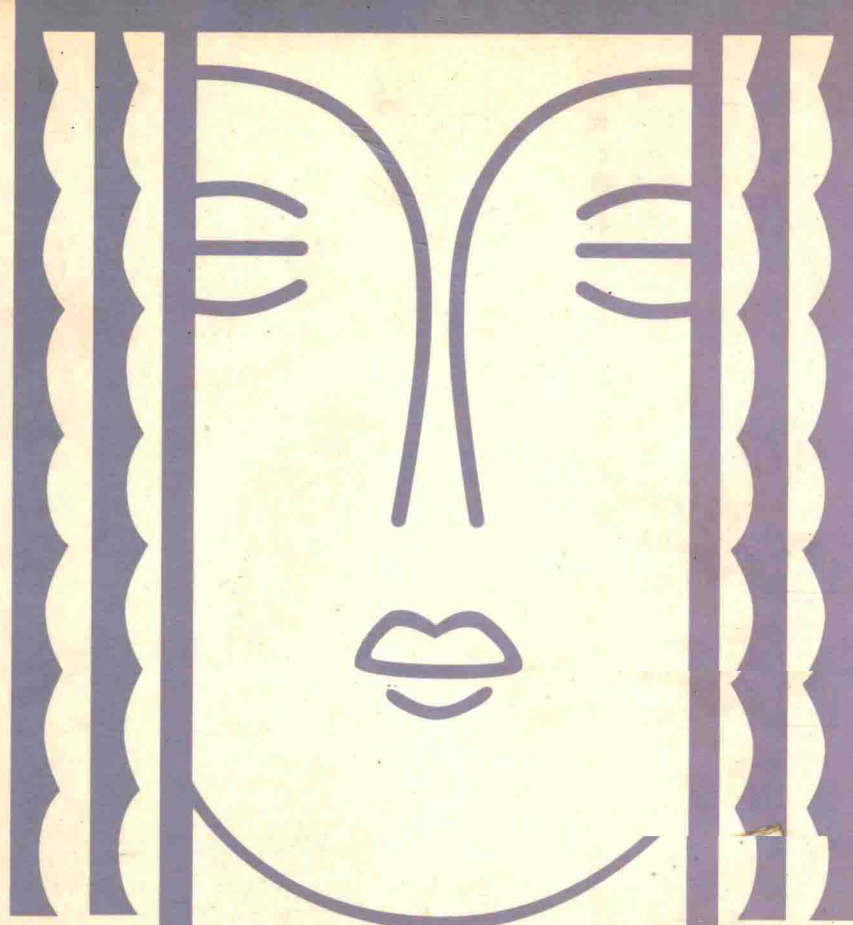


STEVEN HELLER

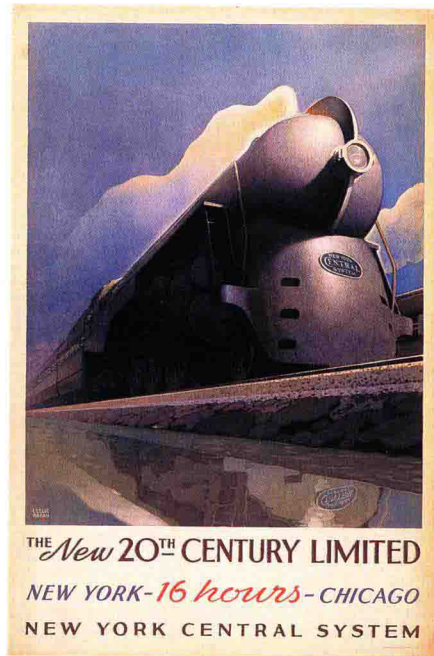
& LOUISE FILI



A M E R I C A N
A R T D E C O
G R A P H I C
D E S I G N

Streamline





S T R E A M L I N E

The authors are indebted to Suzette Ruys, our researcher, for the incredible time and effort put into locating the corporate archival material used in this volume. Our gratitude goes to Leah Lococo for her design and production assistance. Thanks also to Bill LeBlond, editor; Leslie Jonath, assistant editor; and Michael Carabetta, art director, at Chronicle Books, without whom this series of books would not be possible.

