A LETTER TO INDUSTRIAL MEMBERS

The wars of today, the political upheavals, the troubles of management and labor, have tended to make us lose sight of the fact that for a good deal more than a century the human race has been involved in the only fundamental revolution since the first man deliberately planted wheat and taught his neighbors to do the same instead of trusting nature to supply him with food.

This revolution is not a war. No dictator has arisen to dominate the world. Nor is it a crusade in behalf of a new political ideology. No prophet has proclaimed its doctrine, and propaganda has not played a part in furthering its aims. It has no conscious objective: yet its course is as inexorable as would be that of a new glacial age advancing upon the earth.

The industrial revolution is responsible for many of man's woes but also for most of his comforts. It has been in progress for so long a time that most of us are unaware of it and regard it as the natural state of affairs. Only the student of history who takes the whole course of civilization into his horizon realizes the changes which are now taking place in man's work and way of life.

The industrial revolution is the result of harvesting the energy found in nature to replace the physical labor of man and the animals he has domesticated. That began long before the nineteenth century—as soon, if you like, as man floated downstream on a log but really when he learned to use the wind to sail his boat. He took a long step forward when he rigged his sails in a circle to turn his grindstone and another when he caused a similar wheel to revolve by making a stream flow over its blades. But the real industrial revolution came when heat was made to change water into steam and the expansive power of steam was harnessed to turn the wheels. With each new application of power more men were released from back-breaking labor, and each man, tending his machine, could produce an ever increasing number of objects for the use of his fellow men.

What we now call mass production existed in essence long before the industrial revolution. Primitive man, in the early stages of civilization, had found that when clay was put into a fire it would become as hard as stone, and he soon made himself pots in which to cook his food and to store his grain until the next harvest. At first each man made his own pot, but soon the people in the community noted that one of their number made better pots than anyone else and left it to him to make all the pots required by the neighborhood. Thus the specialized craft was developed and quantity production began. The next stage was competition. The primitive potter developed his craft by making the best pots in his community, and then he had to improve his product because of the rival potter in the next village. It was nevertheless hand labor that was involved, and the product was the creation of the individual who handled the clay and worked at the wheel. Today, in many parts of the world, pots and everything else continue to be made in very much the same way; but in other countries steam, water power, electricity—and the machine—have taken over the making of nearly all articles used by man. Of the millions of items for sale in New York shops how infinitesimally small is the number whose production is not due in some way to the machine!

What is the result of this kind of mass production—this machine mass production? The man who handles the actual material of which the object is made has had nothing to do with the form, color, appearance, in short, the design of the object. This is determined by the man who builds the machine which produces the object and he is interested more in the machine—simplicity of process, saving of power and time, that is to say, economy—than in the product itself. His hands never touch the clay.

Our homes are full of machine-made things. The broom has given way to the carpet sweeper.
and then to the vacuum cleaner. Mechanical refrigerators have replaced the old iceboxes. The piano is no longer the mark of respectability and elegance, for the radio has taken its place. Fireplaces are gradually coming to be used solely for decoration. The very materials of which our houses are built are now products of machinery.

Things are made by machine because it is cheaper to make them that way. Every product that comes out of a machine undersells what it imitates and before long replaces it. It costs only a fraction as much to make it as to make the original, and therefore it need not be so satisfying to the eye. The handmade article can never compete with it. It is only when another machine comes along and does a better job that we begin to get improvement in design.

This process of refinement in machine-made things had not become very effective when the Museum was founded. Indeed, it was the habit among the artistically minded to condemn all such products, for most of them lacked the pleasing qualities of the objects they replaced. The group of public-spirited men who founded the Museum were not affected by this negative attitude but took positive steps toward the improvement of machine-made products. The provision in the Museum's charter for “encouraging and developing... the application of arts to manufacture and practical life” shows clearly the realization of the founders that manufactures would take an ever greater place in everyday life and that one of the functions of an art museum should be encouraging good taste in industrial design as well as “developing the study of the fine arts.”

In recent years many new inventions have come into general use. The makers of some of these have been conscious of the value of good design. In the case of others the process of natural selection has operated. To take an example. Among the early manufacturers of automobiles, Henry Ford is the best known, for he was the first to produce a car which could be bought by the ordinary man. His Model T was not so good-looking as the more expensive cars, but appearance did not matter so long as it was cheaper than other cars and could be depended on to run. In the course of years, however, other manufacturers began to compete in price with his product and they added something to efficient performance—comfort and style. Finally Ford had to give in and make his car comfortable and good-looking too. Here again, as in the case of the pottery from the next village, that added something had done its stuff.

There is no concrete object in the Museum for an automobile maker to copy. There are an infinite number of beautiful objects here which exemplify basic principles of proportion, line, composition, color, texture—in short, design. Industry has taken advantage of the facilities which the Museum offers but could well make much more extensive use of them.

Machine-made things can be just as beautiful as those made by hand, and the designer of these things can be just as great an artist as the artists, known or unknown, who produced the masterpieces housed in the Museum. As more and more of the things we live with are invented and produced by the machine until the revolution is complete, what will our world be like? Will utility alone be the measure of the things that surround us? Will functionalism outweigh appearance? Will “streamlining” continue to saddle objects that never move? Will borrowed ornament cloak poverty of conception? Will it take decades of competition to smooth off the harsh edges of each new product that comes into our houses? Or can manufacturer, designer, engineer, and advertiser, the quadrumvirate of this new age of the machine, be persuaded to come to that vast store of what is beautiful and has been desirable in the past in order to learn how to make things desirable in the present?

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