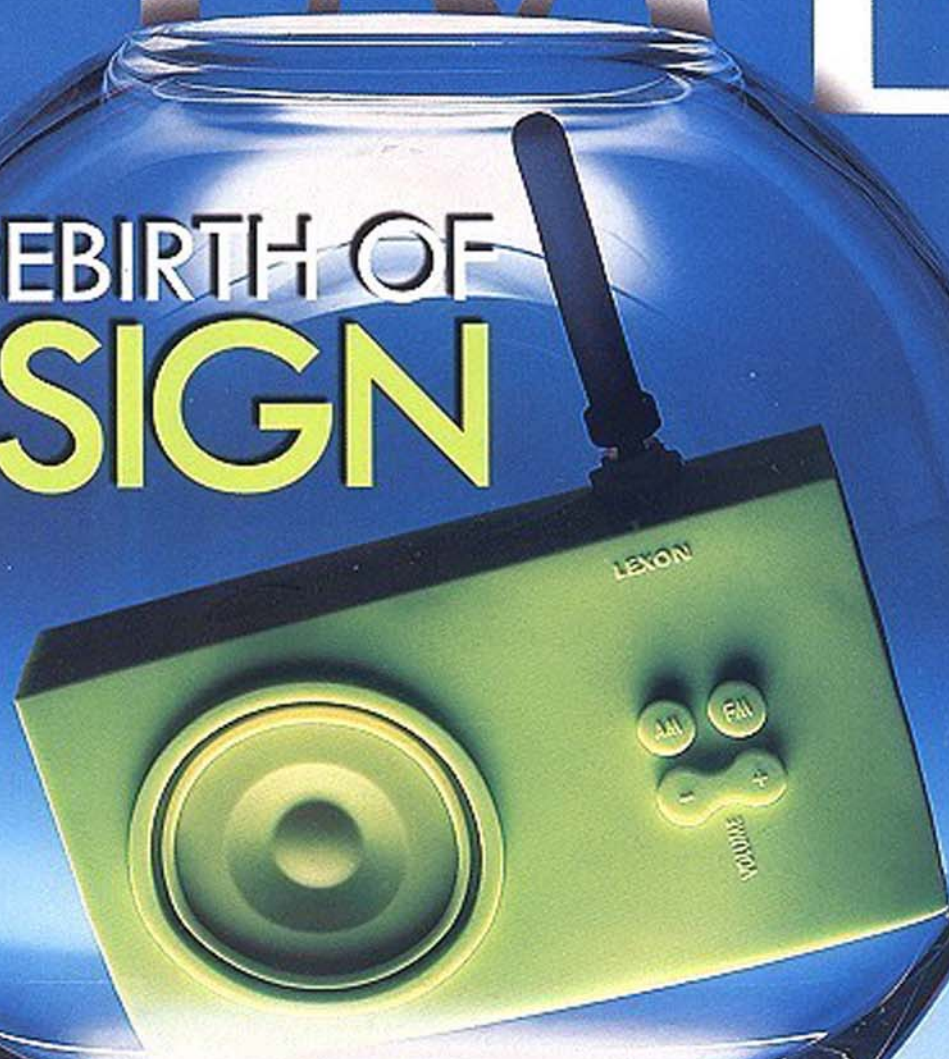


MARCH 20, 2000 \$3.50

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THE REBIRTH OF DESIGN



Rubber radio
by Marc Berthier

Function is out. Form is in.
From radios to cars to
toothbrushes, America
is bowled over by style



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“When industries are competing at equal price and functionality, design is the only differential that matters.”

MARK DZIERSK, Industrial Designers Society of America

Ladies and gentlemen, may we present the design economy. It is the crossroads where prosperity and technology meet culture and marketing. These days efficient manufacturing and intense competition have made “commodity chic” not just affordable but also mandatory. Americans are likely to appreciate style when they see it and demand it when they don’t, whether in boutique hotels or kitchen scrub brushes. “Design is being democratized,” says Karim Rashid, designer of the Oh chair by Umbra and winner of a 1999 George Nelson award for breakthrough furniture design. “Our entire physical landscape has improved, and that makes people more critical as an audience.” And more willing. Says Mark Dziersk, president of the Industrial Designers Society of America: “This is the new Golden Age of design.”

Make that platinum, because design has become big Big Business. Nobody is quite sure how big, but just consider that Americans spent some \$6 trillion on goods and services last year, and roughly one-fifth of it went into buying stuff for their homes. The stunning success of the colorful (read: No more beige!) iMac, for instance, not only helped save Apple but has also inspired a raft of whimsically styled, low-cost personal computers from firms like Dell, Gateway and Compaq. The New Beetle rescued Volkswagen’s image two years ago and became a catalyst for change in the auto business. Carmakers are finally putting a premium on how their products look because they know that otherwise we won’t buy them anymore.

