

SPECIAL REPORT

DESIGN

Less is more: the rise of the very limited edition

The days when Modernists saw design for mass production as the height of achievement are gone. By **Glenn Adamson**

Good design used to be a simple matter. Was the object easy to use? Simple in appearance? Made from high-quality materials? Value for money? Those were the important questions. But today design is significantly more complex. Before a product ever gets to a consumer, it has usually been subjected to investment analysis, prototype development, focus-group discussion and advertising campaigns. Apple has achieved pre-eminence when it comes to the rigorous application of such techniques, but there are numerous companies that are equally consistent in building and maintaining their design identities: Dyson, Johnnie Walker, BMW, Disney, Prada and Coca-Cola, to name just a few.

In a discipline dominated by such rationalisation, the sensibility of individual designers would seem to have relatively little power. Yet, as Apple's current promotion of Jonathan Ive suggests (he is as close to a public figurehead as the company has, post-Steve Jobs), the celebrity designer is still a force to be reckoned with. Tom Dixon, Ron Arad, Philippe Starck: these figures can be marketed like Hollywood actors. They shepherd their brand identities just as assiduously as any multinational, but their tactics are rather different.

In this exalted firmament, a special place is reserved for objects with the principal function of being looked at. These showpieces are often extravagant, frequently ingenious, sometimes poetic: Tomás Libertiny's vase constructed entirely by honeybees (the "Made by Bees" series, begun in 2007); Marcel Wanders's chair made of rigidified macramé (1996 and onwards), like a hammock that's snapped to attention; Julia Lohmann's lamps handmade from Japanese seaweed. Though designers rarely make their core income from such prestige

In 2009, curator Gareth Williams staged an exhibition at the V&A entitled "Telling Tales" (14 July to 18 October). An exploration of the narrative tendency in contemporary design, the show had the structure of a fairytale. It began in a space evocative of a forest glade, populated with naturalistic objects; continued in a palatial setting, filled with extravagant neo-Baroque furnishings; and ended up in a dramatically lit section called "Heaven and Hell". Williams had devised the project prior to the onset of the recession, but when it arrived it seemed bang on time: a Last Judgment on the excesses of design in a bubble economy.

The quintessential object in the show was Tord Boontje's *Fig Leaf Cabinet*, 2008. Made of enamelled copper and cast bronze, and lined with custom-woven silk, it was manufactured by no fewer than 11 separate craft ateliers under the direction of Meta, an offshoot of the prominent British antique dealer Mallett. This connection to the past was fitting, in that Boontje's cabinet was sheer neo-Rococo excess. The fact that its imagery referred to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, and hence to Original Sin,



A Joris Laarman "Bone Chaise" piece (left), Studio Job's "Robber Baron" installation at the V&A (below); a Thomas Heatherwick "Extrusion" bench (inset)



series of scorched design classics (a touch of hellfire?) were also included in "Telling Tales". Taken together, these works suggested a design scene obsessed with its own questionable moral stance.

More recently, the ceramic designer Barnaby Barford has picked up on this theme with a series of mirrors based on the seven deadly sins, created for David Gill Gallery. The first of these, *Avarice*, was first shown last October at the Pavilion of Art and Design fair, an unapologetically commercial milieu. Made of hundreds of delicate porcelain flowers, each printed with a pattern taken from currency notes, the mirror was deliciously appropriate to the surroundings. If Tord Boontje's spectacularly over-the-top *Fig Leaf Cabinet* seems in retrospect to have captured the exuberance of pre-recessionary culture, then Barford's mirrors are exquisitely anxious, a reflection of our wiser but more troubled times. *G.A.D.*

made its £350,000 price tag seem like an important aspect of its content. Studio Job's "Robber Baron" series (2006 and onwards)—hideously gaudy creations that seemed almost to parody their prospective buyers—and Maarten Baas's

projects, they play an important role in establishing and maintaining reputation, rather like the haute couture line of a clothing brand.

There is little consensus about what to call these spectacular products. "Design Art" had a brief vogue, but designers tend to hate the term and for good reason. Even at this uppermost level of the market, design is a phenomenon unto itself. It does have points of contact with fine art: the fabrication workshops that manufacture the objects often make sculpture too, and most of the clientele who purchase limited edition design are serious art collectors. But as Marc Benda, of Friedman Benda Gallery in New York, points out, the days when there was a single art world with a unified frame of reference are long gone. Now there are "many, many miniature ecosystems". They are certainly interconnected but each has its own distinct culture made up of a network of practitioners, galerie advisers, auction house specialists, museum curators and private collectors.

Fabulously expensive, quasi-useful

Limited-edition design is one of these microsystems. It has affinities with contemporary art, high-end decorator furniture and industrial prototyping, but it is nonetheless a terrain in its own right. Pieces are usually functional, but only in a notional sense. Everyday activities like sitting, eating, and drinking serve mainly as pretexts for a leap into the imagination, a useful friction that helps strike the spark of formal invention.

