

Swiss Army Knife, Switzerland (Karl Elsener, Victorinox, 1891)

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In 1975, the mountaineers Doug Scott and Dougal Haston were making their ascent up Mount Everest. This would become the first successful British Everest Expedition, but they nearly didn't make it: Haston's breathing apparatus froze, so Scott used the one tool he had that could unblock the ice-clogged equipment and save his life—a Swiss Army knife. These adventurers are not the only ones to have realized the life-saving importance of this portable tool, or rather toolkit, given the multiple instruments it comprises. From astronauts to picnickers, farmers to fishermen, it is an essential for both extraordinary and everyday situations; surely if any object merits the status of a design icon it is the Swiss Army knife.

The knife was first designed in 1891 by Karl Elsener, a Swiss cutler who had honed his skills in the knife-making centres of France and Germany.¹ On returning to Switzerland in 1884, he set up a workshop in the Swiss-German town of Ibach, where he sold his knives through his mother Victoria's hat shop.² On her death in 1909, Elsener named the firm after her, and following the introduction of stainless steel to the knife's production in 1921, renamed it Victorinox.³ While the still-family-run firm now manufactures many other objects, including cutlery, luggage and even fragrances, the Swiss Army knife is its most recognizable product. It is also the most iconic of today's multipurpose tools, and perhaps even the most iconic modern tool.

Its iconicity rests as much on its life-saving abilities as its design credentials; its compact, largely unadorned form and functionality makes it the pinnacle of everyday modernism, included in both New York's Museum of Modern Art and Munich's State Museum of Applied Art and Design's collections, as well as in the pages of several iconic design publications.⁴

Swissness

The knife's iconic status is tied up with its recognizably Swiss nationality. This is most overt in the casing, which bears the national flag's white cross and red background. The knife also embodies Swissness in less tangible ways. As the design writer Dorian Lucas notes, it shares the same qualities of 'precision craftsmanship' and 'Calvinist functionality' as other Swiss exports such as watches, jewellery and a celebrated graphic design tradition.⁵

Yet while the knife's nationality is a strong part of its iconicity, the folding multipurpose knife is not actually a Swiss invention. The earliest examples date back to the first century AD, when Romans used them primarily as eating tools.⁶ Nor is Elsener's knife the first to be spring-loaded, a crucial feature that allows the blades to open and shut firmly and so avoid unpleasant accidents and an invention that led to their leap in popularity in the seventeenth century.⁷ Nor do any of Victorinox's versions, such as 1968's SwissChamp with thirty-three different attachments, hold the record for incorporating the most tools. This goes to the British-made Sportsman's Knife, unveiled at the Great Exhibition of 1851, which had more than eighty.⁸ Victorinox may be the first, but it is not the only Swiss manufacturer. Wenger, based in French-speaking Delémont, has been manufacturing its own knives since 1893, although it now does so under the umbrella of Victorinox, which acquired it in 2005.⁹ Nor is

¹ The Knife and its History (Ibach: Victorinox, 1984), p. 126.

² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³ Dorian Lucas, *Swiss Design* (Salenstein: Braun, 2011), p. 125.

⁴ Hilary Beyer and Catherine McDermott, *Classics of Design* (London: Brown Reference, 2002), pp. 14–15; Deyan Sudjic, *Cult Objects* (London: Paladin, 1985), pp. 47, 49; Simon Alderson, 'Swiss Army Knife', *Phaidon Design Classics vol. 1* (London: Phaidon, 2006), p. 51.

⁵ Lucas, *Swiss Design*, p. 5.

⁶ Simon Moore, *Penknives and Other Folding Knives* (Aylesbury: Shire, 1988), p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), p. 33.

⁹ 'History', http://www.victorinox.com/ch/content/history_page.

Accessed 14 March 2012.

Switzerland the only purveyor of folding multitools today. From the American Leatherman to the French Opinel and the Spanish Laguiole, several nations have their own versions, albeit none as iconic as their Swiss counterpart.

This initial inspection of the Swiss Army knife not only undermines some presumptions about the knife's origins, but also suggests that one of its most revealing aspects is what it can tell us about the role that national identity plays in the history not only of icons, but designed goods more generally.

The Origins of the Swiss Army Knife

The Swiss Army knife's origins are connected with the birth of the nation itself—Switzerland became a federal state in 1848, in a period that design historian Jeremy Aynsley has described as having been defined by its developing 'national consciousness'.¹⁰ In 1890, Elsener established the Association of Swiss Master Cutlers, which aimed to replace their army's German-made pocket knives with their own domestic production. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful: unable to beat the price and weight of the imported knives, the organization collapsed.¹¹ Heavily in debt, Elsener continued his quest alone and by 12 June 1897, he had patented the *Offiziersmesser* (Officer's Knife), which was both lighter and more functional, adding a corkscrew and additional smaller blade to the existing awl, long blade, can opener and screwdriver. This increased capability was made possible by what remains the key part of Elsener's design, a system allowing all the blades to operate from just one spring, thereby enabling the addition of more tools without increasing the knife's size.¹²

Subsequent developments contributed to the knife's increasingly Swiss appearance. In 1897, Elsener replaced the wooden handle with a red one, made first from fibre, and now Cellidor plastic. In 1909 the Swiss escutcheon, until then an optional feature, was made standard. Coming twenty-five years after the firm's establishment and just thirty since the federation's official adoption of the emblem, its inclusion was indicative of Switzerland's consolidating national identity and an act of protectionism.¹³ Only Swiss manufacturers were allowed to use the flag, which distinguished it from the increasing number of copies that testified to its growing popularity. Today this flag is accompanied by a stamp on the blade's shank that verifies that the knife is Swiss made.¹⁴

