

UDC 7.036

DOI: 10.34670/AR.2022.92.50.002

The steampunk style: genealogy and diversity in contemporary art**Ergali N. Dautov**

PhD in Art History,
Associate Professor at the Department of artistic interior design,
Stroganov Moscow State Academy of Arts and Industry,
125080, 9 Volokolamskoe hwy, Moscow, Russian Federation;
e-mail: ergalid@mail.ru

Abstract

The article is devoted to the phenomenon of steampunk—a style that originated from literature of a certain genre and subject, and then spread to movies and video games, fashion, interior art, decorative and applied arts, and street art. Today, steampunk is an important vector in the development of modern stylistics of art. The article aims to carry out an analysis of the definitions of steampunk, explore its origin and interaction with other genres and styles. Steampunk is viewed as a trend in fashion, decorative and applied arts, and an interior design style. The author of the article deals with the works of contemporary artists in the steampunk style; in particular, the article considers the biomechanical direction in the art of steampunk. Steampunk, which almost accidentally got its name in the 1980s, is a powerful stylistic movement that has formed an entire subculture, with its fashion and literature, cinema and animation, interior design style and lifestyle. Steampunk is a form of escaping into a beautiful and formidable past, but its stylistic influence also suggests that the soul of modern man shows a craving for the romance of steam and mechanical machines, the secrets of the pre-computer era, and alternative development of the evolution of technology. All this is reflected in the art of steampunk.

For citation

Dautov E.N. (2021) The steampunk style: genealogy and diversity in contemporary art. *Yazyk. Slovesnost'. Kul'tura* [Language. Philology. Culture], 11 (6), pp. 8-18. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2022.92.50.002

Keywords

Steampunk, retrofuturism, cyberpunk, neo-Victorianism, Gothic.

Introduction

Steampunk is a subgenre of science fiction that set a fashion for a certain style in clothing, interiors, and decorative and applied arts. Steampunk as a trend is inspired by steam energy and the culture of the late 19th century, before the advent of the scientific and technological revolution. At the end of the 20th century, steampunk emerged as a literary movement developing the ideas of cyberpunk and opposing it, but later became a subculture.

The concept of steampunk appeared in popular culture when it was introduced as a term by the writer K.W. Jeter; he coined the word as an ironic pair to cyberpunk in 1987. However, the movement itself originated earlier: the first literary works that are now considered steampunk literature, appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. The steampunk narrative style imitates Victorian fiction, and the patterns of this world are associated with the development of steam technology.

Research results

The English designer John Colthart defined steampunk using the following formula: “STEAMPUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam × airship or metal man/ baroque stylings) × (psuedo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics × adventure plot” [VanderMeer, Chambers, 2011, 9]. The writer J.P. Blaylock thinks that steampunk is a genre variety of science fiction, the action in which takes place in a certain historical epoch (primarily in the industrial society of the 19th century) and is characterized by the involvement of steam technologies, not electronic machines and mechanisms [Skorokhod'ko, 2015, 223].

S.N. Volkov outlines the aesthetics and worldview of steampunk in the following way: “The concise characteristics of steampunk include:

- retrograde pessimism;
- longing for the impossible;
- the romanticism of the Victorian era;
- the contrasts between elegant clothes and rigid mechanics;
- the contradictory aesthetics of the steam world (a combination of incongruous things);
- the philosophy of engineering madness brought to genius, etc.” [Volkov, 2020, 106].

Steampunk is based on the idea of the alternative history of mankind, which made a different choice at the end of the 19th century, improving mechanics and steam engines. The artistic world of steampunk has a lot in common with the images of retrofuturism, and there are also intersections with fantasy, alternative history, horror, science, and detective fiction [Norets, 2018].

Steampunk is contradictory in its own way because it is both nostalgic and apocalyptic: “on the one hand, the 19th century is a time of remarkable achievements in science and technology, and on the other hand, it was marked by the heyday of crime, the growth of poverty, and the increase in the number of the disadvantaged in big cities. London as the center of everything Victorian occupies a special place in this associative series” [Skorokhod'ko, 2016, 96].

