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Valentine Portable Typewriter and Case

RISD Museum

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Kate Shapira

Hi. I'm Kate Schapira. I am a writer and teacher and I am really excited to talk to you about this Valentine portable typewriter.

I love this typewriter and have loved it ever since I first saw it in the Museum, partly because I really love typewriters. I love the way that it feels to use them; I love the kind of technology they are. To me, a typewriter seems halfway between handwriting and writing on a computer, and that's sort of how I use it as well.

I love how it feels to hit the keys. Of course, I'll never get to touch this one, probably, but I long to touch it, because the other thing that I really like about this particular typewriter is how inviting it is, and how it seems like it would actually really be a pleasure to use. Functional but not just functional; beautiful but not just beautiful.

It's an object from the past in the sense that it was made in the past, but it's still an object, it still exists in the present, it's still here. And I think that looking at the things that people have made can help us connect with the things, connect with the people that made them, think about what they wanted out of a thing that they made and how that fits in with what we want out of a thing that we make. I think that looking at the ways that people have made things differently can get us excited about making things or using things or adding to things in the present.

Hello. My name is Khipra Nichols. I teach in the Industrial Design Department here at RISD, and today we're looking at Olivetti's valentine typewriter.

My first impression, of course, when I see it, is the bright red color, which jumps right out at you. This typewriter was designed in 1969; I think it was released in 1970. And for a typewriter to be bright red in those days was really outstanding. Typewriters were muted colors, dull—they were heavy, cast-iron. And suddenly, Olivetti brings out this typewriter that's made of plastic; it's bright red; it's actually portable.

When thinking about the development process, I do know that back in the 60s, and even today, Olivetti was hiring writers, graphic designers, industrial designers, illustrators, a variety of professional disciplines that were all working together, which is quite common today. But again, back in those days it was quite new.

You can also tell they really considered the user, how a person would use this. I think that they must have also been thinking about maybe a younger user, more youthful, a student. They don't necessarily have an office so they're more likely to be in a restaurant or a café or a library.

You may ask why this typewriter is something relevant—it was designed many, many years ago, in 1969, 1970. Why would we care about it? And why is it in so many museums? I think one answer is that because it was so different, it's almost more an invention than a design. Olivetti invented a new way to conceive of and merchandise and market a very common object. Typewriters had been around for a long, long time, but this was a breakthrough in how typewriters were seen and used.