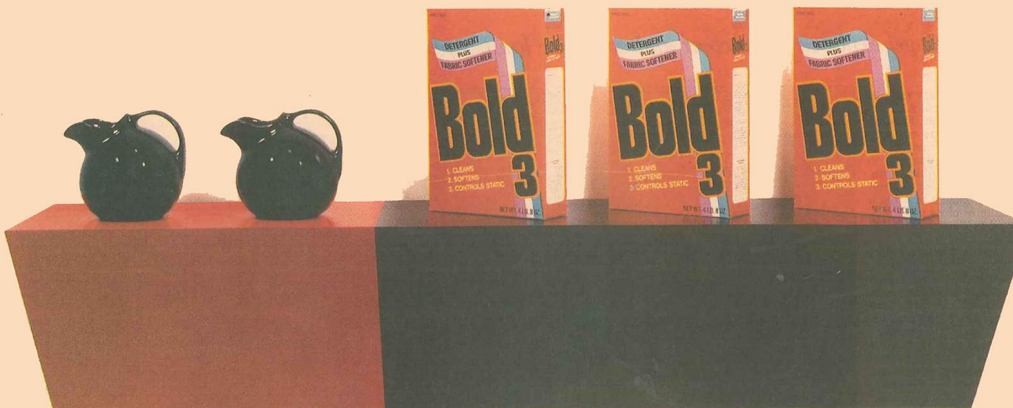


ARTS & BOOKS



You can't be serious

Postmodernism was meant to offer liberation from modernism's chilly rigour. Instead, Peter Aspden writes, it became a byword for shallowness, kitsch and empty irony. Can the V&A's autumn blockbuster rescue the movement's reputation?

It was the cultural movement that dared not speak its name, at least not without the knowing addition of ironic quotation marks. It was derided, even hated by its earnest enemies, who blamed its playful ways for the collapse of values in western culture. Its insouciant attitude towards truth, seriousness and purity mocked the solemn tropes of thousands of years of art history.

And yet, it seems, we are finally ready to celebrate the legacy of postmodernism.

The Victoria & Albert museum's new exhibition dedicated to the movement, opening later this month, may be the greatest hiding-to-nothing ever risked in the institution's rich history. The respectable and lovely shows that have preceded it over the last decade, starting from art nouveau, and taking us right through to the deranged futurist visions of cold war modernism, have together formed a stunning overview of modern art and design, and a rigorous 100-year history of taste.

Now we come to the end of the trail, the final edition in the series, and what? Buildings that look like toys. Teapots that look like buildings. Camp pop stars posturing in ludicrous outfits. Surface championed at the expense of depth, play standing in for purpose, ironic detachment observing coolly amid the wreckage of metaphysical ambition. Should this be a celebration, or a funeral for western art's most profound aspirations?

Curators Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, understandably devoted to their exhibition, know they have a battle on their hands. Postmodernist aesthetics are widely regarded as an unfortunate blot on the visual and conceptual landscape of the 20th century. An aberration. A spasm of kitsch that will prove to have no serious consequence on subsequent cultural trends. But Adamson and Pavitt are determined to put the case for the defence.

Here is a start: a vital clue to understanding postmodernism lies in its very title. It is the only artistic movement explicitly to name its enemy. The postmodern moment was an explosion of impatience, "an outraged antagonism, or annoyed indifference, to the legacy and narratives of modernism," Adamson says.

The rigorous discipline and purity of form demanded by modernists had started with impeccably good intentions, but had by the 1960s been ambushed by the corporate world, which filled its reception halls with Le Corbusier armchairs, and whose leaders sat in identically sleek and soulless offices, monuments to their vaulting yet smoothly pursued ambitions.

The new generation of artists and designers was repelled by such corporate associations. Paula Scher, then starting out as a young graphic designer (and now a principal at the Pentagram design consultancy), describes the stultifying feeling: "Modernism was like my mom," she tells me in her New York office. "Don't mess around, just sit and play nicely."

Her own field was dominated in the early 1970s by the Swiss international style – the Helvetica typeface was a hegemon of the graphic design world. "But the international style had become the language of AT&T," says Scher. "And that was bad. I had been part of the hippie rebellion. Corporations were the enemy."

Her aims in those days were, she says, modest: "I wasn't interested in ripping

things apart. I was interested in inventing form. I was trying to find something a little dirtier, less precise. But I certainly didn't know I was being a postmodernist. I didn't even hear the term until the mid-1980s."

Scher's early experiments with lightening the tone of modernist design led her to what would become a key strategy in postmodernist aesthetics: quotation from the past. Her famous 1984 poster design for Swatch was a deliberate act of homage to a 1934 constructivist poster by the Swiss designer Herbert Matter. "He was a hero of mine," says Scher. But the design world saw the tribute as straightforward theft. "I became a pariah for years. And it still gets taught at art school as plagiarism."

She talks a little wistfully of the emphasis on wit and parody that marked those days of experimentation. "I have a hard time explaining it to students these days," she says. "But the joke was the thing."

