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FOOD

The Enduring Mystery of the Oreo Cookie Design

BY JAKE ROSSEN
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When the National Biscuit Company introduced the Oreo cookie in March of 1912, there was no mistaking its origins. It was a blatant knock-off of Sunshine Biscuits's Hydrox, a double-

wafer chocolate and cream sandwich snack that capitalized on the popularity of a similar home-baked treat that had been circulating since the mid-1800s.

The Hydrox was introduced in 1908. But Sunshine had relatively little of the advertising or production power of Nabisco, which was formed in 1898 as a conglomerate of baking companies: The fact that it beat Oreo to shelves by four years was irrelevant. Consumers largely passed up Hydrox and opted for Oreos, which were sold in bulk for 30 cents a pound.

The two cookies had more in common than a similar taste: Both used cookies that were ornate, with wreaths adorning the outer side. In 1952, possibly in an attempt to further distance themselves from the competition, Nabisco opted to change the Oreo design to a slightly

more complex pattern that has invited comparisons to everything from the Knights Templar to the Freemasons.

Were conspiracy theorists focusing too hard on the humble Oreo? Or has the cookie been trying to tell us something all along?



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The Oreo wasn't the only snack Nabisco introduced in 1912. The company also produced Veronese biscuits and Mother Goose cookies, the latter embossed with characters from popular nursery rhymes. As with Hydrox, it had become common to create cookie molds that could imprint a distinctive shape on top of the crunchy wafers. It's a practice that likely has origins in Europe, where producers of communion wafers used molds to create edible religious symbols.

Mass-market cookie businesses had more cynical motivations. It was in their best interests to create distinctive patterns that helped consumers distinguish one product from another. Nabisco's Lorna Doone cookies had a vaguely atomic symbol along with the cookie's name: Hydrox osted for flower

COOKIE'S NAME, HIGHLIGHTS SPECIFIC DESIGN

petals in addition to wreaths. Even out of the package, it was easy to tell one sugary snack from the other.

In 1924, Nabisco made a slight alteration to the Oreo, adding turtle doves on either end of the cookie's name and enlarging the font. It remained unchanged for nearly 30 years, until 1952, when a former Nabisco mail room employee named William Turnier was tasked with building a better cookie.

Turnier had arrived at the company in 1923, running correspondence for executives before he befriended workers on the food engineering side of their headquarters in New York City. At night, he pursued his GED: Turnier had dropped out of school over bullying he had experienced as a result of being afflicted with polio.

“He was about 18 months old when he got it,” Bill Turnier, a professor of law at the University of North Carolina and the late designer’s son, tells *mental_floss*. “He was a very bright guy and should’ve gone on to college, but people made fun of his limp and he couldn’t take it. Bullying is nothing new.”

Shadowing creative employees, Turnier developed a new skill set—industrial engineer—and was eventually hired on to revamp Nutter Butter as well as their line of Milk-Bone dog treats.

It’s not known what direction, if any, Turnier was given when it was time to give the Oreo a facelift. The only thing he kept was the cookie’s name in the center. In place of the wreaths, Turnier positioned an array of four-petal flowers. Surrounding the word “Oreo”

was a colophon, or emblem, that was a circle with two crossed lines at the top. It was the same design Nabisco had been using to adorn its company logo.

“That was his idea,” Turnier says. “That design goes back to monks who used it on the bottom of manuscripts they copied in Medieval times. It was a sign of craft—saying they did the best they could. Nabisco really liked that.”

Satisfied with Turnier’s blueprint, which allowed the company to create dough molds to his specifications, the Oreo underwent its cosmetic change in 1952; Turnier continued to work for Nabisco until retiring in 1973. It was unlikely he had any awareness that his design for the Oreo would become a kind of Rorschach test for snack lovers, with people finding subversive messages in the way he illustrated the

cookie.



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In theories that have become easier to disseminate with the advent of the internet, some Oreo observers have noted that Turnier's four-leaf flower looks remarkably like a cross pattée, a symbol that the Knights Templar carried into the Crusades in the 12th century. The two-bar cross could be construed as the Cross of Lorraine, also from the Knights Templar. Alternately, both could be a subtle nod to the

Freemasons, a secret society that functions to this day.

How much of this is inferred and how much did Turnier intend? According to his son, the elder Turnier's choices were aesthetic in nature. "He just liked the look of the flowers. He could never understand when people would locate him demanding some kind of explanation. 'Why did you use a four-petal flower? There aren't any!' Here's a man in his 80s, and he'd call me up quite distressed.

"And of course, there is a four-petal flower, the fireweed. We had some when I was growing up in our backyard."

Likewise, there was no meaning to the number of ridges—90—that surround the cookie's margin. "He said he probably used a compass to make sure they were evenly-spaced," Turnier says.

The smaller triangles near the word “Oreo” were probably inserted to avoid having any empty space on the cookie’s face.

While Turnier believes his father was not inclined to reference religious iconography, he does note that one member of his family held an intriguing position. “My grandfather was a Freemason,” he says. “But my dad was Catholic.” Though he was probably exposed to Freemason imagery during his life, Turnier had no intention of delivering a secret handshake to cookie lovers.





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Nabisco has never offered an official explanation for the design. They do not, in fact, fully acknowledge Turnier had anything to do with it, insisting that their records don't account for who was responsible for the cookie's alteration in 1952—only that Turnier worked as a design engineer during that period of time.

Turnier, who keeps a copy of his father's original 1952 blueprint hanging in his Chapel Hill, North Carolina home, believes the Oreo was simply adorned with easy-to-replicate designs that were possible thanks to the cookie's durable texture. "The dough dictates what you can do with the cookie," he says. "The dough for Oreo, you could almost make a coin out of it. You can insert a lot of

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detail. And then people look for
meaning.”

The elder Turnier died in 2004. In contrast to the theories and mystery that have surrounded his work, the etching on his tombstone is unmistakable: Set in the upper right corner just above his name is a fully adorned Oreo cookie.

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