



John Vassos: Industrial Design for Modern Life

By Danielle Shapiro



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What should a television look like? How should a dial on a radio feel to the touch? These were questions John Vassos asked when the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) asked him to design the first mass-produced television receiver, the TRK-12, which had its spectacular premier at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Vassos emigrated from Greece and arrived in the United States in 1918. His career spans the evolution of central forms of mass media in the twentieth century and offers a template for understanding their success. This is Vassos's legacy—shaping the way we interact with our media technologies. Other industrial designers may be more celebrated, but none were more focused on making radio and television attractive and accessible to millions of Americans.

In *John Vassos: Industrial Design for Modern Life*, Danielle Shapiro is the first to examine the life and work of RCA's key consultant designer through the rise of radio and television and into the computer era. Vassos conceived a vision for the look of new technologies still with us today. A founder of the Industrial Designers Society of America, he was instrumental in the development of a self-conscious industrial design profession during the late 1920s and 1930s and into the postwar period. Drawing on unpublished records and correspondence, Shapiro creates a portrait of a designer whose early artistic work in books like *Phobia* and *Contempo* critiqued the commercialization of modern life but whose later design work sought to accommodate it.

Replete with rich behind-the-product stories of America's design culture in the 1930s through the 1950s, this volume also chronicles the emergence of what was to become the nation's largest media company and provides a fascinating glimpse into its early corporate culture. In our current era of watching TV on an iPod or a smartphone, Shapiro stimulates broad discussions of the meaning of technological design for mass media in daily life.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Danielle Shapiro makes a convincing case for John Vassos's formerly unheralded, but highly significant, early contributions to the field now known as user interface (UI) design. The chapters about Vassos's design of knobs, dials, displays, and casings for RCA radios and studio recording machinery are especially illuminating. Furthermore, the book is beautifully written; the illustrations, almost all 'new', are aptly chosen; and the footnotes are a rich source of information not only about Vassos but also about twentieth-century design in general."—Carma Gorman, The University of Texas at Austin

"*John Vassos* is a complex portrait of an artist and designer whose early illustration work criticized the tempo and commercialism of modern life but whose later design work took for granted those same qualities and attempted to accommodate people to them."—Jeffrey L. Meikle, University of Texas at Austin

"In the first complete picture of John Vassos, Danielle Shapiro definitively captures an industrial designer of the first rank."—Russell Flinchum, North Carolina State University

"John Vassos energized the flow of products, people, and media with his streamlined designs for everything from kitchen appliances to turnstiles and radios. Danielle Shapiro has created an original portrait of this important designer and this key period in American design and popular culture."—Ellen Lupton, senior curator of contemporary design at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

"In our current era of watching TV on an iPod or a smartphone, Shapiro stimulates broad discussions of the meaning of technological design for mass media in daily life."—*ArtDaily.org*

"Replete with rich behind-the-product stories of America's design culture in the 1930s through the 1950s, this volume also chronicles the emergence of what was to become the nation's largest media company and provides a fascinating glimpse into its early corporate culture."—*Industrial Designers Society of America*

"*John Vassos, Industrial Design for Modern Life* is not only an essential book for designers, but for those who love the history of design."—*The Arts Fuse*

"Not simply the first biography of a designer who was a major contributor to the design of consumer electronics but also a solid examination of the evolution of consumer and industrial design during Vassos's lifetime." —*CHOICE*

About the Author

Danielle Shapiro is an independent scholar who has served as senior program officer in the Division of Public Programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities. She earned her PhD in art history and communications studies from McGill University.

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From reader reviews:

Roberta Nieves:

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Mary Ruch:

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