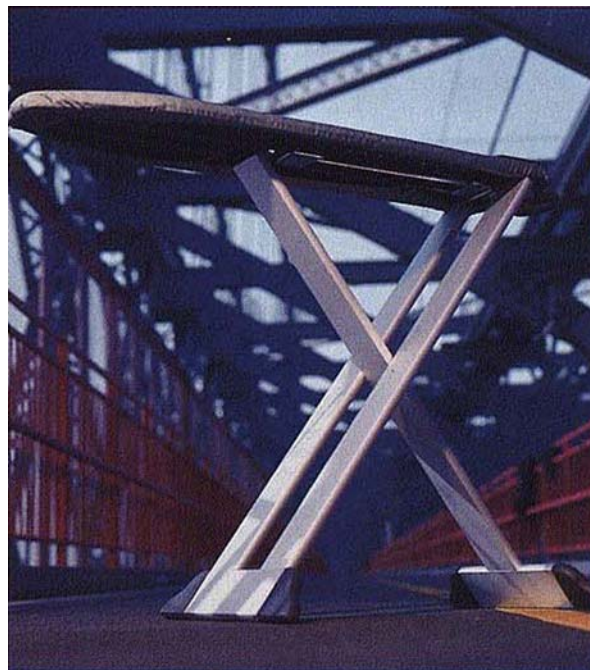
So it is with makers of just about everything. “When industries are competing at equal price and functionality, design is the only differential that matters,” says Dziersk, echoing the credo first spouted in the ’30s by Raymond Loewy, father of industrial design. Loewy was the man who gave America the Lucky Strike pack and the sleek Greyhound bus, and when he added a flourish to the Coldspot refrigerator, to make it look just a little more streamlined than its 1934 competitors, Sears’ sales skyrocketed.

Loewy used to say that the most beautiful curve was a rising sales graph, and that notion has driven design since he was in shorts. Good design married commerce during the Great Depression, and Loewy’s career took off then because he made products irresistible at a time when nobody really wanted to pay for anything. In the ’50s, Charles and Ray Eames led a cohort of Californians who used postwar manufacturing capacity to create sleek, efficient domestic environs. In the ’60s, however, industrial design

ing a living from making the beautiful things in your life. There are big corporate players, like Sony and Ford and Philips, the European electronics consortium. There are architects and designers-iconoclasts like Philippe Starck and young upstarts like Jasper Morrison or Marc Newson. Or businessmen like David Neeleman, whose no-frills but chic airline, JetBlue, began flying last month. And of course there’s Martha Stewart, who has parlayed her sense of style into a multidimensional billion-dollar role as America’s spokesperson for taste. Martha’s line of home furnishings helped wipe the red ink off the bottom line of the discount department chain K Mart.

If anyone believes in America’s new appetite for design it is Terence Conran, Britain’s style impresario. Twenty years ago, Conran launched a Stateside chain of catchy furniture stores in his name, but he jumped ship early in the ’90s. Now he’s back, determined to catch the new wave. In December he opened a 22,500-sq.-ft. store in Manhattan. Like its counterparts in London, Paris and Tokyo, the Terence Conran Shop is a design bazaar, with everything from \$17 digital watches to \$3,550 violet-colored lounges. “I never quite understood why design didn’t take off in America before,” says Conran, who is cautiously optimistic this time around. “There really is a wind of change here now. America is about technology, being proud of achieving so much and confident about having a culture that reflects that.”

Americans’ appetite for design is flourishing at least partly because America is. The housing-construction boom has reached historic proportions, and people need to fill those new homes with stuff that defines who they are. It used to confer status to have an expensive designer couch; now it’s important to have something that’s personal, whether it’s from the flea market or B&B Italia. Like the Mosquito Table, which looks like an aircraft wing. Or the Conrad (not Conran) chair, made from something called Bora Bora bark. “In this boom economy, people have a craving to express their individuality,”



BANAL AND BEAUTIFUL A flat folding ironing board of zinc and steel: \$385

seemed to lose its way and end up in the mire of an American consumer sensibility that simply wanted more products for less money, from which it began to emerge only in the ’90s.

Now, instead of one Raymond Loewy, the design world is humming with an eclectic mix of impresarios and entrepreneurs intent on earn-

Nothing underscores the technological revolution better than plastics, long viewed as cheap and ugly. Not since the early-20th century popularity of Bakelite has plastic been so loved. Polypropylene, for instance, the plastic that has been around since the '50s, can be molded so smooth it is almost sensuous, and it takes dyes like silk. German design firms Authentics and Koziol have made much hay out of plastic's new pizzazz. Koziol's spaghetti forks with a smiley face, ice-cream scoops with eyes and the "Tim" dish brush with legs are some of more than 300 "cutensils," as they're known, that flew off shelves of American stores last year.

