Design Notebook: Exhibit captures great moments in their souvenirs.

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Design Notebook

Ada Louise Huxtable

Exhibit captures great moments in their souvenirs.

WHEN Cosimo de Medici was married in 1608, the event was celebrated by a mock naval battle of mythological boats. There was a Ship of Neptune and a Ship of Hercules as part of a fantastic flotilla with dragon prows and tree masts—beautiful, extravagant, symbolic and surreal creations designed especially for the occasion.

There is no record that these ships survived or were ever seen or used again; only a set of 17th-century engravings remains to confirm their transient existence. A return appearance for an anniversary would have been redundant or anticlimactic. The ships were made to celebrate the moment and to exist for that moment only. And by doing so they made the occasion extraordinary and memorable through art.

In 1899, when Admiral Dewey returned from the Pacific, New York City erected a triumphal arch of stucco and plaster that took two months to build and cost $40,000. It stood at Madison Square, at the end of a long row of plaster columns embellished with heroic figures representing great moments in America's naval history. The crowd began to destroy this made-for-the-occasion architecture as the triumphal parade passed through; but it had served its purpose—to celebrate the moment and the larger event.

"To Celebrate the Moment" is the title and theme of a small and fascinating exhibition that has just opened at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street, through early January) directed by Richard Oliver, Curator of Architecture and Design. It features the baroque boat engravings and Dewey's motley memorabilia; there are also medals and scarves printed with "Our George, He's All Right," in addition to pictures of the arch. Plus a variety of trophies, souvenirs, greeting cards, decorative and commemorative objects, and photographs and drawings of such temporary esoterica as floats and catafalques. Polychrome Pennsylvania Dutch birth and baptismal certificates and melting snow sculptures at the Dartmouth winter carnival are a few more of the disparate things that share an idea both witty and profound.

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All of these examples are used to show the ways in which design marks certain events in our lives with ceremony and delight. It can solemnize the somber recognition of fate, heighten emotions of pleasure and intensify the meaning of the moment, from birth to death. The objects may be paper kitsch or major works of art. They can be unique and temporal and they may even self-destruct immediately (fireworks, birthday cakes), or they can be useless for anything except to confirm an occasion or an achievement (the ancient Greek hydria for the winners of the original Olympic games; today's Oscar or Tony). Their use may be limited to a single, repeated event, as Hanukkah lights and Christmas tree ornaments.

The purpose, or "function" of these things, on which so much thought and art is expended, is solely to delight the eye, warm the heart, or rekindle connections with tradition or the past. They answer the need for continuity and rhythm in life, for ceremony and celebration. The point the exhibition makes is that this is done by a creative esthetic act. In Mr. Oliver's words, "Design is one of the most powerful tools we have for enhancing the meaning and emotive power of moments of special significance."

He lists these moments as 'inevitable," "annual," and "unique." In the inevitable class are birth, birthdays and death. Annual events include holidays and festivals and their ceremonial or ornamental observance, from the floats of the Rose Bowl parade—to department store decorations—here the heroic rabbit-and-egg décor of Easter at Simpson-Crawford's, an installation carried out by the Bronze and Paper Maché Company in 1904.

"Unique" refers to memorable one-of a-kind celebrations, either for ourselves or as part of our culture. Cosimo's boats and Dewey's arch are unique items, and so are 11 Erté drawings in the show, including one of the Countess D'Anamon's "Emerald" costume worn —just once—to Paul Poiret's 1913 Jewel Ball.

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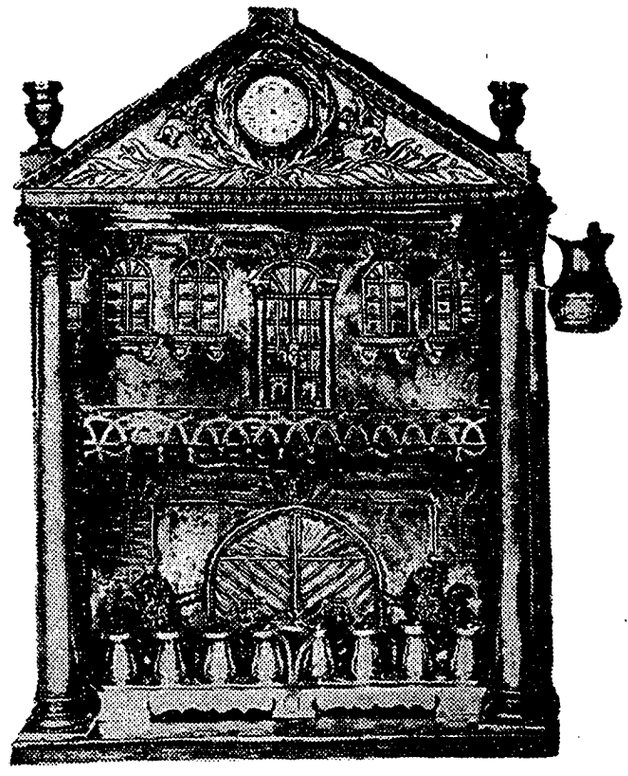
Few of us will ever have emerald costumes or mythological ships or triumphal arches, but we all treasure special moments enhanced by special acts of design. My own favorite is the memory of a cake with which I was surprised at a small dinner party, ordered from that master baker-designer, William Greenberg—a confectionary compliment with an artfully executed butter cream design of the Brooklyn Bridge and brownstones, an architectural theme for a building buff that was not to outlast the night. I could hardly bear to see it eaten. If bridge and brownstones were as temporal as the evening's pleasures, the gesture and the object are unforgettable.

The better memories of my generation are made of just those celebrations of the special events that we think of as passing or ephemeral. The stylish, escapist pleasures of World's Fairs, the foolish tinsel of New Year's Eve turn out to be enduring and indelible experiences. They are memories that even a younger generation tries to share in the name of nostalgia or camp, collecting trylon and perisphere paperweights, campaign buttons and old valentines.

A decorated piece of paper or some painted commemorative pottery can have many meanings. In our rented summer house, in addition to a Grover Cleveland plate, there is a cake dish with historic views of Salem, Mass., and a murky green-glazed pin tray with a ghostly view of the Hartford Capitol. Less important than the evocation of person or place is the kind of lasting sentiment that can be summoned for a walrus-mustached man, the landmarks of New England, or the monuments of a world one never knew.

It all translates into a deeper meaning still—tradition and continuity, anchors, associations and affections, institutional dignity and universal dreams of glory. What counts is the strength and validity of the responses that outlast the objects of celebration. To shape that meaning, to deal in both immediacy and immortality, is no small achievement for the art of design.



Cooper-Hewitt Museum courtesy of the Jewish Museum

To celebrate Hanukkah and rekindle connections with the past, a 19th century silver lamp from Germany reproduced the facade of a synagogue.

Cooper-Hewitt Museum

A design object to mark the ceremony of Christmas: The front and back of a printed holiday stocking made in New York in 1899.