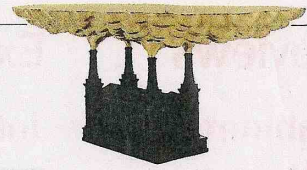
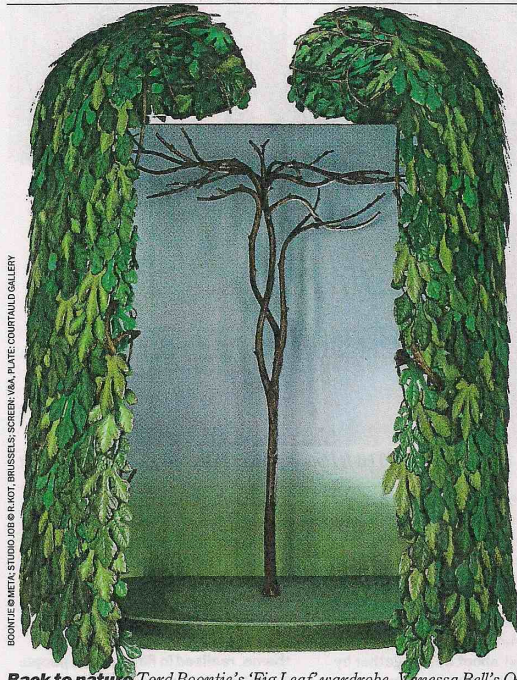


Art



The V&A unveils its big summer show



BOONTJE © META STUDIO JOB © RIJN OT BRUSSELS; SCREEN: V&A; PLATE: COURTAULD GALLERY



Art

Back to nature Tord Boontje's 'Fig Leaf' wardrobe, Vanessa Bell's Omega screen, Studio Job's 'Robber Baron' table (top); and Duncan Grant's plate (bottom)

Some impressive examples of design art are going on display at two London venues, finds **Ossian Ward**

This page has been devoted to the phenomenon of 'design art' before, but never has such a convincing display been mounted in London. 'Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design' is a bit of a mouthful, but the proof in this pudding is in the eating and it's a heady confection for sure.

A wooded entry leads you from the V&A into 'Forest Glade', the first of three camper-than-Christmas environments, followed by 'Enchanted Castle' and 'Heaven and Hell'. The leafy, mirrored and moody backdrops are distracting, but not to the detriment of these already confused, oft-grotesque hybrids of, say, a wedding dress fused with a chair, or a bath mashed with a boat; not to mention the dead-calf stool and the pig's-skull teapot (with a water-rat cosy, in case you're interested).

Beyond 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' theme-parkery, there's a true engagement with the complex

nature of these objects and how their ugly or ostentatious aesthetics seem to frustrate the very purpose of furniture or domestic usefulness. The definition of 'design art' is everywhere: when function is not of sole importance, the artistry takes over, cleverly interweaving work-a-day familiarity with visual ideas that challenge such normality. So, the 'Fig Leaf' *armoire* by Dutch designer Tord Boontje is both a place to hang clothes, on its bronze branches, and a thing of insane beauty, with 616 enamelled copper leaves. But what makes it art and not just louche design is the comment Boontje prompts on the very act of covering our original nudity. It's deeper than it looks.

Another characteristic of 'design art' is vast expense, with most items produced in editions of only three or five. Studio Job (more Belgian and Dutch designers) excoriatingly sends up this exclusivity in its 'Robber Baron' series echoing the tastes of Russian black marketeers or Chicagoan mobsters. Their gold cabinet has its contents exposed by a bank-heist hole, while the 'Robber Baron' table billows a cloud of industrialist pollution. These

jokes on power and glamour would reflect ironically on their owners' wealth were it not for the converse irony that the V&A probably can't afford such pricey pieces for its own collection.

The selection by Gareth Williams is not uniformly satisfying, but the brilliant catalogue explains the pull of

'Fig Leaf' wardrobe comments on the act of covering our nudity

these objects without the final room's OTT (Damien) Hirstian histrionics of skulls, taxidermy and coffin boxes.

Yet 'design art' is not a new-fangled craze. Consider what the Bloomsbury set were up to more than a century ago in a shopfront on Fitzroy Square, W1. Omega Workshops was an industrious studio where artists such as Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell toiled away on designs for dresses, carpets and ceramics that would bear distinctive abstract patterns, derived from post-impressionists like Matisse and Derain.

The Courtauld's slim but fascinating show, 'Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of

the Omega Workshops 1913-19' explains how art critic Roger Fry (Omega's leading light) introduced a avant-garde French painting to London, but not quite why he tried his hand at putting cubism on rugs and shawls. His decorative experiment didn't even last as long as the show's title suggests, closing in 1916, perhaps due to a lack of seriousness in dabbling on tables and lampshades, but more likely due to the cost and exertion of producing uniquely customised, hand-pimped objects. Yes, it was early 'design art' (although every piece was meant to be collaborative, stamped with Omega's anonymous ' '), but Fry deemed it a failure and shut up shop, blaming the closed-mindedness of English tastes, rather than the lengthening First World War.

Fry was right to believe that interior design could convey the 'expressive power of the human mind' – why can't a teapot make you stop and think in the same way a painting might? And while the best design art is on show today at the V&A, Fry was also right to say that it's anything but made in England. 'Telling Tales' is at the V&A until Oct 18, 'Beyond Bloomsbury' is at the Courtauld Gallery until Sept 20.

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