

were British designed and built, but had it not been for Honda, Rover would be no more than a business school case study in failure.

If RHP could not meet Japanese quality standards, did it deserve to survive on its own? And Hitachi's Hirwaun factory does at least still employ 800 people; had it stayed in British ownership, it would probably be as dead as the coal mines that surround it. The Japanese have been a good thing for the British economy, and this exhibition reminds us of that.

After a decade of scorning Japanese investment, the French have now decided they want it too. I didn't mention it to the Twingo, but I did wonder what a Renault version of the Honda Accord would look like.

Exhibition

Women Designing: Redefining Design in Britain Between the Wars

3 to 31 March

Faculty of Art and Design Gallery,
University of Brighton

Reviewed by Penny Sparke

In a text accompanying the 1935 British Art in Industry exhibition, the designer Betty Joel remarked: 'It is very difficult to define good design, but I should say that a thing is well designed if it is so unassuming that when you live with it you do not get tired of it.'

Compared with the often strident polemics of many male modernist architects and designers, this modest way of thinking about things comes as a refreshing change. In fact, the self-effacing character of good design that Joel pinpointed could also be applied to women designers of the inter-war years.

Jill Seddon and Suzette Worden, the curators of the exhibition, point out that the 393 female professional designers they discovered to be practising in that period have, with only a handful of notable exceptions, been 'hidden from history'. Until now.

Seddon and Worden's task has been to rediscover them, make their work public, and begin to address the question of how it might modify our assumptions about the nature of design and its history. They have done a tremendous job of 'digging up' individuals – some known to us, but most of them not – in making available examples of their work (mostly graphics, textiles, ceramics and metalwork, but also a little interior design and architecture).

They provide information about the training and work opportunities for women designers at this time, and have discovered other ways in which women influenced the design process – whether as consumers, mediators or 'taste-makers'.

There were, apparently, harsh com-

ments made by modernist critics about some of the exhibits at the 1935 British Art in Industry show. A number of women had taken the opportunity to display work, and there were signs of rebellion in the ranks. The inclusion of a silver-gilt tiara, for instance, with glass coral and turquoise beads and resplendent with feathers, must have made art historian Herbert Read's toes curl.

The curators of the present show speak of the need for a 'flexible aesthetic' if we are to bring these women into the picture. The exhibition suggests that the stark minimalism of Rita Beales's woven textiles with their muted colours can sit happily alongside the playful and brightly coloured figurative decoration on Dame Laura Knight's ceramic objects.

Indeed, the inclusion of much figurative work in this show suggests that such a spectrum is not only possible but necessary if we are to assess women's contribution to design in this century. Among the exhibits are London Underground posters by Dora Batty and others, Polly Binder's charming illustrations, book covers for the Curwen Press by Margaret Calkin James, and ceramics by Greta Marks.

Perhaps the most radical inclusion in the exhibition – and certainly the most challenging to conventional modernist design criteria – is the work of the flower arranger Constance Spry, and the flower painting of Gluck who worked closely with her. A letter from the Fulham Pottery, which made vases especially for Spry's arrangements, noted the surprise that was felt when she requested that there should be no glaze on them. A shiny glaze, she pointed out, would detract from the viewer's appreciation of the beautifully arranged flowers.

This placing of the object back into the context of its use is a refreshing change from the isolation of the cult object on its plinth, a feature of the eighties. Perhaps it's time to give women designers a real chance.

The exhibition will travel to Sheffield Hallam University (May to June); the Howard Gardens Gallery, Cardiff (November to December); and Stoke City Museum and Art Gallery (March to April 1995).



Off the plinth: ceramics from Susie Cooper and (top) Dame Laura Knight