Design Notebook

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Industrial design: Invented to serve and shape a 20th-century consumer economy.

THE 20th century is already in the hands of the historians. The young scholars for whom even the 1950's represent a distant nostalgia are looking at the first half of the century with the dispassionate detachment reserved by one century for another. The buildings and products of the 1920's and 30's that were meant to revolutionize the world, and life, are being studied with a coolly analytical eye.

Those who think they know how it was in those days are in for a surprise. What was admired then is discarded now, and what was rejected is being revived. A field that flourished, and languished, and is now becoming the subject of dissertations, is industrial design — that curious amalgam of promotion, marketing, technology and taste invented by the 20th century to serve and shape a consumer economy.

Industrial designers shared the optimism of the architectural theorists and practitioners of the modernist revolution who believed that the marriage of art and industry could provide answers for most of the ills of society, or at least put beauty and utility within the reach of all. But while the taste-makers were in hot pursuit of a mythical "machine art" realized largely in handmade prototypes or limited production for educated users, the industrial designers were successfully creating mass-produced objects for a universal market.

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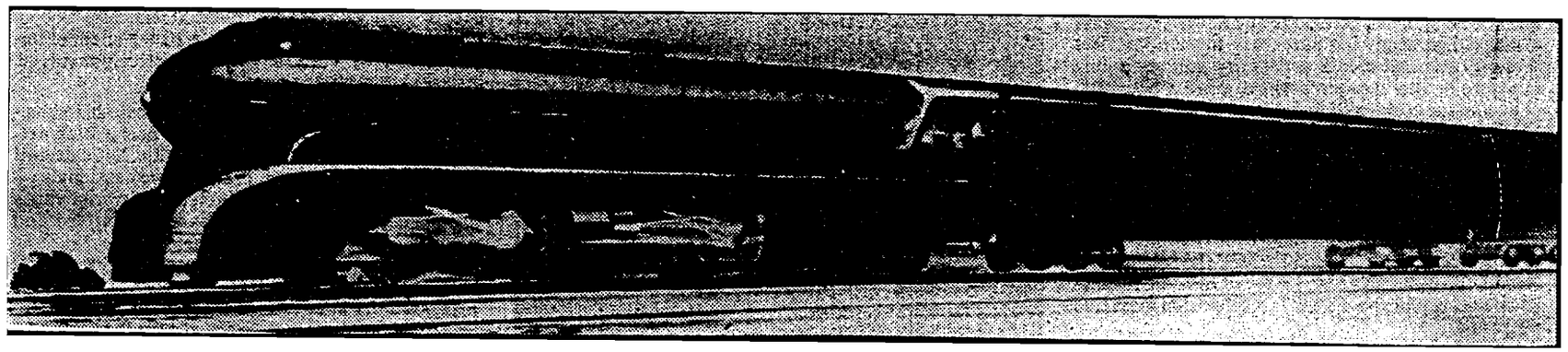
This was not the "good design" of the art museums, but genuine consumer, or product design with a large appeal and even larger sales. These were the things that people wanted, and bought, and used, and even enshrined in their homes — the shining white refrigerators and washing machines, the streamlined aluminum toasters, the Bakelite-encased radios replaced by the Formica-veneered television sets to be followed later by the high-tech "home entertainment centers," and above all — the chrome-trimmed and tail-finned automobiles in the garage that were the ultimate social symbol and design artifact.

For its first few decades industrial design was a profession in ascendancy, full of high excitement and colorful personalities. Men like Norman Bel Geddes, Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Dreyfus, Raymond Loewy and Donald Deskey, designing for the Fortune 500 corporations and claiming to be masters of every need from "a pen to a city" (Teague's words), confidently predicted the shape of the products and the life style of tomorrow in World's Fair exhibitions and the pages of glossy magazines.

