

# INDUSTRIAL DESIGN & DIGITAL DESIGN

*"To look ahead one must learn to look back."*

Leonardo da Vinci was not the first industrial designer, but perhaps he can be considered the greatest. The proverbial "Renaissance Man" designed all sorts of machines, products, and devices light years ahead of his time. Da Vinci is a perfect example of a man who saw more than what was directly in front of him—who imagined better things than what surrounded him at the time.

Benjamin Franklin, one of America's greatest figures, could also be considered one of America's greatest industrial designers. He designed the lightning rod, a device still in use today. He created bifocals, and the Franklin stove which heated rooms to an even temperature (something the fireplace couldn't do).

In 1847 Sir Henry Cole, a public-spirited Englishman, startled the Council of the Society of Arts by saying, "Of high art in this country there is abundance, of mechanical industry and invention an unparalleled profusion. The thing still remaining to be done is to effect the combination of the two, to wed high art with mechanical skill".[1] The effect of da Vinci, Franklin, Cole, and numerous others led the movement to reject tradition when it stood in the way of utility and comfort. [2]

The roots of industrial design lie deep in history; and though inventors throughout the 18th and 19th century developed game-changing products, it wasn't until the mid-20th century when industrial design found its true golden age.

Following a decade of decadence, the 1930s brought economic depression and the rumblings of war. Manufactured goods served the purpose for which they were intended, but they came off production lines with a stagnant sameness. There was little difference between competing companies; each product was wholly utilitarian. The industrial designer was viewed as a decorator whose task was simply to make products "prettier".

But in time, a few alert manufacturers realized that design was more than decoration. They realized that to make products work better, look better, and be more usable to the consumer was a valuable, and overlooked principle. They realized good industrial design was a silent salesman, contributing increased efficiency, a better look, assurance, and confidence. [3] This enhanced perspective of what design is, and what design does, grew from a spark to a wildfire over the next decade as companies embraced the value of good design.

The industrial designer grew from just a decorator to a professional who insisted on dissecting the product and learning how to make it look AND work better.[4] Where design was once viewed as polish, now it was viewed as purpose—the idea that products must be designed from

the inside out. And what really sold the philosophy was how products which valued and included design from the beginning drastically outsold those which did not. Design not only contributed to the physical worth of the product, but also to the financial worth of the product. And thus the golden age of industrial design was born.

Sound familiar?

I believe digital design today is in a similar place to industrial design in the 1930s and 1940s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, websites and digital products had a very utilitarian feel about them. Table layouts, blue links, unobtrusive elements, and very little visual design. Everything pretty much looked the same.

Design for the digital space, with the exception of a few outliers, was predominantly decorative in nature. Design wasn't viewed as a part of the "building" process; instead design was relegated to the "make pretty" process. Now, similar to industrial design in the 1930s, companies are recognizing the aesthetic and financial value of design. We're realizing (again) that design is much more than decoration—that it isn't all about how something looks, but it's how something works.

Just like the mid-20th century was a renaissance for industrial design, I believe we're entering a renaissance for digital design. What's the common denominator between the two?

It's people.

When we focus only on the utility of a product, and neglect the user of the product, we tend to focus on what the product IS, instead of who it's FOR. We care about the USE of the product more than how it's USED. The result tends to be products that may perform a job well, but aren't that enjoyable to use.

For example, in the 1950s typewriters were painted with a glossy black paint. Many stenographers would complain about headaches after a few hours using the machine. Industrial designers determined that it was the color of the paint that caused excessive eye strain resulting in headaches. By changing the color of the paint, the eyes were less strained and the majority of the users' headaches disappeared.

Or consider Responsive Design. For many years web designers designed sites for one environment or viewport. The result is that the website would look and function well in a desktop environment, but would fail miserably in other environments. Sites that are designed responsively are environment and device agnostic, meaning the experience will be pleasant regardless of how or where it's viewed.

It's not just about what a product is used for. We must also consider who uses it. When we design for people and empathized with their needs, we will produce better products and

experiences. As digital designers we live in an amazing time. Similar to the industrial design community a half-century ago, we have to opportunity to take advantage of a vast, golden landscape and create beautifully designed products.

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[1] Designing for People, 21

[2] *ibid*, 20

[3] *ibid*, 18-19

[4] *ibid*, 23