reproachful answer to Philip Johnson's *Machine Art* show

In the 1930s, automotive streamlining was more an exercise of style than aerodynamic science, but the sleek new shapes made it possible to reach higher top speeds than square-cornered vehicles... Even so, the cars of the teardrop era were about defeating wind resistance in the same way a Chanel coat was about weather protection.

Phil Patton on the exhibition *French Curves: The Automobile as Sculpture*, Petersen Automotive Museum, Los Angeles, "Celebrating the Teardrop, A Style to Cheat the Wind." *The New York Times*, June 21, 2004, p. D9.



◀ **Les Desirs inassouvis**

(Unsatisfied Desires) 1928

Artist Salvador Dalí

Materials Oil, sand, seashells on board

Size 29.5 x 24.75 in.

Photo
Courtesy

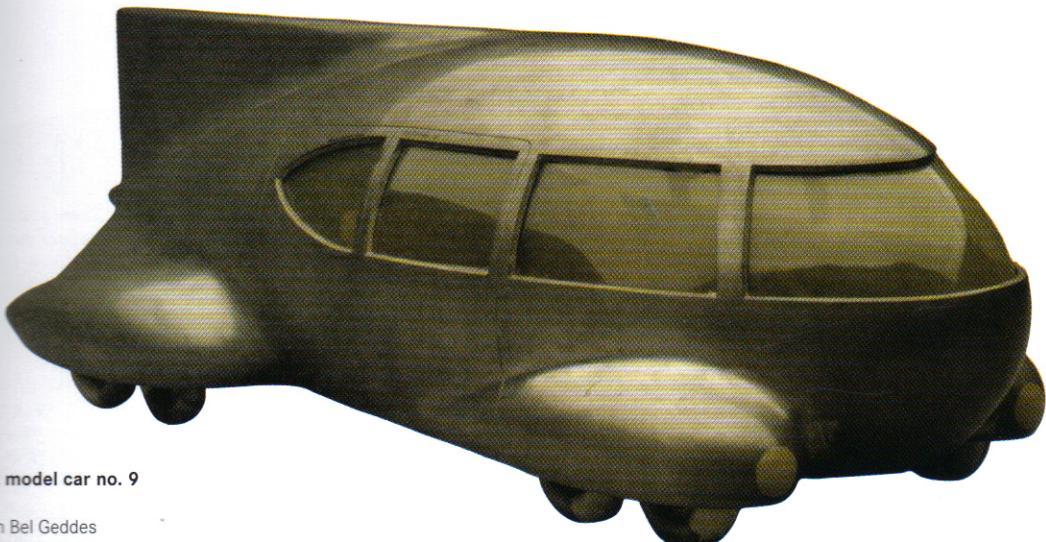
Arrested Milk Drop 1957
Harold Edgerton
Harold and Esther Edgerton
Foundation, 2004, Courtesy of
Palm Press



of 1934—which was also the year of the Chrysler Airflow's spectacular failure, the elegantly swooping and much more successful Lincoln Zephyr automobile designed by John Tjaarda, the Douglas DC-3, and Norman Bel Geddes' teardrop-shaped patent model car. The show grew in time to stand symbolically as a reaction against the machine inspirations of Modernism—whether in the Euclidean geometries of sphere, cube, and cone; the form of industrial building and equipment; or the streamlining of speeding aircraft, trains, and automobiles.

The arrival of war cast the work of the machine in a new, more sinister light. Softer, natural forms were more human and more humane. Gone was the nobility of gear and propeller, now that both dealt death. Gone also was the romance of streamlining, now that it was at work in warplanes.

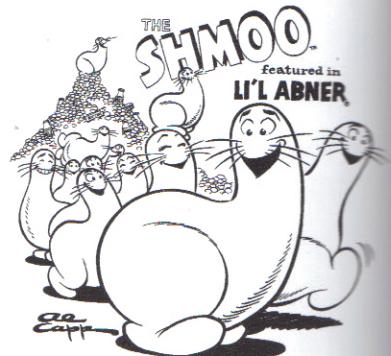
After the war, the softer shape took on a new attraction in postwar prosperity. Everything seemed possible, and in the blob everything was possible to see. It was an empty cipher into which associations and desires could be read, and it was the infinite object that offered space for personal projection. The quintessential cliché psychological test, after all, was the Rorschach inkblot. The blob offered in its abstraction the versatility and mutability of desire as well as meaning and function.



Design
Materials
Size

Patent model car no. 9
1934
Norman Bel Geddes
Cast metal, plastic
6 x 6 x 18 in.

In August 1948, the blob came alive for the public in Al Capp's *L'il Abner* cartoon strip with the arrival of the Shmoo. The Shmoo character was a blob walking upright, a creature with a polymorphously perverse desire to please. It would fall down and turn into any food that Capp's characters wanted at the merest whim—it could be ham or chicken, pancakes or papaya. It laid eggs and gave milk. Its eyes could be used as buttons and its whiskers as toothpicks. The Shmoo was able to satisfy the world's wants—a grander version of the Everlasting Gobstopper candy of Roald Dahl's 1964 masterwork, the children's morality tale *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The Shmoo was perpetual and inextinguishable; it represented our nation's collective id turned into a personal mascot for the endless consumption promised by the postwar boom—and an American economy whose exuberant boasts had already begun to attract critics and parodists.