The Swiss Army continued to be an important patron of both the Victorinox and Wenger versions of the knife. In the national spirit of neutrality, the Government agreed in 1908 to buy half of its knives from Victorinox and half from Wenger, designating the former purveyors of the 'Original' and the latter of 'Genuine' Swiss Army knives.¹⁵ Yet while this martial customer guaranteed substantial sales, it was the international, not the domestic, market that was most responsible for the knife's growing popularity in the twentieth century. During World War II, American soldiers stationed in Europe took them home as souvenirs, stoking the appetite of the nation that is the knife's biggest market today.¹⁶ Unable to pronounce *Offiziersmesser*, these G.I.s were also responsible for the knife's Anglicized name. Furthermore, America's army wasn't the only one to admire the knife. In 1976, the German army adopted the knife as part of their regulation equipment, albeit in a suitably Teutonic green colour with an Eagle insignia.¹⁷

Tools as Design Icons

The Swiss Army knife is not the only iconic design with military origins. In his book *Cult Objects*, Deyan Sudjic includes the knife as part of a larger family of civilian-adopted objects, such as the Zippo lighter and the Jeep.¹⁸ Examining the knife's military patronage not only invites us to question the origins of other objects we rely on today, but also

¹⁰ Jeremy Aynsley, *Nationalism and Internationalism* (London: V&A, 1993), p. 7.

¹¹ Alderson, 'Swiss Army Knife', p. 51.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Lucas, *Swiss Design*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *The Knife*, p. 160.

¹⁵ Carl Hoffman and Jake Page, 'On Everest or in the Office, It's the Tool to Have', *Smithsonian* 20 (1989): 110.

¹⁶ Hoffman and Page, 'On Everest', 108.

¹⁷ Mel Byars, *The Design Encyclopaedia* (London, New York: Lawrence King, Museum of Modern Art, 2004), p. 215.

¹⁸ Sudjic, *Cult Objects*, p. 11.

provides a way to consider the knife as an example of a fundamental object type: a tool. In particular, the knife shows how tools are objects designed with specific users, and usage, in mind.

As the semiotician Jean-Marie Floch has observed, while the Opinel knife was designed for ‘farmers and craftspeople’, the Swiss Army knife was designed with a soldier in mind.¹⁹ This intended user determined the configuration of its toolbox. While Victorinox could not predict how they would be used, each tool implied a specific use (for example, the Phillips screwdriver was included so that soldiers could dismantle those other tools: their rifles) making the knife a form of instruction manual to regiment and regulate soldiers’ actions.²⁰

As Victorinox’s range expanded in the early 1900s, they similarly expressed a designated user, both in name, such as the Carpenter, and in tools included, such as the Farmer’s knife, with its addition of a saw blade. These examples suggest how tools both constitute and are constitutive of professions and activities more generally; it is the tools we use that make us who we are.

Some later models have retained this link with specific skilled pursuits, although now they are more about leisure than work, as in the Angler model.²¹ However, Victorinox’s attempt to keep up-to-date by introducing tools such as an LED light, USB drive and MP3 player that can be used for a variety of applications, and including more tools on one model—such as the SwissChamp—suggests a loosening specificity and growing flexibility in terms of intended use and user. This decreasing connection with skilled professions in the increasingly overequipped Swiss Army knife also shows how tools—implicitly useful objects—can slip into the more frivolous realm of gadgets.

In his 1965 essay ‘The Great Gizmo’, the architectural critic Reyner Banham defined the gadget, or gizmo, as ‘a small self-contained unit of high performance in relation to its size and cost’.²² Banham’s essay focuses on the gadget’s compact portability rather than its more widespread connotations as a novelty, yet the knife’s slippage into the latter as it includes ever-more tools compromises even Banham’s definition. Questions over portability and functionality with even the most basic models have seen the emergence of competitors such as the Leatherman, introduced in the 1980s, which puts a pair of pliers, rather than spring-loaded knife, at its centre.²³

Despite this challenge, the Swiss Army knife remains an iconic object, one promoted by, and used to promote, its nation. In 2006 the Swiss Postal service devoted two stamps from its series to Victorinox, and in 2008 Victorinox beat several competitors to renew its Swiss Army contract—continuing the military patronage that first brought the knife into existence.

Conclusion

As this brief account has indicated, looking closer at the Swiss Army knife enables examination of concepts of nationality in objects. Specifically, it sheds light on the role of nations in the conception, production, mediation and consumption of design. Its identifiable Swissness also suggests that to be iconic an object doesn’t need to be the first, nor the only one of its kind, but it does need to be the most recognizable.

As an object type, the Swiss Army knife also demonstrates the need to attend to the tools that surround us. The names and types of tools included in each model demonstrate how closely tools are tied up with human activities and also how objects are conceived with intended users and usage in mind. Finally, whether they are being used up mountains or on fishing boats, the Swiss Army knife also suggests that icons, due to both their design and representation, have a heightened level of determinism in attempting to guide users’ behaviour, however they end up being used.

¹⁹ Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual Identities*, trans. Alec McHoul and Pierre van Osselaer (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 163.

²⁰ Charles Holland, ‘Icon of the Month’, *Icon*, June 2012, p. 40.

²¹ ‘Swiss Army Knives’, <http://www.victorinox.com/ch/content/swissarmy/category/1>. Accessed 18 May 2012.

²² Reyner Banham, ‘The Great Gizmo’, in *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 113.

²³ Leatherman, ‘Interactive Timeline’, <http://www.leatherman.com/Timeline/index>. Accessed 18 May 2012.