

The Future is Our Business: A Visual History of Future Expertise

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SUMMARY

Nearly all cultures have developed models of how to project and predict the future. Ways of thinking about the future range widely: from diviners and alchemists, through urban improvers and insurance companies, trend forecasters and risk assessors, and to film-makers and novelists. Projections of the future engage, whether explicitly or implicitly, with their own present. They may critique an existing state of affairs, or simply offer the promise of a better world. There is in one sense an inherent contradiction in the premise that expertise in projecting and predicting the future is possible. By their very nature, claims about the future are unverifiable at the time they are made. This places high rhetorical demands on self-proclaimed futurists or experts in the future who must demonstrate their superior insight through spiritual, statistical, or scientific means.

The project will explore what societies at different times and places have considered constitutes expertise in the future, and how this expertise has manifested itself visually. This project will explore one major aspect of future expertise, specifically examining the visual dimension of the futurist's repertoire of persuasion. Most work in the field has emphasized text as the primary instrument of the futurologist. As a recent BBC radio documentary on the topic suggests, there is popular fascination with the predictions of future experts, from the Oracle at Delphi through Nostradamus and the science fiction authors of the twentieth century, and a rich literature on such expertise exists. The visual analogue to this tradition, however, has typically been treated dismissively.

Future projection by artists and designers is sometimes used as an adjunct to verbal description; often it is seen as exceptional or eccentric (with notable exceptions, such as the oeuvre of Leonardo da Vinci). This project will examine less canonical material, seeking to provide an account of future expertise as such rather than a series of monographic examples. In addition, the scope of research will incorporate 'non-artistic' visual material of a technical nature, such as patents, diagrams, maps, charts and graphs.

The research will feed into the V&A's inaugural exhibition for its new set of temporary exhibition galleries opening in 2016. 'The Future: A History' will be a thoughtful, research-driven examination of imaginary projection as a historical phenomenon across the globe. It will chart a passage from medieval depictions of the future as divinely revealed (e.g. medieval images of the last judgment), through increasingly instrumental and secular attempts to control the future (e.g. in modernist city planning), to a more recent exploration of explicit fictionalization as a *modus operandi* for future-oriented art and design, as practitioners have become more self-aware about their work's fundamentally speculative character. It will explore many interrelated avenues of research: cross-cultural comparison of religious art (eschatological imagery) and material culture (divination and fortune-telling tools); visual representations of utopias and dystopias, which have functioned as important

means of political expression, particularly in repressive societies; and specific object typologies that have been used for manifesting possible futures (prototypes, renderings, data visualizations). Together, the physical artefacts and the models they represent constitute the hopes and fears of past and present.