

# “Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990”

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This is a daunting prospect: to review an exhibition on what might be considered the most slippery, indefinable “movement”—one that crosses not only design’s disciplinary boundaries, but also all aspects of creative endeavor. It is an “ism” which manifests itself differently in every field of practice, and as soon as it looks as if it has finally been tied down, wriggles free once more.

But if writing a review is daunting, how must it have felt to curate this major exhibition? The opening of “Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990” at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (September 24, 2011-January 15, 2012) attracted a lot of media attention, at least in the UK—certainly more than was written for previous V&A shows covering major art and design movements. And this question of curating dominated the majority of articles. One reviewer thought it “a risky curatorial undertaking,”<sup>1</sup> and even the curators themselves admit it could be seen as “a fool’s errand.”<sup>2</sup>

The covering of Postmodernism follows a logical trajectory of movements that the V&A has addressed in recent years: Art Nouveau: 1890-1914 (2000), Art Deco: 1910-1939 (2003), Modernism: Designing a New World (2006), Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970 (2008). However, each of these movements is perhaps more definable with respect to its origins, scope, and intentions than postmodernism. Where to start? Where to end? The show is deliberately framed within a tightly defined 20-year period, even though its starting point is still hugely debated (despite Charles Jencks’s desperate attempts to define a single point), and its end—even to the point of asking if it ever will end—is equally questioned. We can no longer go back to the grand narrative of a single style, not after Postmodernism has sucked the ideology out of modernism and spat it back out as just one more stylistic possibility in a world where anything now goes. Hence, the clarity of hindsight needed to accurately critique postmodernism is perhaps not yet available.

Spread throughout three large rooms and split into discrete sections, the show begins, as might be expected, with an attempt to explore the roots of and background to postmodernism,

1 Adrian Searle, “Postmodernism as More Than Ironic Teapots,” *The Guardian*, September 21, 2011, 15.

2 Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt (Eds.), *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990* (London: V&A Publishing, 2011), 9.

singling out 1960s Italy, and the Janus references by Ettore Sottsass and Alessandro Mendini to ancient and popular culture. The accompanying collection of artifacts includes teapots that resemble Aztec temples and 1950s jelly-molds. These are immediately juxtaposed with Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Stephen Izenour's 1972 take on the ultimate postmodern city in their book *Learning from Las Vegas*, where they reveled in the "messy vitality over obvious unity" seen in a crowded city of semiotic signs designed to be read at 35mph.

Throughout the exhibition, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion* tries to define its subject to the viewer through such diverse comparisons, but it also delights in providing numerous, sometimes opaque and often conflicting explanatory statements at different stages. The opening gambit, that postmodernism is "a broken mirror, a reflecting surface made of many fragments" is possibly the most eloquent. Another states that postmodernism's central aim was "to replace a monolithic idiom with a plurality of competing ideas and styles." The exhibition certainly reflects this attitude, making it a disjointed experience. But trying to make sense of so many disparate pieces is to miss the point: Postmodernism is an attitude more than an easily definable style.

Certain elements of the exhibition could have been readily predicted. Ridley Scott's 1982 dystopian vision of future society, *Blade Runner*, takes center stage of the section "Apocalypse Then," looping the opening scene of a slow aerial cruise over a cramped and shambolic Los Angeles of 2019. These images are screened over pieces that include Danny Lane's glass chair (1988) and Ron Arad's concrete stereo (1983), both looking as if they were created from post-holocaust rubble.

Emblematic Formica furniture by Sottsass and geometric teapots by Peter Shire front the section called "New Wave," representing the point at which "What had begun as a radical fringe movement became the dominant look of the "designer decade." Here, Memphis, the radical Italian design and architecture collective conceived by Ettore Sottsass in the early 1980s, moved from the use of everyday modern materials to luxury materials. The turning point is presented as an anti-establishment sell out—"subversion with commercial appeal." But how can one "sell out" when anything goes? In a suitably anarchic way, Michele De Lucchi's pastel-painted prototype appliances still maintain an air of simplistic, stubborn defiance against the realities of mass production.

In comparison, elements also appear that are perhaps not as well-known but that nevertheless say much about the tenets of postmodernism. Californian furniture maker Gary Knox Bennett's 1990 "Little Aluminium Desk, Blue" is a beautiful Art Nouveau-styled piece in ColorCore, aluminum, and wood. Pieter de



Figure 1  
View of the “Strike a Pose” section  
of the exhibition *Postmodernism:  
Style and Subversion 1970-1990*,  
2011 © V&A Images.

