

Aluminum

by design

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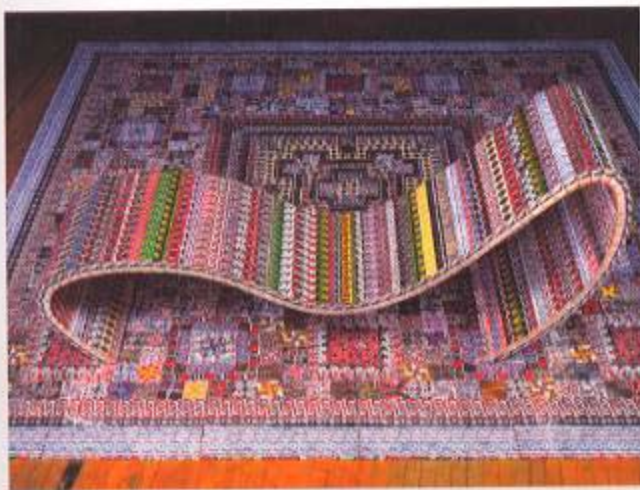
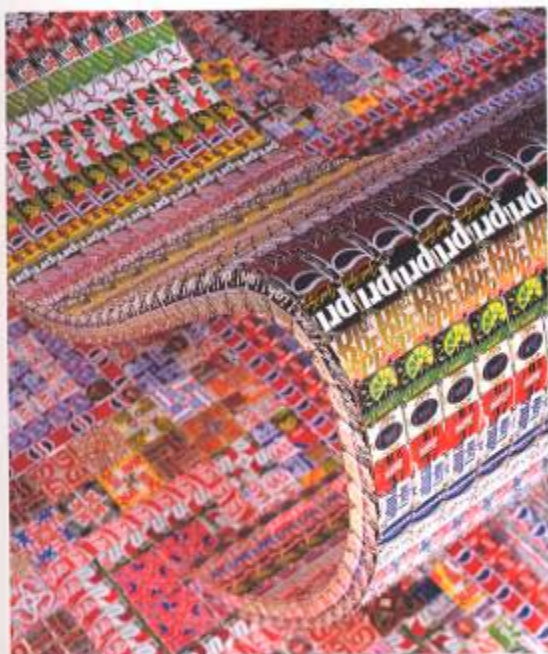
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Clare Graham (American, b. 1949)
Carpet of Printed Can Labels
 and *Serpentine Chaise Longue*,
 detail and full view, 1997
 reused aluminum beverage cans
 cat. 4.66 and 4.67

(opposite)
 Boris Bally (American, b. 1965)
 Transit chairs, 1997
 reused aluminum traffic signs
 cat. 4.64



The secondary aluminum industry—which obtains the metal by melting scrap or recycled aluminum—first developed about 1912 and was well established soon after the start of World War I. By 1937, according to *Aluminium and Electrolysis*, it was “one of the foremost branches of the general aluminum industry.” Yet its scale and economic, social, and environmental impact were minor compared to today’s industry. For example, U.S. figures for total recovery of aluminum in thousands of metric tons were 46.6 in 1935 and 3,685 in 1997. Recycling aluminum is economically viable for three reasons. First, recycling aluminum requires only 5 percent of the energy necessary for primary production. Second, aluminum can be remelted indefinitely without deterioration of its intrinsic properties. And third, effective collection schemes exist today because recycling is ecologically expedient, politically encouraged, and embedded in the consumer’s psyche.

Designers, architects, and craftspeople incorporate used aluminum products in their works for a variety of reasons—esthetic, economic, social, and political. Clare Graham is an avid collector of things that often end up in the garbage, from swizzle sticks and bottle caps to the pull tabs of beverage cans and the cans themselves. Graham admits to an obsession with quantity and multiples. His private vision transforms his vast collection of objects with little intrinsic value and questionable aesthetic appeal into unique, fantastic forms. Boris Bally, a skilled metalsmith, began using recycled aluminum road signs in 1997. Initially he produced bowls, and because the aluminum could not be heated without destroying the enameled surface, he raised it by hand hammering. He later employed more commercial spinning and machine-bending techniques, still with reused signs as the basic material, first in the production of bowls and trays, then in a chair design known as the Transit chair, which was patented in 1997.

Bally forages up and down the eastern United States in search of street signs, rescuing them from the recycling mill by offering scrap dealers more than the going rate for recycling. One recent haul brought in 10,000 pounds of signs from Ohio. The work of Graham, Bally, and other artists who use waste material will not correct the imbalance between production and consumption of natural resources. It does, however, raise awareness about recycling and provide a new future for objects that might otherwise have had an ignominious end in the smelter.