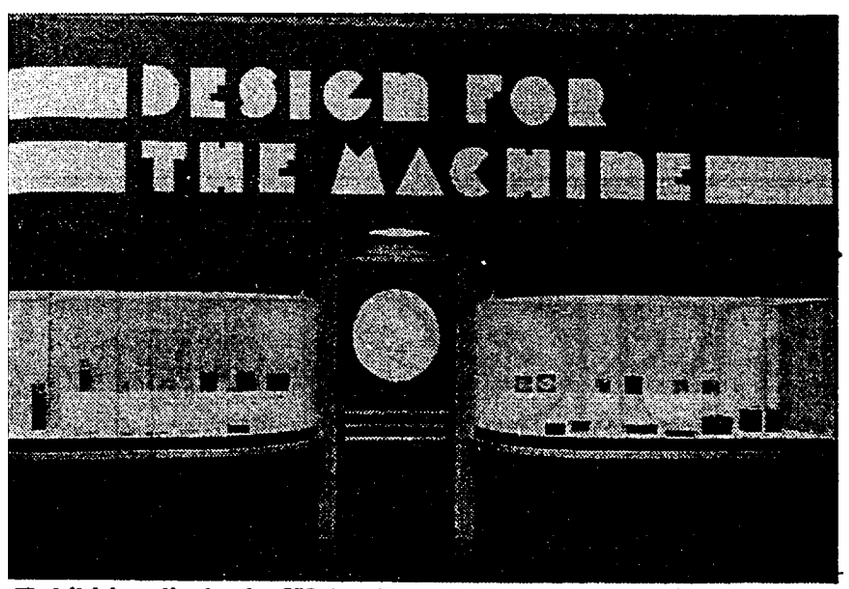
The ideal shape of the 1920's and 30's was the teardrop; the streamlined form was imbued with a mystique that combined suggestions of aerodynamic forces and sleek modernity. Objects were made to look as if they were about to take off, whether they were "airflow" automobiles or immobile pencil sharpeners.

The world of tomorrow was the Futurama that Geddes designed for the General Motors exhibition at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, with its superhighways and electronically controlled traffic looping through visionary cities. Although the commercial futurologists never cracked the Museum of Modern Art, which set the ultimate standard for tomorrow — to their considerable despair — they all made it big in the marketplace.

What these popular designers and the high art proponents of "good design" had in common in those pioneering days was a romantic ideal of perfect products for a perfectable society. But both the élite and the common versions proved equally vulnerable; they succumbed to complex social problems and the persistence of bourgeois esthetic standards. The designer's dream of the ultimate, "correct" solution for all functional objects was the victim of business and marketing realities. The perfect, "final" design was subjected to constant revisions in the interest of model changes for increased sales. Today, the world of tomorrow looks like a technocrat's Paradise Lost.



Streamlined train designed by Raymond Loewy in 1937



Exhibition display by Walter Dorwin Teague in 1934

Some ground-breaking research in this field has been the subject of a series of lectures called "Great Designers of the Twentieth Century" taking place this month and next at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design.

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Still to be given are a talk on that many-faceted team of top 20th-century designers, Charles and Ray Eames, by Roger Guilfoyle, on June 4; a presentation on "Victor Proetz: A Classical Style for the Twentieth Century," by Lynn Springer, on June 11; and a final lecture, by Lorraine Wild, on "Graphic Design in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," on June 18. (Further information is available from the Cooper-Hewitt Museum at 2 East 91st Street.)

A recent presentation by Jeffrey L. Meickle offered a particularly illuminating view of "Industrial Designers of the 1930's — Norman Bel Geddes and Walter Dorwin Teague." The material was taken from a book based on his doctorial dissertation, "Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-39," to be published by Temple University Press this fall.

Mr. Meickle is not an art or design specialist. He is a graduate of American Studies programs who finds himself equally attracted to such American cultural phenomena as science fiction, the occult and the technological visions of American designers.

