Carma Gorman

20th Century Design History by Sarah Teasley and Chiharu Watabe

Sarah Teasley and Chiharu Watabe’s 20th Century Design History is a compact, attractively designed book that provides chronologically organized case studies and color images of key works, figures, materials, and institutions that shaped—or that were typical of—the twentieth century’s shifting styles, production processes, and distribution channels. Although its glossy, colorful pages and short blocks of text make it at first glance like a non-scholarly “greatest hits” compilation, its text in fact provides useful critical analysis. And, as its chronological rather than alphabetical arrangement implies, it focuses much less on named designers than does a work such as Charlotte and Peter Fiell’s Industrial Design A–Z.

Teasley, an assistant professor at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and Watabe, a Tokyo-based design journalist, wrote the book in both English and Japanese, a logical choice given the book’s appeal to readers of both languages. Although dual-language books are sometimes awkward to read, this book’s consistent layout, coupled with the prominence of the English-language headings, makes it very easy to navigate. This review addresses only the English-language text, which is presumably the more accessible of the two languages to Design Issues’s readership.

20th Century Design History opens with brief introductory remarks by both Teasley and Watabe, which are followed by ten chapters, one for each decade of the twentieth century. Within each chapter, a section featuring full-page case studies (accompanied by color images) is organized chronologically, and is then followed by a section of shorter half-page analyses that is also arranged chronologically, starting again at the beginning of the decade. This organizational strategy, which groups the shorter analyses two to a page, saves a great deal of paper and expense. On the other hand, it also suggests a hierarchy of importance that I am not sure the authors intended, and which I suspect was foisted upon them by the publisher. A single, strict chronology within each chapter—page count be darned—would have been more logical and useful to readers. However, this is a minor quibble, one which to some extent is addressed by the lengthy timeline that follows the ten chapters.

The timeline is a substantial component of the book, spanning pages 132 to 167. The 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s are allotted a double-page spread apiece; every decade from the 1930s onward receives two. Across the top of each spread, on the horizontal axis, are five headings: Graphics, Products, Fashion and Materials, Architecture, and Society. The vertical axis is chronological. The timeline includes not only the case-study items that are discussed in the chapters, but also additional brief entries that help further contextualize the case studies. The timeline makes it very easy to compare developments in, say, graphics and fashion in the 1970s, and identifies a number of products and events that would not have occurred to me to list, but that certainly help convey the feel of the era—e.g., 1973: “Birkenstock releases its popular Arizona sandal (Germany).” This section of the book is similar in spirit to Steven Heller’s and Elinor Pettit’s Graphic Design Time Line, or the timelines that appear in most art history survey textbooks. Like many of those other timelines, this one includes a few small black-and-white illustrations per double-page-spread, a useful enlivening device.

There are many things to like about this book. One is its reasonably even-handed attention to product design, architecture, graphic design, and fashion. Those who will probably be best pleased with the authors’ selections of case studies are historians of product design; historians of architecture and graphic design and fashion may feel that their fields get shorter shrift. But there is definitely an attempt at balance, and if nothing else the book shows very effectively how these fields of design have overlapped and developed in concert. 20th Century Design History is thus a potentially useful book to assign in a design history survey course that enrolls students in many different subfields of design.

Another appealing feature of the book is its studied balance between the exceptional and the ordinary. Canonical objects such as Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye and Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion car are, not surprisingly, included in the book. But so are mundane objects such as Cup Noodles, the Bic disposable lighter, Saran Wrap, and Nintendo. And rather than providing case studies only of objects, the authors also tackle influential retailers (such as the Body Shop, Muji, and Habitat), publications (such as Learning from Las Vegas, Astroboy, and Wallpaper) and government programs (such as Japan’s G-mark system and Britain’s Utility scheme) that have arguably had some impact on consumers’ notions of “good design.”

Also very welcome is the incorporation of Japanese (and to a much lesser extent, Chinese, Korean, and Indonesian) design into the standard Eurocentric narrative. Although the ways in which Western art/design/culture have been informed by Japanese art/design/culture are mentioned in most historical narratives (e.g., Japonisme, miniaturization, just-in-time production), this book also suggests some of the effects Western ideas and practices have had on Japan (e.g., department stores, Culture Village, clothing styles). China is addressed to a lesser extent in the main text, but a number of important Chinese developments are noted in the timeline at the end of the book.
The pithiness and incisiveness of many of the entries also makes this book appealing. For example, the entry on Hello Kitty manages to trace in just eight sentences not only the origins of the demure cat, but also the cultural importance of the brand, particularly its lack of a story line (in contrast to nearly all other animated characters, which are based on movies or comic books) and its “fableless” production (Sanrio does not fabricate itself, but instead contracts out all manufacturing).

