

LEGISLATING KITSCH



The Plastic Lawn Flamingo: Portrait of a Commodity

BY MEDINA LASANSKY

Designed by Don Featherstone in 1957 to grace the front lawns of suburban America, the pink plastic lawn flamingo quickly became a familiar feature of the American landscape. While it was intended as a seasonal item with a relatively short shelf-life, the flamingo has been the lawn ornament industry's best-selling item for the past forty years. Over half a million pink flamingos are produced each year by Union Products, a plastics company based in Leominster, Massachusetts. While this is only one of several companies which produce lawn flamingos, it is the producer of the original Featherstone bird—which today comes in its own retro-style collector's box bearing the artist's signature.¹

Although millions of plastic lawn ornaments sell each year—channeled directly to the masses through chain stores such as Sears, K-Mart, Montgomery Wards, Target, and Stuarts—the industry remains relatively small. There are only four companies producing such items in the United States and Canada and they sell almost entirely to a North American market. Union Products is the largest of these four. And due to the intensity of Featherstone's activity during his forty-two year tenure as the company's only artist, he alone has been largely responsible for populating our yards with these familiar manufactured vernacular creatures. Among others, his *oeuvre* of sculpture includes the all-time favorite illuminated flying reindeer, the toy Christmas soldiers, the swan and donkey planters, and the mother duck with baby ducklings. He is the creative individual behind what is typically assumed to be an anonymous plastic phenomenon. While supervising a workshop of 200 people, he responds to the demands of both consumer and dealer.

Despite mass-production, Featherstone creates images directly for his clients, modifying his products according to their demands, needs, and traditions — at times even re-articulating

regionalized trends into national phenomena. For example, when the NAACP voiced their concern that the skin color of the Black Santa Claus was too light, Featherstone created a Santa with a darker face. In 1993 when a group of Massachusetts feminists argued that the domestic imaging of Santa's wife sweeping was oppressive, Featherstone removed Mrs. Claus' broom. He created the blue flamingo in the late 1980's for the residents of towns where the pink flamingo had been banned by neighborhood beautification committees and aesthetic watch groups. In 1996 he introduced the Snowmingo, a white flamingo which could be purchased during the winter season when stores refused to market the warm-weather pink one. Multicolored plastic "granny fannies" were created to capitalize on the wide-spread popularity of home-painted plywood and pressed-board cut-outs depicting women bending over exposing their bloomers. Similarly, in 1994 Featherstone created plastic eggs with built-in loops to facilitate the creation of "egg trees" — a long-standing Easter tradition in areas of German settlement which had begun to gain popularity elsewhere across the country. Finally, in 1996 he introduced unpainted "concrete-colored" decorations which imitated the appearance of the much loved concrete lawn ornament yet without its inconvenient permanence (the weight of these objects precluded the arrangement of seasonal *tableaux*) and relatively high-cost.

Also influencing the design process is the "buyer" — the individual who contracts to purchase lawn ornaments for retail store chains at the annual trade shows. These shows serve as immense art galleries — venues where artists and manufacturers such as Featherstone and Union Products can display their work to potential clients.² Logically, these buyers/dealers are key to the successful mass-dissemination of the image. They not only make purchases for an entire chain of stores, but they provide Featherstone with suggestions as to how to change old products and create new ones. In their capacity to analyze how products sell, they are able to alert Featherstone to changing trends such as color and subject preferences, as well

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as recent market successes and failures. In this way the buyer/dealer becomes an arbiter of the image, helping the sculptor to modify his figures to satisfy the perceived tastes and trends of a large consumer market. It was in fact a dealer who recently suggested to Featherstone that he expand the line of holiday lawn ornaments to include Thanksgiving figures, which are the company's latest addition.

