

# Once upon a time, there was a designer . . .



**Edwin Heathcote**  
DESIGN

## Telling Tales

Victoria & Albert Museum, London

As a museum, the Victoria & Albert is there to transmit information about culture and history through objects. Every object, even the most stripped-down modernist product, tells a complex story through its form. But can an object reveal too much information? What happens when the narrative overtakes and ultimately replaces the function?

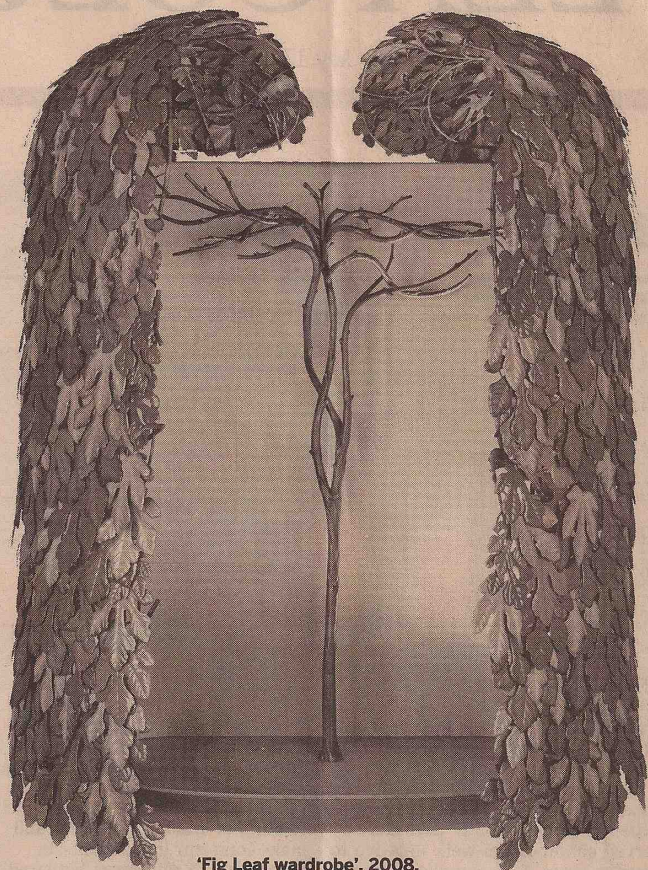
What happens is that you get design art. The museum's intriguing new exhibition frames contemporary design not in terms of function but in terms of narrative, placing an extraordinary collection of objects, by mainly young Dutch designers, in the context of a series of fairytale sets.

Design art is only just emerging; its language, and particularly the language of criticism and theory within which it exists, remains unformed. At its most superficial, it can appear as a transparent attempt to enter the lucrative world of galleries, by redefining design in terms of limited editions and rarity. At its best, it brings an enriching new layer to product design, a stratum of meaning, humanity and association so that objects bring their archetypal stories with them. Both are available here.

Liberally strewn with quotations from Walter Benjamin and Angela Carter, *Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design* brings together some strange and compelling things. It opens with a room entitled "The Forest Glade". Populated with furniture by Tord Boontje and Jurgen Bey, it attempts to recall the archetypes of the fairytale. Chairs draped with flowers or transforming into foliage fall somewhere between Sleeping Beauty and Miss Havisham, while a fig-leaf-clad wardrobe speaks (a little too loudly) of the tree of life and the expulsion from Eden. From there the mood shifts to "The Enchanted Castle". A disco-mirrored, Rococo hall, this is the most striking room and contains the most wonderful set of exhibits, Studio Job's "Robber Baron" series. A satire on the taste

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'Fig Leaf wardrobe', 2008, designed by Tord Boontje

Meta

of the oligarchs who are presumably the intended clients for this kind of piece, it includes a blasted-through armoire, the huge bullet-hole itself becoming a fractured, crystalline decorative motif, and a coffee table made from the flattened surface of a billowing cloud of golden smoke rising from a blackened power station, its four

chimneys standing-in as legs.

The next room, "Heaven and Hell", is filled with objects recalling the Surrealists' interest in the uncanny, Freud's "Unheimlich". It is a bit of a mess but does contain a few visually, if not necessarily intellectually, arresting works. I particularly liked Dunne and Raby's "Huggable" mushroom cloud, a genuinely

disturbing clash of the domestically soft and the martially destructive. Also discomfiting is Boym Partners' "Buildings of Disaster", a series of desktop replicas of sites of destruction, from the Tower of Babel to the World Trade Centre, each rather beautiful, slate-grey objects bearing the barely perceptible physical traces of tragedy.

That the curators have felt the need to arrange these objects in a tricky, theatrical setting and to overlay them with a spurious narrative about fairy tales and folklore reveals an insecurity about the value and place of this kind of emerging art. These works play on engaging with fear and discomfort, with the unsettling and the sinister ever present just beneath the surface of the everyday. But this subversion is nothing new. There is little here that wasn't done by Meret Oppenheim's "Object" (a fur-covered teacup) or Man Ray in his "Cadeau" (a clothes iron with spikes), both from 1936, or even, arguably, by the designers of the Baroque, who sought to disturb and disorientate in works of distortion and intricate detail that also conveyed meanings about life, death and God.

What has changed since then, though, is the advent of cyberspace, of instant communication, immediate gratification and global homogeneity. In attempting to tie the exhibits to familiar stories, the curator, Gareth Williams, implies that there is a desire for real objects that tie us to the specifics of place and, through tales, to time. But too often these things descend into whimsy. Design's cultural resonance derives from its relationship to the ritual of everyday life as it is lived, from the history and evolution of use. The objects here, as the show's title implies, have a different meaning: they aim to mislead or at least provoke. When objects are removed from the realm of the useful, they cease to be design. But do they become art?

Until October 18  
Tel 020 7942 2000



Studio Job: 'Robber Baron table', 2006

R. Kot