The steampunk style is associated not only with the aesthetics of mechanisms and steam engines, but also with Victorian England and early capitalism with its characteristic urban landscape. The socio-ideological message of steampunk is connected with environmental issues—the attraction to the real, the tangible and the rejection of disposable plastic and the same computerized forms. Steampunk is associated with the culture of second-hand shops and flea markets; it is focused on the beautiful past [Ashley, 2010].

The formation of steampunk is associated with literature [Rose, 2009], but it quickly conquered visual arts, including comics [King, Page, 2017]. Steampunk has become very popular in cinema and animation. The most significant works in cinema include *The Wild Wild West* (1965-1969), *Brazil* (1985), and *The League of Outstanding Gentlemen* (2003). There are such popular Japanese animated films as *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), and *Metropolis* (2001); Western animated films include *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) and *April and the Extraordinary World* (2015). Among the visual arts, steampunk is especially popular in video games. Such projects as *The Eidolon* (1985), *The Steel Empire* (1992), *The Chaos Engine* (1993), *Thief: The Dark Project* (1998), *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (2001), *Syberia* (2002) with its sequels, *Dishonored* (2012), and *Frostpunk* (2018) have expanded the concept of steampunk, worked out its aesthetics in detail. Some bands playing art rock, dark cabaret, darkwave, and industrial music adhere to the steampunk visual style (Abney Park, The Clockwork Dolls, The Clockwork Quartet, etc.).

The existence of a specific art form in steampunk led to the emergence of the steampunk style: “In typological terms, steampunk, like dieselpunk, is a form of techno design; its visual emphasis is based on the beauty of mechanical techno forms” [Konovalov, 2014, 20]. The steampunk style is based on “steampunk” modding and redesigning of modern objects and devices—with levers and gears, with shiny copper, polished wood, and leather. The emphasis is put on the artisanal workmanship of objects, on the rejection of industrial design.

Steampunk fans, using the style in clothing and decoration, can unite under the concept of neo-Victorianism. In clothes, the steampunk style is reflected in the imitation of Victorian details and genres: women wear long bustle and corset dresses, men have tweed suits, tailcoats and coats, spats. Accessories are important and include pocket watches, stick umbrellas, top hats and bowler hats, goggles. Modern accessories are redesigned to look “Victorian”. In general, steampunk fashion combines the stylistics of high fashion, neo-Victorianism, Gothic Lolita, and Elegant Gothic Aristocrat. It is also possible to note the “fashion” for the imitation of the replacement of body parts with mechanical parts (Figure 1).

The first company that began to produce clothes in the steampunk style was Steampunk Couture by the fashion designer Kate Lambert (Kato). In the 2010s, haute couture houses such as Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, and Chanel presented their own versions of steampunk fashion at shows.

The steampunk style is also used in jewelry: “In jewelry steampunk is actualized as an artistic practice, and in the process of wearing jewelry as a means of theatricalizing everyday life. In addition, each of these practices of creative transformation of reality is realized simultaneously within personal and collective frameworks” [Prokopovich, 2016, 39]. In the manufacture of such jewelry, there are such substyles as pure steampunk (only metal parts), steampunk plus (various materials, including beads and polymer clay), vintage steampunk (the imitation of antiquity with lace, leather, buttons, etc.) [Ibidem].

In decorative and applied arts, the features of the steampunk style include the same rough or refined retro materials (steel, bricks, copper, ceramics, leather), the shapes of gears and airships, watches and their details [Vygonskaya, Alekseeva, 2019].

The entourage of steampunk as a style of urban life includes the following features:

- gas and candle lighting;
- factory chimneys, smog, cobblestone pavements, shops, theaters, slums;
- old information technologies: newspapers, cash registers, calculating machines, and the telegraph;
- high-level steam technologies, mechanical robots, analog dials;

-
- characters such as mad scientists and engineers, maniacs, hardened criminals, travelers, detectives, spies, prostitutes, the first feminists, street vendors, etc.

