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Designing Gifts

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Creating and designing the things that we give to others is different from designing products for other uses. They are expected to convey far more. We all know when we have baked the perfect cake, but more commonly we rely on others to create that something special for us, to present to our loved one. We turn to bakers, florists, jewelers, illustrators, packaging designers, surface pattern designers, the ceramic sculptors and the firms that employ them to create a present that we can buy. The presents we give are a form of communication. They express our emotions and represent in three-dimensional form how we understand the relationship between us.

As an Academic and as a Design Consultant with two overlapping careers that involve both design management research, semiotics was first introduced and considered through Judith Williamson's (1978) book "Decoding Advertisements", which was based in part on her experience of working in the advertising industry. It was a forceful thesis but seemed to imply that there was a way of decoding images. Alternative readings of the images seemed to have little place in her argument. In retrospect, advertisements are often so specifically constructed or coded so that they can be decoded within the cultures that created them. She had been, one could say, a participant observer in the process. But it is the visual language of the advertisements that may not be understood by everyone and everywhere.

Design History and Cultural Studies were very new disciplines in 1982. Academics interested in material and popular culture were searching for theoretical explanations and looking at sociology and social anthropology for approaches. In turn social scientists were starting to be

interested in consumer culture and the built environment. The cross-disciplinary work and debate continues today. Semiotics and the writings of Roland Barthes (1972) for example was found to be useful tool to understand the worlds of advertising, marketing and publishing, particularly in articles where word and image were displayed together. A study of the construction of a media image for Lady Diana Spencer can be analyzed using his techniques and continues to be valuable for the press and magazine coverage of the British Royalty since 1981.

The First Semiotics Conference provided an opportunity to look afresh at semiotics and the insights it can provide, as well as the social anthropological theories, in order to review their significance and value in the light of commercial experience of the gift industry. Vicki Thomas Associates is unusual as it is a specialist design consultancy that has created designs for the gift industries since 1984. It is made up of a team of some fifty specialists. Designers and illustrators are not trained or initially see themselves as gift designers. It was started following cross-disciplinary research of a similar kind using social anthropological theories and applying them to an analysis of material culture.

According to Marcel Mauss (1925) gift exchange is a social process, which occurs in all cultures, and gifts in their very nature contain an obligation, to be returned or passed on. His seminal study was based primarily on anthropological studies, but his work can be used to better understand the gift industry today and the commercialization of the gift exchange process and its effect on design. Many of the products, offered to the consumers as gifts are considered kitsch by design critics but they valued are by the recipients, treasured and passed on to another generation. The borderline between a gift and a bribe is a narrow one and there are negative aspects to the gift exchange process as it creates obligations and indebtedness, which can lead to corruption and intimidation. Each society has it specific checks and systems of control but they vary and

not enough research has been done in this field may it for example a study may help us understand the tolerance of corruption in some political systems. For the argument here it is concerned it is seen to be primarily a positive process of sharing and mutual support.

For Arnold van Gennep (1960) gift exchange is one the “rites of passage” and it is argued here that gifts are designed today for all those occasions, when we move our spatial or social locations. Gifts are designed as souvenirs or as wedding gifts, they are given when we are born and to mark our death, when we graduate and retire, they are given to mark the seasons and when we get a year older.

Lewis W. Hyde in 1983 argued that creative talent is also a gift in Marcel Mauss’ terms that should be shared. We give of our time and talents. He argues that jobs we consider vocations; like teaching, the clergy and nursing are all governed by the same gift exchange process. Social enterprises and charities increasingly finding new ways of using the process to support their activities; they rely on people giving their time, their money and their talents. At conferences and in journals we share our research.

When we call someone gifted, Hyde argues we expect a similar exchange. Creative and talented individuals should be supported by patronage. The compromise in the commercial gift world is that they create smaller or minor versions of their work that can be sold, often only once before the objects re-enter the gift exchange process; the musical recording, the limited edition prints or the designer label product.

Gift exchange, it can be argued is a process on the feminine side of our nature. Gift production, buying and the organization of the linked rituals, as well as much voluntary work, is often based in the home and undertaken by women. Some feminist observers and design historians consider gift

creation by women to have been devalued by male critics as purely hobbies and of less worth.

