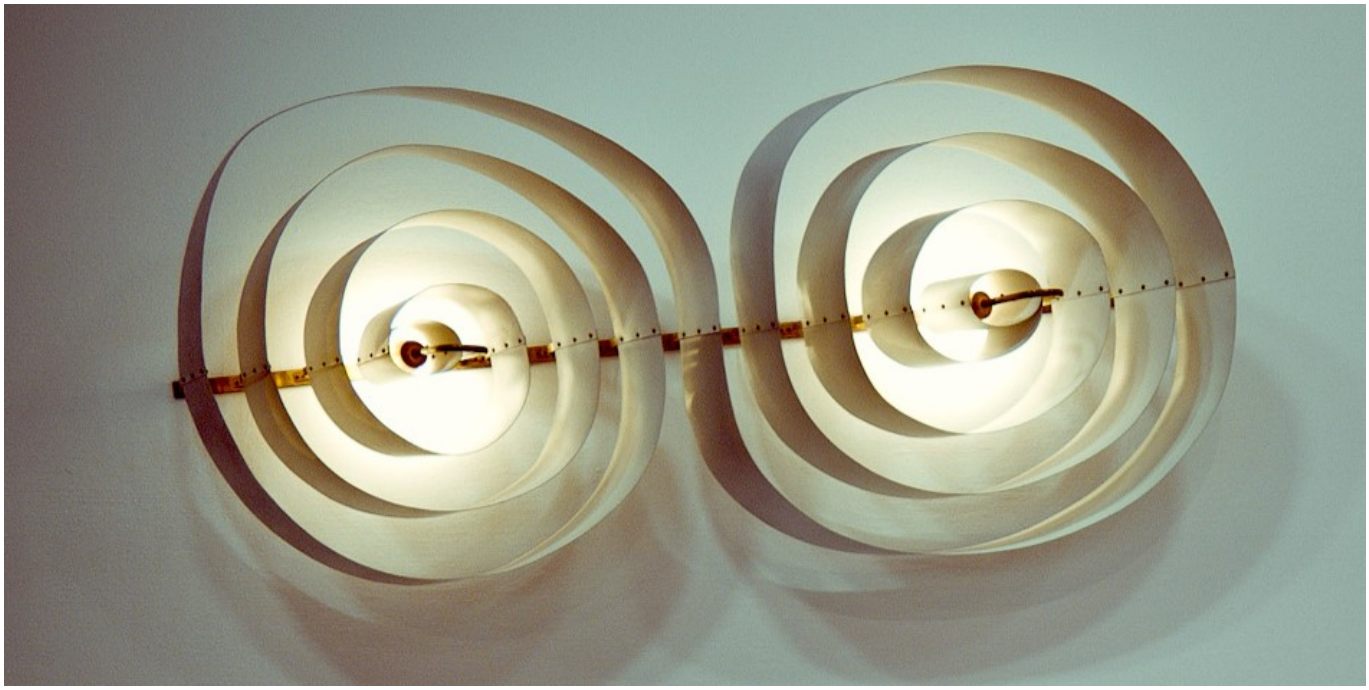
Industrial Design. Culture and Hallmarks of a Global Art Form [1/7. Presence of Design]



by Enrico Maria Davoli

The seven-chapter essay we begin publishing today is not a design history manual. However, it is not a summary of convenience, either. Rather, it aims to explore the general notion of "design" and the more specific notion of "industrial design".

• First chapter addresses the pervasiveness of design in today's world. As with all creative human activities, there is no clear dividing line between author's objects, which represent a small percentage, and anonymous objects. Whether the latter are truly anonymous or merely reflect what occurs in most production sectors, where the work does not entitle the workers to public visibility, is not important here. The important thing is that design is first and foremost an artistic industry and a collective creation.

• Second chapter analyzes the two words making up the expression "industrial design", emphasizing the differences between the english and italian expressions and explaining why the english term has become more prevalent. However, behind the words "design" and "industry", in addition to their etymology, is a very ancient historical and social matter. The two terms coexist in "industrial design", but for a long time, they existed separately. Their fusion dates back no more than a hundred years.