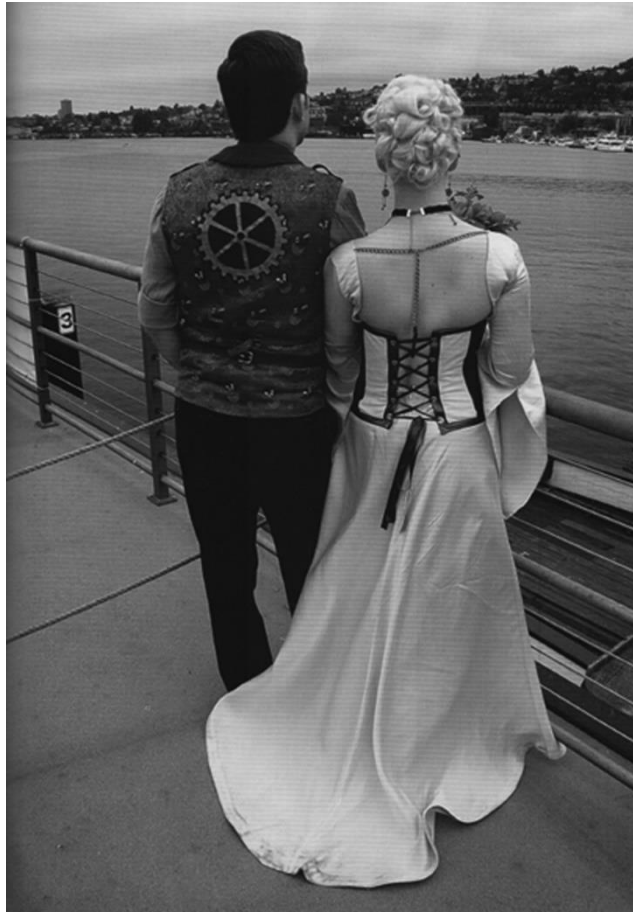


Figure 1 - Steampunk fashion. The 2010s [VanderMeer, Chambers, 2011, 147]

Steampunk in interiors is still the same strengthening of the mechanistic component of retro and vintage: “The attention of designers is drawn to the splendor and diversity of the subject world of the Victorian era, as if its development were continuing today. The images and details of steam engines, steam locomotives, and steamships are the subject of the game and the main element of this visually iconic expression; there are artifact images, e. g., steam submarines, steam airplanes in the form, in which they could appear in modern times. Interior details and accessories are also permeated by the aesthetics of the rarities and art objects of the 19th century. Levers, verniers, gears, clamps, pressure gauges, electric machines, cremalliers instead of door handles, and portholes—all these subject-spatial components, together with furniture, require a return in finishing to polished copper, bronze, brass or their patinated versions. Cast iron in lighting or heating fittings, even with vegetable decorations, is sometimes used. Genuine leather upholstery of furniture (or its imitation) is perfectly in harmony even with rusty metal (a specially induced effect) of tables. The Victorian saturation with objects, signs, and images and the theatrical museality of interiors are steampunk markers that define several basic solutions” [Pyatkov, 2018, 196] (Figure 2).

The “Victorian” style in steampunk is understood more than broadly: the term “Victorian” has become so malleable that its use no longer corresponds to its historical boundaries, i. e. the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). For steampunk, it can cover the subsequent Edwardian era (1901-1910)

or serve as a sign of the near awakening of the Industrial Revolution [VanderMeer, Chambers, 2011, 9].



Figure 2 - Bedroom interior design in the steampunk style [Ibidem, 198]

Let's consider the most striking examples of the art of steampunk. François Schuiten in 1994 transformed the Arts et Metiers metro station in Paris so that it acquired the appearance of a retro submarine, similar to that in the works of Jules Verne (Figure 3).



Figure 3 - F. Schuiten. The design of the Arts et Metiers metro station in Paris. 1994 [Arts..., www]

Kinetic Steam Works is known for steampunk works; in particular, its founder Sean Orlando created the Steampunk Tree House, an exposition on a tree that is installed in Dogfish Head Craft Brewery (Milton, Delaware) (Figure 4).

The Californian artist Shannon O'Hare, with the help of volunteers, built a Victorian-style mobile home and named it The Neverwas Haul. It was shown at the Burning Man Festival in 2006-2015 (Figure 5).



Figure 4 - S. Orlando. The Steampunk Tree House. Dogfish Head Craft Brewery (Milton, Delaware). 2008 [VanderMeer, Chambers, 2011, 6]



Figure 5 - S. O'Hare. The Neverwas Haul. 2006 [The Neverwas Haul, www]

In the town of Oamaru, New Zealand, the harbor area, in which many Victorian houses have been preserved, is dedicated to steampunk. Oamaru got into the Guinness Book of Records for the largest collection of steampunk objects in the world, most of which are at the Steampunk HQ (Figure 6).



