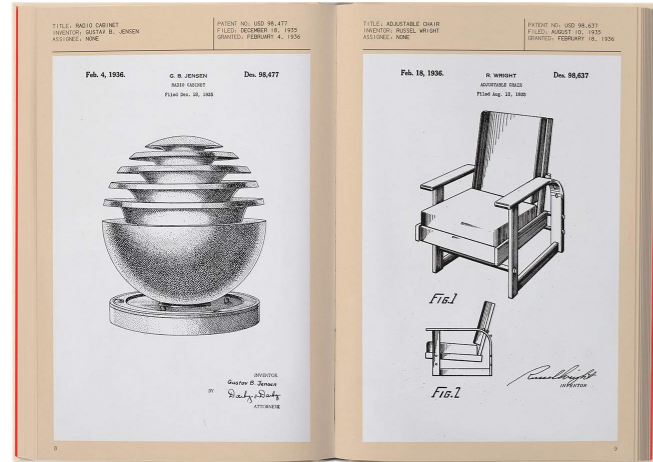


Patented: 1,000 Design Patents

by Thomas Rinaldi



Radio Cabinet, Gustav B. Jenson, 1935/1936 (left), Adjustable Chair, Russel Wright, 1935/1936 (right), pages 238-239

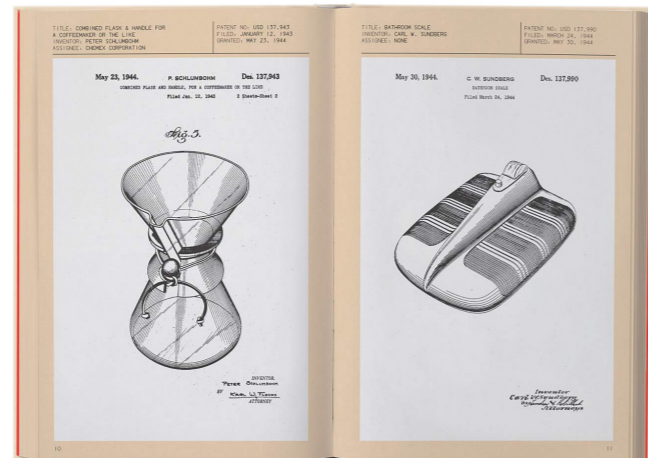
Before encountering this neat little house-brick-sized volume I assumed the world of design patents was defined by impenetrable legal documentation; the only element that piqued my own interest being the stark yet delicate technical drawings that accompanied them. To be honest, my only run-in with them would have been in design reference books, normally used to illustrate the careers of specific designers. The concept of the entire US Patent Office archive as an object of study, in and of itself, is an idea so intriguing it seems amazing that it has, up to now, remained largely unexplored outside academic circles. In a book suitable for casual browsing as well as bearing closer scholarly scrutiny, Phaidon's wonderfully presented *Patented: 1,000 Design Patents* tackles this not inconsiderable task in a highly accessible and engaging fashion.

In his introduction, architect and author of *Patented*, Thomas Rinaldi, outlines the history of Design Patents and why they are deserving of the meticulous attention afforded to them in this book. *Patented* focusses on Design Patents as opposed to Utility Patents; the key difference being that Utility Patent legislation – introduced in the US in 1790 – seeks to protect the way things work, whereas Design Patent legislation – which followed in 1842 – protects the way things look. The introduction of this legislation represents a watershed moment

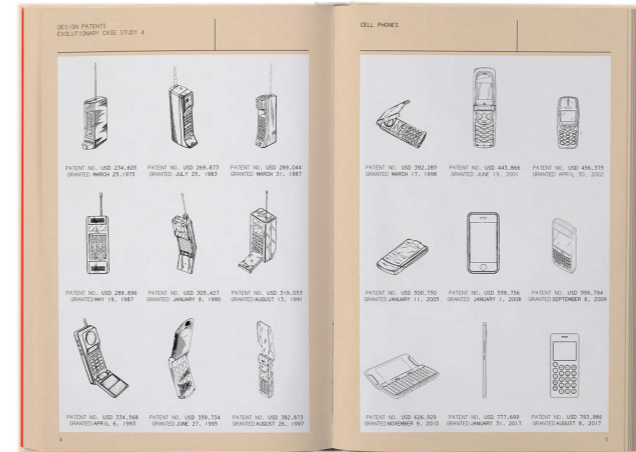
in industrial design, where processes of mass production laid the foundations of the revolution of consumer goods, with a focus on aesthetics over mere functionality.