For Mauss the gift exchange process generates trade and encourages commercialization. A study of the growth in consumer culture in the nineteenth century by Hobsbawm (1983) identified as “The Invention Tradition”. In the United Kingdom, for example Prince Albert introduced the Christmas tree from Germany. Gift makers and designers absorb traditions to make their products more appropriate. The gift industry since then, particularly the greeting card and florists - have been criticized for inventing new occasions such as Father’s Day and Grand-Parents Day (Gregory, 1978) in order to generate more sales. Henry Cole the man behind the founding Victorian & Albert Museum sent the first Christmas card. Both products, the decorated tree and card, built on existing Christmas cultural traditions; in the first case the bringing evergreens and a Yule log and in the second case and the Christmas letter and the Valentine card. Writers at the time, like Charles Dickens encouraged generosity and the notion of social philanthropy is clear in the first Christmas card design although it was also criticised for showing feasting and children drinking alcohol.

Nineteenth Century manufactures, like Bolton, Wedgewood and Peak Freans and retailers; the grocers, fancy good stores and the new department stores all focused on gift giving occasions of all kinds to promote sales. “Art Manufactures” and commissioning stores like Liberty’s in the 1880’s produced what would be called “designer ranges” a century later. (Thomas, 1984)

The Twentieth Century saw the rise of the specialist gift shop, as part of redevelopments such as Covent Garden in London and Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco. Bookshops and gift shops were extended in cathedrals, museums and galleries, extending and institutionalizing the whole tradition of buying

gifts when we travel. The souvenir is nothing new and can be dated back at least to the days of Chaucer and the pilgrimage. Charities like Oxfam and Notting Hill Housing Trust opened shops selling new and recycled gifts. Now we support the work of these institutions, more often by what we buy in the shop or Internet catalogue rather than what we pay at the door. These retailers also commission ranges, which reflect their brand message and the interests of their supporters.

It is argued that products are designed for these gift-giving occasions and that gift products share what have been called “design attributes”. They are three-dimensional messages and this is inherent to their design. The message is sent from the giver to the receiver and the channel is the commercial gift industry. The industries’ needs effect what is offered to the public the business creates noise and can interfere with or limit the message.

Let us look at some start by looking at some of the occasions or rites of passage. Souvenirs relate to the place through their imagery, the materials used in their construction and the actual form they take. They can bear the flag and country name or the choice can do so more subtly through the choice of materials and contents.

IMAGE

When a child is born and they are welcomed into a family or community. Products are created that follow local cultural traditions say for example a silver spoon. Gifts of money can be handed over but they are often presented in a different form say as, moneyboxes. There are baby things in baby colors. We are giving the child an identity within the group and securing their future.

At the other end of our lives, as we know from archaeological digs, we mark some one’s passing with designed objects, but today some people are seeking new ways to mark their own lives and remembering the dead fro example the development craft materials to create memory books, boxes and quilts. But

more fundamental to the larger social exchange process are the very large gifts that are passed on in wills and bequests to charities and individuals.

We seem to hold back on destroying gifts. Many of the gifts we exchange during our life items are passed on and are not destroyed. They continue to be traded. They end up white elephant stalls, in charity and antiques stores. Items like these would not exist in the form and volume they do, without gift exchange. For example, silver is used, skilled craftsmanship employed and distinctive styling used to create appropriate gifts from their period. The metal can be refashioned by later generations, but it remains special, we call it precious and we know it has a financial value when we give it.

Gifts are passed down through families. Genealogical networks overlap with transport networks and patterns of migration, spatial geography, the meaning, and message and gift essence can be passed on through the generations. The gift objects can be actors in Latour's network theory, their value can be fought over and collections can be divided by the structure of the social relations. (Thomas, 2009)

Are these types of gifts, the ones that are designed for specific occasions, should we consider them as "genres" of gifts? The analysis of commercial gifts proposed "design attributes" or one could say similar signs are used to convey the appropriate messages in gift design.

For example gifts are packaged and presented. Yes, large objects like cars and buildings can be given but they are often wrapped with a symbolic ribbon, they are dedicated with brass plaques and engraved foundation stones. In Korean wedding money from the families to the couple is put into special embroidered silk envelopes. Even in these greener times, new materials such as banana paper and reusable containers – like hampers are proposed and revived by the retailers. In Japan,

presentation packing is essential. The gift giving design traditions vary from one culture to another.