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INTRODUCTION

6

FASHION & STYLE

16

HOUSE & GARDEN

34

FOOD & DRINK

46

DRUGS & SUNDRIES

56

BUSINESS & INDUSTRIES

64

TRAVEL & TRANSPORT

80

ARTS & CULTURE

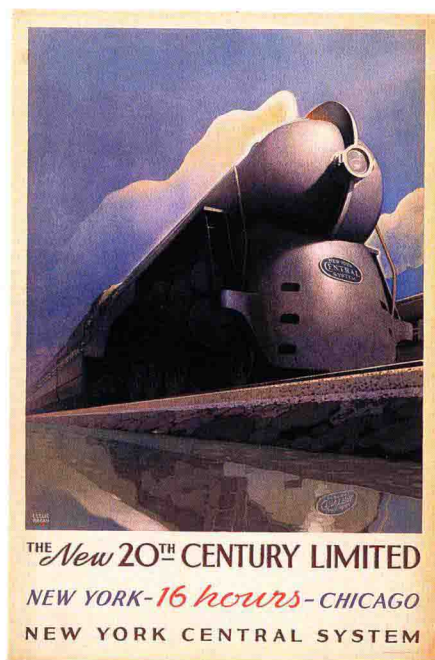
94

TYPE & LETTERS

116

BIBLIOGRAPHY

132



S T R E A M L I N E

S T E V E N H E L L E R

A M E R I C A N A R T D E C O

S T R E A

C H R O N I C L E B O O K S

E L O U I S E F I L I

M L I N E

G R A P H I C D E S I G N

S A N F R A N C I S C O

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6

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16

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34

FOOD & DRINK

46

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56

BUSINESS & INDUSTRIES

64

TRAVEL & TRANSPORT

80

ARTS & CULTURE

94

TYPE & LETTERS

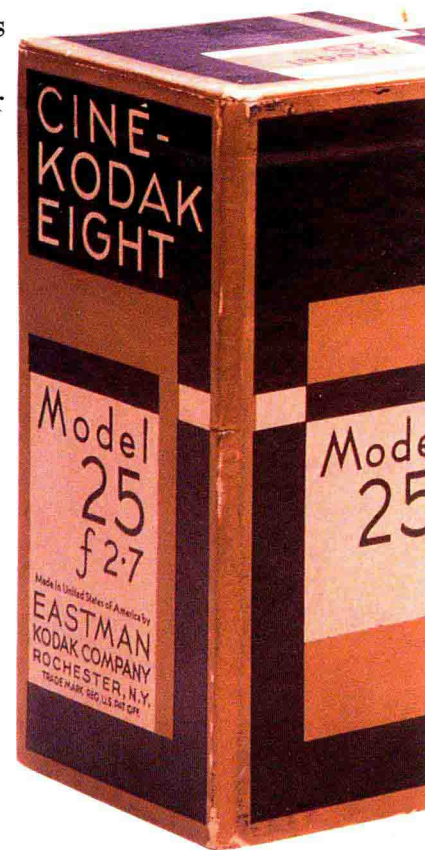
116

BIBLIOGRAPHY

132

Streamline was a distinctly American design style forged in the crucible of the social and economic turmoil of the 20s and 30s. Overproduction for inactive markets demanded radical measures and forced business into an unprecedented alliance with a new professional known as the designer. In an effort to stimulate consumption these white knights of industry launched a crusade against outmoded industrial output that resulted in the application of new futuristic veneers that brought out the inherent machine-made attributes of products and commodities. Influenced by Modern art, which to a certain degree was inspired by the machine itself, the industrial designer was not like the nineteenth-century decorator, an apologist for or rebel against mass production, but rather a visionary who understood that art should be of its time and products should represent the era in which they are produced.

