



PROF. WILHELM WAGENFELD (1900-1990) COMPOSED THE FOLLOWING ESSAY FOR THE FIRST IF YEARBOOK 59 YEARS AGO. HIS THOUGHTS AND REMARKS ARE MORE CURRENT THAN EVER BEFORE - MAY THEY PROVIDE YOU A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AS MUCH AS THEY DO FOR US.

THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES OF A DESIGNER

I

Domestic objects only fulfill their purpose when they quietly integrate into the whole context, thus serving us. After all, we want to live with these objects and enjoy them. This is how we want our chairs, our lamps, our crockery and cutlery to be, we want them to be beautiful in use, to feel and to look good. We want these objects to exude something that cannot be explained and that will enrich and relax our domestic environment.

II

We should not underestimate the social effects of industrial goods and their influence on the thinking, feeling and acting of those who buy, sell and produce them. Each product engenders a multitude of ideas and demands, both good and bad. Interacting with objects is akin to interacting with people: it can be inspiring and helpful but it can also be crippling and dull; it can support us, but it can also be harmful.

Considering these issues out of a passion for one's work is the kind of industrial responsibility that is able to frame commercial considerations in more holistic and far-reaching ways and that, since it is a commitment to quality, gives a company substance and strength.

III

Industrial goods are not created in secluded studios or workshops: they are created in factories as joint achievements of everybody who participated in their development. Works of art are created differently. Still, we tend to call our work an 'artistic contribution', in order to frame something elusive.

The stronger the artistic contribution is, the more it will define the result of the work. Artistic collaboration in factories therefore means joint thinking, joint calculating, joint planning, being familiar with both production and distribution and also with the real needs of consumers. Formgiving, then, means being able to visualize the beauty that can be developed and can exist within such tight parameters. It is not the drafting machine that is the birthplace of new devices: it is the model workshop, the place where, after some initial notes, we feel our way towards the desired object by using clay, plaster, wood, metal and plastic and by filing, sawing, modeling, cutting and forging. In a first playful approach, an idea is turned into a tangible form and thus becomes the first reference point for all those with a vested interest in the product. At this stage, objections are raised: the contributions by technicians, salespeople and master craftsmen that are, more often than not, of a limiting nature, but without which the new cannot come into being. This is not to say that technicians or salespeople could be formgivers or that they would take decisions to that effect. The result would be the same as if artists took on technical or business-related responsibilities: certain bankruptcy, only in this kind of bankruptcy, assets will not go under the hammer but will go onto the market as 'popular taste'.

But let's put formgiving into the right light! It is not about shrouding, it is not about attraction, it is not about a dramatization of industrial products for the audience: it is, indeed, a considered creating and making. What is the 'new' that we are aiming for? It might be an item that everyone needs, so simple and useful that we hardly notice it, or it may have to be so festive that its glamour shines like a bright light amidst all the elation. Or it has to be a device that is so mundane and simple that we could easily believe that it was already known to our forefathers. Additionally, we should never have to think about whether these objects come from a workshop or a factory or whether they were made by hand or by machines.

But most importantly, no industrial product must bear the traces of its conception, nor those of 'art' in the stale sense of the term. Holding its own next to a real work of art, without being too loud, without attracting attention, without interfering – that's already asking a lot. Try and find colorful textile or plastic curtains that do not overwhelm the picture on the wall. Try looking for lighting that does not claim the whole space for itself, try finding a radio that does not force itself upon us like a film prop or a centerpiece and that, instead, is simply there. And this is what it's all about: to create objects that are simply there, that quietly belong – this is one of the major tasks of industrial formgiving.



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WHAT IS THE 'NEW' THAT WE ARE AIMING FOR?

IV

The giving of form, the designing of things, should take as its starting point that which already exists, only to go beyond that and to lead to something new and unknown. It is simply a fallacy to believe that everything has already been done, that we've already seen each possible form of a jug or of a bowl. Our potential to create new forms is as inexhaustible as nature. No one leaf on a tree is exactly like another.