• Third chapter examines why projects never existed in the technical,

scientific, and communicative form common today, in pre-modern societies. To answer this question, we must delve into the organization of these societies, their production systems, and the value scales that governed various types of work, including what we now call artistic work. A comparison with industrial and post-industrial modernity reveals the profound changes having occurred.
• Fourth chapter reflects on a time long past when artisans, working together, developed the most basic design ideas and shapes for a few objects, using relatively simple physical and chemical processes. Decorative repertoires applied to various classes of objects with a rigor that might seem out of place today, are the counterpart of today's much more fluid and flexible design.
• Fifth chapter explores a fundamental dynamic for understanding the origins of modernity and, therefore, of industrial design: the invention of movable type printing. This new technology sparked insights and energies that were previously unimaginable, stimulating the spread of ideas and their verification, validation, and transformation into actions and objects.
• Sixth chapter recalls the fundamental stages of Industrial Revolution, which established the historical and cultural basis for design as a profession. It also draws parallels between design and other sectors of modern industry sharing a planning dimension.
• Seventh chapter attempts to outline the designer's profile as an actor in a society where consumption is constantly rising. Their contribution is decisive in determining the final appearance of the products the people consume. This is a summary profile, outlined through a few typical situations, and the names mentioned are purely for illustrative purposes. It is not an abstract order of importance, but rather a logic of representativeness with respect to the general issues addressed in the text.
• The bibliography is divided into chapters and consists of texts that were important for writing the essay, despite their relevance to design issues not always being immediately apparent.

1.1. Design is Everywhere

When we look through the advertising flyers found in our mailboxes, we see that most of the items depicted, such as appliances, cell phones, PCs, sports equipment, and DIY tools, fall within the realm of design, however basic and stereotypical they may be. When we visit a low-cost furniture showroom (multinational IKEA is perhaps the best-known example) we see that many of the items replicate, albeit in a simplified way, the canonical styles of 20th-century design. Even the car we drive could be considered a piece of design history because its aesthetic obsolescence will make it appear obsolete in a few years, ready to be added to an ideal car design gallery.

Design is everywhere in the objects and images of our daily lives. Design processes are linked to the things surrounding us, from tableware and transportation to appliances and food packaging, subway signs and corporate logos, and the hardware and software of the many technological devices we use.

When we talk about design, we're not just talking about everyday objects; in that case, we're talking about *product design*. We also consider interior architecture and furnishings (*interior* and *furniture design*), communication, publishing, and advertising (*graphic* and *visual design*), typography (*type design*), clothing (*fashion design*), lighting (*lighting design*), packaging (*packaging design*), the internet (*web design*), the setting up of an exhibition (*exhibition design*), and gastronomy (*food design*). There are also rapidly evolving issues, such as *interaction design*, *retail design*, and *service design*, as well as new approaches and philosophies, such as *universal design* and *design for all*.


Trony kitchen appliances flyer, August-September 2023.

When introducing the concept of "design" and its impact on today's world, an overview similar to what we have seen so far seems obvious. However, emphasizing the obvious is insufficient and can be counterproductive. Three centuries after the beginning of the modern industrial era, it's clear that the objects that fill our lives require careful planning divided into distinct, interdependent phases – from design to mass production, storage, market launch, sale, consumption, and disposal and recycling. Design, in fact. However, the term "design" is becoming increasingly blurred and generic. Labels are multiplying while the things they refer to are becoming inflated and changing appearance, like in a mirror game.

Until about fifty years ago, most designers had backgrounds in painting, graphics, and architecture, and those were their professional credentials. Today, however, designers are hybrid figures at the intersection of multiple, fragmented disciplines. They occupy many fields that were previously monopolized by fine and applied arts exponents.

On the one hand, the word "design" refers to a complex activity that branches out across different production chains. On the other hand, its position at the intersection of art, technology, economics, psychology, and sociology seems increasingly indecipherable, and its artistic, aesthetic, and ethical prerogatives seem increasingly nebulous. What is the common thread, the unifying element, behind a complex set of skills aimed at designing a

product, an environment, or a service, whether material or immaterial? Where are the roots of an activity that is everywhere and nowhere?

1.2. Anonymity and Authorship

The linguistic stereotypes that have entered everyday use tell us something important about the subject. For instance, we refer to an object (such as a chair, lamp, or table) bearing a signature or famous brand name as a “design object”. However, as mentioned earlier, all mass-produced objects are, in reality, “design objects”. They fall along a spectrum ranging from purely utilitarian designs entrusted to technical offices whose designers remain virtually unknown, to acclaimed, internationally renowned designs whose most illustrious names are true stars. Their creations are the pride and joy of the most prestigious companies and appear in antique shops, modern art galleries, exhibitions, museums, and auctions.

As with every discipline, from painting to theater to music, anonymous and depersonalized design items have always existed and always will. These are design items whose authors are unknown or disregarded, even if known. Many objects created in the second half of the 19th century fall into this category. These objects are still essential in our daily lives today and include deck chairs, clothes pegs, paper clips, and drawing pins.