Figure 6 - A steampunk playground in the town of Oamaru, New Zealand. 2015 [The steampunk playground..., www]

The mechanical-organic impulse was one of the interesting trends in the art of steampunk. It often combines the organic and the mechanical, as if trying to reconcile two opposing impulses.

The artist and sculptor Vladimir Gvozdev rethinks the Industrial Revolution in a bizarre manner, depicting clockwork or steam-driven animals. His paintings, such as the image of a mechanical frog, hint at the pseudo-Victorian desire to see how everything works, through dissection. His mechanical elephant and mechanical rhinoceros (Figure 7) reflect the influence of Jules Verne in steampunk.

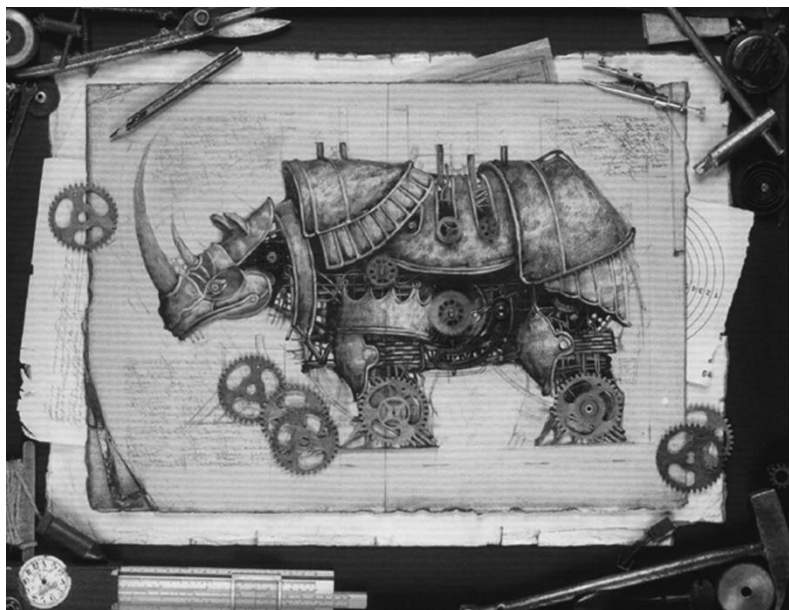


Figure 7 - V. Gvozdev. A mechanical rhinoceros [VanderMeer, Chambers, 2011, 112]

Vladimir Gvozdev has long been attracted by the aesthetics of technical drawings and images of animals, but this series combines these elements with a fascinating story from 1918. Once Vladimir Gvozdev was told about a German mechanic who lived in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. After the defeat of Germany in the First World War, the mechanic went mad and was placed in an insane asylum for life. There he began inventing “vengeance weapons” (Vergeltungswaffe). Vladimir Gvozdev has never seen his drawings, but he liked the story so much that he tried to use his own drawings to make something like a portrait of the inventor himself—to create a small museum of the mind of this German mechanic [Ibidem, 113]. Three-dimensional avatars of Gvozdev's images, i. e., his sculptures, provide for a different look at art through the use of coarser textures. They have a rougher, earthy look, enlivening the material based on diagrams.

Mike Libby, a Boston dweller, in his Insect Lab, which presents three-dimensional clockwork insects, creates fascinating intersections between the organic and the mechanical (Figure 8).

