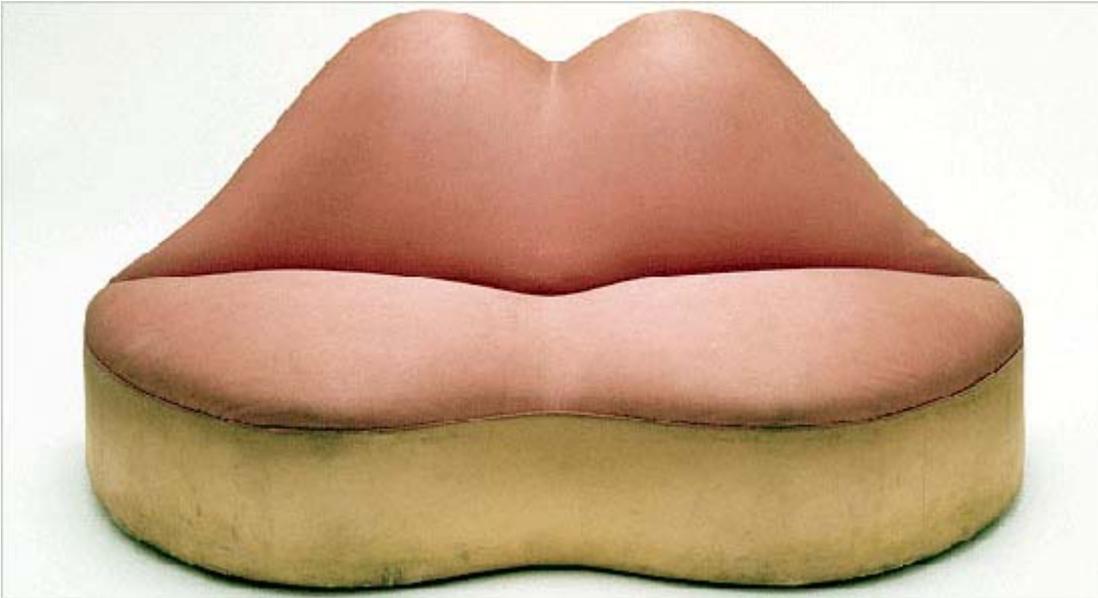


The Surrealist comeback in design

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Salvador Dalí, Mae West Lips Sofa, 1938. (Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation and ADAGP, Paris)

What's wrong with grabbing a lobster's tentacles when you pick up the telephone? Nothing, according to the Surrealist artist, Salvador Dalí, when he presented the art collector, Edward James, with a job lot of Lobster Telephones in 1938 for his London home.

To Dalí, the lobster and telephone handset were interchangeable. "I do not understand why, when I ask for grilled lobster in a restaurant, I am never served cooked telephone," he said. Whatever James thought of grappling with a fake crustacean whenever he made a call, he got off lightly. The Lobster Telephone did work, and Dalí's other ideas were more macabre. One was for a telephone mounted on a live turtle. Another, an homage to Edgar Allan Poe, was to be covered by dogs' noses, with a dead rat stuffed inside the receiver.



The Lobster Telephone is a highlight of "Surreal Things," an exhibition exploring the relationship between Surrealism and design, which opens at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London on Thursday. It is the latest in the V&A's ongoing series of shows devoted to 20th-century design movements, of which Art Deco and Art Nouveau have been the most popular. The exhibitions are organized chronologically: the last was on Modernism, and the final shows will be Cold War Modern in autumn next year, and International Baroque the following spring. Yet "Surreal Things" is aptly timed, as Surrealism, or, at least, a Surrealist-influenced style, is currently making a comeback.