Bruyne’s “Chantilly Chest” is a 1975 piece by “an early Belgian innovator of pop and postmodern furniture;” the black lacquered chipboard cupboard includes brightly colored diagonal decoration that “violently appropriates” a section of a nineteenth century cabinet, creating “a layering of present and past, deepened by the fact that the violated cabinet was already a historicist copy of a piece of French Baroque court furniture.” In the words of Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

In the section titled “Strike a Pose,” the exhibition moves from design per se into popular culture—music, dance, *Blade Runner* fashion—qualified with the explanation that “post-modern performance strategies resembled those being explored elsewhere in design. Performers deconstructed and reassembled themselves.” Highlighting the lack or at least blurring of fixed identity central to postmodernism, here Annie Lennox questions gender stereotyping, David Byrne twitches inside his big suit, and reality is stretched in the cut, pasted, and retouched images of Grace Jones on the cover of her *Island Life* LP. A video plays of a dance choreographed by Karole Armitage, which recalled elements of Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet. Is anything truly new?

The celebrity status of postmodern pop stars like Jones, Lennox, and Byrne showcased here highlights the fundamental paradox at play. The exhibition reminds us that followers like Lady Gaga are mere shadows of leaders like Grace Jones; Devo will only ever be a devolved Kraftwerk. In a world where standing out from the crowd is essential, such is the fate of all who are not outrageously original. As The Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia once

Figure 2

Consumer's Rest chair by Frank Schreiner  
(for Stiletto Studios), 1990. © Victoria and  
Albert Museum, London.



said “You do not merely want to be considered just the best of the best. You want to be considered the only ones who do what you do.” But in a postmodern world, where we finally are aware that so much has already been done before and that it lies around just waiting to be picked up, repackaged, and re-presented, being truly unique is now more difficult than ever.

Arriving at the section titled “Style Wars,” postmodernism is no longer anti-establishment but as commodified as it can be, as the graphics of *I.D.* and *Face* magazines vie with fine art photography and Peter Saville’s record sleeves. And by the section, “Money,” filthy lucre has tainted everything. Jeff Koon’s 1986 silver bust of Louis XIV “perfectly captured the decade’s fascination with consumer desire, wealth, and power.” Remember *Wall Street*?

The exhibition certainly reflects the zeitgeist of the period. As the show draws to a close, we see further demonstrations of such commodification. Frank Schreiner’s “Consumer’s Rest” chair—originally formed from real salvaged shopping trolleys—becomes a factory-produced piece. Michael Graves parodies his own earlier “high design” work for Alessi with a Mickey Mouse version of his Tea Kettle for the mass-market store Target, which got to capitalize on the designer’s name. Like Pop Design, which ran out of new references as it moved from grass roots to

haute couture, postmodernism was no longer radical or subcultural but predictably mainstream. I was struck by the similarity of Alessandro Mendini and Kean Etro's "Designer's Suit," covered in client's logos, to the corporate-sponsored one worn by Morgan Spurlock when promoting his anti-branding film, *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*. In the end, it seems, such commodification is what killed postmodernism, turning political statements into profit. The "Architect's Collection" of high-design table pieces for Swid Powell was a financial disaster, and in response, designer and critic Stanley Tigerman called its failure a signal of "the end of the whole goddamn thing, the end of Swid Powell, the end of Postmodernism."

The book accompanying the exhibition is, as usual with publications from the V&A, a thing of beauty. Edited by the curators, Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, it provides the much-needed, in-depth contextual critique that would be too much to take in at the exhibition itself. Their major introductory text covers and justifies in detail the main arguments underpinning the exhibition, and following it are 40 insightful essays by some of today's best writers on design, including scholars, designers, and celebrities. These essays cover every aspect of postmodernism that emerges in the exhibition, including architecture, furniture and product design, fashion, film and performance, and graphic design, among others, and they place the movement in a far wider global perspective.

If the role of an exhibition such as this is to excite, question, and inspire, then *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion* achieves its purpose exceedingly well. If, on the other hand, the goal is to educate a public unaware of the intricacies of this "most elusive of genres,"<sup>3</sup> then I'm not convinced that a visitor would be much the wiser after seeing this show. But then, rather than blaming any shortcomings of the exhibition, this can be put down to the very nature of postmodernism itself. As one critic put it, the exhibition covers a "recent cultural past that has, almost without us noticing, gone from cutting edge to museum."<sup>4</sup> (Of course, one could argue that most of the pieces were perhaps designed as museum pieces in the first place, rather than as serious consumer goods.) When I asked Glenn Adamson at a conference a few years ago how he intended to end the exhibition, given its subject, he was evasive: "You'll have to come and see it," he said. The end of the exhibition, as it turns out, is marked with the question, "Why can't we be ourselves like we were yesterday?" as a New Order video for *Bizarre Love Triangle* plays along—supposedly reflecting the "permissive, fluid, and hyper-commodified situation of design today." Finally, we are presented with the truism: "Like it or not, we are all post-modern now."

3 Tim Adams, "It was a late-20th-century buzzword. But what was postmodernism really all about?" *The Observer*, September 25, 2011, 11.

4 Hari Kunzru, "Signs of the Times," *The Saturday Guardian*, September 17, 2011, *Review sec.*, 18.