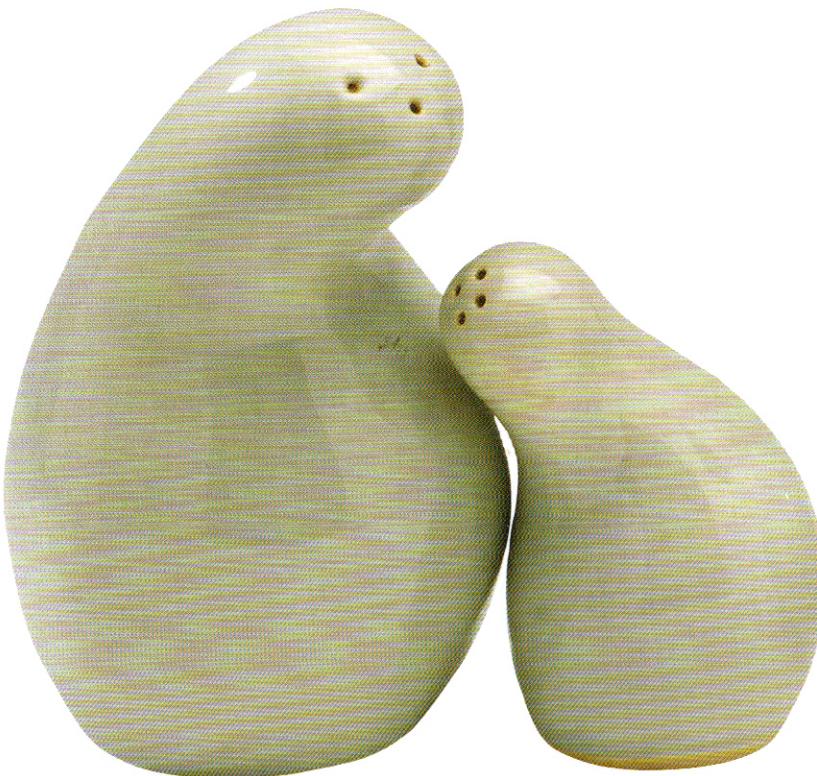
The Shmoo 1948
Artist Al Capp
Courtesy Capp Enterprises, 2004

Li'l Abner: Ah nevah seen one!! Whut is a shmoo?

Old Man: Shmoos, mah boy—is th' greatest menace to hoomanity th' world has ever known!!

Li'l Abner: Thass becuz they is so bad, huh?
Old Man: No, stupid—it's because they're so good!!

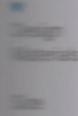
Al Capp, *Li'l Abner*, United Features Syndicate, August 10, 1948.



Town and Country salt and pepper casters c.1946
Design Eva Zeisel for Red Wing Pottery
Materials Glazed earthenware, cork
Size Salt 4.375 x 2.875 x 2.75 in.
Pepper 3 x 2.125 x 1.75 in.

Beauty is at the root of man's discovery of the world around him, and makes him want to live. Since designers are the authors of our physical culture, the things they create should make our lives pleasurable, comfortable, and elegant.

Eva Zeisel, *Eva Zeisel on Design: The Magic Language of Things*, The Overlook Press, New York, 2004, p. 25.



La Chaise prototype 1948
Charles and Ray Eames
Hard rubber, foam, plastic, wood,
metal
32.5 x 59 x 34.25 in.

The Shmoo quickly became a commercial sensation. Al Capp's book *The Life & Times of the Shmoo* sold 700,000 copies in a year, outdoing Dwight Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe*. After Mickey Mouse but before Smurfs, the Muppets, or Pokémon, the Shmoo sold licensed toys and knickknacks to a tune of \$25 million in 1948 dollars; they remain highly collectible today. Shmoo figures filled with candy were among the goods airlifted into Berlin in 1948 to defeat the Soviet blockade of the city—providing neat images of the cornucopia of capitalism defeating communism on the streamlined silver wings of C-47s, the military version of the DC-3.

The Shmoo more than echoed the shape of Eva Zeisel's playful but tender *Town and Country* salt and pepper shakers for Red Wing; their soft shapes suggesting at once nature, craft, and informality. The Zeisel pair were little characters of indeterminate relation, often interpreted as mother nuzzling child—a ceramic cartoon of domestic care. The Shmoo had another echo in the now-iconic *La Chaise* by Ray and Charles Eames. According to the Eameses, the specific shape of the fiberglass seat, suggestive of Henry Moore or Picasso, was a notional one, a placeholder for the possibilities that new materials offered to produce a variety of shapes to meet individual desires. In theory, fiberglass, a burgeoning manufacturing material taken from the recreational boating industry, could be molded into a variety of forms; in the hands of the Eameses, it took on an appropriately flowing aesthetic.





American Stove Company
ceiling 1943
Design: Isamu Noguchi
Site: St. Louis, Missouri

The turning away from the old aesthetic of mechanized machine imagery toward an aesthetic based on the fluid, organic—indeed, non-linear—forms of the postwar era was at least in part a response to the unsettling ambivalence and uneasiness of the new age.

Kevin L. Stayton, *Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940–1960*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, p. 25.

The Eameses began their design practice by supplying the military with bent-wood splints, but when the war was over, they, along with every sector of American industry, “retooled” and turned their business toward the design of furniture and objects to fill the modern postwar home. In doing so they laid deep the foundations of a design practice that would provide a creative partnership model that continues to influence designers today. The exuberance of postwar blobby form is unmistakable and appeared in art, design, architecture, craft, and graphics, spreading its positive message across all design disciplines.

It was no accident that a sculptor dabbling in design, Isamu Noguchi, would bring biomorphic shapes to furniture and interiors. Noguchi believed in his own form of “edited accident”—the careful choice of stones for sculpture and gardens. His vision extended into the home with his famed glass-top organic coffee table for Herman Miller and occasionally into interior design, as in the ceiling he designed for the American Stove Company Building in St. Louis, Missouri—essentially a rock garden for the ceiling.

Biomorphic design came to swimming pools and garden design as well. Seeking to emulate ponds and blend with nature, pools began to give up their square corners thanks to the use of fiberglass. Beginning in the 1940s, as Thomas A. P. Leeuwen records in his history of the swimming pool, *The Springboard in the Pond* [MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998], designers such as Thomas Church began to pioneer a quiet revolution in the design of free-form pools in pool-friendly climes such as Los Angeles and Palm Springs. Like other blobby shapes, soft-edged pool shapes suggested both the natural and the artificial at once.