The market for plastic lawn art was born during the 1950s. Plastics technologies adapted to serve a wide range of peace-time consumer uses allowed the mass-production of relatively durable, inex-

Don Featherstone

pensive, three-dimensional, highly colorful plastic ornaments.³ A prosperous economy contributed to the successful growth of chain stores which provided the nationwide marketplace for these new consumer goods. The rapid growth of home ownership and a preference for the self-contained single-family house with its front-yard facing onto the road



provided a theater for the display of yard art and the increased commercialization of holidays presented the occasions to exhibit the assortment of largely seasonal images.⁴ This collection and display of semi-exotic, spectacular and amusing plastic lawn sculpture was the modern catholic version of the inhabited garden grottos and follies of courtly Renaissance and Baroque landscapes. Placed in carefully constructed groupings which were meant to entertain, astonish, and amuse, plastic lawn decorations — a more affordable variation of the Victorian cast iron and even rarer aluminum lawn art — contributed to the genre of sculpture which celebrated the playful relationship between artifice and nature.⁵

Yet, more than the fine pedigree, its multivalent and multi-functional nature is the secret to its success. The flamingo is simultaneously an object of celebration, derision, and hatred. While passionate lawn ornament fans carefully create elaborate front-yard *tableaux* (often arranging their flocks among a variety of props), others sabotage and steal the creatures (a flamingo kidnapped from a Georgia yard was returned only after its owner made a public appeal on National Public Radio). There are even town decorating and beautification committees, neighborhood associations and historic districts which lobby to have lawn flamingos

outlawed as aesthetically offensive. This debate has prompted both individual and organized retaliation—most of which assumes the form of satirical commentary on the aesthetic prejudice against these plastic creatures. The response is varied, from businesses which will “flamingo” the yard of an unsuspecting recipient to celebrate a special occasion; to a popular t-shirt which

depicts the flamingo and bears the phrase “ruin the neighborhood—stick ‘em in your yard;” to the inclusion of a “lawn ornament drill team” which twirled pink flamingos like batons at the annual “Gross National Parade” in Washington, DC in 1994. While the flamingo has come to symbolize the definition of poor (working-class) taste, it has also been adopted by gay culture as symbolic of their own disenfranchisement.⁶ And yet this association, firmly set up in John Water’s 1972 classic cult film *Pink Flamingos*, has not precluded the ornament from being appropriated by other cultural groups, including the mid-1980s, yuppie *Miami Vice* watching consumers who were drawn to the flamingo as a trendy kitsch item.⁷ Easily recognized, and



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readily lampooned, the flamingo has acquired the rhetoric of a national cultural icon. Manufacturers such as Saturn Corporation have even begun to capitalize on the high visibility and common language of the plastic bird by using its image to sell merchandise — as was evident in the advertising of the Saturn *SCI* in 1996.

Featherstone never envisioned that his flamingo would serve as a vehicle for the expression of such diverse interests. It was certainly not designed with that in mind. Nor did he ever predict its fame. Neither Union Products, nor the stores which sell these flamingos, have ever mounted an advertising campaign. For that reason these ornaments are a consumer culture anomaly — they are a commercial success without the aid of commercialization. Stories of flamingo sightings which appear in

local newspapers across the country allow Featherstone to unobtrusively monitor (and even contribute to) the continuous reinvention of the bird. As documented by his personal clipping file, the aura surrounding his flamingo has brought him a certain amount of mainstream recognition as well. He and his birds have been the subject of



multiple interviews for the popular press, including *People Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*. To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the flamingo he appeared on the *Today Show* as well as *Sixty Minutes*. In these newspaper and magazine articles Featherstone is frequently referred to as a “genius creator”—a title which, while he finds it amusing, he does not disregard. He now incorporates his signature at the bottom of each mold in order to distinguish his “originals” from the flourishing trade of fakes and knock-offs made by his aggressive “followers.”

