

*Design in the USA*. By Jeffrey L. Meikle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 252 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, bibliography, timeline. Paper, \$22.50. ISBN: 0-192-84219-6.

Reviewed by Merritt Roe Smith

Jeffrey Meikle is no stranger to the study of design. In 1979 he published *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925–1935*, a monograph that cast fresh light on a neglected subject while placing it in the larger context of modern industrial America. *Design in the USA* expands upon his earlier work by investigating the origins of professional design and its development from the late nineteenth century through the golden years of the 1930s and 1940s to its decline and reconfiguration during the late twentieth century. As part of the Oxford University Press History of Art series, *Design in the USA* is a fresh synthesis aimed at a large reading audience.

Although design emerged as a recognized profession after the Civil War with the “Kensington” and “Arts and Crafts” movements in interior design, it did not reach maturity until after World War I. In a fascinating chapter entitled “Designing the Machine Age, 1918–1940,” Meikle argues that the worlds of art and big business began to converge during the 1930s, when “the profession known as industrial design emerged during the Great Depression” (p. 105). Norman Bel Geddes, Walter Dorwin Teague, Raymond Loewy, and Henry Dreyfus led the way with their strikingly modernistic “streamlining” styles that drew on the reigning industrial ethos of the age in emphasizing “the beauty of precision, control, and visual efficiency” associated with “smooth orderly progress” (p. 121). Anyone who has viewed the precisionist art of Joseph Stella, Charles Demuth, and Charles Sheeler can readily appreciate the artistic roots of streamlining. Clearly, more was involved than simply producing new, more visually appealing and sophisticated products. Indeed, Meikle reveals that leading industrial designers were called upon by business moguls to help them sell their products in the midst of a devastating depression. He concludes his discussion of this “golden age” of design by pointing to the inherent contradiction that existed between the shining optimism of the

modernist/streamlining movement and the widespread pessimism that accompanied the Great Depression.

The alliance between the design and business worlds grew after World War II as pent-up consumer demand energized postwar markets. While Lowey and other “big name” industrial designers executed some of their best work in the postwar period, they were joined by a younger cohort of designers who took the modernist impulse in new and interesting directions. Perhaps best known were Eero Saarinen and Charles and Ray Eames (all connected with the Cranbrook Academy of Art near Detroit), whose compression-molded organic furniture designs proved extremely popular among high-end buyers. At the same time, General Motors and other automobile makers assembled design teams that took streamlining to new levels of ostentation and excess in the belief that “more is better” (p. 152).

While the design business flourished during the postwar years, Meikle argues that it also became segmented into an elitist, “high-end” wing presided over by New York’s Museum of Modern Art and a more vernacular, “lower-end” wing, known as “Populuxe.” Including everything from “American Modern” dinnerware to mass-produced refrigerators and electric toasters, Populuxe aimed at a growing middle-class market. “The sheer multiplication of objects,” Meikle notes, “signified democratic abundance itself” as well as “the desire for release” in an age of cold-war containment (pp. 156–57).

Meikle ends *Design in the USA* with a perceptive reflection on the fragmentation and decline of modern design during the 1960s (which he associates with widespread social tensions generated by urban poverty, racism, and the Vietnam War) and the emergence of “postmodernism” during the 1980s (which he associates with the advent of the information age, especially the electronic digital computer). Focusing on Ford’s innovative 1986 Taurus, the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, the “biomorphic” houseware designs of Michael Graves, and especially Jerry Manock’s “user-friendly” Macintosh computer of 1984, Meikle reveals how the transition to postmodern design took place. Of all these developments, he views the electronic digital computer as the most important agent of change because its ever-changing software innovations gave users “a feeling of being closer to the source of things, closer to the basic level of the artisan or craftsperson, than at any time since the advent of the

Industrial Revolution.” Thanks to computing, things became more malleable and flexible, thus fostering “explosively proliferating forms of expression addressed to increasingly smaller subcultures” (p. 210).

One of the great strengths of *Design in the USA* is the way Meikle contextualizes his subject and relates it to broad currents in society and culture. However, readers of the *Business History Review* may be disappointed that he does not probe the nexus between business and design very deeply. Although designers were artists, they also were closely aligned with the business world. Yet, other than a brief discussion of Harley Earl and Detroit industry after World War II, we learn little about the business side of design. Nonetheless, this is a highly useful study. Anyone who wants to learn about design and material culture in America should begin by reading this well-written and beautifully illustrated book.

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