It was the joke, however, that annoyed so many people, artists and audiences alike, as postmodernist techniques became more widely adopted. When the septuagenarian architect Philip Johnson appeared on the

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cover of Time magazine in 1979 holding a two-foot model of his new AT&T building in New York, it sent shock waves around the profession. Not only was the building's Chippendale top and pink granite detailing a humorous affront to all those stern edifices in its central Manhattan neighbourhood, but they had also been designed by one of modernism's most famous champions. It was an act of treachery, and the building was widely hated.

Judith Grinberg, who worked with Johnson on the project, looks out of a window from which you can see the building's controversial jigsaw-piece top and says serenely: "You can see it smiling at us." She recalls Johnson showing the design to her, and to AT&T. "When he first came in with the scribbles, I thought he was joking. I still don't know where it came from. It wasn't easy persuading AT&T that this was the right solution."

She says the building became a "lightning rod" for the controversies over postmodernism, which nevertheless legitimised the movement throughout the world. "Philip was just bored. He wanted to be more playful," she recalls. Critics today mark the corporate acceptance of the explicitly postmodern building as the beginning of the end for the movement, in much the same way that modernism had been commercially hijacked, but within a much shorter timespan.

By the 1980s, postmodernist designs were finding mass acceptance, particularly in their witty reinterpretations of everyday objects. Etторе Sottsass, founder of the Memphis group, manufactured furniture that was largely dedicated to looking good in photographic reproduction, and barely concerned with comfort. It chimed with the times, which championed ostentation and originality. "They still challenge," says Marc Benda, of New York's Friedman Benda



Gamble Main picture: 'Supremely Black' (1985) by Haim Steinbach. Left: Grace Jones in a maternity dress (1979) by Jean-Paul Goude. Bottom left: a cover of WET magazine (1979) by April Greiman and Jayme Odgers. Bottom right: 'Super Lamp' (1981) by Martine Bedin



furniture gallery, of the extravagantly coloured chairs and sofas. "They fight harmoniousness. They reflect this profound disillusionment with the practice of good taste," Sottsass too disliked being labelled a postmodernist. "I once had a conversation with him about it, and he yelled at me for 20 minutes," Benda says.

Adamson and Pavitt want to recapture that radical and energetic repudiation of the past that fuelled the best postmodernist art and design. It was after all related, particularly in New York, to punk and its various musical offshoots. "Once we realised we could put David Byrne and the Grace Jones at the heart of our narrative instead of Philip Johnson, it changed the project for us," Adamson says. And according to Pavitt, the glossy designs of 1980s fashion also reflected trends in post-

modernist philosophy, which concerned itself with the mutability of identity.

Both curators want to downplay the ironic aspect of the movement. "We were determined not to make this a show about the Ironic Gesture," says Pavitt, wary of the cliché. "We want to convey the sense of enthusiasm at the heart of postmodernism, not that dissipated feeling of 'we have done it all, there is nothing left!'"

They say they made an early decision not to attempt any compact definition of a relentlessly complex movement. "It is a term that troubles a lot of people," says Pavitt. "They either know too much about it, or never really got to grips with it."

Adamson adds that embracing the plurality of postmodernism will be to the show's advantage. "We were anxious not to make it look like all the artists and designers here were trying to accomplish the same thing. They weren't." Visitors to the exhibition will instead be given a "good handle" on the movement, he says, "by studying its palette of techniques." Which were? "Bricolage. Quotation. Fragmentation. Self-referentiality." The exhibition itself, he adds, will avoid any postmodern trickiness. "It is a historicist approach."

So what, looking back, is the legacy of postmodernism today? There is, inevitably, no easy answer. And yet it is all around us. "Postmodernism in terms of a design movement may have had a limited shelf life," Pavitt says. "But postmodernism as a set of broader concerns is an ongoing project." She is surely right: the vocabulary of popular culture – the mash-up, the remix, the pop-up – is deeply influenced by postmodernism's promiscuous cultural plundering. They are confused art forms for confusing times.

"And you can't imagine contemporary art without postmodernism," adds Adamson. "The exhibition's scope ends in 1990, on the brink of the digital revolution. Soon, thanks to Photoshop and some fiendishly sophisticated computer software, everyone would become his or her own postmodernist."

Today's cultural climate is freer, less constricted by the dictates of taste. But is it a happier place? Be careful what you wish for, Adamson says he wants the exhibition to show "both the advantages and disadvantages of radical permissiveness". He wants to give visitors a sense of the ambivalence of liberation, and of "the bewildering nature of free-floating subjectivity", in which no one tells you what to do, and self-invention is everything.

Of course there was eventually a reaction against all this playful questioning, as art forms turned once more to their worthier and more traditional imperatives. But their pure intentions were surely forever compromised. "You can't unlearn the lessons of postmodernism," says Adamson. "Modernism was the transparent window, but postmodernism is the shattered mirror." And we are still picking up the pieces.

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