No flower blooms in the exact same way as the one next to it and no two birds will ever sing the same song. However, what we once and for all need to overcome are those ideas of doing justice to purpose and material, which have been observed like a catechism for far too long. In fact, what we really need is to master purpose and material in such a way that they conform to our will like clay conforms to the hands of a potter. After all, purpose is just a contingent, a parameter that can be measured and described. A soldier's mess tin needs to have purpose in that it must hold his food. But 'useful' is more than that: it explains the manifold relationships of human beings and objects, the objects we use to eat and to live in and with. Culture starts with usefulness, with overcoming mere purpose. Therefore 'using' is not only related to the mundane but also, and with different premises, to the unusual and the exceptional, or, to express it in a word that is slightly misleading here: to the representative.

V

The 'Kidney' certainly isn't a more beautiful table than the Chippendale reproductions so deeply loved by our Philistines, and Rococo vases with their gaudy decals are no more preposterous than the asymmetrical tat we find nowadays. But what, then, is the truly better, the truly perfect and the beautiful in industrial products? It might be a chair from a factory or workshop, which is so new and made with such love and care that we don't even notice how perfectly it fits into our time. Or it might be a piece of cutlery, crockery or a glass that is, in every respect, so pleasant to the touch and to the eye that you'd think it had been there all along.

'Quality' is an inner property of industrial goods. It is not solely defined by a product's form, but by all the work that went into it, not only the clearly visible work but also that which can only be sensed, that was necessary to create the chair, the crockery or the cutlery. If we understand quality in this way, then it needs the whole human being, it needs the passion and the best intentions of all participants. Therefore, quality is not the achievement of the formgiver: it is the achievement of the factory, the beautiful result of a solid cooperation between all those who contributed to the work. The salesperson is as important as the factory manager, as the technician, the scientist, the master craftsman and the shop-floor worker. Where there is no perfect cooperation, there is no perfect product. While its form may turn out well, there will still be a tangible dissonance, there will be traces that tell us that this form is nothing but an empty shell. Where there is no consensus and no total affirmation, there can be no perfect execution. More often than not, a product of beautiful form is so boringly naked that it would benefit from even the most trivial ornamentation. The simpler an industrial product is intended to be, the more difficult are the prerequisites to achieve this. 'Simplicity' is a quality that can only ever exist at the beginning and at the end, in the unbiasedness we know from children and in the clarity that lies beyond wanting and coercing.



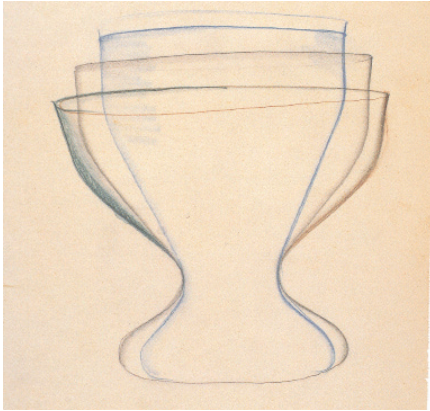
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VI

"There are enough lemon squeezers around. They only cost a few pence and make a lot of work but no profit", a retailer once said to me when I told him about our experiments with glass. He was right, because for all he knew lemon squeezers were badly executed, cheap glass products that you could find anywhere. You wouldn't want to put them on your dinner table. All of them, with their rather inefficient ways as necessary evils, did their job in the kitchen when you handled them carefully so as not to chip the sharp, cheap molded glass. Our intention, however, was to create a new type of lemon squeezer as a beautiful and technically well executed glass utensil that would grace any table in the garden or in the home. We thoroughly looked into the use of existing squeezers and discovered a lot of room for improvement. That's how we developed the idea to use scalene grooves with unequal angles for the cone instead of the usual equilateral ones.