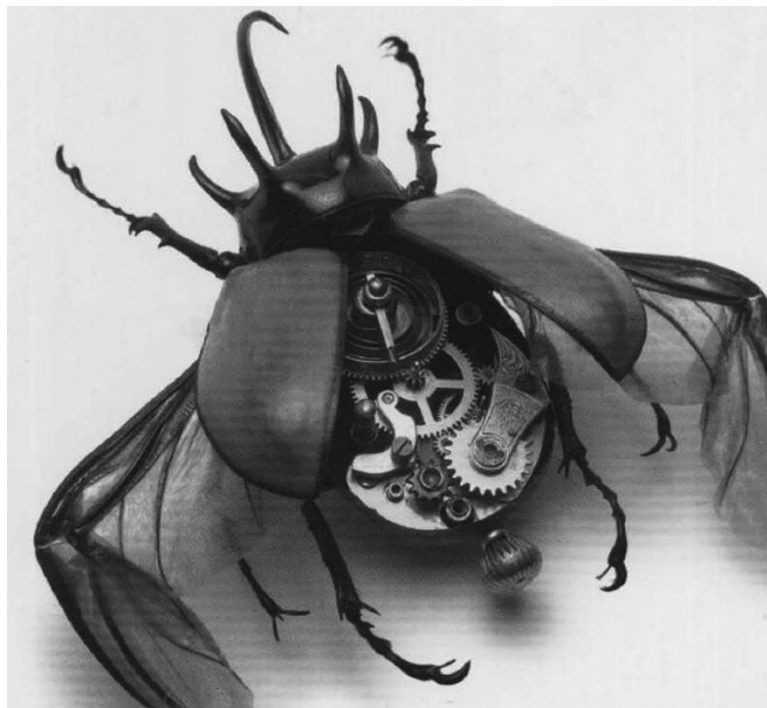


Figure 8 - M. Libby. *Dynastidae: Eupatorus Gracilicornis*, a rhino beetle with brass/steel gears, spare parts and a spring. 2009 [Ibidem, 116]

The results are decorative, but they involve the use of thin, impractical devices. Mike Libby says that he wants to pay tribute to the unique, beautiful details, shapes, textures, and colors of each sample. He wants them not to look like poor Frankenstein mutants of nature, but to seem a matter of whim and luxury, as if they came out of a great science fiction story. The process of creating his insects is complex and complicated, but Mike Libby also admits that at some level it's really as simple as it seems—dead bugs and broken watch parts. The complexity stems from the way Mike Libby combines these elements: he uses a whole range of adhesives, tweezers, files, pliers, archival markers, saws, heaters, and sandpaper to sharpen all the metal parts of a watch, and he does not alter the insects cosmetically—they are beautiful without changes [Ibidem].

In 2009-2010, a large-scale exhibition of steampunk art was held at the History of Science Museum, Oxford, England, where the works of 18 artists in the steampunk style were shown (Figure 9).



Figure 9 - A steampunk device. The History of Science Museum, Oxford [Steampunk displays..., www]

Steampunk festivals are held all over the world. They primarily demonstrate the visual culture of steampunk. In 2010, the S.T.E.A.M.Fest was held in Avondale Estates (Georgia, the USA). In 2015, the Alexandria Plein Air, the first steampunk festival in Russia, was held in Peterhof's Alexandria Park, where fashion and objects of the “Victorian” style were demonstrated.

Here is a more detailed description of such an event: “Steampunk: the Beginning,” an exhibition at California State University at Fullerton, ran from April 7 – May 10, 2012 at the Begovich Gallery. The show featured more than sixty paintings and illustrations created by Visual Arts alumni, faculty, and current students, all inspired by three Cal State Fullerton alumni and their steampunk-related publications: *Homunculus* (1986) by James Blaylock (B.A. 1972., M.A. English, 1974); *Infernal Devices* (1987) by K.W. Jeter (B.A. Sociology, 1973); and *The Anubis Gates* (1983) by Tim Powers (B.A. English, 1976). The exhibit included a genial group portrait by Cliff Cramp of all three alumni authors, dressed as Victorian scientists” [McGee, 2012, 362].

Conclusion

Steampunk, which almost accidentally got its name in the 1980s, is a powerful stylistic movement that has formed an entire subculture, with its fashion and literature, cinema and animation, interior design style and lifestyle. Steampunk is a form of escaping into a beautiful and formidable past, but its stylistic influence also suggests that the soul of modern man shows a craving for the romance of steam and mechanical machines, the secrets of the pre-computer era, and alternative development of the evolution of technology. All this is reflected in the art of steampunk.

