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What Apple Learned from Kodak

Posted by: Helen Walters on December 05, 2008



Currently Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, Bill Buxton writes a [regular-ish column](#) for the Innovation channel here at *BusinessWeek*. In the process of working on a new piece, we got to emailing about how innovation can flourish in a downturn.

Bill made the point that industrial design in the U.S was born between 1927 and 1929, i.e., right on the eve of the great depression. Now-legendary designers such as Henry Dreyfuss, Walter Dorwin Teague and Raymond Loewy all flourished in this time and as Bill noted, "Firms employed these folks because they brought real value. It was about survival, not visual lollipops."

Then he sent me the image above, along with the caption: "Knowing history worked for Jonathan Ive and Apple. It might work for the rest of us too, if we just did our homework." The rest of the email told an important tale, with a great moral, so I asked Bill if I could post it here and he graciously agreed. The camera image comes courtesy of Ralph London of the London Collection.

Bill Buxton: "Great design is as much about prospecting in the past as it is about inventing the future. This we can see in the following tale of two pocket-sized examples of personal technology – separated by 76 years.

In 1926, Kodak launched the third generation of their Vest Pocket camera line, the Series III. While the product line had been very successful, they wanted to expand its market appeal, in particular, to women. To help them with this, they turned to the designer, Walter Dorwin Teague, who had recently set up one of the first industrial design consultancies in the USA. The concept that he developed was to do a version of the camera that would be released in five distinct and different colours, packaged in a satin-lined box of matching colour. (All previous Vest Pocket Cameras had been solid black.) This version of the camera was released in April, 1928 under the name, the Vanity Kodak.

Leaping ahead to 2003, Apple Computer had just launched the third generation of their iPod MP3 music player. While the product line had been very successful, they wanted to expand its market. To do so, they turned to their head of industrial design, Jonathan Ive. The concept that he developed was to do a smaller version of the iPod, and release it in five distinct and different colours. (All previous iPods had been solid white.) This version of the iPod was released in January, 2004 under the name, the iPod Mini.

Did Apple steal the idea from Kodak? Not at all. Was Apple aware of the Vanity Kodak, and the what and the how of Teague's contribution? Without a doubt: Jonathan Ive is an outstanding designer, and the Vanity Kodak is one of the classic examples in the history of industrial design. What Apple did was learn from history, and adopt, adapt, and assimilate past success to current context. That is simply good, intelligent design in action. It is also a very good lesson: an obsession with the new and original, without a deep literacy and appreciation for the past, leads to a path of missed opportunities."

Thanks, Bill. We'll post his new column, on research and innovation, soon. I'll add the link here when the piece is ready.

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Peter Mortensen

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Bill is one of the few great design strategists in the marketplace of ideas. Thanks for sharing your insight!