Anonymous objects (photo credits Triennale Milano).

Venturing into the paradox, we can identify borderline cases of spontaneous design outside of any market strategy. This is evident in the many artifacts

created by non-professionals in economically poor regions who construct objects for self-consumption or meager trade that would otherwise be unavailable. Something similar (i.e., pseudo-design that empirically imitates industrially produced objects) occurs wherever political, economic, and social conditions make it convenient to substitute goods with self-produced ones, due to their scarcity and high cost.

For now, let’s not go any further down this road because it would lead us to the overly simplistic assertion that design has always existed and will always exist. In fact, we know that since the dawn of time, humans have distinguished themselves from all other animals by being the only ones capable of developing and continuously perfecting objects and tools that facilitate interaction with the surrounding environment, exploit its resources, neutralize its dangers, and devise new survival strategies. Nevertheless, it can be said that the planning dimension underlying design is implicitly or explicitly present in every step taken by the human species.

1.3. Industrial Design

First, it’s important to understand the historical context in which design emerged as a discipline. Specifically, it emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries when the Industrial Revolution took control of the global economy. Another important issue that is rarely addressed is clarifying the relationship between design and other languages, such as visual, audio, and multimedia, that also emerged during this period. These languages, just like design, have belonged entirely to the phenomenology of the mature industrial revolution, which set out to conquer the world, since its earliest manifestations.

“Industrial” is precisely the word we cannot do without when discussing design as an activity that oversees the modern production of consumer goods. So, it’s not just design, but rather industrial design, as it was called in the mid-twentieth century when the first historical, aesthetic, and technical studies on the subject were published. However, before examining how industrial design became a protagonist of modern culture, marking its entire historical trajectory, two issues must be addressed.



John Absolon, William Telbin (for Vincent Brooks, Day & Son Litographers), Interior view of the Crystal Palace during the London Great Exhibition, 1851, hand-colored lithograph from the series "Recollections of the Great Exhibition", Lloyd Brothers & Co., London 1851, 38 x 54.4 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum (Wikimedia).

The first issue is lexical and will be addressed in the next chapter. Why are english words so often used to express ideas that could be conveyed in one's native language with nearly identical words? In reality, they are only apparently identical. The italian "disegno industriale", the french "dessin industriel", the german "industriedesign", and the spanish "diseño industrial" are all equivalent to the english "industrial design." In fact, the russian expression "promyšlennyj dizajn" (промышленный дизайн) is a direct translation of the second word in the english term. In short, other languages have assimilated the english expression, preferring it to their own and thereby acknowledging its primacy. In the next chapter, we will clarify these aspects and recognize the rights of precedence to the extent that they can be identified.

The second issue is historical and chronological in nature and will be analyzed in chapters 2, 3, and 4. Given that the history of industrial design coincides with the Industrial Revolution (even theoretically and

philosophically, the awareness necessary for developing a modern design culture only emerged in the 18th-century Enlightenment) there are nevertheless a series of premises present in previous ages that cannot be ignored. What historical significance should be given to this legacy of ideas, workshop practices, and empirical solutions that lie at the intersection of art and science and span the entirety of human civilization? What relationship exists between the traditional dimension of knowledge, in which the human and the divine are closely interconnected, and the technical-scientific pragmatism that has taken its place in the last centuries?

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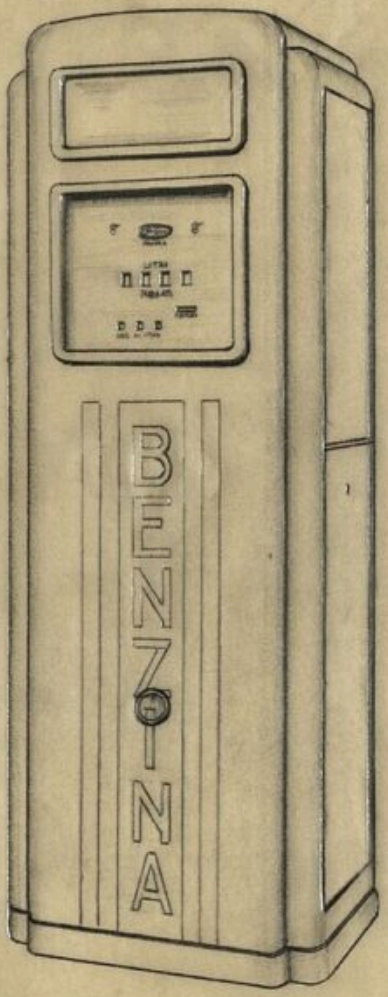
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