

1960s—1990s:

Postmodernism in Design

Postmodernism v. Modernism

- Modernist design (from its roots in the late-19th-c Arts + Crafts movement through the post-WWII International Style) tended to define itself against mass culture (the mainstream of commercial industrial design promoting consumerism).
- Beginning in the 1960s, this opposition lessens w/ increasing omnipresence of mass culture + academic study of the communication systems (semiotics) of mass culture.

Postmodernism v. Modernism

- Some characteristics of postmodernist design:
 - Revival of the communicative (symbolic) function of design
 - Vanguard (experimental, not popular) designers making reference to commercial culture + media
 - Vanguard designers making reference to past styles (highbrow + lowbrow)

1960s + 70s: Italian “Anti-Design”

- In a 1972 MoMA exhibition featuring Italian design, one section was devoted to work associated w/ Anti-Design.
- Anti-Design departed from International Style “good design” by its incorporation of brazen references to pop culture.
- MoMA’s recognition of Anti-Design signaled an evolution in the taste of authoritative cultural institutions, an increasing acceptance of departures from International-Style (modernist) orthodoxy.

Paolo Lomazzi, Donato D'Urbino + Jonathan De Pas, Joe Chair, 1970. Polyurethane foam covered w/ leather. W: 65 ¾ ". Manufactured by Poltronova, Pistoia, Italy.

-Included in the 1972 MoMA exh., *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*.

-What about this design departs from the International Style?



April Greiman (American, b. 1948), poster for California Institute of the Arts, 1978.

POSTMODERNISM OF THE LATE 1970S + THE 1980S

Postmodernist style of this period = richly symbolic + often eclectic.

Departs from modernist formal economy + purity w/ plurality of deconstructed, layered + collaged stylistic references.

Postmodernist graphic design often departs from the modernist grid for more eccentric layouts.

The mixing of fonts, often within the same word, also typifies postmodernist eclecticism.



Gail Anderson (U.S., b. 1962), with Fred Woodward (U.S., b. 1953), editorial layout for *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 1995.

- The postmodernist graphic design of the late 1970s + the 1980s also sometimes eschewed legibility in favor of a more playful, unexpected, rules-breaking approach.
- As this example shows, this tendency extended well into the 1990s.



Wes Wilson (U.S. 1937-2020), from series of “Billy Graham Presents” concert posters, advertising New Year Bash, December 31, 1966, at the Fillmore Auditorium, San Francisco.

The intentional illegibility of some postmodernist graphic design had roots in the late 1960s “psychedelic” style, most famously from the West Coast of the U.S.

It was an early (+ arguably postmodernist) reaction against the strictures of International Typographic Style, at that point associated with voices of authority (government, corporations) + authoritarian approaches to communication (unambiguous, forceful methods preferred by modernists).