Working Model for Reclining Figure: Internal/External Form 1951
Artist: Henry Moore
Material: Bronze
Size: 13 x 20.5 x 6.75 in.



By the 1950s, blobby shapes held many meanings. They had become visual shorthand for the “natural” or “crafted,” as in Russel Wright’s *American Modern* dinnerware and *Iroquois Casual* china. These collections signaled a modern sensibility, a break with tradition. Wright and his wife, Mary, even went so far as to write an instruction manual for casual, modern style with suggestions on everything from entertaining to housework; their *Guide to Easier Living* was published in 1950 to popular acceptance.

The mutability of the blob played out as adaptability to the body, a quality that attracted designers. It accommodated to many hands and many bodies and many uses. As vessel or tool, it provided a welcoming, organic shape, in contrast to shapes with more rigid geometries. As a form for furniture, it offered to meet the body at least halfway, suggesting a flexibility of arrangement and implied informality in welcome contrast to the right angles and straight backs of traditional spaces and furniture.

One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs. But such signs! They tower. They revolve, they oscillate, they soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless. I can only attempt to supply names—Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald’s Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney.

Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1963, p. 8.

>	Egg chair 1958
Design	Arne Jacobsen for Fritz Hansen
Materials	Leather, chrome
Size	42 x 35 x 30 in.



<	Iroquois Casual carafe c. 1950
Design	Russel Wright for Steubenville Pottery
Material	Glazed earthenware
Size	9.938 x 4.538 x 3.938 in.





The *Sacco* chairs (and their beanbag imitators), designed in 1968 by Piero Gatti, Cesare Paolini, and Franco Teodoro, were the Shmoos of furniture. They turned into any slouching shape you wanted—but ironically the novelty of their adaptable forms quickly passed. Ergonomic “give” was desirable, but only to a degree. Free-form was one of the freedoms espoused by the counterculture beginning in the 1960s, with overtones of “free speech” at Berkeley’s campus, and even the quaint rebirth of “free love,” which had its roots in the early twentieth century. The beanbag chair became a summary cliché of the 1960s: it was freedom in a brand-new bag—but it offered so much freedom it quickly led to stiff limbs and deadened buttocks. In the end, the beanbag chair was a miniature parable on the limits of freedom.

In Verner Panton’s *Living Tower* the same notion of flexible seating was evident, but reconfigured to provide a communal arrangement of modules. When deployed en masse, the *Living Tower* concept became a psychedelic, womblike cave called *Phantasy Landscape*, exhibited as a conceptual installation for Bayer AG at the 1970 Cologne Furniture Fair. The installation lives on in photographs, and was re-created in 2000 for the Vitra Design Museum’s exhibition on the work of Panton. The *Living Tower* was an eminently flexible piece that made sense only in groupings—if not gropings. But *Phantasy Landscape*’s “total environment” approach gave visual gestures a sense of permanence, as if a quick brushstroke of a colorful paint were rendered three-dimensionally. Adaptable to many positions and postures, the installation was an optimistic, organic, exuberant, yet nonetheless fetal form of furniture that has a direct link to the work of contemporary designers like Karim Rashid and Ron Arad. The work of Panton and the *Sacco* both changed forever the way that furniture is conceived, understood, and experienced.

Phantasy Landscape 1970
Verner Panton for Bayer AG
Vitrine installation, Cologne
Furniture Fair

Abandoning the classic tripartite division of floors, walls, ceilings—he [Panton] created a total, homogenous environment where the dimensions fused together. This radical concept, unmatched in the history of modern design.

Matthew Remmell (translated by Jeffrey Keeler) “*Beyond the Chair*,” *ID Magazine*, November 2000, p. 55.

The Space Age had its transport hub model in the swoopy arches of the TWA terminal, designed for New York's Kennedy Airport by Finnish architect Eero Saarinen. Flight and speed are also expressed in the pure forms of the *Drop* tea service for Rosenthal, created by idiosyncratic German designer Luigi Colani. Colani—one of the more influential designers, although unheralded by the public—was one of the first modern designers to use biology as his form generator of choice.

By the end of the 1960s, the employment of biomorphic shapes in furniture and lighting design was often a consciously historic move—a recollection of 1950s design in particular. Art-inspired biomorphic shapes straight from Arp's sculpture and paintings became common currency as well. As a quotation of the past, the future blob of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s would become more playful, even toylike, as it was energized by new possibilities in computer-based design and manufacturing. But even though designers took much of their inspiration from the past, the new curvaceous forms they created ultimately owed their existence to a kind of global cultural fluidity that was begging to be recognized, expressed, and celebrated. That new global fluidity, like Arp's early *Forest* sculpture, had its origins both in the generative potential and importance of nature within our increasingly artificial world, and the inexplicable shapes of the unconscious that took the form of blobs.

