The future is now


From, desk lamps, and hair dryers are so familiar that most people don’t associate their design with technology’s impact on society. But an examination of mundane objects can serve very well to illustrate how technologies affect form and function. The current Hayden Gallery exhibition takes two decades — the 1930s and the 1980s — and through consumer items attempts to demonstrate each period’s attitude toward progress.

In the 1930s, explains curator Katy Irons, engineering was concerned with speed and motion. Reverence for the machine, a J. C. Penney linear-tracking turntable, Grid Systems’ “Company” computer, and the Priveeoe “telephone access controller” are all packaged in large, flat, almost indistinguishable mass black boxes. Of these products the latter (a device for screening incoming telephone calls) is the most expressive, its thin rectangular surface interrupted by a vertical wall suggesting an upraised hand or other barrier.

On the other hand, while looking for more of these taciturn dusky slabs, Kline uncovered many colorful, friendly objects whose form clearly says something about their workings and purpose. Another trend in contemporary design, the thought — deliberate reaction against black-boxes! Many of us, however, realize that similar brightly-colored plastic products have been around at least since the late 1960s, long before there were any black boxes against which to react.

Some of the examples chosen to represent this category of contemporary design are neither especially attractive nor functional; an afternoon upstairs at Lechmere Sales or Crate & Barrel, where the black monoliths are somewhat less imposing, would prove the existence of this pessimistic notion of progress — a Qwip facilitative machine, a J. C. Penney linear-tracking turntable, Grid Systems’ “Company” computer, and the Priveeoe “telephone access controller” are all packaged in large, flat, almost indistinguishable mass black boxes. Of these products the latter (a device for screening incoming telephone calls) is the most expressive, its thin rectangular surface interrupted by a vertical wall suggesting an upraised hand or other barrier.

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