ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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An Inclusive View of Design

You may go to the Museum of Modern Art and see useful and beautiful objects of everyday use on display in the galleries, and you may also arrange to inspect a vast array of consumer and industrial products in the museum's Study Center. The Modern's Design Collection, established in the 1930's as an essential part of its radical theories about the nature of contemporary creativity, has long stressed innovative and handsome objects of commercial manufacture notable for their high levels of art and technology. Thus toasters and typewriters joined the traditional decorative arts as legitimate museum collectables.

All of the products selected have been consistent with that aspect of the modern dream that saw the marriage of art and industry as the way to a better life through machine efficiency and elevated taste. The standards applied were restricted, uplifting and absolute. "Good design" meant either that the object was technologically innovative or simply stripped of all extraneous trim to emphasize elegant form.

The canonical results have managed to make a lot of us feel uneasy or insecure, because those suave and startling furnishings and objects that the museum espoused have rarely fitted into the ad hoc accumulation of our lives without showing up the expedient crumminess of our domestic styles; they shattered any tenuous claims to esthetic coherence. Those who were young or bold enough could start with a clean slate; those who were trendy enough could dispose of everything now and then and start fresh. The rest of us were left with the conviction that our own tastes were messy, irrelevant or déclassé.

I am not knocking the museum, or beautiful objects of any definition or persuasion. The Design Collection is a significant contribution to the archives of modern art. But I am pleased to report that the new revisionist way in which we are looking at everything from art to history is finally affecting our understanding of the field of design.

Since design is the spinoff of the creative process that touches all our lives and almost every aspect of our existence, this change has its esthetic and cultural significance. And it seems appropriate that some of this re-evaluation is taking place at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street), the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, where many of the city's most provocative architecture and design shows are currently being mounted. (The other place to watch is the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 8 West 40th Street.)

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The newly opened exhibition called "Take Your Choice: Contemporary Product Design," which can be seen in the Cooper-Hewitt's small ground-floor gallery through May 13, is no more than a tiny sampling of appealing and interesting design objects, but those objects have been selected and presented in a way that would have been virtually unheard of a decade ago. Organized by Richard Oliver, the museum's Curator of Contemporary Architecture and Design, it is a limited, but delightful display. (Viewers seem to share the affectionate rediscovery of the comfortable old Wearever aluminum coffee pot and the clunky Juice King orange squeezer; there is rejoicing among those who have kept the jazzy, streamlined Toastmaster. The transformation of these objects from dernier cri to kitsch to historical artifact is now complete.)

It is clear that the Cooper-Hewitt interest in design extends beyond the traditional and very fine decorative arts of its earlier collections to the processes and products of the 20th century. And it is also evident that this interest is both historical and analytical, in contrast to the Olympian proselytizing that has marked the pronouncements of the design apostles of the modern movement. There is perspective, wit, information and innuendo here, as well as objects you can love or hate.

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The title, "Take Your Choice," immediately suggests that no single, approved model of anything is being enshrined, an impression borne out by the fact that the half-dozen or so objects in each of 10 categories — toasters, telephones, cameras, calculators, typewriters, coffee-makers, juicers, radios, clocks and chairs — offer a variety of solutions, deliberately and intriguingly juxtaposed. But the selection is not as simple or random as it seems. These objects illustrate a basic point — which is that design is a process that responds to so many variables that the number of acceptable ways to shape, house, define or style (a taboo word for the modernists because of its cosmetic implications) any item, at any particular time, is almost limitless. Consumer preferences, in fact, which grow out of a larger cultural context, have a good deal more to do with the options offered than designers' standards. And consumer judgments are

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made on the basis of subjective feelings, individual needs and emotional responses rather than on any objective evaluation of how close the design may come to some hypothetical ideal.

A typewriter may be chosen because it corrects mistakes, not because its handsome housing won a prize; a coffee-maker will be bought because it has radically altered the brewing process no matter how it looks; a clock is selected for novelty as often as for readability. Objects may be chosen to blend inconspicuously with their surroundings, or to stand apart as symbols of newness or status. An expensive hi-fi will be designed to look as slickly "engineered" as possible and a giant TV projection system makes its presence felt like a Cadillac in the living room.

According to Mr. Oliver, these choices are far from arbitrary. He isolates four factors that consistently influence the consumer: innovation, process, materials and imagery. Some products are genuinely innovative because of the development of new techniques or materials. Others offer different features to different people so that the selection is made on the basis of use or process according to individual needs, as in cameras for amateurs or professionals. Where use does not vary, materials will. But the way the product looks, its style or "image," may ultimately carry a stronger appeal than anything else about it, even overriding function.

This makes for some entertaining setups in the museum's display cases. Take clocks, for example. There is a handsome 19th-century timepiece with all of its intricate brass wheels exposed to view next to the latest version of a clock with exposed works — a rectangle of clear plastic that reveals the circuitry of a modern digital design. With these are two artful Deco digital models perceived as radical in the 1930's and accepted as period pieces today. For sheer utility, there is the Big Ben alarm by Henry Dreyfus that woke up America in the 1930's and 40's, and for sheer stylishness, a tiny, numberless, bright red-plastic Italian clock of up-to-the-moment, daunting chic. Take your choice; they all tell time.

We are beginning to have a much more inclusive view of the art of design, as this show demonstrates. Twentieth-century design is unique because of the use of the machine, the explosion of technology, the mobility of society, the invention of consumerism and marketing, and the rise of income and expectations. It is a rich field for the study of cultural history and society's self-image — the currently acceptable word for taste. ■