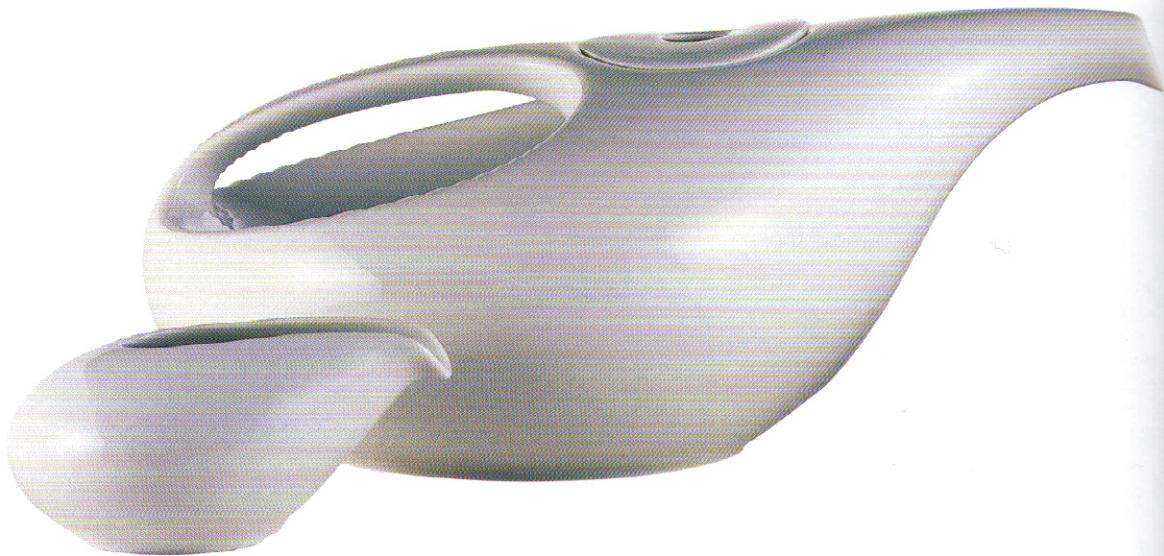
►
Design
Site
Photo

TWA Terminal 1956–62
Eero Saarinen
John F. Kennedy International
Airport, Jamaica, New York
Ezra Stoller

▼ **Drop teapot and creamer**
1971
Design Luigi Colani for Rosenthal
Material Glazed porcelain
Size Teapot 4.125 x 9.875 x 7.75 in.
Creamer 2 x 3.875 x 3.375 in.

I have invented nothing, the forms I use are millions of years old, I am merely a design archeologist.

Luigi Colani, quoted in Philippe Pernodet and Bruce Mehly, *Colani*, Éditions Dis Voir, Paris, 2000, p. 12.





We live on a round planet, all that surrounds us is concave, therefore I don't see why we must detach ourselves from our environment, leaving behind straight lines and sharp corners that correspond to nothing. I've come to a pretty certain conclusion. Nature sculpts perfect designs.

Luigi Colani, quoted in Philippe Pernodet and Bruce Mehler, *Colani*, Éditions Dis Voir, Paris, 2000, p. 58.



THE LOOK AND FEEL OF OPTIMISM

STEVEN SKOV HOLT AND MARA HOLT SKOV

Jube Jube lamp 2001
Scott Laughton for Lolah
Earthenware ceramic with glaze
17 x 8 x 41.5 in.

The new design current as I see it, has been informed by joy, exuberance, and optimism. What I see realized before me now is a vision of the future as it was portrayed in movies, books, and magazine articles of decades past. The uniformlike clothes in bright colors, the weird gizmos in space-age shapes, the curved edges, the candy colors, the impossible structures, and the talking watches are all there.

David Byrne, "A Blip, a Blob, a Groove, and a Curve: Thoughts on Design," *Men's Journal*, December 2000, p. 106.

What, then, is a blobby object or a blobject? It is a product, graphic, building, or other form of designed object that brings together in one entity several of the following qualities: a pleasing plasticity of fluid *form*, a delicious sense of *color*, a chance to exist at any *scale*, a heightened sense of flowing *materiality*, and a powerful connection to our *emotions*, including a strong optimistic tendency.

Today's blobjects rely on the powers unleashed by the computer, particularly the software-based modeling programs that have encouraged new low-cost explorations in form making and new options in rapid prototyping and production. Across the various avenues of design, advances in building, molding, pixel capture, and materials technology have resulted in new creative possibilities for the look of even the most ordinary project. Yet while the new technological possibilities are wondrous, they do not solve the truly fundamental questions. Blobjects fail or succeed by doing what other epochal design solutions have done before them: by combining technological mastery with cultural expression.

That same combination of technological mastery and cultural expression produced the essential "rightness" of the streamlined shapes of the 1930s, the biomorphic shapes of the 1940s and 1950s, and the psychedelic, swirling shapes of the 1960s and early 1970s. Each provided the defining imagery of its era, a visually symbolic summary of what was and what could be—just as the blobject does for us today.

Form

A blobject is first and foremost an expression of pure *form*—a unified arrangement of matter held together by a rounded, curvy skin, housing, or enclosure. A blobject is defined by its quintessential fluidity, viewed from any perspective. Classic variations on the blobject's form are the hourglass, kidney, beach rock, and amoeboid shapes. A blobject can be as minimal as two egg-like volumes joined together by a simple membrane, as in the *Jube Jube* lamp by Toronto-based designer Scot Laughton. Here is lighting that hovers gracefully in the air while casting a gentle, blob-shaped pool of light. Reductive designs such as this seem natural for a furniture design group that grew out of a custom yacht manufacturing firm in an industry where design is celebrated for its restraint.

Or a blobject can be as complex as the undulating surface of Karim Rashid's designed-to-be-iconic *Blob* object chair, one of an extended family of projects with curve-friendly names like *Blibs*, *Blobs*, *Pods*, *Plobs*, *Globjcts*, *Lobjcts*, and *Mutablob*s (p. 231). The curvaceous forms that Rashid was struggling to get on the market in the 1980s and early 1990s were given new life as the power and availability of 3-D surfacing and modeling software caught up to his ideas, and Rashid's relentless work ethic garnered him increasing media attention.



Blob object chair 1999

Karim Rashid of Karim Rashid, Inc. for Sandra Gering
Gallery
Materials: Automotive lacquer on fiberglass
Size: 24 x 40 x 40 in.

"Blob object" may sound like a comical bit of design jargon, but with a little coaching, one can learn to see that blobjects are thriving in fantastic numbers and littering the modern landscape. They are computer-modeled objects manufactured out of blown goo. They are rounded, humpy, bumpy creations.

