

Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990, V&A, London

It always worked better on the page, whether in books, on posters or exquisite architectural drawings — By Edwin Heathcote

Once a movement is named “postmodernism” it kills everything that follows it. Even old modernism, pure, white and minimal, after postmodernism becomes just another style, an attitude. Is postmodernism the movement at the end of culture?

The Victoria & Albert Museum's latest blockbuster-style exhibition attempts to document a roughly two-decade moment that seemed at the time to come and go quite fast but which is actually very much still with us. It is, remarkably, both a horrible mess and a hypnotic snapshot embracing some unspeakably hideous pieces of furniture alongside some sublime drawings and film clips. The show somehow manages, against the odds, to convince one that these disparate pieces are genuinely part of a coherent moment.

The story begins with architecture. East Coast architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's 1960s road trip celebrations of Vegas and strip malls suggested that modernism's dumb boxes, the glazed-expression architecture of Midtown Manhattan, had become corrupted by big business; laconically subverting Mies van der Rohe's minimal dictum that “less is more” into “less is a bore”, they prescribed a strong shot of pop culture. Other postmodern masters, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling, Ricardo Bofill, filled the modernist void with classical motifs, the architectural archetypes that, for modernists, represented the greatest heresy — nostalgia.

Postmodernism produced some memorable (though often for all the wrong reasons) buildings as well as a lot of dross. But then, in 1978, Philip Johnson plonked a Chippendale top on the new AT&T Building in New York and, at a stroke, corporatised a once subversive movement. Johnson's surprisingly seductive elevational drawing is, counter-intuitively, one of the exhibition's highlights.

It quickly became apparent that postmodernism's particular style of subversion — appliquéd ironic historical references, architectural bricolage — was not only easy but popular. Clients, after years of feeling obliged to commission what Tom Wolfe called the “non-bourgeois worker-housing” aesthetic of the Bauhaus, welcomed decoration back. Postmodern architecture was cuddlier than modernism, fluffily radical. But, as this show makes clear, there was depth here occasionally too. Alexander Brodsky's eerie engravings present a Kafkaesque world of nightmare architecture; Rossi's cities look like de Chirico landscapes made real; Rem Koolhaas and his wife Madelon Vriesendorp envisioned a half-

ruined, anthropomorphised Manhattan collapsing into its elements. These were visions inspired by a Piranesian mix of ruins and fragments; from Stirling to Blade Runner, they questioned modernity and progress while accepting and enjoying its ubiquity. These are the tantalising crumbs of an era that had its cake and ate it.

After the architects, the designers moved in and, from those fragments of antiquity and modernity, fashioned ridiculous pieces made more for exhibition than for use. Always aware of their own iconoclasm, the postmodernists introduced the idea of design for magazine covers, of what would later become “design art”. Studio Alchymia's subversion of minimalism segued into Memphis's slick presentations — design as advertising. Just as in architecture, radical design became subsumed into corporate consumer culture and the fit was good.

Like the hip-hop pioneers of the time, what the architects had done was to sample: a bit of Bauhaus modernism, a little Baroque, a dash of Constructivism, all drowned in a huge dollop of pop culture sauce. What the V&A does very well is to show how that sampling spanned disciplines as diverse as furniture and music, graphics and fashion. Peter Saville's reproduction of a Fantin-Latour still life as the cover for New Order's 1983 electro-pop album *Power, Corruption and Lies* remains as surprising now as it was then; it also nicely complements the display of Grandmaster Flash's turntables.

Nearby are Grace Jones's mad maternity dress and David Byrne's square-cut baggy suit, all displayed in a pseudo-industrial nightclub against the haunting tones of Laurie Anderson's “O Superman” (a UK number two in October 1981 — even postmodernism can seem suddenly hauntingly attractive at times). This central section of the show is about how the young, the hip and the desperately self-conscious used postmodernism to create their own identities and then put those new selves on stage; as well as Jones, this is the realm of characters such as Klaus Nomi and Leigh Bowery.

The third and final section, on the high-end branded goods of the 1980s, that decade of excess, begins with a big dollar sign and ends with a neon sign pointing the way to the Shop. Postmodernism, with its quotes and samples, its incessant recycling, proves perfectly suited to the demands of cyclic capitalism, to commodification.

The one thing the show doesn't do (perhaps can't do) is literature, the source of the sampling and quoting, the unreliable narrators, the inter- and meta-textualising and graphic playfulness that defined postmodernism. That's just as well because we might find that the mostest, posttest-modernism is Don Quixote (1605) or Tristram Shandy (1759). Postmodernism always worked better on the page, whether in books, on posters or the exquisite architectural drawings on show here. They almost seduce you into thinking it wasn't such a bad thing after all.

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