Of course, the creation of fabulously expensive, quasi-useful objects is hardly new. Every Baroque palace in Europe is stuffed with them. But in the context of professional design, the prevalence of bespoke and limited-edition work is a fairly recent development. Modernists of the mid-20th century certainly made unique and limited-run objects, but that was not really their intention. Metalsmiths at the Bauhaus went so

CONTINUED ON PAGE

Adamson, Glenn. "Less is more: the rise of the very limited edition". *The Art Newspaper*, February 2013.

Less is more: the rise of the very limited edition

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

far as to retouch photos of their teapots, so as to hide damning evidence of hand craftsmanship. They dreamed of mass production but it proved difficult to reach a mass market.

By the 1970s, the tables had turned. Modernism was mainstream, and designers in Italy, America, Britain and Japan began to depart from its strictures. Modernists had argued that design should be objective, rational and democratic; figures like Shiro Kuramata, Gaetano Pesce and Ettore Sottsass demonstrated that it could be outrageous, expressive and exclusive. Their self-consciously extreme objects were props for an ongoing theatre of the absurd. They were, quite literally, made only for show, in the glossy pages of a design magazine, in the lobby of a boutique hotel, or standing on the well-lit platform of a museum. All these contexts stand apart from everyday experience. It was a direct inversion of the Modernist ambition to bring sensible design to the masses.

Postmodernism was a brief spasm, its heyday lasting only a decade. Its impact, however, is still felt today. Designers have thoroughly absorbed the idea that mass production is trumped by mass reproduction—that design is, above all, a

means to get an image circulating in the world. The story told about an object may be much more important than its use. These days, design students might even be encouraged to imagine an entirely fictional scenario—an alien world or a future society, perhaps—and then create furniture or clothing appropriate to that environment.

Yet underpinning these flights of fancy, more often than not you will find a deep investment in the fundamentals of workmanship. A compelling storyline must be a part of the designer's offer, but as Benda says, this has to be more than "good packaging for a product". The most effective design narrative is that which is inscribed into

"The most effective design narrative is that which is inscribed into the object's substance: in the process by which it was made"

the object's substance: in the process by which it was made. Innovative craft, often taken for granted in the postmodern era, has come to be a central concern. The young Dutch designer Joris Laarman is a leading example of this approach. His "Bone Chaise" series (2006 and onwards) was designed through a computer algorithm that calculates a maximally efficient supporting substructure for a biomorphic, shell-shaped seat. The resulting form is simultaneously automated and organic, and (given the amount of handwork involved in the original mould and the finishing) a harmonious marriage of innovative and old-fashioned techniques.

Once Laarman and his team had worked out

the challenges of production, they created a range of related forms. Aurélie Julien, of the gallery Carpenters Workshop, says that the rendering of a single design idea in multiple versions, materials or colourways, allows for flexibility in selling the work. The bottom line is that the designer and gallery are able to more easily recoup the investment made at the research and development stage.

One of the most ingenious variations on this tactic is a series of aluminium benches ("Extruded Benches", 2009 and onwards) realised by British designer Thomas Heatherwick. Made under the auspices of the

gallery Haunch of Venison (which specialises in contemporary art, but has recently edged into limited-edition design), and managed by the master artisan Theo Theodorou, the benches were made with the world's largest hot metal extrusion machine using a single massive die. Yet because of the unpredictable action of the molten aluminium, each bench is unique.

As design has become increasingly ambitious in production, galleries (and skilled project managers like Theodorou) have taken on an important role. This too has precedents in the 1980s, when Alessi, Sawaya & Moroni and Swid Powell began editing collections, and connecting star designers and architects with bespoke crafts-

manship. Galleries such as Friedman Benda, Carpenters Workshop and Haunch of Venison have perfected this practice. Galerie Kreo in Paris likens its work with designers like Hella Jongerius and Martin Szekeley to that of a "research laboratory". That may seem like promotional rhetoric (indeed, it is) but it has a basis in fact. At Carpenters Workshop, according to Julien, the realisation of a single piece can last long as three years. Given that the gallery's editions are usually limited to eight (in conformity with longstanding French practice regarding multiples), this represents a significant investment of time and resource into each resulting object. Clearly, this is not design for the masses.

Is it worth it? Will today's limited-edition objects become tomorrow's classics? Or will they come to seem irrelevant baubles, a little *cul-de-sac* in the course of design history? For museum curators like myself, this is a crucial and difficult question. So far, the V&A has tried to keep pace with limited-edition work, even as we increasingly turn our attention to less tangible (and often less expensive) design. It may be that the days we should be collecting apps, websites and blogs rather than tables and chairs. As figures like Laarman and Heatherwick demonstrate, however, there is still plenty of room for innovation and excitement in the domain of physical objects. It may be hard to say for sure what makes good design in the 21st century; but that does not mean it is not out there.

• The writer is head of research at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Adamson, Glen. "Less is more: the rise of the very limited edition". *The Art Newspaper*, February 2013.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760