

“Design Research Unit: 1942-72.” Cubitt Gallery, London, 18 September – 24 October 2010. Travelling to Norwich University College of the Arts Gallery, UK, 30 October – 27 November 2010; Tate St Ives, UK, 5 February – 2 May 2011; Liverpool John Moores University, UK, 4 March – 1 April 2011; Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, UK, 15 April – 13 May 2011. *Design Research Unit: 1942-72*, by Michelle Cotton (London: Koenig Books, forthcoming, 2011).

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“Design Research Unit 1942-72” at London’s Cubitt Gallery showcased the work of this mould-breaking design partnership. Founded in 1942 by art critic and poet Herbert Read, with advertising executive Marcus Brumwell and designers Milner Gray and Misha Black, Design Research Unit (DRU) played a central role in redesigning Britain after the Second World War. The Cubitt exhibition, curated by Michelle Cotton, showed highlights of DRU’s work across more than four decades, from their origins in earlier design groups, such as the Industrial Design Partnership, to their work on corporate branding projects in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Arranged in nine small sections, the show’s potency lay in the resonance of the material itself, shown, as it was, stripped of context and description and accompanied by brief captions. This installation, adopting an old-fashioned austerity through presentation in glass cabinets within the stark gallery space, is not the text- and photo-heavy treatment often associated with contemporary design exhibitions. Instead, photographs and artefacts were displayed like the contemporary art objects usually shown at Cubitt.

Seeing objects that had been designed to signify specific place or brand identities with such limited accompanying material was disorienting. This distancing effect was especially acute for those, like me, who grew up in a world—in my case Westminster of the 1970s—in which DRU’s design work was constantly in the background in the form of the street signs, the visual identity of the local tube and train stations, and the sign on our local pub. The installation’s lack of context provided a chance to see afresh this familiar material. But beyond the initial striking visual impact, the absence of further information was ultimately unsatisfying, leaving unanswered intriguing questions about how ideas and projects evolved.

Leaflets setting out DRU’s founding aims, as well as group stationery listing partners and associates, pointed to the continuing importance of collaboration in their work, and the pioneering working relationships that they fostered. DRU were unusual in working across the design categories: taking on projects in interior design, exhibition and stand design, and textile and graphic design. Its directors, Black in particular, were acutely aware of the importance of adapting organisational structures to need, rather than the other way round. DRU therefore worked flexibly with a structure of specialist associates, as and when needed. This structural flexibility also allowed DRU to expand their expertise across the boundaries of medium, from their origins within exhibition design (which, until TV became ubiquitous by the late 1950s, was still a medium of extraordinary potency for communicating official information to the public and for selling products), and to their later involvement in corporate branding in all its guises, from uniforms, to textiles, signage, and packaging.

DRU members' contributions to the most important mid-century British exhibitions were shown through a few beautifully reproduced black and white photographs of the Ministry of Information touring exhibitions, of Britain Can Make It (V&A, 1946) and of the Festival of Britain (1951). These again offered a tantalising glimpse of the utopian social vision of the members, which certainly warranted fuller explanation within the exhibition. Black – who offered his fantastic idea for an exhibition on the South Bank two years before the Festival of Britain site was finally selected—was the most experienced British exhibition designer of his time. DRU's contribution to the Festival included not only their well-known designs for the interior of the Dome of Discovery and the Regatta restaurant, but also an entire visual identity for the Festival sites and publications, overseen by Austin Frazer and Milner Gray.

Members of the Unit had a vision for a Britain in which good design permeated everyday life, from your local post office counter to the train you took to work. The Cubitt show treated us to some of DRU's excellent work in this vein: the brilliant simplicity of the blue, red, and black Westminster street signs; the wonderfully succinct double-arrow British Rail sign; and the "Red Barrel" pump for Watney's Ale. Social idealism, married with a deep entrepreneurial pragmatism, defined the group's continuing success into the 1970s. This is neatly illustrated by a story told to me recently by Black's daughter, Julia. When Black visited Buckingham Palace to receive his knighthood in 1972, he revealed to her that he was carrying his Communist Party membership card in his top pocket. Asked why he was going at all, he replied with a wink, "It's so good for business!"

The ultimate test of DRU's designs is that they still endure on central London street corners and in stations up and down Britain. The Cubitt show, by removing these works from their original context, successfully demonstrated their aesthetic interest. But it offered little information about the works or how they were produced. Hopefully the catalog (not yet released at the time of writing) will address some of the questions that the exhibition posed, but did not answer.