Patented focusses on 1,000 Design Patents from 1900 to the present day. Each patent is given a single page, with the distinctive black and white line drawings accompanied by limited text. A title block gives key details of the patent, including the name of the Inventor (or designer), the Assignee (manufacturer name), patent number and the dates of the patent being filed and granted. They are organised chronologically, meaning that iconic design classics from renowned designers – such as Phillip Starck, Richard Loewy, Buckminster Fuller and Charles Eames – are found alongside mundane items whose design have been overlooked and underappreciated. This is very much in the spirit of the patent process and documentation, and in particular the accompanying drawings.

In his introduction Rinaldi explains that the drawing standards are set out in the Patent Office's "Manual of Patent Examining Procedure". This serves to ensure a consistency and establishes a level playing field which strips iconic designs of their familiarity and also draws attention to the design



Combined Flask & Handle for a Coffeemaker or the Like, Peter Schulmbohmer for Chemex Corporation, 1943/1944 (left), Bathroom Scale, Carl W. Sundberg, 1944 (right), pages 350-351



Design Patents: Evolutionary Case Study 6: Cell Phones (pages 28-29)

subtleties of “seemingly inconsequential objects” in a way which “allows us to broaden our concept of design to include mundane items as expressions of human creativity in a way that has been generally reserved for higher art forms up until now”. The chronological ordering dispenses with any form of hierarchy and serves to create some enjoyable juxtapositions; the iconic Fender Stratocaster sharing a page with a pogo stick, the Mars Rover appearing alongside a dishwasher, Steve Jobs' ground-breaking Apple Lisa personal computer facing a toy Star Wars TIE Fighter.

To navigate his way through the US Patent Office's sizeable catalogue, Rinaldi identified three axes: object type, inventor and assignee. This allowed him to narrow the 800,000 potential entries down to the carefully curated selection of 1,000 presented in this volume. Similarly, a set of directories is provided at the back of the book: Patents by Type, Patents by Inventor and Patents by Assignee. This allows the reader to begin cutting their own cross-sections through this otherwise daunting collection, much like the author with the significantly more daunting task of tackling the entire Patent Office archive. From this, prolific yet overlooked (perhaps even forgotten) designers emerge, disparate and apparently unconnected products are exposed as having a shared design provenance through individual Inventors or Assignees, leaps in design precipitated by technological progression are exposed, and

the movement away from and back towards subtle aesthetic trends become discernible.

Patented is both an inventive and insightful exploration of a hitherto unexploited resource for design historians. As well as rendering visible a myriad of connections between otherwise disparate products, companies and individual designers over the past 120 years, the book provides an overview of the outcomes of a legislative process which has gone largely unchanged since its introduction almost two centuries ago. An interesting point Rinaldi briefly mentions is that patent legislation was introduced not only to protect the rights of the designers but also to “(make) new inventions a matter of public record so that inventors could build on each other's work”. It is striking that design patent legislation was introduced as a response to the democratisation of design precipitated by mass-production while at the same time having a focus on disseminating designs to promote future innovation.

This collaborative underpinning of patent legislation has, perhaps arguably, been undermined in recent years by the high-profile and precedent-setting Apple vs Samsung lawsuits which appears to have placed more of a focus on patents as tool for monetising the design process over its democratisation. Despite this, it is heartening to know that the patent process has survived so long in a largely unaltered state and has proved itself to be flexible enough to deal with complex patent wars between rampart tech giants in much the same way as it dealt with the mid-twentieth century surge in affordable consumer design. ○

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