**Humor in Design**

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Humor is something so subjective that it is difficult to define what humor in design might be. Most obviously

humor is an essential component of much illustration, in particular cartoons and for many children’s books. It

has also been an essential part of advertising and, in the UK in particular, public information and propaganda.

A notable use of humor in this respect was the “careless talk” campaign in the Second World War.

Humor and novelty are closely linked in many areas of three-dimensional design. Traditionally much

has been in the form of *trompe l’oiel*, particularly in ceramics. Here tablewares formed to look like fruit and

vegetables have been commonplace for centuries. Ceramic is also frequently employed to model novelty items

that look like figurines or simple ornaments, but in fact turn out to be functional tablewares; tea pots are a

particular favorite for such treatment. Novelty items of this type began to proliferate during the second half of

the nineteenth century with rising mass production.

Associated with the mass market and “bad taste,” humorous, novelty designs were generally derided

by western European design critics, particularly those subscribing to modernist beliefs in the twentieth

century, but they were embraced in postmodernism. Famously, Venturi and Scott-Brown’s concept of the

decorated shed in *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972) looked particularly at a shop selling duck products, itself in

the form of a duck, legitimizing this type of design as one worthy of critical attention. Postmodernists termed

this sort of design “product semantic” in that the object visually represents its purpose, although traditionally

it would be described as a “visual pun.” There is a long history of such products, such as “cow creamers” (milk

jugs in the form of cows, pouring from the mouth with the tail the handle). Indeed, a Minton’s wine jug,

enclosed by grape vine with its stem the handle, won a UK Society of Arts prize in 1846, something that would

be unthinkable a generation later.

A more subtle type of humor in design often works on a principle of “knowingness” in which ironic or

“witty” references are made to past styles, but where humor ends and historicism takes over is a matter of

opinion. A lot of 1950s European whimsical design made reference to that of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries as a type of counterpoise to modernism and were often created in conjunction with it. This is seen

particularly at expos, such as the 1951 Festival of Britain, where it not only characterized the entertainment

side of the event but was also used to explore national identity.

Witty references to past precedent are a feature of much design of the “postmodern” style of the early

1980s that only fully make sense to those with knowledge of the grand narrative of architectural and design

history, or to particular specialist disciplines. With a long history and a huge resource of objects to exploit for

references, studio and small production ceramics were, and remain, particularly strong in such humor. Such

design is often termed “playful.” The products of the Italian Memphis Studio, with their 1950s-looking plastic

laminate surfaces, references to art deco, and a host of other historic popular styles, could be seen to

epitomize “playful” and thus humorous use of the past in design.

**References and further reading**

Heller, Steven and Gail Anderson. 1991. *Graphic Wit: The Art of Humor in Design*. New York: Watson-Guptill