Whereas Victorian and Art Nouveau styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries hid evidence of the machine under faux naturalism, Streamline's aerodynamics symbolized the mechanized tempo of daily life. By 1938 Streamlining was such a widespread practice that Sheldon and Martha Candler Cheney wrote in their seminal analysis of

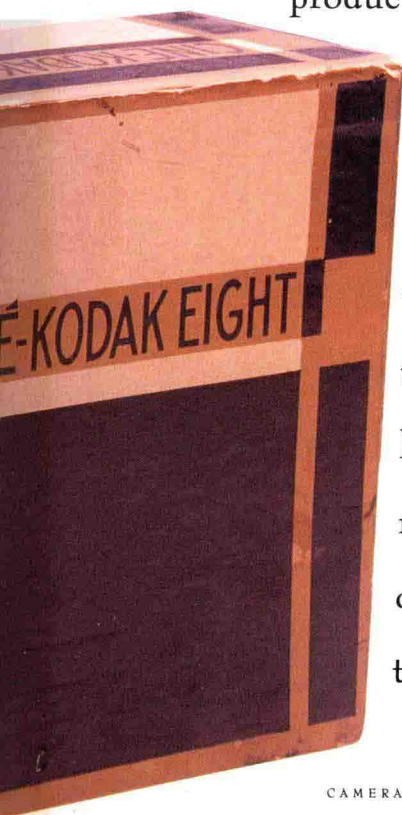


American industrial design, *Art and the Machine* (Whittlesey House, 1939), that “Everywhere, there is . . . merchandise distinguished by the beauty that is peculiarly a product of artist and machine working together.”

Industrial products were not, however, the first to receive a Machine Age makeover. In the early 1920s European Modernism, which was practiced at the Bauhaus and through affiliated schools and movements and proposed the objectification of everyday products, was introduced to the American consumer primarily through

magazine advertising. Yet the term *modernistic*, connoting the commercialization of this radical design language, is a more accurate way to describe the new advertising trends. Modernistic design was ersatz modernism. Although it employed Modern characteristics, such as rectilinear rather than curvilinear form common to Art Nouveau, it was not a total rejection of functionless ornament but rather a compromise between purism and bourgeois luxury. Aspects of Cubist and Futurist painting were adopted as ornamental motifs that imbued new life in otherwise traditional layouts, and eventually

modernistic art was seamlessly wed to the Modern typographic principles that stressed asymmetry



