

The Collections of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich Recontextualized

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What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. The relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness.¹

—Walter Benjamin

Rediscovering the Familiar

The four collections of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich—Design, Graphics, Applied Art, and Poster—are for the first time appearing together in a collection catalogue entitled *Every Thing Design*. The central theme is *Wertewandel* (the change in values) in contrast to *Wertebeständigkeit* (the constancy of values), a theme which, in a museum context, is as attractive as it is complex. Inexhaustible in their diversity, the objects selected for presentation here bear witness to the determination of designers to continually re-evaluate design tasks and offer new aesthetic challenges to the general public. At the same time, the structure chosen for this publication seeks to elucidate what collecting means: transcending mere material accumulation in favor of a continuous debate with time-conditioned ideas and shifting contexts. This contextualizing of objects provides multiple perspectives that lead to a new interpretive approach for one of the most important European collections of design and applied art.

This publication is arranged into distinct sections framed by an extensive visual prologue and epilogue. The dramatic composition of the visual sequence is the result of an outsider's perspective—namely that of designer Irma Boom from Amsterdam, who chose the image pairs. Rather than a chronological sequence, design-related characteristics such as forms, colors, materials, and creative processes, determine the central theme.

Eight thematic compositions arranged around subject matter—in addition to central questions of design, production, and reception—form the core of the publication: *Change and Constancy*, *Authorship and Customization*, *Process / Technique / Function*, *Materiality / Immateriality*, *Information and Seduction*, *Life Cycles and Ecology*, *Design Reloaded*, and *Immigration of Forms*.

Change and Constancy presents works that to this day retain their validity and are still in circulation or use, and contrasts them with those works that have gone out of "fashion." What makes an object a

classic, the when and the why continue to fascinate. For advertising purposes, a "classic" means guaranteed sales, a timeless product created for eternity and forever contemporary. And still a design aim can often be eclipsed by its reception, as for example with "Typenmöbel" furniture, originally conceived for mass production but now considered classics of modernist design.

Authorship and Customization analyzes the consumer's desire for uniqueness. The designer is thought to ensure the quality of a product, in contrast to an object designed by an unknown hand. Mass-produced articles that are individualized and diversely produced create the illusion of exclusivity. If a product's design seems to be "always customized"—whether it is IKEA's build-it-yourself principle or Freitag bags—a marketing strategy is clearly at work. "Customizing" refers to the increasing presence of Service Design, which beginning in the 1990s has been an essential product component. Service Interfaces designed for immaterial products are, from the customer's perspective, desirable, useful, and usable; from the provider's perspective, effective, efficient, and unique. The Service Designer visualizes, choreographs, and formulates solutions that do not as yet exist.²

Process / Technique / Function points to synergetic design processes. The material from which things are made undergoes considerable processing, often demanding innovative approaches. And yet material has a seemingly immaterial counterpart, which is described in the fourth subject area, *Materiality / Immateriality*. This "immateriality" is represented by objects made from specific materials such as lace, hair, or eggshell porcelain.

The contrast of *Information and Seduction*, discussed in the fifth chapter, leads to surprising results. As in all the other subject areas, the objects in the collection span more than two centuries and form antipodes. If "seduction" is a direct reference to today's advertising practices, then it finds an early counterpart with the "Siren," a marionette from the Applied Art Collection from the nineteenth century. In Greek myth, the Sirens are daughters of Achelous: seductresses, hybrids of human beings and birds (usually with a female head), with superhuman knowledge and the ability to change the weather. In order to resist their beguiling song, Odysseus had himself tied to a ship's mast. The objects of seduction are contrasted with the sober information found in orientation systems for airports and train stations, which have their roots in commercial design.

For the theme *Life Cycles and Ecology*, Henry van de Velde's *Die Engelwache* (*The Angels' Watch*) was selected. While it is an important work in a discussion about applied versus fine art—representing as it does the artist's return to the crafts—and indeed could appear in

Change and Constancy, it is because the scene depicted is a baptism that it is found here. The ecological aspect, once again assuming a critically important role, is represented by examples of recycled materials used in industrial design, as well as by posters that call for a reasoned approach to resource use.

The contents of the final two chapters appear to be closely related. *Design Reloaded* presents icons of diverse design rhetoric alongside products that indicate a revival of design elements. The reloading of products brings together the past, the present, and the future. *Immigration of Forms* points to historically relevant influences. The works collected in this section represent the revival or reinterpretation of style elements from all fields—design, art, and commerce, sometimes with results that from a postcolonial perspective seem questionable.

Transcending the thematic compositions is a sociocultural observation of evolutionary processes. Societal conventions determine the contemporary validity of an object: as a reflection of public perception, fashion and trends shape and are shaped by the zeitgeist. A large selection of some 700 objects makes it possible for readers to come to terms with the question of changing values, to compare, and to make their own observations.

The holdings of these collections make it possible to look with new eyes at our culture and history. Surprising viewpoints emerge that can become an inspiration for the future.

The History of the Collections and Their Emphases

In order to answer the question “what should be collected” for the present, and to develop a perspective for the future, it is necessary to look back at the evolution of the four collections over time. In 1863, Gottfried Semper, at the time director of the department of architecture at the Eidgenössisches Polytechnikum (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) in Zurich, was asked by Julius Stadler to bring his influence to bear on the establishment of a collection of representative works of industrial manufacture and from the applied arts, a strategy then being pursued in other European countries.³ The idea was to inspire and strengthen local industry to make it competitive in a changing environment conditioned by economic necessity in a world growing increasingly closer, in which, like today, countries fought over markets. New communications systems such as the transatlantic telegraph (1866), and the world’s fairs with their global view of the latest products and innovative means of manufacture—including industrial production—demonstrated to Switzerland that it too had to change.

The pioneering applied art museums included the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria & Albert Museum, founded in 1852 following London's Great Exhibition of 1851, which became the model for many other museums: the Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna, now the MAK-Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst / Gegenwartskunst (1863), and the Deutsches Gewerbe-Museum in Berlin (1867). Applied art museums and their collections were not simply storage rooms for study collections, but also places intended to communicate with and educate the public in order to foster aesthetic literacy.

In 1875, the City of Zurich founded its Kunstgewerbemuseum with a "collection of international applied arts," out of which the museum's four collections would evolve. Just three years later, on May 3, 1878, the Kunstgewerbeschule opened, which today is the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK). It advocated the then-common teaching method of encouraging the copying of representative works for the later application of assimilated concepts. Most of the two-dimensional models were old ornamental engravings (Dürer), while the three-dimensional objects consisted mostly of historicist vessels. The students had to imitate these styles rather than develop their own creative expression.

From the outset, the Applied Art Collection included all sorts of objects: graphic art and commercial graphic design, East Asian objects, bookbindings, textiles, furniture, ceramics, works in glass, metal, and wood, marionettes, and posters. Conceived as teaching "material," the objects in the collection were thus not intended to neither serve the standing of the museum nor promote a private collection, but were rather associated with the school of applied arts.

The first essential steps towards defining a collection policy began to be taken in 1905, with the appointment of a new director of the Kunstgewerbeschule, Jules de Praetere (1879-1947) of Belgium. He sold many of the important works that had been collected until then in order to "modernize the school of applied arts, which had ossified in pseudo-academicism." His acquisition policy, which focused on a clear, minimized formal idiom, brought new wind into the sails of the collection, though from today's perspective such a caesura in the building of a collection would be rather controversial.

The works were sold with the intention of using the funds derived from deacquisitioning unwanted historicist objects to invest in Art Nouveau objects, the dominant style of the period. This change of course in the acquisition strategy of the institution's collections marked an important milestone: purchases were no longer made retrospectively by selecting from objects of historical importance, but were rather collected from contemporary production. Works were now purchased

directly from manufacturers and artists, at factories or world's fairs where works of international provenance were offered.

The new flow of information had a positive influence on the mindset and choice of forms in artists' creative processes. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of *Japonisme* sparked by the Japanese pavilions at the world's fairs of the nineteenth century—the subsequent influence of Japanese art and culture on European design is easy to identify. In addition, the logic behind copying objects lost its meaning as a result of the evolution of photography and its documentary and artistic possibilities.

The reformist attitude in Zurich was also a harbinger of the developing Werkbunds (Work federations). The German Werkbund set the standard in 1907 by breaking free of a design world based on decoration and imitation in favor of the reformist approaches of the emerging industrial design. The Swiss Werkbund was founded in 1913 in close cooperation with the Kunstgewerbemuseum under the leadership of Alfred Altherr, who had been the museum's director since 1912.

The Applied Art Collection [Kunstgewerbesammlung]

The Applied Art Collection includes over 15,000 objects and, alongside the Graphics Collection, is the oldest collection of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, as well as one of the most important collections of international applied art in Switzerland. Originally assembled as a collection for training, commerce, and industry, the collection's focal points are the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concentrated geographically on Europe, the United States, and modern Japan. It includes textile art, ceramics, and glass, dating from the historicist era to the present day. The Art Nouveau section has groups of works by William Morris, Emile Gallé, René Lalique, Hermann Obrist, and Henry van de Velde, and enjoys an international reputation. Among the finest items are a unique collection of marionettes by twentieth-century artists such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and an important musical instrument collection of some 250 objects.

The Graphics Collection [Grafiksammlung]

The Graphics Collection, is unique in Switzerland in terms of its diversity and its current focus on European graphic design. Documenting the aesthetic, technical, and cultural changes in our daily lives, from Gutenberg's time to the present, the Graphics Collection encompassed all graphic disciplines relevant to instruction at the former Kunstgewerbeschule. Once comprised of drawings, graphic

art, as well as illustrated books and textbooks from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, over time the collection has come to include private press work, East Asian works, as well as artists' books, photography, and graphic design.

Today the collecting activity concentrates on Switzerland and Europe, with a particular focus on advertising and information graphics, lettering, typography, and book design. The collection is being enlarged by the acquisition of current works by innovative graphic designers and advertising agencies, works from the estates of important designers, and examples of corporate design from important firms. Particular attention is paid to job printing; that is, graphic design in the form of flyers and advertisements that, like posters, were not designed for the long term and hence have relatively short design half-lives. Such works afford designers maximum freedom to express themselves in a contemporary language.

The Poster Collection [Plakatsammlung]

The Poster Collection is one of the largest and most important archives of its kind in the world. Over 330,000 objects, 120,000 of them researched and inventoried, document Swiss and international poster history—including political, cultural, and commercial posters—from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. The geographical emphasis—itsself determined by the history of poster design—is on Switzerland, Europe, Japan, Cuba, the former Soviet Union, and the United States.

The collection is continually expanded and brought up to date both in dialogue with contemporary output and acknowledging historical achievements. Its historical, thematic, and geographical diversity offer both a survey of poster art and a look into a visual archive of the everyday world. In addition to the principal questions of graphic design and typography, the Poster Collection also concentrates on a sociopolitical understanding of design, as posters reflect in a unique way the aesthetic and social processes of a particular era.

Posters are a fluid medium. They are pasted up and hang for just a few weeks in the streets before they, like sediment, are covered over by a new layer. Once posters have disappeared from the streetscape, years if not decades pass before the best of these works are sold at auction for high prices. Thus collecting posters requires one thing above all: being present and acting quickly based upon clear quality standards and an awareness of the textual context of existing holdings.

The Design Collection [Designsammlung]

The Design Collection—initiated in 1987—is devoted to the design of twentieth- and twenty-first-century mass-produced objects and the philosophy they reflect. The focus is on a broad representation of Swiss design, juxtaposed with reference objects of international provenance. This juxtaposition generates a dialogue that, thanks to the rich holdings, makes it possible to situate national cultural products within an international framework. Recurring themes in Swiss product design include strict functionalism, precision, and a highly developed mechanical culture that are evident in such classics as the Swiss watch and pocketknife.

The museum collects objects by well-known designers and everyday objects of anonymous design. The collection now boasts over 10,000 products and around 20,000 examples of packaging, and includes limited-run, mass-produced objects supplemented by prototypes and models. In addition to acquisitions and donations, since 1989 the collection also includes on permanent loan exemplars of product design generously supported by the Swiss Confederation, Federal Office of Culture Bern. Parallel to the object collection, an archive of Swiss design is being built to serve the needs of academic research work. Design drawings, user manuals, patent records, advertising materials, source texts, as well as parts of studio, company, and association archives form the basis of the documentation that extends far beyond the individual object.

A New Platform: www.emuseum.ch

The collections of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich have evolved over time and continue to do so, and thus, like all collections, they seismically map the beliefs of their day. Today, the Internet is a vital, forward-looking platform for making collections accessible internationally. The collection currently includes more than 500,000 objects, which are continually being inventoried and their entries updated. Between 2006 and 2008, more than 30,000 objects were made available online.

A user-friendly thesaurus is planned as soon as the detailed classification of all works with a simplified keyword system has been completed. When beginning a search, users will be presented with preselected objects onscreen. Making all the collections available online will create a far-reaching communication platform both for specialists and others interested in design. It not only expands the information on "collecting the everyday," a new subject of study, but also inspires new forms in the creative realm.

The image database offers an "over-view" of the collections' many objects and offers new perspectives. It is also possible to arrange them according to constantly changing categories. The objects in the individual collections then provide a network of cross-references and connections. Take salt and pepper, for example. A search for "Salz*" and "Pfeffer*" within the collections produces a total of forty records for a wide range of objects: salt shakers, posters, advertising, picnic cutlery, photographs, and even a beer mug designed by Henry van de Velde with a "salt glaze." Such meaningful onscreen results from a simple word search provide users something that could only have suspected given the large number of available objects. The screen provides a new picture. The unusual collection produced by a search term visually remaps the topography in which an object can be located. The connecting element can be a form, a technique, a color, a material, a date, a name, or much more.

Establishing New Connections

Increasingly, objects are being considered from broader points of view that point to new potential discourses and connections. These variations are pioneering contributions toward a descriptive culture in the field of design at its intersection with the applied arts. And based on exhaustive research, these changes make a reclassification possible. For professionals, the people and institutions module of the database—roughly corresponding to art historical provenance research—makes this process visible.

With product design, the question arises over what data should be entered; for example, the current name of the company or the historical one? With all the changes in the corporate landscape, that is not a simple research task. Often we have to break new ground in order to define special rules. Conversely, it is important to follow the history of the producer parallel to that of the product, since it is closely connected with the latter's production, design, and, sometimes, failure. A failure can often lead to a great success story on a second try. "Brilliant failure" is part of the creative process and deserves to be documented, reinforcing our awareness of the process, of research, and of experimentation—a look behind the scenes, as it were.

One oft-cited example emboldening us to try novel approaches is the librarian Julia van Haften, who while working at the New York Public Library in the 1950s was given the task of reorganizing the catalog of the book collections which had been based on departments such as architecture, archaeology, ethnography, and geology. The result was an entirely new discipline: photography as an art form. This example

illustrates how new perspectives alter time-established associations, and that novel approaches can indeed bear fruit.

With this reference to the overturning of old systems of categorization, we also point to an oft-discussed pair of concepts whose contextualization has often resulted in confusion: the "fine" and the "applied" arts, which are always depicted as polar opposites. In contrast to fine artists, for example, industrial designers do not work "self-reflexively"—that is, they do not conceal their lines of thought in complex formal idioms, oftentimes indecipherable, as part of a social critique or artistic strategy—but are rather bound to a task that must result in a functioning product. In the development phase, the two disciplines are often closely related and have certain things in common. As for example with "radical design," the proponents of which resemble those who do product development research. In the end, however, the two groups pursue different goals. In the designer's case, the coffee maker functions; in the artist's case, it mutates into a form with different content.

The Collection of the Future

Subjective appraisals and a curator's perception will forever influence a collection's expansion, which also must naturally reflect its prior history. Acquisitions must join the "choreography" of existing groups of works in order to advance collection strategies, or they at times must break with them if these strategies have distanced themselves from contemporary reality, as in the case of plaster casts. Objects in a collection must offer new characteristics relevant to the present and reflect new phenomena. To use the example of commercial graphic design, that concerns the whole spectrum of the digital palette, from type design to web sites to works of interactivity and game design. The departments of the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste can point the way forward; training its students for the future, it cannot help but influence the expansion of our collecting strategy—in the digital realm for example.

This opportunity to react to change—and which can be traced back to the relationship between teaching and research—will expand the horizon of our collections, and guarantee their contemporaneity. Conversely, our collections' holdings play a crucial role in research and design and continue to be a fertile pool of ideas for all creative ends by bearing witness to a great tradition of design, crafts, and industry, and communicating essential aspects of materials, technique, production, distribution, and reception.

What has remained of the philosophy on which the museum was founded is the concept of a study collection. The collections are seen as

performing an integrating function between theory and practice, art and industry, production and reception. They have been shaped by an interaction with the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, by the current production of designers, and by the vigilant eyes of the curators. In the structural diversification of the respective collections, they move between materiality and immateriality, continuously rewriting history.

Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 204.

2 Michael Erlhoff and Tim Marshall, eds., *Design Dictionary: Perspectives on Design Terminology* (Basel, 2008), p. 355.

3 Julius Stadler (1828-1904), professor for the theory of style, ornament, composition exercises, and landscape drawing at the Polytechnikum, who was engaged in 1863 to create an applied art collection in Zurich. Semper wrote about the London exposition of 1851 in "Wissenschaft, Industrie und Kunst" (1852), in which he advocated just such a collection.