Bruce Sterling, *Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years*, Random House, New York, 2002, p. 79.

We might now ... herald in the present millennium with the words "Hurrah, hurrah for the friendly curve."

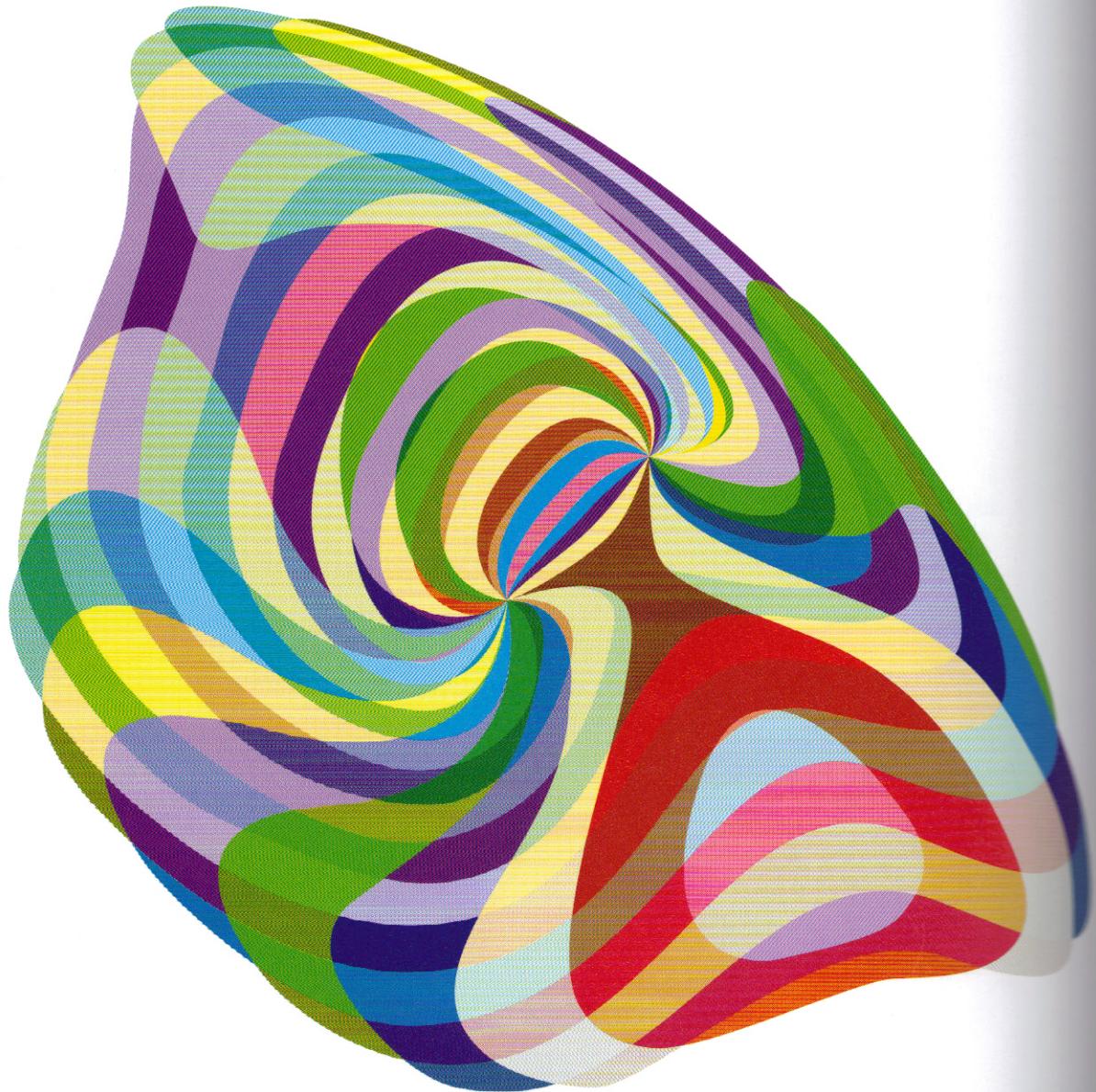
Eva Zeisel, *Eva Zeisel on Design: The Magic Language of Things*, The Overlook Press, New York, 2004, p. 208.



Wovo Servware bowl 2001

Smart Design for Wovo
Injection-molded ABS plastic
7 x 7 x 16 in.





*Would there not more buildings in the red of
dawn and dusk? Or in deepest ochre, an ochre
of sand and sun and the setting sun, an
ochre of force and quiet dignity? Or a tower
in the green of pine? It would offend no one.
People would dance.*

*David Eggers, "Technicolor Skylines,"
Metropolis, August–September 2002, p. 34.*

Color

A blobject is enhanced by the conscious, conspicuous, and delicious use of color—highlighting its form, material, and friendliness, and giving the design an emotional hook. A blobject can be one single, exuberant color, as it is in the bright-green *A.U.* chairs for Edra by Japanese design duo Setsu and Shinobu Ito. These chairs—a firmer and perkier take on the beanbag—offer an informal way of sitting that is set off by their supersaturated, high-contrast hue. Color can also be employed in an exciting, multihued manner, as it is in the *Colour and Form* animation for London's Design Museum created by London-based Saville Associates. Representing the opposite extreme of astronomy's black hole, the vibrant imagery employs every color in the rainbow in a swirling, pulsing formation that suggests emergence rather than disappearance—an appropriately upbeat, abundant, and attention-getting use of color.



A.U. chairs 2003

Design
Materials

Studio I.T.O. for Edra
Molded polyurethane foam,
stretch fabric, leather, plastic
base

Size:

Small sofa 30 x 51.25 x 57.5 in.
Chair 27.5 x 36.25 x 45.75 in.



