

Household design of the 1950's essay

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158) Discuss in relationship to the ‘ innovation’ in household designs of the 1950’s, how do these designs compare to similar examples of today? Do designers today feel “ compelled to improve on last years model? “ American corporate designers were learned in Modernist theory, but nevertheless found bulbous aerodynamic bodysHELLS an appropriately slick garb for wares of a vigorous, efficient society with an aggressive faith in its future. Flashy exaggeration at the hands of the stylists, ever compelled to ‘ improve’ on last year’s model, gave streamlining a bad name. ” (Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, The New Design Source Book, 1992, p.

58) When discussing this quote in relation to household designs produced during the 1950s, it is important to understand the effects that Streamlining had on society; how it fuelled mass production and mass consumption and has had lasting affects on designers in the design industry today.

Streamlining is the design language referring to the change that first occurred in the USA, as a search for a style for the age. The style spanned from 1935 through to 1955.

During this time, design became an important way in which many countries that were affected by the war “ set out to reassert their position within world trade”. The USA recognised this need and set out to develop a national design style. Streamlining was originally derived from Aerodynamic experiments, and in particular drew from the latest developments in mass transport including cars, aeroplanes, boats and trains, as they became a popular image of technological achievement.

The streamlined ‘ look’ is characterised by bulbous, organic, seamless, sleek outlines and the style is aimed to symbolise the present and the future.

Streamlining was applied to many different kitchen artefacts and household designs, providing integrated products with bulbous and tapering outlines. 1

Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p. 136 2 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p.

134 Streamline consultant designers such as Walter Dorwin Teague, Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss were totally untraditional with their use of materials and approach towards design. Henry Dreyfuss, for instance, exploited new materials when he designed the Model 500 Telephone 1949 (figure 1) using cellulose acetate that came in a range of bright colours. It provided one of the very first visual models for the telephone that is still familiar in the modern environment today. 3 Raymond Loewy’s streamlined Cold spot refrigerator 1934 (figure 2) also demonstrates use of new materials, being the first refrigerator complete with rustproof aluminium shelves. The overall curved form drew on the recent developments in metal

stamping which allowed shallow curves, thus giving the form a streamlined edge. He also hid the door hinges and gave it a jewel like nameplate.

Loewy was one of the first designers who managed to turn the refrigerator into a visually desirable object. Walter Dorwin Teague, Raymond Loewy, Henry Dreyfuss and many more designers saw the US entering a new 'design conscious' age; the style promoted was completely modern in inspiration and impact. 5 These designers took the European Modern movement as a theoretical starting point, and often quoted Le Corbusier at length in their various manifestos.

Teague (1883-1960) referred, like Le Corbusier before him to the importance of 'classical' ideals in modern design. However, their real 3 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p142 4 Schonberger Angelor, *Raymond Loewy: Pioneer of American Industrial Design*, Prestel, Berlin, 1990, p161 5 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p142 emotional commitment was to the contemporary world of speed and modern technology. 6 By the 1950s, the style had spread throughout America and the 1950s had become known as an era of "dream cars, dream kitchens, dream houses" and mass consumption promoted as a social and economic necessity.

The 1950's saw high technology enter everyday life on a massive scale. The consumer society of the 1950s was presented with machines such as fruit juicers, coffee makers, vacuum cleaners and toasters that eliminated the burden of manual tasks and increased leisure options. Designers and manufacturers continued to appeal to the consumer's aspirations, by

producing streamlined forward-looking products, targeting the “ American dream”. In the USA the majority of people aspired for such things as a secure job in a large corporation, a house in a nice suburb, a large family, a large car, and an array of labour saving devices. Designers and Manufacturers targeted this new generation of “ homemakers” and consumers.

8 Hence, design became undoubtedly linked with mass production and mass consumption. The affluence of the decade famously summed up by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan as having “ never had it so good. ” 9 The consultant designers of the 1950s moved increasingly into corporate design, developing ‘ corporate identity’ schemes for big organizations. Many either had their own corporate structures set up such as Teague Associates (founded by Walter Dorwin Teague), or became more closely integrated into corporate structures. It was 6 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p142 7 Fiell Charlotte & Peter, *50's decorative Arts*, Taschen, 2000 p13 8 Fiell Charlotte & Peter, *50's decorative Arts*, Taschen, 2000 p14 9 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p137 an extremely competitive market, compelled towards ‘ improving’ on previous models for lots of household devices, as there was a constant need for any advantage over other companies’ products.

Due to large sums of money at stake, designers started to play it safe by giving what market researches said consumers wanted. 10 This restricted most possibilities of the designer being really innovative. This can be seen when looking at the work produced by Raymond Loewy during the 1950s.

Many of the products that Raymond Loewy designed are still familiar to us today, such as the legendary Frigidaire refrigerator 1955 (figure 3).

Despite the fact that this refrigerator became the world's largest selling household refrigerator, it is important to note that the idea was actually conceived by the research department of Frigidaire, Raymond Loewy Associates simply collaborated as designers or 'stylists'. Loewy was one of the first designers to understand design as a marketing factor: "if you have two products which do not differ in terms of price, function and quality, it is the product's attractive external appearance which wins the race. 11 The work of Loewy did not require any fundamental changes to the way the machine worked, but rather, an "unashamed face lift" made for the purposes of the marketplace.

