

# Tales of the expected

Only the best in this show re-engage with a tradition of storytelling through design, says **Geoff Shearcraft**

## EXHIBITION

### TELLING TALES: FANTASY AND FEAR IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

V&A, Cromwell Road,  
London SW7 [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)  
Until October 18

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"In the middle sixties someone asked me to design a coffee table. I thought that a work of mine could be altered. This debased the work and produced a bad table which I later threw away. The configuration and the scale of art cannot be transposed into furniture and architecture. The intent of art is different from that of the latter, which must be functional. If a chair or a building is not functional, if it appears to be only art it is ridiculous."

Writing in 1993 Donald Judd believed there were clear distinctions between art and functional objects. He would no doubt be distraught to see how Ikea has appropriated his art to make fully functional sideboards for the masses.

Those who share Judd's simplistic distinctions are unlikely to engage with this new exhibition in the V&A's Porter Gallery. Curator Gareth Williams has also produced an excellent book and

assembled almost 50 objects exploring contemporary designers' attempts to create functional objects with narrative character and associated meanings.

All the exhibits might be described as "design art". Part functional, part conceptual but wholly collectable, they will be largely familiar to anyone that has followed the Milan Furniture Fair in recent years.

The exhibition is divided into three rooms, each with a distinct theme. The first room, the Forest Glade, provides a theatrical showroom for designs to "recall a state of innocence". Wieki Somers' Bathboat (2005), a boat for holding water in, hits exactly the right combination of formal associations and material sensuality to enrich a familiar object and the everyday experience of its use. Few of the adja-

cent objects succeed as well, tending to sacrifice the experience of use for visual impact.

In The Enchanted Castle the exhibition design is more intrusive. Studio Job's exquisite Robber Baron series (2006) of polished, patinated and gilded cast bronze pieces are set against mirror tiles, recalling the window display of a high street amusement arcade. The final room,

Heaven and Hell, forms a viewing bottleneck where the

materially resonant provocations of Dunne & Raby and others are practically hidden by a contrived set of viewing windows. It is ironic that a collection of objects that aspire to be conceptually accessible and engaged with the wider social context are quite so inaccessible to exhibition visitors.

Naming a show about objects at the V&A "Telling Tales" is something of a tautology. Any attempt to create a distinct exhibition of objects "designed in the spirit of storytelling" in the same building as an ancient Greek drinking cup in the shape of a boar's head, the complex marquetry of the Lawson cabinet and the restored ironwork intricacies of Gilbert Scott's Hereford Screen appears to be setting itself up to fail. Yet the exhibition subtitle's reference to contemporary design makes clear the scope of its decidedly post-modern agenda.

In the context of the world's largest collection of the decorative arts this exhibition presents a small group of contemporary designers' aspirations to overcome a century of modernist functionalist rhetoric and continue the tradition of telling stories through

designed objects. Revisiting the V&A's 4.5 million objects suggests that this tradition has always been integral to the act of design, contradicting Judd's polarised distinctions between art and function.

Many post-modern designers have attempted to re-engage with this tradition (notably in the 1980s) but have invariably failed

owing to an obsession with the image of an object over its experience. The most successful objects in the exhibition avoid this trap, using decorative devices, historical allusions and material choices to combine sensual experiences with meaningful stories.

German sociological critic Walter Benjamin was convinced that storytelling and making objects were similar activities and provides an appropriate challenge to designers. "One can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very own task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way."

*Geoff Shearcraft is a director of AOC and teaches a design unit, Learning from Milton Keynes, at London Metropolitan University.*

### TELLING TALES

The accompanying book by Gareth Williams is published by the V&A, 128pp HB, £19.99.

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