**Design Classics**

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The “design classic” is problematic in terms of design history and theory. The term enjoyed great currency in

the UK and the USA during the so-called “design decade” of the 1980s and is still used freely today. Design

classics are usually objects that can be displayed on plinths or in exhibition spaces. Where an object is too big it

can be represented by models, photographs, and/or “touchstone” type elements of it.

Typically, design classics are presented in object-by-object, populist design histories. One of the first of

these was Stephen Bayley’s *In Good Shape* (1979). Design classics crossed the boundary between American

sales-driven “industrial design” and high-modernist European “good” design, reflecting the contradiction of

design being seen as something of the mass market but the designer being seen as a creative genius whose

products are an art form. It is not a term that has entered the language of “soft” design, such as design

thinking, service design, and codesign.

Design classics are generally items that have become significant in terms of continuous production over

a long time with sustained sales—“timeless”; those that have disrupted and adjusted accepted aesthetic

norms—“iconic”; and/or have enjoyed huge sales and are internationally or, better still, globally recognized as

“ubiquitous.” Other (often contradictory) terms are often applied to design classics, such as “unique.” This

reflects the fact that the design might be unique but the product made in huge quantities.

An example of a “timeless” design classic is a chain-driven rear-wheel, pneumatic tyred bicycle. Here

the “classic” elements are more a set of features that are common to almost all bicycles built since 1900. The

problem then becomes *which* bicycle represents the whole? This is invariably a very subjective process that

tends to favor those objects that enjoy strong demand from collectors, ironically often because of their rarity

or unusualness within the type-form, for instance the obscure Mikael Pedersen design was illustrated by Penny

Sparke in *A History of twentieth Century Design*. As with art objects, classic status is enhanced if an individual

can be credited with the design, along with precise maker and date.

An example of an “iconic” classic is the Olivetti “Valentine” typewriter (1969). This product, designed by

Ettore Sottsass, is seen to have reimagined the look and use of office equipment, mainly by being presented in

bright red, black, and yellow giving it a “pop” aesthetic. The same “iconic” status is given to Henry Beck’s

London Underground system map (1933), which set the standard for diagrammatic representation of transport

systems across the world.

An example of a “ubiquitous” classic is the Coca-Cola bottle, which has been manufactured in huge

quantities with minor changes since 1916. The huge market reach of Coca-Cola is what gives the bottle its

status rather than the bottle itself.

An interesting facet of design classics is that although the term ascribes high cultural capital to objects,

this is often not reflected in the monetary value they achieve on the secondary market. The fact that many

design classics were made in large quantities undermines this key process in ascribing “importance” to art

objects.

**References and further reading**

Lees-Maffei, Grace. 2015. *Iconic Designs: 50 Stories About 50 Things*. London: Bloomsbury