Braun: Designed to Keep is a book worth holding onto

Every object made by humans has a story to tell. There’s the story of the people who made it, of the materials chosen, and the creative motivation. Only when you understand the story do you understand an object’s meaning. Or so says Dieter Rams, who headed up product design at Braun from 1961 to 1995.

is the story of Braun. It’s billed as “the most comprehensive history” of the company to date. Telling it requires more than 400 pages and 500 images, including never-before-published archival materials and brand-new full-page photography of Braun’s most iconic products, each instilled with Rams’ “less, but better” approach that would directly influence designers like Naoto Fukasawa and Apple’s Jony Ive.

What’s most striking as I thumbed through an advanced copy is how desirable many of those early Braun products remain today, some of which were introduced almost 70 years ago. No surprise, I guess, given the disposable detritus you’ll find on Amazon and AliExpress, places where product design prostrates itself to the gods of mass consumption and devices vary with flourishes of useless decoration usually reserved for the Walmart cereal aisle.

I mean, just look at the TP1 (1959) in the image below, the portable predecessor to the Walkman that worked as a radio and also played records from the bottom like a Miniot turntable, and the T3 transistor radio (1958) that certainly provided Ive with some inspiration for the iPod’s click wheel interface:

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underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*Someone — an advertising executive, presumably — taking their TP1 portable music player for a stroll.*

Have you ever been stopped in your tracks by a table fan? Just look at the HL1, which first made its appearance in 1961:

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*President John F. Kennedy being cooled by the fan in 1963.*

Braun really excelled at Hi-Fi, and this wall unit designed in the mid-1960s was what space-age living was all about:

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*For Braun's 100th anniversary, Virgil Abloh presented a version of the 60-year-old Hi-Fi decked out in chrome and featuring a modernized turntable.*

Braun: Designed to Keep is published by Phaidon and written by Professor Klaus Klemp, the German design historian and curator who has spent the last two decades carefully documenting the work of Dieter Rams through major exhibitions and books like *Dieter Rams: The Complete Works*. If a group of experts has gathered somewhere on the globe to discuss the legacy of Braun or Rams, you can bet that Klemp was invited.

Another thing I really enjoyed while flipping through it was noting the size and placement of the Braun logo — first introduced with the raised "A" in 1935. In *Rams*, the excellent 2018 documentary directed by Gary Hustwit (which also features Klemp), the acclaimed designer, then on the cusp of his 86th birthday (now 91), says he always wanted the Braun logo to be

small and unobtrusive — a battle he fought with at least 10 CEOs, by his account, all of whom wanted the wordmark printed loudly on every Braun product.

“When you’re new someplace and you have to introduce yourself, or enter a room and say ‘I’m so and so,’ you don’t shout. You should do it quietly,” said Rams in *Rams*. “If every product shouts ‘I am Braun!’ it will get irritating.” This makes sense when you understand Rams’ dedication to the creation of a common design language during his four decades at the company.

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*Plenty of archival material is used throughout the book. On the left, product labeling on a clock face is evaluated — Braun has relied on the Akzidenz-Grotesk typeface since 1955. On the right, the team discusses a model of a future Hi-Fi system.*

Credit can also be seen on every product photograph, which includes a caption naming the original designer and the date it was first produced. Spoiler: not every famous Braun design is a Dieter Rams design. The book ends with 60 biographies in a section titled “Design is made by people.”

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*Bold typefaces — Braun Linear, in this case — urge the reader to stop browsing for a moment.*

a:hover]:text-black [&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a:hover]:text-gray-e9 dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-underline-gray-63 [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-13 dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63″>*Originally designed by Will Munch in 1933, the Braun logo was updated (pictured) by*

Wolfgang Schmittel in 1952. It has changed only slightly ever since.

Just 41 pages of *Braun: Designed to Keep* are, understandably, dedicated to the Braun of today. After all, it wasn't until 2010 that Procter & Gamble — which purchased Gillette in 2005 and had witnessed Apple's extraordinary global success — reverted to a "Past Forward" embrace of Braun's own design legacy. Klemp says that 2012's Braun Series 5 shavers were one of the first products to embody this reinterpretation. Which, well, fine.

This shaver from 2020 does seem to hew closely to early Braun designs: