Reading, Writing, and Consuming Design: Commodities and Their Reception in Literature
Design Studies Forum-sponsored session, College Art Association 2005 Annual conference, Atlanta, Georgia (USA)
Thursday, February 17, 2005, 8:00 - 10:30 PM, Trinidad/Madrid Room, Convention Level, Marriott Hotel
Chair: David Raizman, Drexel University, College of Media Arts and Design

In *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (1979), Ernst Gombrich quotes a passage from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), effectively revealing an undercurrent of popular indifference and even resistance to the paternalistic meddling of design reformers such as Sir Henry Cole in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Such literary references to the products of design suggest a fertile area for art historical investigation. For instance, comments about tea sets and other domestic objects and fashions in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (c.1798) and *Mansfield Park* (1814) are a barometer of social aspirations and tensions in late eighteenth-century Britain; the array of accouterments of middle-class life, whether alarm clocks, dashboard cigar lighters, or toothpaste, as they accompany the protagonist's activities in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) reveal an uneasy adjustment to the emerging culture of consumption dominated by big business, national brands, and advertising techniques; finally, the very strangeness, even incomprehensibility of mass-produced commercial products (flashlight batteries, for example) imported for sale in the remote setting of an African trading outpost as they are described in V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1980) is the result of these objects' detachment from the norms of industrial production, competitive commerce, and merchandising in 20th-century western societies. In the last case, the reader not only shares this odd reaction to everyday commodities but confronts the particular economic underpinnings of his/her 'normative' view of otherwise unremarkable products.

This session presents papers from art historians that further explore the relationship between literature and commodities during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The papers will consider the audience the literary author wishes to address as well as the audience that directly experiences the commodities. Presenters will also address a wide range of perspectives including but not limited to the production of technology, gender identity, and social formation.

While the examples briefly mentioned above constitute part of a traditional canon of western literature, our papers will also explore a broader range of literary genres and audiences for fiction, including popular fiction, film, narrative illustration, and art criticism. As a group, session papers demonstrate how literature serves as a valuable resource for exploring the reception of commodities and for expanding our understanding of the practice of design.

Lucinda Kaukas Havenhand, Virginia Commonwealth University
"The 'Dream House' and Constructions of Masculinity in 1940's America Literature"

The publication of two popular books of fiction bracketed the 1940's in America: Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* (1943) and *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* by Eric Hodgins (1946). Both were made into movies soon after their publication (1949 and 1948 respectively) attesting to their popularity and further dispersing their messages.

These books (and their subsequent films) both present male protagonists whose main focus is the design and construction of buildings. In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Rourke struggles to maintain the ideals of an often misunderstood modern architecture while offering the reader a clear understanding of what the proper design of buildings for America should be. In *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*, a somewhat blundering and naïve Mr. Blandings struggles successfully to transform a ramshackle farmhouse into the perfect contemporary home for himself and his family. Although very different in tenor and style, both books accomplish similar ends. Both books commodify a design aesthetic and philosophy for building a postwar home into an easily understandable and purchasable package and both link "masculinity" with the idea of building an ideal home or "dream house." The movies, which transform the books into easy-to-read visual texts, further expand the audiences and accessibility of their messages.

This paper explores both the books and the films as commodities that not only promoted design but certain kinds of masculinities to a post-World War II market. It will examine the links made between design and masculinity in them; the similarities and differences of their messages and their target markets; how their translation from books into movies may have impacted their reception; and how they played an important role in the propagation of differing ideas of the "American Dream" and the promotion of single-family home ownership in the immediate post World War II period.

Jennifer Barrows, San Joaquin Delta College
"Reading and Writing Artistic Dress: Artists' Intentions and Public Opinion"

Between 1892 and 1912, artists throughout Europe turned their energies to making beautiful clothing. They used the term "Artistic Dress" to refer to their efforts, directed in part against the illogic and ugliness of contemporary fashion. My paper focuses upon how the written word effectively contributes to understanding the reception of Artistic Dress.

Many designers of Artistic Dress wrote expository articles, essays and books on the topic. These writings explain the intentions of the designers as well as the means by which their goals were to be achieved. Such expository writing has also served as the primary source material for recent publications on Artistic Dress, which represents the phenomenon from the viewpoint of those who accepted it—a beautiful alternative to the tyranny of fashion.

The reception of Artistic Dress by a wider audience has received far less attention. The majority of the population rejected Artistic Dress, and their views were expressed in popular short stories and cartoons. These narratives reveal that both physical examples and the expository writing about Artistic Dress were widely known, and also provide examples of how the explanation of Artistic Dress provided by its advocates was resisted by a broader audience.