KODAK

CAMERA PACKAGE, C. 1931

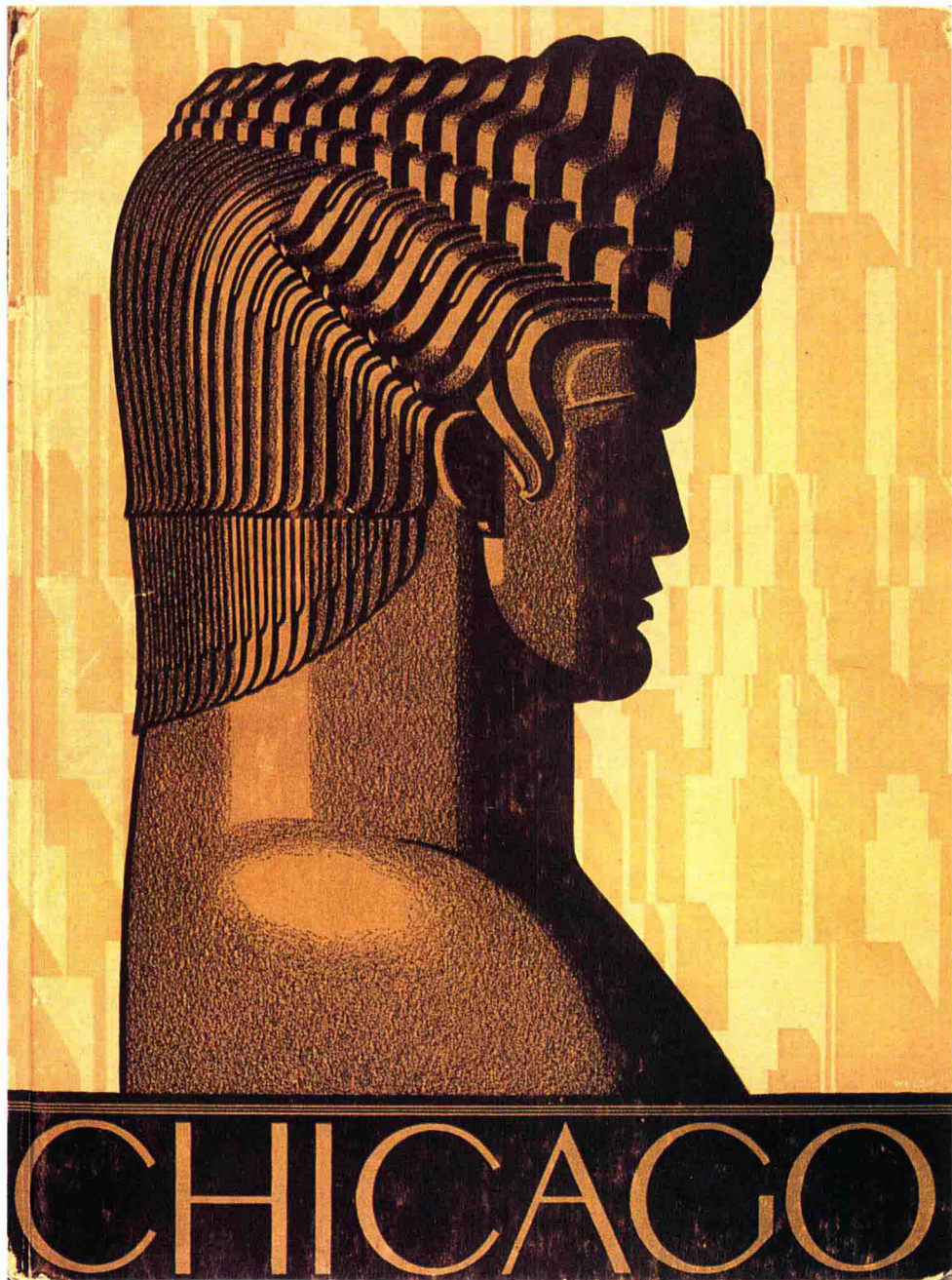
DESIGNER: WALTER DORWIN TEAGUE

CHICAGO

PROMOTIONAL BOOK FOR

HARRIS TRUST & SAVINGS BANK, 1928

DESIGNER: WILLIAM P. WELCH



and sans serif letterforms over central axis classicism. Geometric patterns and shapes, including ziggurats and lightning bolts borrowed from antiquity, were streamlined into emblematic icons and glyphs that came to personify modernity.

Modernistic graphics framed and “dressed” otherwise quaint and timeworn products. Yet, in what became a typically American marketing ploy, it was the advertising and packaging, not the product itself, that was smartly styled. In the early 1920s the practice called “styling” had not yet been adopted for industrial wares. And despite an alarming downturn in the sale of new merchandise beginning in the mid-1920s, business was not yet convinced that the blame for sluggish consumerism should be placed on poorly designed or old-fashioned-looking products. Businessmen reasoned that advertising was the panacea; great campaigns would stimulate consumer enthusiasm. Marketing strategies were developed to present the illusion of progress using typography and imagery that was seductively progressive, or what the industrial designer Raymond Lowey referred to as MAYA, “most advanced yet acceptable.”