12 This resulted in some negativity towards streamlining and a gap opened in American design culture between ideas of 'styling' and 'design'. 10 Schonberger Angelor, Raymond Loewy: Pioneer of American Industrial Design, Prestel, Berlin, 1990, p118 11 Loewy Raymond, Never Leave Well enough alone, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1951, p277 12 Jodard Paul, Design Heroes: Raymond Loewy, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992, p24 Many countries tried to rid the growing concept of 'mass culture' and 'mass taste' and to hold fast to traditional craft-based values which meant so much to them. 13 The Museum of Modern Art acted as an arbiter on the question of what was or was not 'good design'. They emphasized European inspired furniture and applied art products and tended to neglect the streamlined American products that flooded the streets outside the museum. 14

The American automobile and other streamlined household wares became “bete noire” for the tastemakers of the day, who condemned them as “vulgar, ostentatious and superficial”.

15 Henry Dreyfuss, a well-established designer was by the 1950s, closely working with other companies and suggested that the style should be called “cleanlining instead of streamlining” 16 This suggests strongly that he himself, being a streamlining designer, recognised that streamlining was largely associated with the aesthetics of the product, of cleaning up the appearance of an object, rather than focusing on improving the function. In 1956, Henry Dreyfuss Associates (HDA) re-styled the wall-mounted telephone and Bell Telephone re-introduced it into the market (figure 4). It was intended as a companion to the desktop model 500. 17 In 1959 Bell introduced the Princess phone (figure 5), with a hand and mouthpiece across the dial, which also fitted compactly on the base.

Its petite size was re-designed by HDA to appeal to teen-age girls, targeting a mass market through redesigning the aesthetics of the 13Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p161 14 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p143 15 Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992, p143 16 Pulos Arthur J, *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design*, MIT, London, 1983, p393 17 Flinchum Russell, *The man in the brown suit: Henry Dreyfuss*, Smithsonian Institute, New York, 1997, p125 object. Throughout the 1950s there was a strong push in the design industry to be continually moving forward, and constantly

redesigning or 'restyling' products. Today, designers are still very much compelled to continuously upgrade and redesign their products in order to keep up with competitors in the same market.

The media has been a huge contributor to the insatiable hunger for new designs, cramming pages and television schedules with products intended to fill us with awe and the desire to own them. ¹⁸ In some ways consumerism has replaced genuine innovation with ceaseless umbers of novelty products, but with technology progressing and being a dominant driving force in the design industry, it is inevitable that devices now have to be innovative in function as well as aesthetics in order to appeal and stay competitive in an everdemanding consumer society and mass market. Tucker Viemeister of Smart Design says " Americans are always looking for ways to make life easier, which leads to all kinds of inventions, from contraptions to peel an apple, to gizmos to copy the pages of a book, to remote controllers to open their garage doors. But the function is always more important than the look of the device. That it actually works is the final judge. " ¹⁹ The Teague Company is still a leading organisation in the industrial design industry and continues to work closely with other companies updating modern appliances to add function and aesthetic value to the kitchen. Teague's Oster Counterforms 2005 range, (figure 6) which includes a coffee maker, toaster and toaster oven, is based on Oster's iconic beehive blender design. The Coffee maker has auto-shift off with pause ¹⁸Hemingway Wayne, *The Home, Mass Market Classics: A celebration of everyday design*, Rotovision, Singapore, 2003, p7 ¹⁹ Aldersey-Williams Hugh, *World Design: Nationalism and Globalism*, Rizzoli, New York, 1992, p156 and serve capability, an

adjustable heating plate with an indicator and integrated cord storage solution.

The toaster now incorporates an extra high toast lift feature, non-slip top surface, removable crumb tray, multi-shade setting, cool touch handles and removable crumb tray. All three products have attractive sleek metal like finishes with blue LED displays. Frigidaire, who Raymond Loewy collaborated with in the 1950s, is still producing household goods such as refrigerators. Frigidaire's homeware appliances are still highly sought after and continue to appeal to consumers in the mass market. One of the latest models the FRRC 25V8DS Refrigerator 2006 is a stainless steel look design, and displays innovative features such as smart fit glass shelves, humidity controls, electric digital temperature setting displays and transition lighting.

When considering that in the 1950s Frigidaire's refrigerator with rustproof aluminum was considered an innovative design, comparatively their refrigerators have progressed in functional innovation considerably as well as aesthetically. Still incredibly stylised, both Teague and Frigidaire's household designs reflect new functional innovation and seek to explore the design opportunities that arise from the evolving technologies that relate to these appliances. Technology, the media and the rise in consumerism are compelling forces that drive corporate designers to continually update and improve upon existing designs. From 1935-1955, It is evident that Streamlining was the style that characterised American corporate designers, who were forward thinking, faithful in their future of technology, and thus embraced the aesthetics of bulbous aerodynamic forms, applying them to a

vast range of machines, from cars to the average household item. It is a style that is hugely linked with mass production and consequently mass consumption, the principles and aesthetics continuing to live on in many of the designs we see in contemporary environment.

FIGURE 1 Henry Dreyfuss Model 500 Telephone 1949 FIGURE 2 Raymond Loewy Cold spot refrigerator 1934 FIGURE 3 Raymond Loewy Frigidaire refrigerator 1955 FIGURE 4 Henry Dreyfuss Associates (HDA) for Bell Telephone Wall Telephone 1956 (Companion to the desktop model 500) FIGURE 5 Henry Dreyfuss for Bell Telephone Princess phone 1959 FIGURE 6 TEAGUE for Oster Counterforms 2005 Coffee maker, toaster, toaster oven FIGURE 7 Frigidaire FRRRC 25V8DS Refrigerator 2006 BIBLIOGRAPHY 1.

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Flinchum Russell, *The man in the brown suit: Henry Dreyfuss*, Smithsonian Institute, New York, 1997 6. Hemingway Wayne, *The Home, Mass Market Classics: A celebration of everyday design*, Rotovision, Singapore, 2003 7. Hodges, Coad, Stone, Sparke, Aldersey-Williams, *The New Design Source Book*, 1992 8. Jodard Paul, *Design Heroes: Raymond Loewy*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992 9.

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