THERE ARE ENOUGH LEMON SQUEEZERS AROUND.

We first experimented with a plaster model that was prepared and then tested. We wanted to develop a glass lemon squeezer in an organic way, which also entailed a thorough consideration of the bowl that captures the juice: we wanted it to have a good grip and a spout that wouldn't drip. During the modeling stage, we also had the idea of clamping the cone and the bowl together by giving them a small 'nose' and groove respectively in order to make using this small household utensil easier. These kinds of glass products can only be manufactured using compression moulding. When the model was finished it didn't go straight to the moulding workshop. We kept it in order to check, after sufficient time had passed for us to take a fresh look, whether there was anything left to improve. Only after this second investigation were the molds created and the first glass samples produced in the factory. When we tested the first squeezers, we found that our new design would use much more of the lemon than the existing products because all the flesh of the fruit would be pressed, right down to the pith. Therefore we needed to change the slots in the strainer and we also implemented a few other improvements before the new design was launched. Each industrial product needs such thorough development if it is to fulfill its purpose and meaning properly.



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PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

VII

Planning and development are also the most important stages when preparing the production of consumer goods. The more thoroughly, carefully and with wide-ranging scope this is done – and the more those who will later produce the products are involved – the greater is the guarantee that you will have a well-rounded result. This process is to product development what fermentation is to good wine.

You might think that artistic intention, that that which is intuitively desired, would be crushed in this process, would get lost in the to-ing and fro-ing between salespeople, factory managers, technicians and master craftsmen. However, the opposite is true: this interaction of different forces is necessary for the individual artistic input to infuse the factory process and to meld with it. The result of the development process – the production-ready model and the corresponding drawings – are not so much intended to embody individual notions as they are to represent the creation of an industrial community. And that's how industrial work differs from the work of a craftsman or from the work of an artist secluded in his studio.

VIII

For those who are involved in the industrial production of goods and who are concerned about the social and cultural significance of consumer goods, the proper consideration of material and purpose is not an aspect of work but a prerequisite. Doing justice to the material, then, means investigating, 'living' the material in such a way that its specific properties and the possibilities they afford are truly recognized and exploited. In the same way, a product is only fit for purpose when it has been perfected to such a degree that we do not have to think about its purpose any more. What we want is more than just 'purpose', more than just the function of a building, of a piece of furniture or of a device. At home, we don't just want the warmth from the oven or the shelter from the roof: from what we can feel with our senses, we expect both. And we don't just want something to sit on, we want a chair that is inviting. And most definitely, we don't want a 'special purpose pot' or 'special purpose device' on our table, because this is the place where we share a meal, where we come together and where we don't think about the 'why' and the 'what for'.

Certainly, every object we use should be fit for purpose. But, for it to be useful in our lives, we need more from it. When our world consists of a house, of furniture and of devices and appliances, then these objects become part of ourselves. They connect with us as tightly or as loosely as we grow together with them. It's not just about purpose. There's something beyond purpose, which, in terms of form, is meaning and which makes matter come to life. And there is also our being bound to time and to being human that defines how close or how alien and distant objects are to us.

In the same way in which we can read from an antique jug what trends and movements over time have influenced the master craftsman – influences that he wasn't aware of but that he followed nonetheless – in that same way, an industrial product shows us the mindset from which it is derived. We can instantly see from the products of a workshop, from a table or a chair or from the crockery of a ceramics factory, on which level these products were considered, which then defined the level of execution.

An industrial product is different from a workshop product: in its further development it can hardly be compared to the latter. It has not become impersonal: rather, it has taken another route and, following the paths of industry, it has come into its own and rests within itself. This is why, especially with industrial products, an uninvolved, indifferent attitude becomes all the more visible as a disconnect. These are the issues that we have to clarify, the tasks that we have to tackle: the interaction of artistic, economic and industrial forces as a societal and intellectual activity.