Colour and Form animation

2002

Saville Associates for the
Design Museum, London,
United Kingdom

Scale

Embracing the lessons encapsulated in Charles and Ray Eames's film *Powers of 10*, blobjects can exist and function at almost any *scale*. Just as *Powers of 10* moves from the personal to the cosmic and then all of the way back to the microscopic, blobject-like forms are evident inside our bodies and at the reaches of our built world. We can see the form language of blobjects in the way we have envisioned everything from blood cells (pp. 112, 214) to important new buildings including, Future System's Selfridges (p. 130) and spacelab's Kunsthaus (p. 185). In between the scale of cell renderings and urban emporia, a rich range of products, furniture, images, and environments offer further evidence of the degree to which blobjects are scalable across various contexts. A blobject can be a button detail on a cell phone; it can be the cell phone itself; it can be the table that the cell phone sits on; it can be the room environment that the table is in; and it can be the building that contains the room. In short, a blobject can take the form of anything "from a spoon to a city," in the formula first suggested by the Italian post-World War II designer Ernesto N. Rogers. The lesson is clear: a structure or form language that finds success at one scale—as blobjects do in relation to our bodies—has a greater chance of being successful at other scales and in other contexts.



▲ Design Site
Housings 1999
Kolatan MacDonald Studio
Conceptual architecture studies

One way to get a grip on the blob aesthetic is to think of it as information-age ectoplasm. A proto-New Age attempt to square spiritual yearnings with scientific skepticism, ectoplasm was a metaphysical oxymoron: the imperial materialized.

Mark Dery, "The Blob That Ate Design," *Interiors*, June 2001.

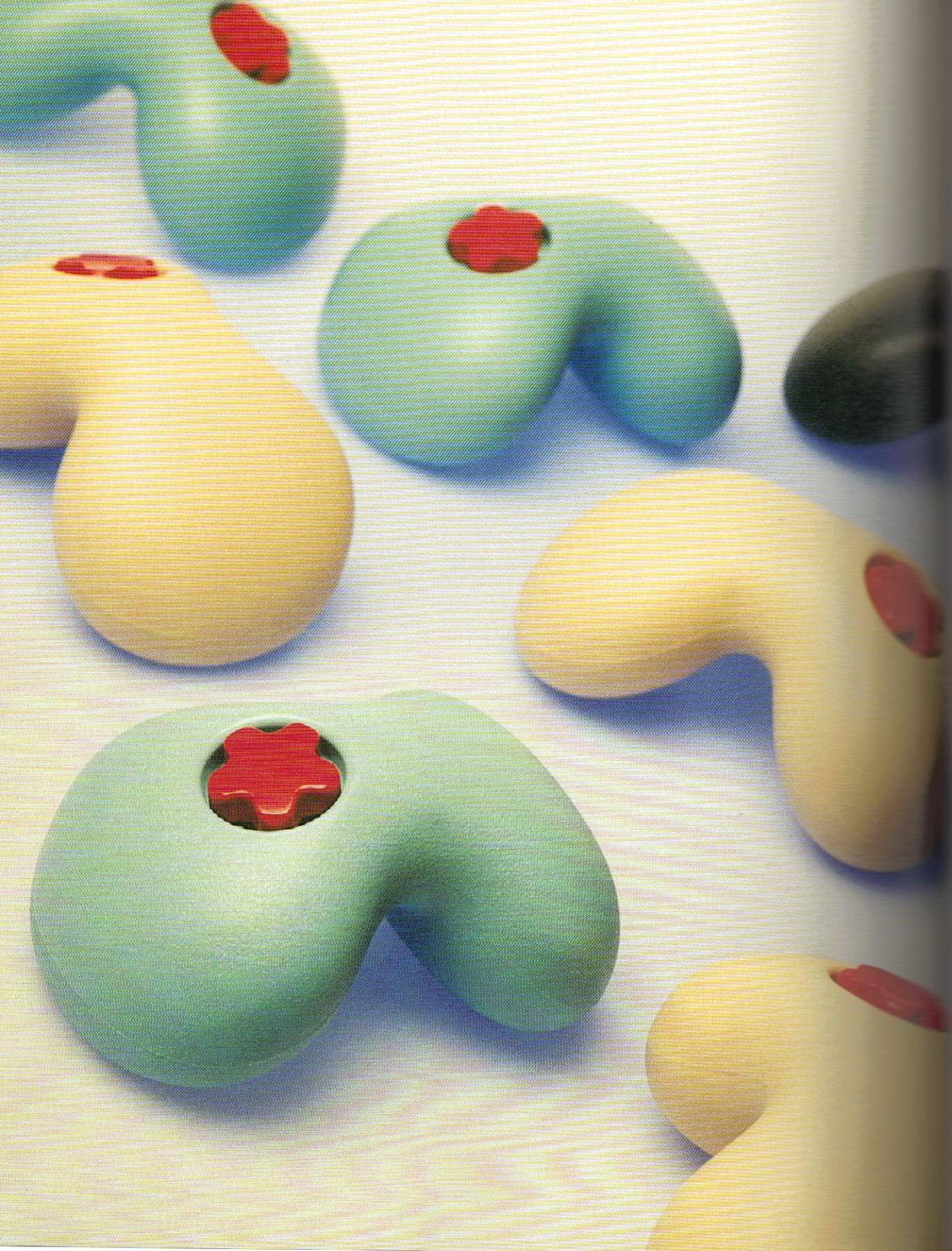
◀ Design Materials Size
Rio portable CD player 2000
newdeal design for Digital Networks
Injected molded ABS plastic, TPU, co-molded urethane
1 x 5.25 in.



