“The Useful-Beautiful Couplet”: On the Aesthetic Appraisal of Designed Objects

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The design!open conference held in Parma, Italy, in May of 2022 exhibited the wealth of recent work in interdisciplinary approaches to design. One ‘track’, in which I was invited to participate, focused on design objects, and suggested that design is a “carrier of functional, symbolic, narrative, experiential values” that “go beyond the traditional useful-beautiful couplet.” [1] In this regard, my presence as a philosopher rather than a design theorist was somewhat that of an outlier, for my aesthetic theory of design remains precisely within this couplet and seeks to understand the relation of form and function as two central elements of designed objects relevant to our aesthetic appraisal of them as being beautiful or aesthetically valuable. This is not to deny the many ways in which designs can be used to display symbolic and/or expressive import but that this import takes us beyond a specifically aesthetic theory of design, which it is my concern to sketch here.

Beauty is the original focus of philosophical aesthetics, and much of the history of the discipline has been an attempt to produce what I will call a unified theory of beauty—defining what beauty is, on the one hand, and how we come to perceive or experience it on the other. Immanuel Kant’s theory is perhaps the most comprehensive and influential, and has informed my work on design [2]. What unified theories of beauty have in common is that they claim beauty is the same wherever it appears, and objects that are beautiful are all beautiful in the same way, or for the same reasons, or as a result of the same singular experience, or due to the same judgement. So, a sunset, a human figure, a work of art, a designed object—if beautiful—will share the same property, and be equally worthy of the same attention and appreciation. Even if we broaden the notion of beauty to that of ‘aesthetic value’ more generally, as has been the practice in most contemporary aesthetics, we find the same search for the same unified theory: aesthetic value has been defined as intrinsic and sui generis—again, as being therefore the same across all possible objects and experiences. As Robert Stecker has recently argued, aesthetic value is “everywhere. [It] can be realized in different ways in different media but it cannot be a different value in different media” [3]. And so beauty is seen as a singular value that is shared by all objects that merit our appraisal.

This is not the place to debate the merits of a unified theory of beauty except to point out that were it true, there would be no need for an aesthetics of design as a uniquely interesting object of philosophical investigation: beauty would be beauty wherever it appeared, in art, sunsets and flamingoes no less than in shoes, kettles, and bicycles. Yet my position has been that designed objects have certain characteristics that make our appraisals of them importantly different from nature and art, characteristics that

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merit closer philosophical attention. From the point of view of users or consumers of design, rather than creators, manufacturers or marketers of them, designed objects are an important part of our everyday lives and activities and in this their functions cannot be overlooked in favour of their form alone.

In one sense, the unified theory is not wrong: we can go to a museum, such as the Louvre, or the MOMA in New York, and look through protective glass at delicate porcelain, at 18th century inlaid desks, and admire their grace, elegance and symmetry, or their arrangement of shapes, forms and colours, and find them beautiful or aesthetically pleasing. The unified theory of beauty places its emphasis on how things look and the pleasure we take in them for that reason. And sometimes we respond to designed objects in just this way. Kant would call this 'free beauty' or the purely beautiful, and it can apply to anything, as the unified theory suggests.

But this approach treats designs as *objets d'art*, or what in English we also call 'conversation pieces', or 'decorative art', where a vase or a table is not used, but displayed, with the intention of being merely appreciated for its look and formal qualities alone. We are not in this regard treating these things expressly *as* works of design however: we are aestheticizing them, in effect moving them from one ontological category of object to another. Categories admittedly can be fluid, and mutable: what was once a designed object meant to be used can become a museum piece of decorative art, or even gain the status of artwork proper, such as African tribal masks, early Christian altarpieces or ancient pottery. My work does not define design in essentialist terms, according to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions but remains sensitive to these historical fluctuations. Nevertheless, my focus is on the appraisal of design *qua* design, when (and while) the object forms part of our quotidian lives. Further, it is important to note that we can make a number of different kinds of judgements about the same object: we can assess a painting for its financial or investment value, or make a prudential judgement about whether hanging it *over there* will cover a hole in the wall; we can judge a shoe ethically as to its materials or the labour practices involved in its manufacture, or *purely* aesthetically as to its elegance in shape, colour and form. Kinds or types of judgements are equally fluid and mutable but need to be distinguished for the purposes of analysis. By 'appraisal' of design, I mean specifically the *aesthetic* judgements we make of designed objects when they are taken *as* design rather than *as* art or *as* conversation piece or *as* carrier of narrative/symbolic meaning (or *as* marketing tool)—and these judgements taken in isolation from our other moral, economic or instrumental concerns.

