In 1926, Kodak launched the third generation of their Vest Pocket camera line, the Series III. While the product line had been very successful, they wanted to expand its market appeal, in particular, to women. To help them with this, they turned to the designer, Walter Dorwin Teague, who had recently set up one of the first industrial design consultancies in the USA. The concept that he developed was to do a version of the camera that would be released in five distinct and different colours, packaged in a satin-lined box of matching colour. (All previous Vest Pocket Cameras had been solid black.) This version of the camera was released in April, 1928 under the name, the Vanity Kodak.

Leaping ahead to 2003, Apple Computer had just launched the third generation of their iPod MP3 music player. While the product line had been very successful, they wanted to expand its market. To do so, they turned to their head of industrial design, Jonathan Ive. The concept that he developed was to do a smaller version of the iPod, and release it in five different and different colours. (All previous iPods had been solid white.) This version of the iPod was released in January, 2004 under the name, the iPod Mini.

Did Apple steal the idea from Kodak? Not at all. Was Apple aware of the Vanity Kodak, and the what and the how of Teague’s contribution? Without a doubt: Jonathan Ive is an outstanding designer, and the Vanity Kodak is one of the classic examples in the history of industrial design. What Apple did was learn from history, and adapt, adapt, and assimilate past success to current context. That is simply good, intelligent design in action. It is also a very good lesson: an obsession with the new and original, without a deep literacy and appreciation for the past, leads to a path of missed opportunities.”

Thanks, Bill. We’ll post his new column, on research and innovation, soon. I’ll add the link here when the piece is ready.

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Reader Comments

Peter Mortensen

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Bill is one of the few great design strategists in the marketplace of ideas. Thanks for sharing your insight!