S2 Sports CD/radio tuner

2001

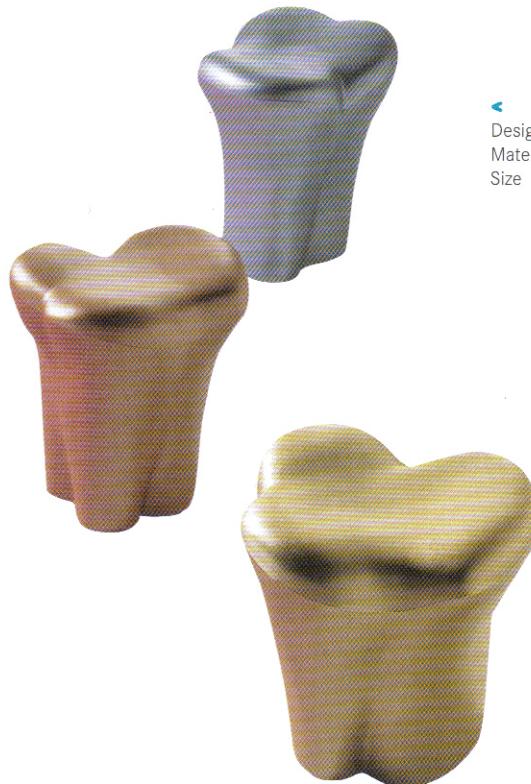
Design
Alexander
Sony Design Center for Sony
ABS plastic exterior
4.5 x 17 x 11 in.



Materiality

A blobject is not just made of material; it celebrates its *materiality*—using water, bits and pixels, and plastic. As industrial design has led the way, it has often been plastics—and their inherent plasticity—that have defined blobjects. Nowadays, the plastic of choice is usually one of the new “polys”: polypropylene, poly-carbonate, polyethylene, or polyurethane resin. Philippe Starck’s polypropylene *Tooth* stool was created through the cost-effective manufacturing process of rotational molding; for comic good measure, the polypropylene was given a metallic sheen. Essentially a rounded caricature of a molar, the *Tooth* joins Starck’s already sizable family of products that are not only useful objects but clever visual puns at the same time.

Marc Newson’s polyethylene *Rock* doorstop is hollow, intended to be filled with a ballast of sand or water on-site, thus making smart, minimal use of materials. The genius of the *Rock* is that Newson and his manufacturer, Magis, have taken on the lowly doorstop—an object almost never deemed worthy of consideration by designers—and made it a form worthy of celebration. Reciprocally, Newson has demonstrated that blobjects can cheerfully take on even the most simple and banal of jobs and still result in a completely delightful design solution.



Rock doorstop 1997

Marc Newson for Magis
Blow-molded polyethylene
6 x 9.25 x 5 in.

Design
Material
Size

Tooth stool 2002
Philippe Starck for XO
Rotation-molded polypropylene
17.25 x 15.75 in.

Emotion

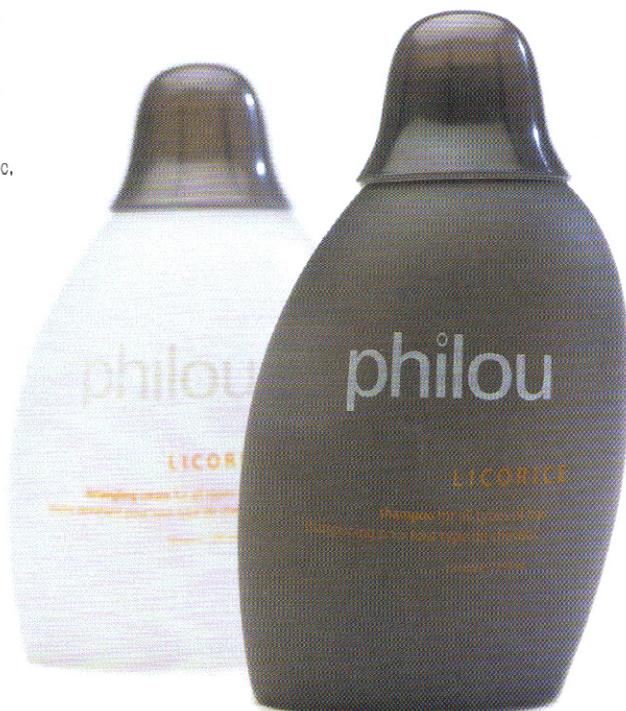
A blobject engenders *emotion*—an immediate visceral response to its exaggerated, caricatured, or otherwise exuberant form, abetted by its particular color and material. A blobject is optimistic, familiar, and welcoming; even the smallest blobject can project a larger-than-life attention-getting presence. A blobject is purposefully engineered, physically as well as psychologically, to appeal to our senses, our sense of self, and our appetites—either for companionship, nourishment, acquisition, sex, or fantasy. It is the first class of objects to be spontaneously designed by a myriad of designers around the world, all operating on a form-follows-emotion basis.

