**Design Objects and the Museum**

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Arguably the first clear attempt to define design objects for museum collections was in the Museum of

Manufactures in London, set up in the wake of the 1851 Great Exhibition and later to become the Victoria and

Albert Museum (V&A). The Museum of Manufactures was specifically arranged to educate visitors about

design. Its original collection was selected from objects exhibited in the Great Exhibition by Henry Cole, Owen

Jones, and Richard Redgrave. All three were instrumental in the formation of the UK’s system of “Government

Schools of Design” intended to improve the aesthetic quality of manufactures. They believed in a binary

opposition of “true and false principles,” with the government schools having a mission to instill “true

principles” into students and in turn the larger public, and the museum was arranged accordingly. Visitors

walked through an exhibition of objects displaying “false principles,” soon popularly dubbed “the chamber of

horrors,” before they reached the displays devoted to “true principles.”

The idea of pitching the true against the false was seductive and was to characterize many displays of

design in museums, particularly temporary exhibitions, throughout the twentieth century. The last notable

attempt to invoke it in a major British institution was by Stephen Bayley in the Boilerhouse Project in 1985,

appropriately in the V&A. This exhibition was mounted while postmodernism was undermining the easy

definition of “good” and “bad” design that developed from “true” and “false,” and had largely underpinned

modernist design theory through the twentieth century.

While the Museum of Manufactures focused on the current, this was soon largely replaced by

antiquarianism. The V&A progressively became a depository for old decorative arts rather than contemporary

design. As “manufactures” developed an ever-increasing history, these too were treated in the same way as

“antiques,” generally being acquired well past their currency and once they had been proven in the secondary

market.

An alternative to an antiquarian approach was that adopted by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in

New York in the 1930s. Here contemporary designed goods were treated as modernist art objects, exhibited

on plinths in isolation, “floating in space” for contemplation. MoMA saw design as very distinct from

technology and was happy to accept an Alfa Romeo motorcar without its engine, on the grounds that the

engine was not part of its formal design. While MoMA was seen to encapsulate modernist attitudes, these

were those of fine art, somewhat different from the technocratic ideals of modernism in design. What MoMA

did achieve was the legitimization of the concept of the “design classic.”

The MoMA Alfa Romeo presents a case study in the problematic of how design is perceived. The V&A

adopted a Kantian classification of objects by material; “ceramics,” “metalwork,” “textiles,” and so on; a model

that was widely adopted. Moreover it was commonplace to separate “design” from “technology,” often

placing them in different institutions. As many designed goods were overtly technological, yet highly

aestheticized, they did not “fit” this model. Nor could the V&A accommodate hybrid items, such as decorative

cutlery with ceramic handles, nor new materials, notably plastics.

**References and further reading**

Farrelly, Liz and Joanna Weddell. 2016. *Design Objects and the Museum*. London: Bloomsbury

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