Perhaps for a variety of reasons, the design of the pink flamingo has been overlooked in discussions of art production. In its material, color and technology, the lawn ornament is unlike traditionally-studied fine art. Made from inexpensive plastic, it appears tawdry to many — far from being the precious product of delicate, labor-intensive craftsmanship. Perceived as ugly, if not offensive by the historians of taste, its merit as a form of visual culture has remained largely unrecognized. Its ephemeral nature has also perhaps precluded it from entering into the mainstream art historical discourse. And unlike the studied art of the cultural elite, lawn ornaments are the vernacular art of working- and middle-class yards. In its replication through mass-production, the lawn ornament initially appears

anonymous and ordinary.

In this anonymity it seems to lack a genius creator and is therefore excluded from a canon of unique masterpieces set into a historical framework predicated upon the biographical narrative first established by Giorgio Vasari. As a product of a commercial world, plastic lawn art initially appears to lack easy categorization by style, type,

iconography or patron — categorization which has been viewed as crucial to the discussion of fine art. Situated within the semi-public realm of the private landscape, the lawn ornament defies classification. It is both public and private art while assuming the traditional character of neither. Finally, an understanding of its emotional expressiveness and seemingly non-intellectual decorativeness does not appear to require academic training. Because of its immediacy there appears to be nothing to decipher. In fact, its humor, immediacy, and magical exoticism is difficult to articulate in phrases with footnotes.

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In both iconography and function, the lawn ornament can be situated within some of the long-standing traditions surrounding the processes and expectations of visual culture: images are modified or newly created according to a client's/patron's wishes and needs; multiple meanings, at times ambiguous and conflicting, are able to coexist in each image as artistic intention often remains subservient to the meaning endowed through use and personalization; mass reception and group construction of meaning make these vernacular products provocative within the everyday experience of a wide audience; popularity makes these ornaments the subject of worship, imitation, quotation, thievery, collection and, under "aesthetic legislation"—rejection and neglect. In all of this we see a nuanced form of image-making which must be understood within a complex network of societal relationships. Thus the plastic lawn ornament functions, in its creation and interpretation, like any traditionally-studied art object.

The case of the enduring lawn flamingo underscores that there is much that is shared between visual consumer culture and fine art. These are phenomena which resonate with intense similarities—sharing a language of creative cause and effect. We should be provoked to consider how that language is used by other familiar forms of mass-manufactured art and architecture including commercialized versions and quotations of canonical "high art." Such consumer images can conceal surprisingly varied lives, multiple articulations, and serial reinventions beneath their formulaic appearances. Their presence challenges historians and critics to be alert and creative in their analysis.

notes

¹The information regarding Union Products and Don Featherstone's design of lawn ornaments comes from several interviews I conducted with Mr. Featherstone during 1995 and 1996. Information about the other manufacturers comes from interviews I conducted with Jim Rawls of the manufacturing division of Empire Plastics; Claire Henderson, the co-owner of Tucker Plastics Incorporated, and Larry Foster, the Vice President for Marketing at Lawnware. Unlike Union Products, none of the other three companies have company artists.

²The trade fairs, held in Chicago each summer and in New York each winter, serve as vital resources for the manufacturers as well.

³For a discussion on the plastic industry see Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic: a Cultural History* (New Brunswick, 1995).

⁴In the past few years there have been several good studies on the development of the yard surrounding the single-family detached house. See for example, Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn. A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, D.C., 1994). For a discussion of the commercialization of holidays in the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, the role of various industries in promoting the celebration of holidays, and the opportunities these holidays provided for the creation of new consumer goods see, Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Commercialization of the Calendar: American Holidays and the Culture of Consumption, 1870-1930," *The Journal of American History*, December 1991, Vol. 78, pp. 887-916.

⁵For a discussion of grottos, see e.g. Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves. Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York, 1982).

⁶See Jan and Michael Stern's definitive *Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*, New York, 1990; and John Waters, *Shock Value, a Tasteful Book About Bad Taste* (New York, 1995).

⁷For one of the most synthetic discussions on yard ornamentation see: Colleen Sheehy, "The Flamingo in the Garden: Artifice, Aesthetics, and Popular Taste in American Yard Art," Ph.D. dissert. (University of Minnesota, Department of American Studies, 1991).

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