Despite its many strong points, however, this book does have some flaws that limit its usefulness, particularly as an introductory textbook. The captions do not always match the illustrations; for example, the building identified on page 138 as Gerrit Rietveld’s Schröder House most certainly isn’t. Other captions omit information that most scholars would deem mandatory; for example, Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center is identified on page 114 only as “a university arts center” in the USA, with no mention of Ohio State University, or Columbus, or even the state of Ohio. Elsewhere, the authors name-drop with little explanation; few novices would have any idea what the authors meant when they said that Osaka’s postwar New Towns “realized Ebenezer Howard’s planning ideals” (p. 91), since Howard is not mentioned elsewhere in the book. Potentially even more confusing to introductory readers is the authors’ occasional use of last names only, as in the phrase “Lalique, Gall [sic] and Boucheron” on page 12. This last example also points out another failure of the book: its extremely sloppy copyediting.

Although pointing out misspellings may seem a petty task for a reviewer, in this case I feel that the many misspellings of proper names (I counted about 35) seriously compromise this book’s utility. An interested student who types “Giacomo Barra” (p. 17) into a search pane, for example, will not be able to locate any information on Giacomo Balla. Nor will typing “Mohamed Femy Agfa” (p. 57) yield any hits for Mehemed Fehmy Agha. Oscar Niemeyer’s last name is spelled four different ways in the book: “Neumayer” (heading of p. 75), “Neimeyer” (text of p. 75, twice), “Niemayer” (p. 158), and—only once correctly—“Niemeyer” (in the index). Some of the misspellings are “near misses” that a search engine such as Google would be able to work around, but some are so egregious that the correct names are not suggested as alternatives. This makes it difficult for an interested student to learn more about the people who are discussed in this book.

Because of the poor copyediting, then, I do not think I would assign this book as the only, or even the primary, textbook in a design history course. But I do think this book could be a useful complement to another textbook or to a course reader. It is conveniently brief and compact, yet provides perceptive analyses. The illustrations are good, and the selection of featured objects, institutions, designers, buildings, films, fashions, publications, and so forth is quite lively, since it includes so many non-canonical (but familiar) objects, and so much more Japanese material than is usual. And the book itself looks very chic, which certainly adds to its appeal.

Ultimately, though, I think the readers who will derive the most benefit from this book are people who are already in the field. These readers will know who Lalique is, will know that the offhanded abbreviation “CI” refers to corporate identity, will already know the correct spellings of designers’ names, and will—most importantly—be in a position to appreciate the ways in which the authors’ astute choice of case studies subtly tweaks and comments upon the standard narratives of the field. Through their insistence on the interrelationship of Asian design and Western design, through their matter-of-fact inclusion of food items as examples of industrially designed products, and through their attention to the many kinds of institutions and organizations and publications that shape products and consumer expectations, the authors of 20th Century Design History provide a thought-provoking model for what twenty-first century design history could look like.
Carma Ryanne Gorman (born January 1969) is an American art historian known for her work in the area of design history. Her American Quarterly article "Educating the eye: Body mechanics and streamlining in the United States, 1925-1950" was one of ten reprinted in the Organization of American Historians' anthology The Best American History Essays 2008. Carma Gorman was born in January 1969. She earned her BA in art history at Carleton College in 1991 and her MA and PhD in the history of art at the University of California, Berkeley. Carma Gorman is an associate professor in the Department of Design at The University of Texas at Austin. Her specialty is the history of design, especially industrial design of the USA from 1890 to the present. Gorman earned her Ph.D. in art history in 1998 at the University of California, Berkeley. Carma R. Gorman Brings Back to Life Familiar Voices in New Anthology on Industrial Design History. Remember Richard Nixon’s address to the nation during the energy crisis of 1973? Industrial design history is chock-full of speeches and statements that couldn’t feel timelier in light of today’s issues. Yet to get to these sources, readers often have to shuffle through dimly lit library floors or dusty newspaper archives. Associate Professor Carma Gorman specializes in the history of industrial and graphic design in the USA. Gorman is a member of the board of directors of the CAA (f.k.a. the College Art Association), a former associate editor of the journal Design and Culture, a past president of the Design Studies Forum, and the owner-moderator of the designstudiesforum-l announcement list. She earned a B.A. in Art History at Carleton College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in the History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley. Carma Gorman. The University of Texas at Austin. Verified email at utexas.edu.