References

1. *Arts et Métiers*. Available at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cf/Ligne_11_-_Arts_et_m%C3%A9tiers.jpg/1200px-Ligne_11_-_Arts_et_m%C3%A9tiers.jpg [Accessed 09/01/20].
2. Ashley M. (ed.) (2010) *Steampunk prime: a vintage steampunk reader*. New York: NonStop.
3. King E., Page J. (2017) Steampunk, cyberpunk and the ethics of embodiment. In: *Posthumanism and the graphic novel in Latin America*. UCL Press, pp. 109-136. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt1rfzxnd.8
4. Konovalov I.M. (2014) Napravleniya “stimpank” i “dizel'pank” v dizaine [Steampunk and dieselpunk in design]. *Visnik*

- Kharkivs'koï derzhavnoi akademii dizainu i mistetstv* [Bulletin of Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts], 7, pp. 19-22.
5. McGee M. (2012) Steampunk exhibition. *Science fiction studies*, 39 (2), p. 362. DOI: 10.5621/sciefictstud.39.2.0362
 6. Norets M.V. (2018) Formirovanie stimpanka na osnove al'ternativno-istoricheskogo myshleniya [The formation of steampunk on the basis of alternative historical thinking]. *Alleya nauki* [The alley of science], 3, pp. 356-366.
 7. Prokopovich L.V. (2016) Stimpank: translyatsiya stilya iz nauchnoi fantastiki v dizainerskuyu bizhuteriyu [Steampunk: style translation from science fiction to designer jewelry]. *ScienceRise*, 6 (1), pp. 38-43.
 8. Pyatkov S.V. (2018) Loft, stimpank, granzh: stil' ili khudozhestvennyi obraz v inter'ere [Loft, steampunk, and grunge: a style or an artistic image in interiors]. *Novye idei novogo veka* [New ideas of the new century], 3, pp. 192-201.
 9. Rose M. (2009) Extraordinary pasts: steampunk as a mode of historical representation. *Journal of the fantastic in the arts*, 20 (3), pp. 319-333.
 10. Skorokhod'ko Yu.S. (2016) Poetika neoviktorianskogo kino: k postanovke problemy [The poetics of neo-Victorian cinema: the problem statement]. *Sibirskii filologicheskii zhurnal* [Siberian journal of philology], 1, pp. 91-98.
 11. Skorokhod'ko Yu.S. (2015) Stimpank kak yavlenie sovremennoi literatury [Steampunk as a phenomenon of modern literature]. *Vestnik Nizhegorodskogo universiteta im. N.I. Lobachevskogo* [Bulletin of the Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod], 2, pp. 223-229.
 12. *Steampunk displays (steamgallery-053s)*. Available at: <http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/gallery/steampunk3-displays/steamgallery-053s.jpg> [Accessed 09/01/20].
 13. *The Neverwas Haul*. Available at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c0/Neverwas_haul_%283898088288%29.jpg/800px-Neverwas_haul_%283898088288%29.jpg [Accessed 09/01/20].
 14. *The steampunk playground in Oamaru*. Available at: https://farm2.staticflickr.com/1697/24348360785_747a12424f_h_d.jpg [Accessed 09/01/20].
 15. VanderMeer J., Chambers S.J. (2011) *The steampunk bible: an illustrated guide to the world of imaginary airships, corsets and goggles, mad scientists, and strange literature*. New York: Abrams Image.
 16. Volkov S.N. (2020) Subkul'turnye tendentsii v epokhu informatsionnykh tekhnologii (na primere stimpanka) [Subcultural trends in the era of information technology (a case study of steampunk)]. *Rossiiskii gumanitarnyi zhurnal* [Liberal arts in Russia], 9 (2), pp. 104-114.
 17. Vygonskaya N.S., Alekseeva E.N. (2019) Osnovnye elementy stilya stimpank v dekorativno-prikladnom iskusstve [The main elements of the steampunk style in decorative and applied arts]. *Mezhdunarodnyi zhurnal gumanitarnykh i estestvennykh nauk* [International journal of humanities and natural sciences], 12-1, pp. 18-20.