IMAGE

In Japan, it is not considered rude to know the value of the gift. In the United Kingdom, “we do not look a gift horse in the mouth”, it is considered rude to question the value and quality of what is given. (Fox, 2007) We may say it is “the thought that counts” if we think a gesture is too small. There are expectations in value (which the commercial firms know) of what it is appropriate to spend on each occasion or person. The retailers and manufactures know that there are price-points such the pocket money items in a museum shop or the price tag on an engagement ring. If one looks at Christmas gift ranges in the shops, there are often options, priced in increments of £5. Commercial gifts are designed to hit those marks.

Commercial gifts often different from the ordinary, this often involved a change in scale, possibly to meet a price point, to be that “little something” a token. Similarly, changing the material or producing something ordinary in a new colourway makes it distinctive. A small item may represent of a bigger gift. Its size may represent craftsmanship and skill. Or it may allow the give to present the object and the recipient to carry it. Souvenirs fit into luggage and miniature portraits can be worn as jewelry. Over large item also sell well, large paperclips and calculators feature in promotional catalogues. On the whole gifts are portable or can be represented by something that can be handled, carried and sent such as the gift voucher.

People like to give new things we call them “novelties” but how novel do they have to be? The wine glass with a twisted glass stem dates back to centuries and the cocktail glass almost 100 years, but a new plastic one with a metal spring stem was exciting and new in 1984. New things make a good gift the recipient is unlikely to already own one; this year it is tablet computers. Semiotic meanings often come in

contrasting pairs and this no different when one is using a gift product to express. In this case, novelty goes hand in hand with traditional designs and forms. Items like cut crystal decanters and gold watches are often given when the gift represents longevity, such as those presented when someone retires. Anything that evokes a nostalgic past also sells well and gives that sense of continuity and sharing across generations.

Gift are designed for particular groups, for men and women or girls and boys. They are there on the shelf to tempt the buyer who is not confident of what to buy. The gender is specified, it can be through various attributes, colour, materials, type form and branding. Dunhill started selling gift products as well as tobacco from before the First World War, products developed primarily as gifts for men.

From the “language of flowers”, to birth stones and gifts producers have adopted, adapted and developed all sort of guidance and linked symbolic languages to make gifts appropriate to a particular occasions and people. Some systems seem to work better than others. Horoscope, based ranges take up display space when usually only one sign has shelf appeal each month.

Gift products do not usually contain images of people. As they do not usually represent the right person as far as the purchaser is concerned. Although recently, the imprintables and websites like Moon Pig are making easier to put the people we know onto products and cards. Several firms have thought there was a gap in the market for cards representing Afro-American people, when the customer prefer to use an animal, celebrity or cartoon rather than an image of someone they do not know. Wedding couples are seen from the back or in silhouette; baby images are very simplified so that ethnicity is unclear.

Gifts are decorative from Fine art works to Christmas ornaments. Using a Royal Academician or a licensed character adds to the perceived value and makes the gift more specific to the recipient. Film companies and football teams have exploited this with licensed merchandise; consider just the success like Disney and Star Wars. Licensing provides a short cut to something novel and valuable and manufacturers are often willing to pay a hefty royalty for the rights to a property in fashion and popular with the buying public.

Gifts are designed by manufacturers to be collected. It is easier to buy someone something you know they love and collect. There all sorts of collectible three dimensional forms; charms, spoons, thimbles... but there also gift items that people end up collecting because they fit these design attributes, items such as socks, ties, mugs and promotional pens. The same standard form can be cheaply changed to suit a different occasion or gift buyer.

Complaints are made about unwanted gifts and goods produced with little thought. The process is not all positive and it has been exploited for commercial gain. Some types of gifts become less appropriate because a culture changes. Smokers' accessories such as lighters as well as all the ritual of offering cigarettes and sharing a light have also diminished.