A common element of both the expository and fictional writing is the stress upon gender. Artistic Dress designers often noted that their work maintained femininity and thus would be an effective counter to fashion. Yet in fictional narratives, detractors cast the medium as a subversive attack on traditional gender norms rather than on the fashion industry. The sum of written material indicates that gender ideals remained fixed for the majority of the population, while the interpretation of fashion and Artistic Dress was flexible.

Many studies of Artistic Dress note that the medium failed to end the influence of fashion. Examination of the narrative literature about this movement provides new insight into this failure. Furthermore, it highlights the inability of both visual and written media to convince a popular audience that an attack on a ubiquitous practice (fashion) is not also an attack on conventional ideology.

Elizabeth Hornbeck, University of Missouri
"Columbia Architecture in Vogue in 1925"

The success of Art Deco as an architectural style can be attributed in part to its synthesis of modern form and materials with French academic classicism. On exhibit at the 1925 Exposition of Modern Decorative Arts in Paris, from which the name Art Deco derives, this modern aesthetic was being defined not only in the pavilions of the exposition but also in the pages of both popular and architectural journals. One architectural critic, Henri Bidou, addressed his comments to an unexpected audience: the affluent female readers of France's *Vogue* magazine, which was primarily devoted to fashion and the cultivation of an elegant lifestyle. His essays aimed not only to educate this lay audience about the values and traditions of French architecture, but also to popularize the modern aesthetic that he saw in the exposition's buildings. He described the new aesthetic both as nude and specifically masculine, which is particularly intriguing considering that his audience was primarily female.

Bidou linked the architecture of the exposition to French architectural traditions; when the style was successfully employed, he argued, it resulted in the classical, rational ideal that had long been the goal of academic architects. At the same time, he transmitted avant-garde architectural values to his audience. Thus he argued that achieving a harmonious relationship between solids and voids replaced ornamentation as the architect's primary formal concern, suggesting a lesson learned from the Viennese architect Adolf Loos' highly influential essay "Ornament and Crime."

Many architectural critics described buildings displaying the new style as "nude," but Bidou's gendering of the style was unique. Also unlike his contemporaries, Bidou discussed the influence of Cubism on this new style. For him, Cubism was particularly masculine, especially when compared with the Art Nouveau style, which he dismissed as feminine and decorative. In this talk I will explore Bidou's attempts to define a new modern aesthetic, as well as the implications of doing so in a fashion magazine, particularly what he saw as the confluence of the new architectural style with masculinity and with Cubism. I will compare his interpretation of the new style with that of commentators in other journals, such as the conservative popular journal L'Illustration, and the professional architecture journal L'Architecture Vivante, who all were struggling with the same challenge of interpreting the new architecture in 1925.

Ethan Lasser, Yale University
“Storied Surfaces: Reading Domestic Objects in Colonial Boston”

My paper will focus on the literary character of a group of high chests produced between 1730 and 1750 in colonial Boston . Known as “japanned” high chests in the eighteenth century, these objects were decorated with vignettes of figures and landscapes that were intended to evoke the imagery of Asian lacquerware. This surface decoration shaped the high chests into pieces of literature: the vignettes were arranged in a narrative sequence, and their subject matter derived from one of the era’s most popular literary genres, the voyage chronicle, represented by the work of authors such as William Dampier, Daniel Dafoe, and Jonathan Swift.

While the relationship between the high chests’ stories and the writing of Dampier, Dafoe and Swift shaped the objects into the centerpieces of the upper class homes of their merchant owners, the association between the high chests and the era’s popular authors created something more than parlor conversation pieces. The voyage chronicles provided a framework for a deeper story embedded in the high chests’ surface narratives: the story of the objects’ secret life. As the anthropomorphic design of the high chests suggests, these objects were produced during a period when the age-old notion of an animate material world – a world where things had hidden lives of their own – was deeply ingrained into the cultural imagination. And yet, the second quarter of the eighteenth century also witnessed the burgeoning energies of the Enlightenment, a movement whose emphasis on rationality questioned and restrained the play of this imagination. A new generation of thinkers called for the secret interiority of the object world to be revealed. The japanned stories, I will argue, represent one attempt at such revelation. As literature, the veiled inner life of the objects was made legible and capable of being understood. This comprehensibility was enhanced by the narrative’s association with the voyage chronicles. The celebrated accounts of exotic otherness in these texts matched and gave voice to the otherness associated with the secret life of things. Even more significantly, the work of Dampier, Dafoe and Swift was written under the pressure of demystification – the pressure of clarifying and exposing the hidden and uncertain – which dovetailed with the Enlightenment’s effort to reveal the secret life of the material world, and to revise its status in the cultural imagination.