Стиль стимпанк: генеалогия и разнообразие в современном искусстве

Даутов Ергали Нуркешевич

Кандидат искусствоведения,
доцент кафедры «Художественное проектирование интерьеров»,
Московская государственная художественно-
промышленная академия им. С.Г. Строганова,
125080, Российская Федерация, Москва, ш. Волоколамское, 9;
e-mail: ergalid@mail.ru

Аннотация

Статья посвящена феномену стимпанка – стиля, который произошел от литературы определенного жанра и тематики, а затем распространился на кино и видеоигры, моду, искусство интерьера, декоративно-прикладное искусство и стрит-арт. Сегодня стимпанк является важным вектором в развитии современной стилистики искусства. В статье анализируются различные определения стимпанка, исследуются его происхождение и взаимодействие с другими жанрами и стилями. Стимпанк рассматривается как направление моды, декоративно-прикладного искусства, стиль интерьера. Более подробно автор

останавливается на произведениях современных художников в стиле стимпанк; в частности, рассматривается биомеханическое направление в искусстве стимпанк. Стимпанк, почти случайно получивший свое название в 1980-х гг., сегодня стал мощным стилистическим движением, которое сформировало целую субкультуру со своей модой и литературой, кино и анимацией, стилем интерьеров и стилем жизни.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Даутов Е.Н. The steampunk style: genealogy and diversity in contemporary art // Язык. Словесность. Культура. 2021. Том 11. № 6. С. 8-18. DOI: 10.34670/AR.2022.92.50.002

Ключевые слова

Стимпанк, ретрофутуризм, киберпанк, неовикторианство, готика.

Библиография

1. Волков С.Н. Субкультурные тенденции в эпоху информационных технологий (на примере стимпанка) // Российский гуманитарный журнал. 2020. Т. 9. № 2. С. 104-114.
2. Выгонская Н.С., Алексеева Е.Н. Основные элементы стиля стимпанк в декоративно-прикладном искусстве // Международный журнал гуманитарных и естественных наук. 2019. № 12-1. С. 18-20.
3. Коновалов И.М. Направления «стимпанк» и «дизельпанк» в дизайне // Вісник Харківської державної академії дизайну і мистецтв. 2014. № 7. С. 19-22.
4. Норец М.В. Формирование стимпанка на основе альтернативно-исторического мышления // Аллея науки. 2018. № 3. С. 356-366.
5. Прокопович Л.В. Стимпанк: трансляция стиля из научной фантастики в дизайнерскую бижутерию // ScienceRise. 2016. Т. 6. № 1. С. 38-43.
6. Пятков С.В. Лофт, стимпанк, гранж: стиль или художественный образ в интерьере // Новые идеи нового века. 2018. Т. 3. С. 192-201.
7. Скороходько Ю.С. Поэтика неовикторианского кино: к постановке проблемы // Сибирский филологический журнал. 2016. № 1. С. 91-98.
8. Скороходько Ю.С. Стимпанк как явление современной литературы // Вестник Нижегородского университета им. Н.И. Лобачевского. 2015. № 2. С. 223-229.
9. Arts et Métiers. URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cf/Ligne_11_-_Arts_et_m%C3%A9tier.jpg/1200px-Ligne_11_-_Arts_et_m%C3%A9tier.jpg
10. Ashley M. (ed.) Steampunk prime: a vintage steampunk reader. New York: NonStop, 2010. 239 p.
11. King E., Page J. Steampunk, cyberpunk and the ethics of embodiment // Posthumanism and the graphic novel in Latin America. UCL Press, 2017. P. 109-136. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt1rfzxnd.8
12. McGee M. Steampunk exhibition // Science fiction studies. 2012. Vol. 39. No. 2. P. 362. DOI: 10.5621/sciefictstud.39.2.0362
13. Rose M. Extraordinary pasts: steampunk as a mode of historical representation // Journal of the fantastic in the arts. 2009. Vol. 20. No. 3. P. 319-333.
14. Steampunk displays (steamgallery-053s). URL: <http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/gallery/steampunk3-displays/steamgallery-053s.jpg>
15. The Neverwas Haul. URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c0/Neverwas_haul_%283898088288%29.jpg/800px-Neverwas_haul_%283898088288%29.jpg
16. The steampunk playground in Oamaru. URL: https://farm2.staticflickr.com/1697/24348360785_747a12424f_h_d.jpg
17. VanderMeer J., Chambers S.J. The steampunk bible: an illustrated guide to the world of imaginary airships, corsets and goggles, mad scientists, and strange literature. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. 230 p.