

Hidden Heroes. The Genius of Everyday Things

Buckminster Fuller Dome, Vitra Campus, Weil am Rhein, Aug, 20 – Sep, 19 2010

An exhibition of the Vitra Design Museum in co-operation with Hi-Cone

We use them every day. They influence our lives. They number in the billions. They are so common that we rarely even think about them: the Hidden Heroes of everyday life. Be it a dowel, a tea bag or a zipper, these objects are classics. Typically based on an idea that was both simple and ingenious, they have often remained essentially unaltered for decades. Due to their constancy, efficient use of materials and great utility, they are the utmost examples of sustainability and functional aesthetics. With the exhibition „Hidden Heroes: The Genius of Everyday Things“, the Vitra Design Museum and Hi-Cone present 35 of these everyday classics, telling about their history and demonstrating the enormous significance they have today, both conceptually and economically.

The Hidden Heroes are pure manifestations of their function. They do their job without clamouring for attention. That's what makes them so appealing. Almost without anyone noticing, they have set standards: in the way that we dress, in the way that we eat, in our means of transportation, and in our daily work. It is also worthwhile to take a closer look at these objects because their stories offer insights into the larger context of cultural and industrial history. The story of the pencil, for example, also tells us something about the democratisation of education and writing; the tin can bears witness to the industrialisation of food processing; the omnipresence of overseas shipping containers points to the rise of globalisation and the worldwide exchange of products. Small, sticky Post-it notes have successfully spread almost simultaneously with computers, since they preserve a last option for handwritten annotations in the wake of digital word processing. And the production figures of the snap fastener, which is over 100 years old, or hook and loop tape, which was invented by George de Mestral in the middle of the twentieth century, allow us to make conclusions about the transformation of fashion and the increasing informality of conventional apparel.

Numbering among the Hidden Heroes are things that have developed, in an almost evolutionary way, through the process of industrialisation over a period of decades. Proceeding through numerous variations, they have ultimately achieved a form that can hardly be improved upon today, such as the paper clip. But they also include things that originated in the spontaneous idea of an individual person, and that advanced from the sudden inspiration of the inventor to a mass produced article in just a few years: for example, the minimalist multi-pack ring carrier by Hi-Cone, which was developed by the American engineer Jules Poupitch in 1960 – a practical plastic carrier for cans that is now also made in a slightly altered version for bottles. Another example is plastic bubble packaging wrap, created by Marc Chavannes and Al Fielding around the same time.

Some of the Hidden Heroes have also set linguistic standards – for instance, when a name brand comes to be used as a designation for comparable products. The trademark Kleenex, established in 1924, has become the generic term in English for paper facial tissues; similarly, people ask for a Band-Aid, a branded product developed by Johnson & Johnson in 1920, when they need an adhesive bandage to cover a small cut or wound. And most people refer to transparent adhesive cellophane tape simply as Scotch tape, a brand of 3M since 1930.

Vitra Design Museum

Why would a design museum devote its attention to such everyday objects? Because these industrial products embody ideals of modernism that are once again highly relevant today: economy of material, a focus on function and longevity. Because it must be the secret desire of every designer to create enduringly successful products like these. Because they continue to inspire new designs – as exhibition objects by Ingo Maurer, Naoto Fukasawa and Claesson Koivisto demonstrate. And because the Hidden Heroes reveal a lot about the importance of design: it is often most effective and influential in the places where it goes unnoticed. It emerges out of the careful examination of daily human life. It often has an eventful history that is closely linked to industry and technology. Yet in some cases, it is also based on tiny changes in the way we think, but which ultimately have a great impact on our everyday lives.

‘Hidden Heroes: The Genius of Everyday Things’ is an exhibition organised by the Vitra Design Museum in collaboration with Hi-Cone. The idea of devoting a single project to the genius of everyday things emerged during the engagement of Hi-Cone as sponsor of the exhibition ‘The Essence of Things’. This new show presents the objects together with patent specifications and drawings by their inventors, with print ads and advertising films – not only from today, but also from the time when the products were striving to become established. It also includes industrial films both current and historical, as well as examples of the impulses and inspiration that these things continue to provide up to the present. The exhibition puts these everyday objects in the spotlight by displaying them in individually designed, multi-media showcases. For the duration of the exhibition, the Buckminster Fuller Dome on the Vitra Campus will be transformed into a stage upon which the things that otherwise exist beneath our conscious perception make a star appearance, thus receiving the attention they deserve.

Hi-Cone and the Vitra Design Museum will also present this exhibition on the Internet from August, 19 onwards at: www.hidden-heroes.net.

Opening hours: Mon – Sun: 10 am – 18 pm

Further information at:
www.design-museum.de/museum/news