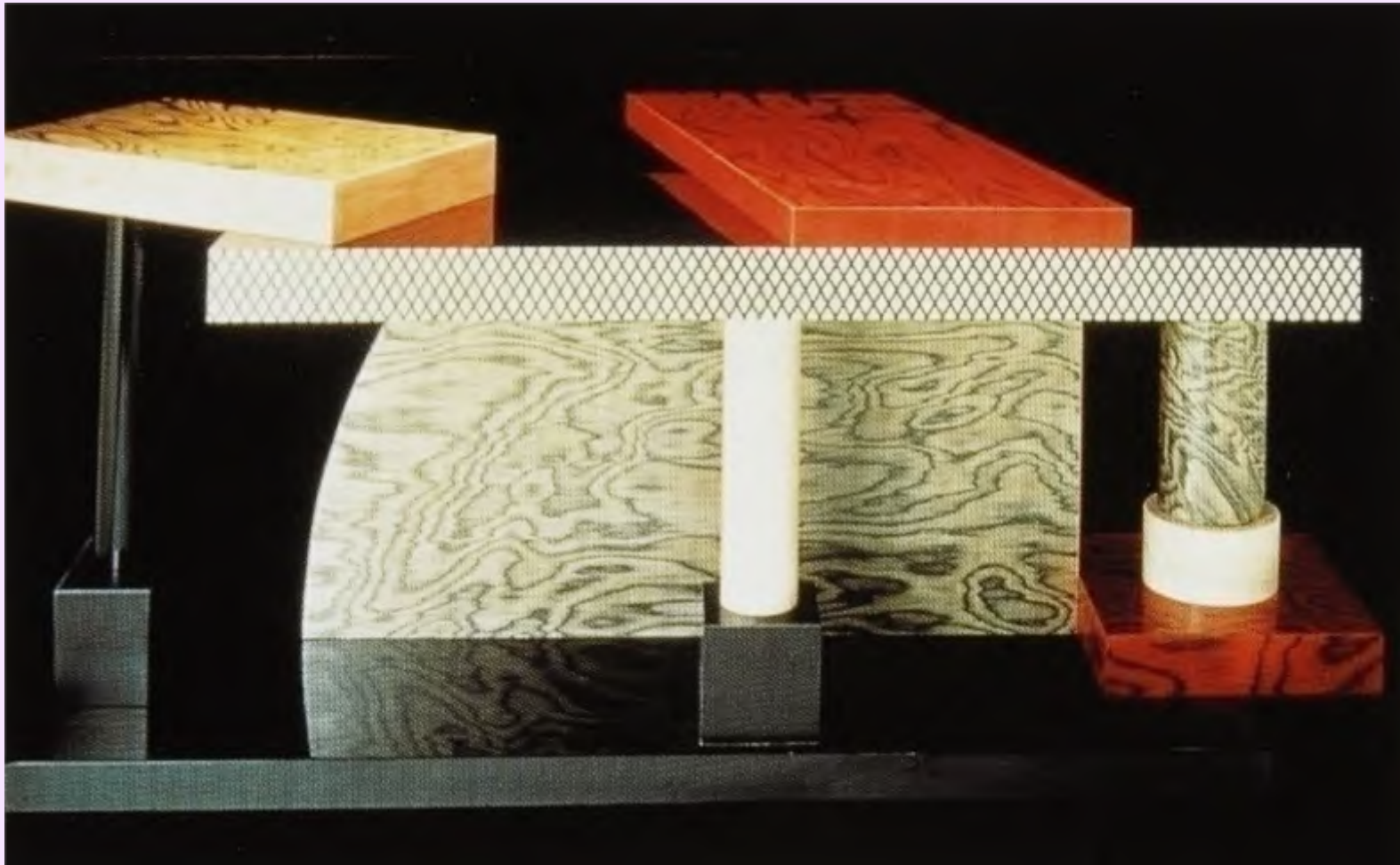
Ettore Sottsass, Jr. (Austrian, active Italy, 1917-2007), Tartar Table, 1985. Reconstituted veneer, lacquer, plastic laminate. 30 x 75 ¾ x 32 1/4". Manufactured by Memphis, 1985.

-Milan design firm Memphis, fnd. 1981, represents a postmodernist stylistic sensibility in furnishings.

-Patterns were inspired by plastic printed laminate surfaces of coffee bars in suburbs + by Hollywood + ancient cultures alike.

-Eclectic + humorous mix of high + low cultural references, cheap + expensive materials.

-Memphis produced limited edition goods for a high-end market!



Robert Venturi (U.S., 1925-2018),
Chippendale chair. Manufactured by
Knoll, NY. 1978-84.

**Another example of postmodernist
design for a high-end market.**

**This = stylistically eclectic, combining a
reference to an 18th-c design
(Chippendale) w/ a contemporary
industrial material (Colorcore = a
Formica Corp. product).**

**Humorous in its re-vision of an older
style.**

**Recuperates the decorative/symbolic as
a valuable, independent element of
design.**



Robert Venturi (U.S., 1925-2018), Seattle Art Museum, 1991. 100 University Street, Seattle, WA. 155,000 sq.ft. Main entrance.

As in furnishings, so in architecture. In this case, on the street level, the **decorative/symbolic** references are to elements of classical architecture (arches, columns).