The widespread availability of color printing spurred advertising agencies to change their tired design conventions. Merely increasing the visibility of a product was no longer enough; it needed to be imbued with an aura that spoke more to image than utility. In addition to advertising, a product’s packaging was as important as its function.

So beginning in the 1920s advertising strategists turned from promoting *things* to selling *ideas*. “More and more art directors have striven to express . . . not so much the picture of a motor car as motion, action, transportation,” exclaimed Earnest Elmo Calkins, the president of Calkins and Holden Inc., a leading New York advertising agency, who was writing in *Modern Publicity* (1930). “Not so much a vanity product as lure, charm, fascination; not so much a breakfast food as gustatory delight, vigor, health, vitamins, sunlight.” This was accomplished not through romantic realism but through lush abstraction.

America did not invent abstract advertising. It started in Europe at the turn of the century and was founded in symbolic (often productless) representations. In the early 1920s “advertising engineers,” as some utopian graphic designers referred to themselves in Russia, Germany, Holland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, practiced progressive approaches to advertising and posters that at once promoted products *and* demolished the barriers between fine and applied art. By 1925, when the first exhibit to promote modernistic design, the *Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, opened along the banks of the Seine, aspects of styleless, orthodox Modernism had already been adopted to create a more luxurious decorative commercial style called Art Moderne.

When Americans were introduced to European Modern art at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, the style was greeted with predictable skepticism and ridicule, but

after American trendsetters returned from Paris with the latest styles and then applied modernistic design to advertising, packaging, and window display the public became enthusiastically accepting. This was not because the masses developed an overnight appreciation for higher levels of culture but rather that over time the inevitable shock of the new wore off and the transformation of certain avant-gardisms into marketing tropes kicked in. In an essay titled "Modern Layouts Must Sell Rather Than Startle" (*Advertising Arts*, 1930), Frank H. Young explained the trend that he called "gone modern." "The layout man has grasped the advantages of the use of modern art in the creation of his arrangements to arrest the reader's eye impressively and to robe the advertisement in a refreshing new dress."

With Pavlovian predictability consumers began to associate modernistic design with the idea of *new and improved*. Earnest Elmo Calkins wrote in *Advertising Arts* (1930), "Modernism, or what is conceived to be modernism, has profoundly influenced American advertising design in both the pictorial treatment and the typography." As one of the most influential advertising executives of the age, Calkins was a pragmatist not a utopian, for he was not interested in Modernism as a force for social change, like the Europeans, but used it as an alternative to the commonplace, and therefore a means to turn the tide of consumer indifference. He promoted "consumption engineering" and

proselytized the business community to accept “styling” as a marketing strategy. He asserted that this was the key ingredient of the marketing scheme called “obsoletism.” “The styling of manufactured goods, which has become such a widespread movement in this country,” he wrote, “is a by-product of improved advertising design. The styling of goods is an effort to introduce color, design and smartness in the goods that for years have been accepted in their stodgy, commonplace dress. The purpose is to make the customer discontented with his old type of fountain pen, kitchen utensil, bathroom or motor car, because it is old-fashioned, out-of-date. . . . We no longer wait for things to wear out. We displace them with others that are not more efficient but more attractive.”

Obsoletism became the ultimate capitalist tool and the engine that propelled the Streamline movement in the 1930s. Artists for Industry, as the early industrial designers called themselves, believed it was their role to fulfill advertising’s promises by designing and developing products that not only looked new but included substantial mechanical improvements. While the term *Streamline* suggests a modicum of artifice, the application of aerodynamic and other engineering principles to products and machinery significantly increased their efficiency. The paradigms of Streamline design are monuments of Machine Age retooling. Although not as pure in its rejection of ornament as the Bauhaus adherents would have preferred, the Streamline ethos was nevertheless resolutely



STATION STYLE
RADIO SCHEDULE, 1931
DESIGNER UNKNOWN