Some of the latest manifestations of Surrealism are screamingly commercial. Take the trompe d'oeil hoarding at 39 Avenue George V in Paris, where a construction site is façaded by an eerily realistic image of a Surrealized 19th-century apartment building whose structure ripples like water. Or the topsy-turvy boutique of the Dutch fashion designers Viktor & Rolf on Via Sant'Andrea in Milan, which is literally built upside down, with a "floor" that looks like the ceiling, and vice versa. You can also spot Surrealism's influence in more thoughtful design projects, like the provocative, slightly sinister work of the young product designers, such as the Swedish group, Front, and Dutch duo, Studio Job.

Oscillating from Surrealized commercialism to a considered reinterpretation of the original Surrealist spirit reflects the central theme of the V&A show. It examines the ambiguity of Surrealism's relationship with commerce, and the tensions that developed during its transition from an avant garde art movement in the 1920s to a commercial design style from the 1930s. "Surrealism had an enormously powerful impact on design in the 1930s, especially on fashion and advertising, and has periodically come back from then onwards," said Ghislaine Wood, the exhibition's curator. "But the reality of how Surrealist artists and designers engaged with commerce was never clear cut. There was a toing-and-froing that got very muddy at times."

The word Surrealism was invented in 1917 by Guillaume Apollinaire, and adopted by fellow French poet, André Breton, in 1924 to describe a radical movement of artists and writers, who drew on their subconscious to depict a heightened or "super-real" vision of the world. The V&A exhibition begins two years later with the sets designed by the artists Max Ernst and Joan Miró for a production of "Romeo and Juliet" by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The Paris premiere of the ballet was disrupted by a group of whistle-blowing protesters, organized by Breton and the writer Louis Aragon, who accused Ernst and Miró of betraying the ideals of Surrealism by selling out to commerce.

These tensions were aggravated during the 1930s, when some Surrealists, led by Dalí, changed their focus from words and images to creating objects for art collectors and, eventually, commercial clients. Surrealism swiftly became a fashionable style in graphic design, fashion and interiors. Some Surrealists, notably the artist Man Ray and Breton himself, succeeded in working commercially without alienating the purists. And there were inspired collaborations, such as those between the fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli with Dalí, Aragon and Meret Oppenheim, and the interior designer, Jean Michel Frank, with Man Ray and Alberto Giacometti.

But there were also a great many uninspired takes on Surrealism, which reduced it to a decorative style, stripped of its early radicalism. The chief culprit was Dalí, whom Breton nicknamed Avida Dollars (an anagram of his real name) for dabbling in everything from advertising and Royal Crown Derby china to window displays for Bonwit Teller, the New York department store. When Dalí discovered that Bonwit Teller had "respectabilized" his display, he broke in to the window sending a prop, a bathtub, smashing through the glass. He was arrested.

Such stunts, coupled with Dalí's increasingly questionable work, diminished his artistic reputation, and Surrealism's too. "The visual strategies of Surrealism lend themselves to commercialization, like the idea of taking an image and blowing it up, or contrasting incongruous juxtapositions" said Ghislaine Wood. "The problem comes when it is literally pastiche, rather than a fresh approach."

Surrealism's ongoing problem is that, whenever it has resurfaced since the 1930s, it has tended to be as pastiche. Although the V&A exhibition traces its influence on the biomorphic objects made by postwar designers like Isamu Noguchi in the United States and Carlo Mollino in Italy, from the 1940s onwards Surrealism was more commonly associated with kitsch commercialism.

Every artistic movement has been commercialized to some degree, but few have suffered as much in the process. Even the dreariest manifestations of Modernism are underpinned by its social goal of utilizing technology to build a better world. But Surrealism was always a solipsistic movement, rooted in self-expression, which is why it has been so easily reduced to an exaggerated style.

Surrealism inspired Pop Art at the turn of the 1960s, and post-Modernism in the early 1980s. Both eras were characterised by economic buoyancy, and a playful, almost mannerist artistic culture masking underlying anxieties, just like today. That's why Surrealism is surfacing again in the fantastical work of neo-Surrealists like Front, and on an Avenue George V construction site.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 27/3/2007.