Gifts maybe decorative and packaged but functional gifts as well. Gifts are designed in collections to suit an activity or hobby. It allows manufactures to sell more at once and include slower selling items. Collections of items are packed together in a tin, compendium, hampers, and toiletry bags and boxed sets. Functional gifts and useful objects are more popular in a recession. It is more acceptable to recycle, give a charity an unwanted gift or pass on jewelry within a family, rather than throw the item away.

Gifts are not about hard work they are about play and leisure. Toys are for adults as well as children. Old toys are revived

and given by adults to their children and grand children. Computer games fall into this category too, especially those that bridge the gap between generations.

We like to give happiness and make people smile. Gifts contain jokes and plays on words. Jokes and phrases are not always understood in another culture. As consultancy trying to license ranges abroad, a shared cultural understanding is often too easy to assume. Often the message can be lost in translation or misunderstood.

Gifts are personalized they are engraved and dedicated, they are made with space to add a personal mark. It is getting cheaper to personalize things with improvements in technology digital printing and machine embroidery being just two examples. Card designs have the type overlaid later so that the same design can be printed indifferent languages.

If we cannot make something ourselves we like to buy things, but that still look like someone has taken the trouble to hand make something, we employ the skilled craft workers and fine artists if we can afford to do so. It may be made in China but it may also have designed in the UK on its base.

Clearly designers and the gift industry as a whole are creating meaning and messages in the products they produce. They do not on the whole stop and analyze of what they are doing or are aware that someone has argued that they are part of a social process. When they can get the message wrong and the gift range does not sell, because it has not been understood and an adopted by someone else, it does not seem to the shopper to be the perfect gift. They have the semiotics wrong. Other times they get it right and they do not analyze why.

Most creative people are trained in a particular field and do not see that they face competition not only from other designers in their field but host of other designers and enterprises who are also dependent on the gift for a large

proportion of their sales. They are also trained on many Fine Art or functional design courses and discouraged from this type of expressive design, it is considered bad design. There is a skill in getting it right and the visual and cultural training is not often part of the curriculum.

In the last decade the MP3 player, digital camera and computer have encouraged the digital sharing of images, film and music. The e-book is making it easier to share the skill of the writer and the on-line greeting card firms have added a new dimension to the role of the illustrator. Somehow the three dimensional tactile nature of the gift product is being diminished. The rules of how we share creative work on line are having to be reconsidered to insure that the creators are designers recompensed. One option is that the creative individuals use the technology social networks and use the web themselves to upload and share and sell direct. In some cases they give their talents over the web in order to benefit directly or in the longer term through royalties or an advertising fee. Are on-line advertisers and social networking sites the new patrons and modes of exchange?

We have also seen the growth of the “experience gift”, with firms like Red Letter Day where the gift and the occasion become merged. Venues – restaurants, hotels and sporting venues too all rely on the special occasion for substantial proportion for their business. The interiors have to be special and the service fitting. So maybe a form of these design attributes, have to be considered in any analysis for the “gift” venue.

How do we create something special in the era of the credit crunch? In the recession now as with down turns and during conflicts in the past, we do not stop giving but we alter how we express our emotions. We return to celebrating at home, we make our own gifts, or we bake. We recycle family gifts; we reuse rings and share the toys of our youth with a younger

generation. Governments look to the voluntary sector and social enterprises to give of their time for a common cause. Giving and supporting others becomes more important on a personal level – we still commercialize where we can. But firms like the cake mix producers know that by just adding one egg and following the instructions we are make rather than buy a cake.

Has the message changed and has the way it is communicated altered? There seems to be a shift in the creative control from the creative to the user. From the gift manufacturer to the giver, the technology has allowed more individuals and groups create for themselves. A grandfather can write a family history and publish it for his grand children; in the US they have been using imprimables allowing anyone to create their own wedding stationery. Firms like Kodak and printers of all kinds know the creative power that now rests with the ordinary person. The importance of copyright protection fought for by Hogarth is often not understood by the person, using their computer to say I love you to their fiancé. Intellectual property law does not seem to have developed quickly enough to insure that we support creativity in the visual arts as well as in music and broadcasting.

A few artist and designers will be able to demand high prices and win patronage. Others will be exploiting the new technology to communicate more directly with public that lacks their design skills and vision. We will continue to share what we have and create in others the obligation to share in return. How that process is visualised will continue to change overtime.

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