

DESIGN AS ART

Today it has become necessary to demolish the myth of the 'star' artist who only produces masterpieces for a small group of ultra-intelligent people. It must be understood that as long as art stands aside from the problems of life it will only interest a very few people. Culture today is becoming a mass affair, and the artist must step down from his pedestal and be prepared to make a sign for a butcher's shop (if he knows how to do it). The artist must cast off the last rags of romanticism and become active as a man among men, well up in present-day techniques, materials and working methods. Without losing his innate aesthetic sense he must be able to respond with humility and competence to the demands his neighbours may make of him.

The designer of today re-establishes the long-lost contact between art and the public, between living people and art as a living thing. Instead of pictures for the drawing-room, electric gadgets for the kitchen. There should be no such thing as art divorced from life, with beautiful things to look at and hideous things to use. If what we use every day is made with art, and not thrown together by chance or caprice, then we shall have nothing to hide.

Anyone working in the field of design has a hard task

ahead of him: to clear his neighbour's mind of all preconceived notions of art and artists, notions picked up at schools where they condition you to think one way for the whole of your life, without stopping to think that life changes – and today more rapidly than ever. It is therefore up to us designers to make known our working methods in clear and simple terms, the methods we think are the truest, the most up-to-date, the most likely to resolve our common aesthetic problems. Anyone who uses a properly designed object feels the presence of an artist who has worked for *him*, bettering his living conditions and encouraging him to develop his taste and sense of beauty.

When we give a place of honour in the drawing-room to an ancient Etruscan vase which we consider beautiful, well proportioned and made with precision and economy, we must also remember that the vase once had an extremely common use. Most probably it was used for cooking-oil. It was made by a designer of those times, when art and life went hand in hand and there was no such thing as a work of art to look at and just any old thing to use.

I have therefore very gladly accepted the proposal that I should bring together in a volume the articles I originally published in the Milanese paper *Il Giorno*. To these I have added other texts, as well as a lot of illustrations which it was not possible to publish in the limited space of a daily paper. I have also made a few essential changes for the English edition.

I hope that other designers will make similar efforts to spread knowledge of our work, for our methods are daily asserting themselves as the fittest way of gaining the confidence of men at large, and of giving a meaning to our present way of life.

Design came into being in 1919, when Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus at Weimar. Part of the prospectus of this school reads:

'We know that only the technical means of artistic achievement can be taught, not art itself. The function of art has in the past been given a formal importance which has severed it from our daily life; but art is always present when a people lives sincerely and healthily.

'Our job is therefore to invent a new system of education that may lead – by way of a new kind of specialized teaching of science and technology – to a complete knowledge of human needs and a universal awareness of them.

'Thus our task is to make a new kind of artist, a creator capable of understanding every kind of need: not because he is a prodigy, but because he knows how to approach human needs according to a precise method. We wish to make him conscious of his creative power, not scared of new facts, and independent of formulas in his own work.'

From that time on we have watched an ever more rapid succession of new styles in the world of art: abstract art, Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, Neo-Abstract art, Neo-Dada, pop and op. Each one gobbles up its predecessor and we start right back at the beginning again.

What Gropius wrote is still valid. This first school of design did tend to make a new kind of artist, an artist useful to society because he helps society to recover its balance, and not to lurch between a false world to live one's material life in and an ideal world to take moral refuge in.

When the objects we use every day and the surroundings we live in have become in themselves a work of art, then we shall be able to say that we have achieved a balanced life.