Robert Venturi (U.S., 1925-2018), Seattle Art Museum, 1991. 100 University Street. Seattle, WA. 155,000 sq.ft. Southeast side, 2nd Ave.

- Unlike strict Int'l-Style modernist architecture, the total structure of the building is legible from all sides.
- This side suggests a building shape different from the other side.



Robert Venturi (U.S., 1925-2018), Seattle Art Museum, 1991. 100 University Street. Seattle, WA. 155,000 sq.ft. Grand stairway.

Venturi treats differing parts of the building uniquely, rather than taking a uniform—consistent, standardizing—approach to all parts of the building.

In this way, postmodernist design contrasts w/ International-Style ideals.



Robert Venturi, Vanna Venturi House, 1962-64. Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
-Robert Venturi pioneered this architectural postmodernism much earlier, in this house he designed for his mother. Many consider this to be the first postmodernist building.
-It defies Int'l-Style modernist rules: especially legibility of interior structure from exterior form, no symbolism + Mies van der Rohe's famous minimalist dictum "less is more."



Shao Fan (Chinese, b. 1964), from the *Chairs* series (1996): *Moon* chair. Medium-density fibreboard (MDF), catalpa, Chinese elm, 56 x 23 5/8 x 19 1/2". Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

-From the mid-1980s—1990s, Postmodernism = influential in China.

-It resulted in more blurred boundaries bet fine art + pop culture + in the integration of symbolism + wide-ranging cultural references in designed objects + architecture.

-This “Moon chair” forms the shapes of the Chinese character for “Moon” (*yue*)



Vivienne Tam (China, b. 1957), *Mao Dress*, from the *Mao Collection*, Hong Kong, 1995. Imagery by Zhang Hongtu. Synthetic knit, L. 57". Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

-In the Mao image, Tam playfully incorporates Chinese history + an int'l pop-cultural icon.

-Tam represents one culmination of the entrepreneurialism + internationalism begun under Deng Xiaoping (r. 1978-89), who encouraged engagement w/ foreign culture + markets as a way to make China more globally competitive: Tam was educated in Hong Kong, but moved to NYC to establish her business. Her shops spread throughout the world.



Xing Tonghe (Chinese, b. 1939), Shanghai Museum, People's Square, Shanghai, 1995.

-China's increased prosperity since the late 1970s went hand in hand w/ interest in foreign design ideas. But it also sparked rediscovery of older Chinese forms.

-Here, Xing Tonghe builds the Shanghai Museum in the form of a *ding*, an ancient Chinese cooking pot.

-The round top + square base of the structure also relates to an ancient Chinese notion of the world's geography in terms of the principle of "round sky, square earth."



Postmodernist Design 1960s—1990s

- Eclectic (style mixing) + borrowing from past styles.
- These features stem from a pluralistic, relativistic attitude toward style (recognizing + accepting no one style as correct or dominant).
- This attitude stems in part from an emerging academic interest, since the late 1950s, in communications and media theory and, since the late 1960s, an increasingly diversified marketplace of styles due to
 - A shift from mass to niche (targeted) manufacture
 - A shift from mass to niche (targeted) marketing
 - Increasing rates of stylistic obsolescence (+ media coverage of changes in fashion)

Discussion of Readings: Postmodernist Critiques of Modernism in Design

Robert Venturi (1966):

1. What does Venturi mean by “complexity and contradiction” in architecture?
2. Why does he advocate it (against the tenets of International-Style architecture represented by Mies van der Rohe)?
3. Is his criticism of Mies van der Rohe valid?

Robert Venturi (1968):

4. Venturi contrasts the concept of “architecture of space” with “architecture as symbol.” What is his distinction + why does it matter?
5. What does Venturi ultimately want architects + critics to “learn from Las Vegas”?

Discussion of Readings: Postmodernist Critiques of Modernism in Design

Rachel Berger (2020):

1. What characteristics does Berger identify as “modernist” in visual communication design + whom does she associate this thinking with in the areas of data visualization and infographics?
2. What is her critique of the modernist approach? Do you think her criticisms are valid?
3. What approaches does she prefer + why does she consider them especially crucial today?
4. Do you agree with her argument? Why or why not?