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LIFE & STYLE

A New York Designer Relishes the Universal Look of Toothpaste Tubes

The tubes look the same, but the design and contents reflect a national character



'It's a designer thing to collect stuff,' says Tucker Viemeister, who displays toothpaste tubes from around the world in his Manhattan bathroom. *PHOTO: BRYAN DERBALLA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **LIZ RAPPAPORT**

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Toothpaste is like Elvis. Or so says Tucker Viemeister, an industrial designer who has collected more than 200 tubes of toothpaste from his travels around the world and displays them on the bathroom walls in his Manhattan loft.

When 66-year-old Mr. Viemeister began the collection in the mid-1980s, "success in design was like being Elvis," he says. "The pinnacle was to design stuff that everyone would want, rich, poor, old, young, anywhere in the world."

And toothpaste is a global thing, says Mr. Viemeister. "Everyone has tubes, but there's

different toothpaste inside.”

The tube that launched his collection was from Finland. The 17-character word splayed down the length of it that captured Mr. Viemeister’s eye on a visit to the country in 1985 was Fluorihammastahna. The word means fluoride toothpaste in Finnish.

His tubes hang vertically from their flat ends, with office clips and nails about 2 inches apart. Visitors’ trips to the bathroom always spark a follow-up conversation, he says, though his home is filled with cabinets and shelves of objects and artworks.

“It’s a designer thing to collect stuff,” he says, recalling that his first boss kept masks from Mexico.

The tube installation represents the type of design Mr. Viemeister has striven for—simplicity and universal usefulness. He was on the team that created the OXO Good Grips kitchen tools around 1990. The ridged, rubbery-handled peelers and pizza cutters were designed to be used by as many people as possible.

He was also part of the group that won the first Presidential Design Award in 1984 for helping design the trail plan, wayfinding system and street furniture for the Mall in Washington, D.C. He has helped create designs for dozens of products, including toasters, telephones and watches, as well as architectural spaces and experiences for clients such as the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas and many others.

Toothpaste tubes have no real value, but each one has a defining characteristic that ties it to its home culture. A Spanish tube has a drawing of a matador on the side and the paste includes dark red dye to make the user’s gums look redder and teeth whiter. A friend gave him a tube from Argentina billed as 10 times as strong as regular mint toothpaste. “It was strong,” says Mr. Viemeister.

The designer has tried most of the toothpastes in his collection. French varieties have flavors like desserts with lavender or lemon, he says. Some from Japan have salty or ultra-fruity flavors. His friends also often bring toothpaste as gifts.

Mr. Viemeister has a tube from a shop in Rome that claimed it sold “papal toothpaste.” It was in a clear tube next to the votives, he says. He has a fashionable shiny white tube made by the men’s clothier Paul Smith.

In Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, he came across a gold mine—an entire store that sold nothing but toothpaste. Mr. Viemeister also has tiny tubes from airplane hygiene kits



Some of Tucker Viemeister's toothpaste-tube collection. The industrial designer brings home tubes from his trips abroad.
PHOTO: BRYAN DERBALLA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

and a miniature tube made for the lifelike American Girl dolls.

“I steer clear of non-tubes,” says Mr. Viemeister. “I like regular caps, too.”

Mr. Viemeister's father, also a designer, helped design the 1948 Tucker automobile. He named his son after the iconic car.

Some of Mr. Viemeister's work for OXO is among the collections of New York museums, including the Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum and the Museum of Modern Art.

He says the Elvis-like ethic of designing for everyone has given way recently to people's desire for artisanal and tailor-made products. “Now, everyone wants to know the person who made their stuff,” he says.

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