

# collectable kitsch

BY SARAH JANE

Mention the word 'kitsch' to anyone and you can expect a mixed reaction. For most people, images of pink flamingos, chenille bedspreads, plastic flowers, souvenir tea towels, novelty-shaped salt and pepper shakers, ghastly figurines and even the humble garden gnome might immediately spring to mind, combined with an intense grimace to show their distinct lack of appeal. But for many others, recalling such iconic 'artifacts' – for want of a better word – from their childhood or younger years brings a gleam to their eyes and a smile to their face that can only begin to convey the power of attraction these often ostentatious and over-exaggerated items still have; and avid collectors world-wide are busy scouring second-hand shops, flea markets and grandma's cupboards to seek out what they see as master works of art.

The term 'kitsch' is thought to have originated as early as 1925-1930 from the German word *kitschen*, which means to collect junk from the street or to throw together. Another possible source of the word is the German phrase *verkitschen*, which means to make cheap. Basically, post-1970s, the term 'kitsch' can be applied to any item having an

aesthetic or artistic purpose that could be described as tawdry or tasteless. It's a style of mass-produced art or design that knows no barriers, is shameless in its approach, and often makes reference to celebrities, cultural icons or social events.

Kitsch art and design is not necessarily associated with any specific time period or region and the term is generally reserved for unsubstantial or gaudy works, or works that were presumed would have wide-scale (even if only short-lived) popular appeal at the time of their production. However, owing to the tendency to be radical, unconventional and overstated in its makeup kitsch style appears synonymous with the dynamic and somewhat provocative eras of the 1960s and '70s.

The 1960s was a decade of enormous change. In America it started with the Kennedys and ended with Woodstock and almost everything that happened in between was the result of a profound transformation from the more demure years of the 1940s and '50s. Australia was no

different. While the world was caught in the grip of 'Beatlemania' in the early 1960s, our own Johnny O'Keefe was fast becoming known as 'The Wild One' and making quite a name for himself in the intoxicating new found world of rock'n'roll.

Fashion trends both here and overseas in the 1960s included mini-skirts, skinny jeans, big hair, go-go boots and acceptance en masse of the extremely risqué bikini. In fact, the clothing of the '60s was as revolutionary and fast-moving as the era's sweeping cultural changes. Designers experimented with bold geometric shapes and used new materials such as leather, vinyl, PVC and faux fur. Also labelled the 'Swinging Sixties' because of the relaxation of many social taboos (one being the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill to the public in the early 1960s), the revolutionary and subversive

Kitsch [kich]  
Noun

Something of tawdry design, appearance, or content created to appeal to popular or indiscriminating taste; gaudy; trash; vulgarized, or pretentious art, literature, etc, usually with popular or sentimental appeal

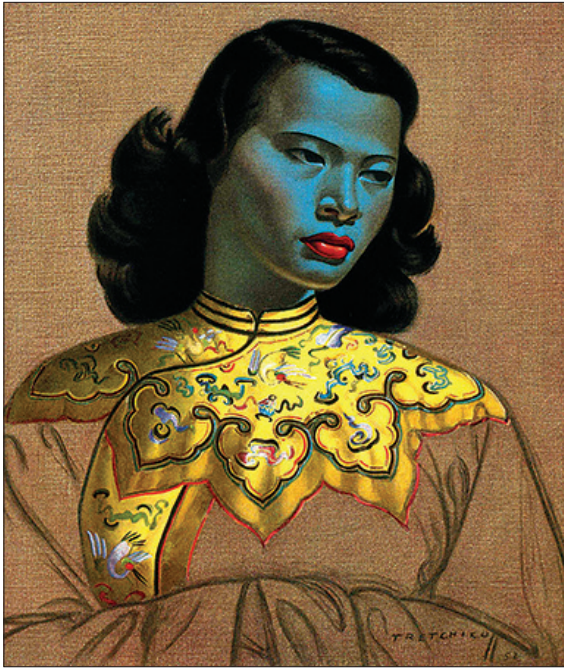


**Above:** Set of five delightfully kitsch 1960s plastic Bambi figures.

**Below:** How to create a '60s kitchen – [www.themancave.ca](http://www.themancave.ca)

**Below left:** Did we mention that Elvis is often considered kitsch? Nearly forty years after his death and he's still inspiration for clocks such as this, with *Jailhouse Rock* as the alarm...





Tretchikoff prints are the pinnacle of kitsch – and hugely popular. Original prints in excellent condition can sell for many hundreds of dollars.

events and trends of the period continued to develop well into the 1970s, the 1980s and beyond.