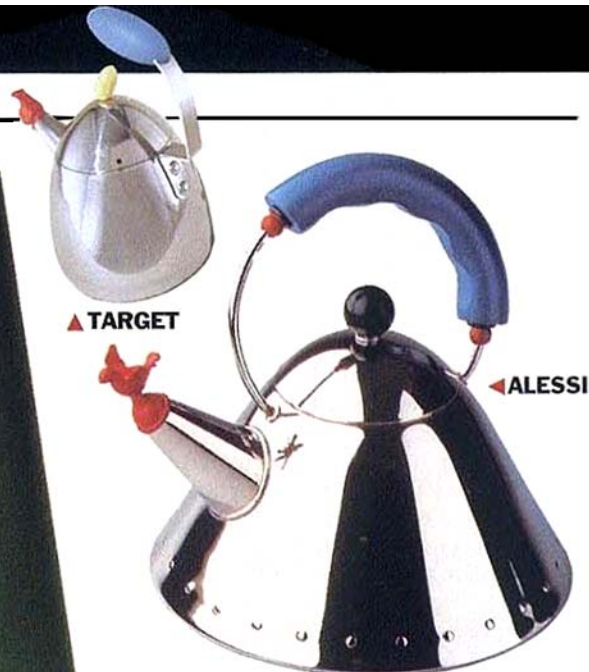
"I had no doubt these would sell in Chicago, New York and Boston," says Elliott Zivin, president of Koziol's U.S. distributor, Majestic. "But they're selling like crazy in Bogalusa, La., and west Texas." So much so that Zivin is bringing in 100 more plastic "blobjects"—another nickname—this year. Shopping for household items is no longer dutiful; it's part of a person's articulation of his or her personal style. Everything is an accessory. It could be coincidence that manufacturers started to think more about making household products fun not long after men started shouldering some of the burden around the home. It could be.

Corporate demand for these new design strategies is surging. Fitch's Bill Faust says his design shop got so many big corporate clients that he went back to school to pick up an M.B.A. "Designers are being invited to the table more and given a voice in making business decisions," says Faust. "I wanted to give the executives more of a reason to consider a design than "We think this is cool." Well, cool could be enough. General Mills is re-examining cereal boxes, Kodak has ditched the black-box camera, Swingline has streamlined its standard stapler. Any company without in-house talent is reaching for a hot design consultant. "Manufacturers recognize that consumers are looking for more than functional benefits," says Barry Shepard, co-founder of SHR Perceptual Management, the design consultancy that helped conceive the Volkswagen Beetle. "A product that matters needs to say something about the person who owns it."

And it doesn't have to say it for long. Buying a cool toothbrush is a way of expressing your personality without making a huge commitment other than to dental hygiene. Your sense of style changes, you buy a new toothbrush. Starck was one of the first to sense this with his translucent Brancusi-esque dollop of a toothbrush for Fluocaril in 1989. Now pharmaceutical companies have released a plethora of toothbrushes—ridged, twisted, tapered, with bands, dots and

▲ **ALESSI**
MORE FOR LESS
Well, more or less. From appliance makers to retailers like Target and K Mart come a plethora of me-too design products that mimic the look of some pricey design classics

DESIGN TEST
It's not easy to tell which one of these lamps is by Philippe Starck for Alessi and which is an Ikea knock-off
ALESSI \$339
IKEA \$20



WHISTLING ALL THE WAY TO THE BANK
Michael Graves' 1985 steeply priced stainless-steel Alessi teakettle played to the roaring '80s. More than 10 years later, with the help of Target, Graves kept the look but shrank the cost (the whistle's not as melodic) **ALESSI \$112 TARGET \$35**



▲ **FRIGIDAIRE**
COLD AND COOL
Same storage space, different price tags
FRIGIDAIRE \$1,899
SUB-ZERO \$5,636

swirls. The same philosophy applies to dozens of products we used to regard as banal—garbage cans, toilet brushes and cheese graters. They're cute, they're cheap and they're disposable.

Cheap is O.K. by Starck, whose cheerful whimsy with juicers, bottle openers and hotel rooms did much to spark America's current fling with design. He says he wants good design to be a commodity—but without being wasteful. He points out that every time he designs a chair, it's less expensive than the one he designed before. "I want every body to have the best products for the price of any bulls in the grocery store," he says.

Inevitably, not all the design efforts out there reflect the sensibility of an artist, and even many that do are downright, well, dysfunctional, like the Lexon radio on the cover of this magazine, which despite appearances is not waterproof. "Function-

ality has become more dimensional," says Susan Yelavich, assistant director of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, which last week opened its first National Design Triennial. "Function now embraces psychology and emotion." Or, as Karim Rashid puts it, "The more time we spend in front of computer screens, the more the look of our coffee cup takes on added importance."

The question now is whether the design economy can be sustained or whether, when America's wave of prosperity recedes, we'll all edge back to plain-vanilla functionality. If he were around, Raymond (x)ewy would remind us that he got his start during the Great Depression, so perhaps the real design revolution is still to come. If so, Constant Nieuwenhuys is looking more prophetic than ever. — *With reporting by Julie Rawe/ New York and Sheila Gribben/Chicago*