He almost fell into the Norman Bel Geddes archives at the University of Texas in Austin, when he was looking for a dissertation topic. The result is a study that offers a fresh and insightful view of a period that has been given little due and even less analytical thought, and a fascinating portrait of a man who combined an original talent, a mix of naïveté and shrewdness and an almost Barnum-like promotional bent.

Norman Bel Geddes worked on a mind-boggling range of projects. His highly successful, avant-garde stage designs of the 1920's and 30's featured monumentality and dramatic effects, including such feats as launching a full-size ship on ball bearings, and the superrealism of offstage flushing toilets. His "Dead End" set for the Clifford Odets play had its New York kids diving into a convincing and watery East River.

The suave mirrored elegance of the Barberry Room of New York's Berkshire Hotel became a gathering place for admiring art and literary sophisticates, but was later replaced by routine hotel-hokey décor. And there were the slightly buckeye projects of later years like the proposed redesign of Brooklyn's Ebbets Field for the disgruntled Dodgers, or the restyling of the Ringling Brothers Circus, complete with shocking pink sawdust.

But he is remembered best among fellow professionals for his personal eccentricities (unending practical jokes, all-night, black-tie charrettes, and fantastic showmanship for clients), and most of all, by the general public, for the Futurama that correctly prophesied a national network of superhighways for a high-speed modern world. (The far-off world that he envisioned was 1960.)

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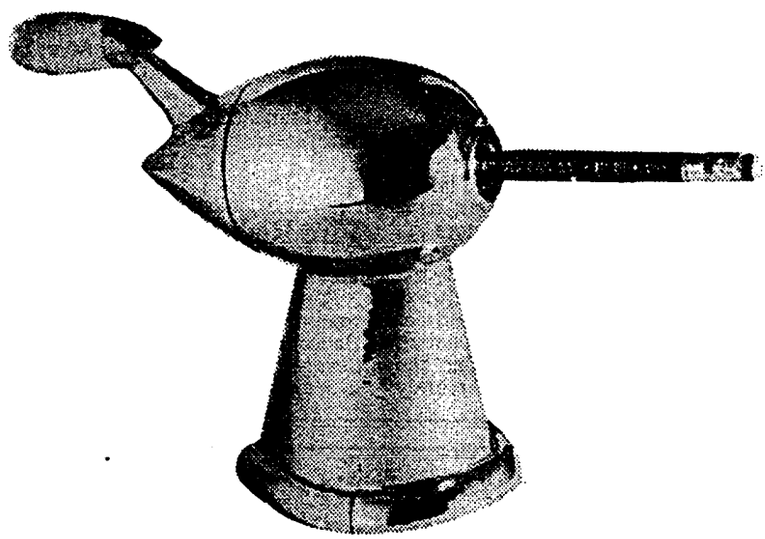
Mr. Meickle places all this in a context of the rise of 20th-century manufacturing and consumerism. He dates the birth of design for industry from Henry Ford's momentous decision to produce the Model A, when the Model T market had reached its saturation point two years before the stock market crash of 1929. This costly and calculated retooling was called "the most expensive art lesson in history." The commercial artists who soon appeared on the scene to help other manufacturers capitalize on "the cash value of art in industry" became the profession of industrial design. They flourished, in Mr. Meickle's words, "wherever businessmen hoped to influence the public through visual appearance." And they set out, "each in a highly individualistic way, to change the shape of American civilization."

With or without museum accolades, they did so. For many years, they were the image-makers for the consuming public and the moneymakers for the manufacturers. If their ideal solutions were never realized, and if their ambitious campaigns were often costly and wasteful, their approach was a far cry from today's use of fashion designer labels to simply stamp a name on a product for associative status value.



Raymond Loewy's streamlined pencil sharpener, 1934

Those appliances, planes and trains and technological inventions of the early 20th century have become today's historical artifacts and cultural curiosities. All Utopias fail; all visionaries meet defeat. We are left with the dust of dreams and the fleeting modernity of the streamlined style.