During the '70s we saw the emergence of hippies and flower children with peace and free love as their motto for existing. Peace signs and the now iconic smiley face logo were everywhere – one theory for this is that it was an attempt to return optimism to the masses during

confidently by both sexes. Advertisements and musicians began using colourful, bold and psychedelic images to promote their products, while black lights and strobe lights were widely used to create a state of intensity and confusion at dances and concert events.

There's no doubt that the social, political and cultural changes of the '60s and '70s had a profound effect on society. New found freedom and the unrelenting desire to push boundaries in every way possible were reflected, not only in the fashions of the

the Vietnam War. Influenced by the hippie trend, the '70s brought us new fashions such as tie-dyed clothing, peasant blouses and both midi and maxi-length skirts for women. Hot pants, glittery disco clothing, plush velour leisure suits (tracksuits) and dance class leotards worn as street wear were also popular, with platform shoes and tight flared leg jeans being worn

day, but in art, furniture and many household goods. This flexibility and freedom of expression is perhaps why so many of the unusual, wacky and unconventionally styled items we label as kitsch today were produced during this period. Manufacturing back then, with cutting-edge mediums such as resins, plastics

**Above:** Flamingoes were a popular subject for 1960s design – all the better when they came in the form of salt and pepper shakers. **Right:** Owls were another favourite bird; these ones are made of alabaster and were marked Made in Italy, probably to give them a bit of European style!



and various synthetics in addition to a far more vivid colour palette, saw the development of not only furniture that was like nothing we had seen before, but of a whole new generation of uniquely quirky kitchen items, ceramics, china, glassware, home decorator pieces, toys and even pets! Extravagant displays of colour, patterns and textures and exaggerated features such as overly large eyes on figurines were rife; and if you didn't happen to own an Afghan hound (first popular during the 1920s and again during the 1970s) with acres of long silky hair requiring daily brushing, your pet of choice may have been of the manufactured types like a Sea Monkey or a pet rock!

A common trait of many items described as kitsch was embellishment with a reference to a major social or cultural event or to be made in the likeness of fashionable celebrities. Not unlike souvenir items such as plates, mugs, tea spoons and tea towels that abounded at the time, commemorative or special edition china and glassware was common during the '60s and '70s and these pieces are often favourites as kitsch collectables today. Events such as the 1969 Moon Landing, the 1964 Beatles World Tour, the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973 and countless milestones in the history of the British Royal Family have



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all been marked in time on a mug, plate or tumbler over the years.

Similarly, to give them extra public appeal, items were often adorned with images of the faces of prominent celebrities or, better still, were fashioned in the actual shape of the celebrity (or at least their head)! Countless vases, teapots, salt and pepper shakers, sugar bowls, mugs, cookie jars, egg cups and even lamp bases have all been made in the likenesses of Mickey Mouse, The Beatles, Marilyn Monroe, Jimmy Hendrix, The Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley, to name just a few. In fact, Elvis, perhaps more than any celebrity, featured

prominently on a wide range of items from plates, mugs and bowls to figurines, pendants, key rings, cigarette lighters, clocks, watches, toys and games and, it seems, anything adorned with Elvis really is automatically deemed kitsch!

Celebrities aside, many other household items during the 1960s and '70s were made to resemble some type of animal or fruit and ceramics of the '60s and '70s also displayed a strong 'native' influence with Mexican, Jamaican and Negro men and women often depicted in various poses as lamp bases, figurines or vases (Australia followed suit with a trend of Australian Aboriginal and native animal-themed items). Animal figurines - very often deer and dogs - with their extremely large eyes were frequently sold in sets of two or three graduating sizes to be displayed together for extra impact. Pineapples were a popular fruit often replicated in lamp bases or in ceramic cookie

jars and the like, where the top of the pineapple formed the lift-off lid. Another classic fruit-inspired piece that featured in many homes at the time was an anodised ice bucket fashioned in the shape of an apple, usually in a red metallic finish,

where the handle for the lid was fashioned by the core (I can distinctly recall one of these in my parents' home growing up!)

Another typical trait of kitsch was multi-functionality. With figurines in particular, it was not unusual to find some type of cavity or hollow section incorporated into the design that meant they actually doubled as vases, candleholders, planter pots etc. Though undeniably kitsch almost for this feature alone, collectable kitsch crockery is now much sought after and it seems the more outrageous and more

outlandish the pieces, the better!

Overall, kitsch can be expressed as an art movement, an idiosyncrasy and a genre that tends to be best summed up as pleasingly distasteful. Most people consider it to be cheap, ugly, lacking in style or class and oddly unappealing, but for many other people it provides a nostalgic trip down memory lane, a warm and cheery link to their past and an escape from the seriousness of reality; and very often it simply appeals for no other reason than because it's funny.



**Above:** Beatles dolls made by Remco. An original set from 1964 with the original Sears mailer box sold for US\$1232 in 2008. **Left:** Detail of a 1960s chalkware wall hanging.



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