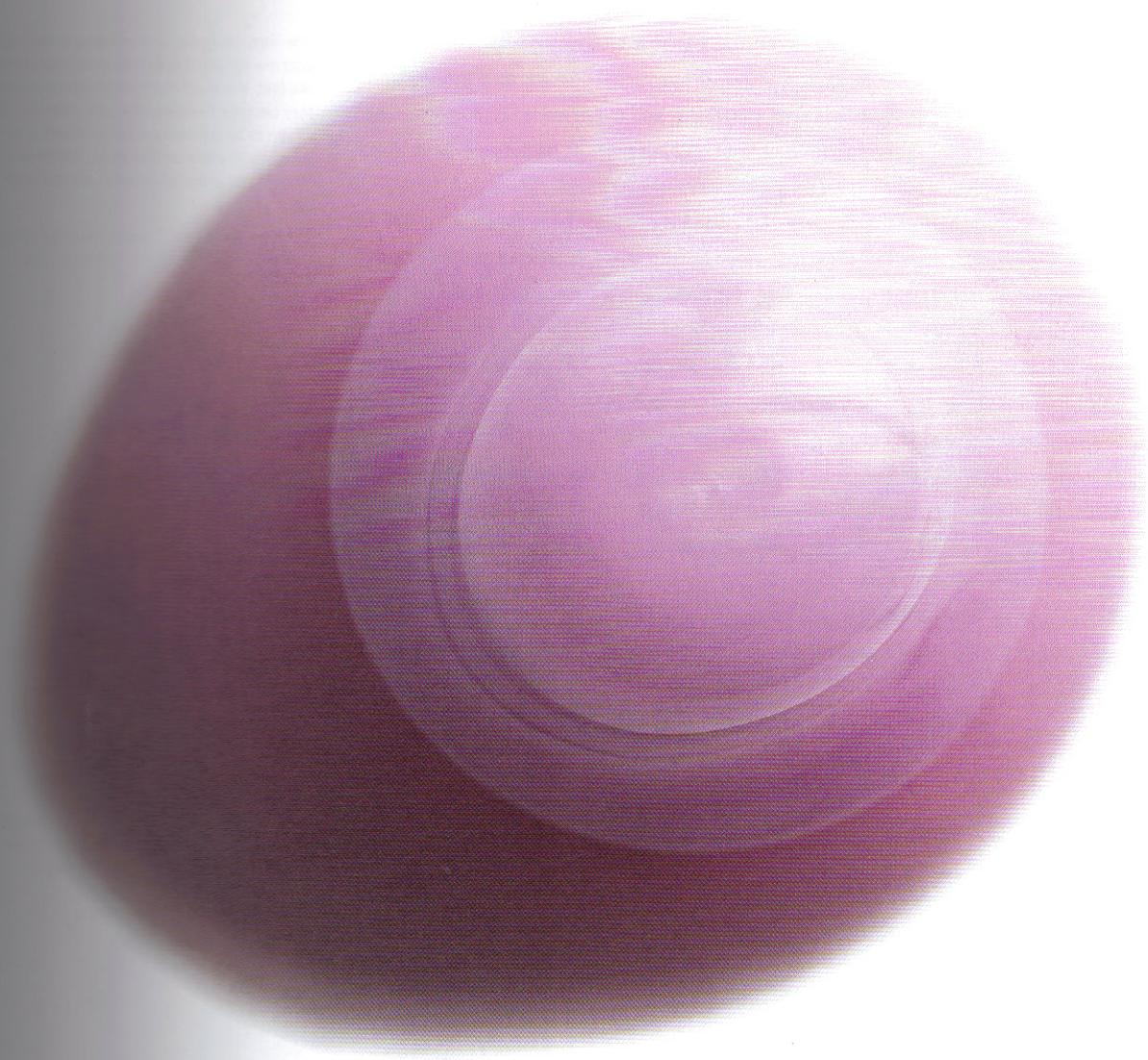
The soft forms and textures of the Philou shampoo and conditioner bottles designed by Yves Béhar of fuseproject seduce the emotions, appealing to no less than three of the five senses. Their curvy forms and gentle colors please the eye; their soft polyurethane material gives to the touch and feels generous and tactile in the hand; and their unexpected scent (permeable plastic!) hints at what's inside, wafting youth-oriented aromas (such as licorice, bubble gum, and banana) toward the consumer. Although originating in the pure geometry of a tilted-axis ovoid, the soft-focus, matte-finish bottles tap deep into the emotional unconscious, suggesting the fullness of a breast highlighted with a color-enhanced, high-gloss, nipple-like cap. A blobject archetype.

>	Philou shampoo and conditioner bottles 2000 fuseproject for Philou Design Materials Low-density polyethylene, Injection molded ABS plastic, coated polyethylene Size 5.25 x 3 x 2.5 in.
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From the outside, the breast represents another reality, and one that varies in the eyes of each beholder. Babies see food. Men see sex. Doctors see disease. Businessmen see dollar signs. Religious authorities transform breasts into spiritual symbols, whereas politicians appropriate them for nationalistic ends. Psychoanalysts place them at the center of the unconscious, as if they were unchanging monoliths. This multiplicity of meanings suggests the breast's privileged place in the human imagination.

Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1997, p. 275.





The most powerful emotional hook that a blobject has is its inherent friendliness. A blobject is always inviting, it encourages touch and interaction, and it responds with softness of form, material, and experience. It is more puppy than full-grown dog, more Teletubby than troubled teen. It asks to be held, even cuddled. A blobject such as the 1996 Vespa scooter redesign can be said to represent both the visual and the experiential epitome of childlike innocence, albeit an innocence with a more-than-knowing wink. In this sense, a blobject tells us something about ourselves and the way that our dominant adult culture turns to its youth subcultures for inspiration, validation, and hope.

As a result of our accelerated culture, the blobject as we now know it will undoubtedly undergo further permutations, but the method and the message behind it will endure. The blobject will always represent the fertile, hybrid moment at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another—a time when the bits and bytes of computer design succeeded in expressing the sensuality, fluidity, and optimism representative of the best parts of travel, exchange, and global culture. Blobjects reflect one avenue of possibility for finding new beauty, delight, and meaning in an increasingly linked, increasingly interdependent world that emerged not by plan but by a spontaneous and simultaneous evolution of *form, color, scale, materiality, and emotion*.

One way, I suggest, is to make sure that products are not just friendly towards their users but that, in a much more comprehensive sense, they become friends of the user. After all, we all like to be surrounded by our friends, the people who make us feel good, who help us achieve our goals: all-around enhancers of our lives....

Stefano Marzano, *Creating Value by Design: Thoughts*, V+K Publishing, Blaricum, The Netherlands, 1999, p. 103.

➤	Vespa ET2 1996
Design	Vespa Design Team for Piaggio
Frame	Pressed steel and monocoque
Engine	Otto cycle 2 stroke, single cylinder 49.4 cc
Size	43 x 28 x 70.125 in.