When focusing on the ontological category of designed objects *per se*, we can observe relatively uncontroversially that while designs have formal properties of shape, colour and so on, they are also purposive things: designs are functional objects, and these functions are relevant to our appreciation of them because when we make an aesthetic judgement about a thing, this judgement cannot ignore the object's ontological status (however loosely we define it to be). We evaluate works of art in a particular way when we know they are artworks (for instance, we interpret them for their meaning). While judgements of free or pure beauty are always possible, even Kant accepted that they occur mostly in nature, as when we appreciate a flower or a seashell for its form alone. The rest of the time, our aesthetic experiences are more complex, and are conditioned by our knowledge of the kind of thing we are presented with.

Designed objects have (at least) two important elements for the consumer or user: form and function—the couplet—and our task becomes one of understanding how these elements come together in an aesthetic appraisal of a given work of design. If we emphasize form over function, we are led in the direction of someone like David Pye's theory of design, who writes that "whenever humans design and make a useful thing, they invariably expend a good deal of unnecessary and easily avoidable work on it which contributes nothing to its usefulness". For Pye, design is all about decoration, or embellishment, which he sums up as "primarily doing useless work on useful things" [4, 11–13]. This, as I have noted, amounts to the aestheticization of design. And if this were indeed the case, we could merely rely on a unified theory of aesthetic value, and have no need to talk about the particular nature of an aesthetics of design at all. Design appreciation would be the same as all other aesthetic appreciation, which I contend it is not.

The alternative, that we emphasize a work's functional properties instead, brings us up against the opposite extreme, in the likes of Adolf Loos, who saw ornament as a crime in design, or a symptom of vulgarity. Dieter Rams, one-time president of the German Design Council and chief designer at Braun, claimed that "people do not buy a specific product just to look at it, rather because it performs certain functions…The festival of colours and form and the entertainment of form sensations enlarges the world's chaos…[Design] must conform in the best possible way to the expectations that result from the function the product fulfills" [5, 111–113]. While both positions may accurately reflect moments in design history, I do not think that either of them are complete. We do not present design awards to things based solely on how they look, regardless of whether they work, but nor do we celebrate the purely functional while ignoring its form. If we did, museums would be filled with hammers, paper bags and toothpicks. Instead, we need a more integrated approach, where form and function are taken together in our aesthetic appreciation of design; Kant called this 'dependent beauty', but I prefer something like 'functional style'.

Let me begin with function. The function of an object refers to what it was intended or meant to be, and must not be confused with the use to which it may later be put. A snow shovel may well be used to prop open a door, but that is not what the shovel was designed for—it was intended to remove snow. Even if the shovel works very well to keep my door open, I do not then call it a doorstop, but I acknowledge that it remains a shovel: I place it in a certain ontological category as being a particular kind of thing, even if my own subsequent use of it is somewhat idiosyncratic. When we appraise a design—in a competition, for instance, or as a potential buyer—we need to understand the object in terms of this 'originating' function—what it was designed to be, whether by creator alone, or creator in conjunction with commissioning client, or by corporate directive—rather than how it might later come to be used. We slot designs into different categories in competitions, and these categories rely on some definition that is grounded in originating function that stays with the object, rather than in a history or pattern of use, or indeed in the forces operating in the marketplace [6]. This is an avowedly intentionalist approach to design ontology, and draws a distinction between function and use, which I think can be too easily elided. David Pye, for instance, is guilty of such an elision when he defines function as "[w]hat someone has provisionally decided that a device may

reasonably be expected to do at present" [4, 14] but this flies in the face of linguistic and conceptual evidence. We may *use* objects in any number of ways without effecting an alteration in what they actually *are* or are designed to be. As Parsons and Carlson note, "[w]e do not need a theory to tell us *that* propping up a garage door is not the 'right' function…of a particular shovel, but we do need a theory to tell us *why* this is the case" [7, 88] and Pye's elision does not provide such a theory as it eliminates the notion of 'designed-to-be' altogether in favour of a kind of ontological subjectivism, where objects become whatever he says they are, whether they start out as shovels or even rocks and other natural phenomena. By contrast, the categorization of an object—what it *is*—must be grounded in, and determined by, some originating function that gives it a stable identity. Uses to which an object may be put do not have the ability to alter its ontological status as being a thing of a certain kind (and objects of nature cannot be said to have functions in the appropriate sense, not matter how useful they may be).

The originating function of an object need not be found in the designer's intention as I have located it (for Parsons and Carlson it is determined more by marketplace success). But however the notion of function is parsed, it remains distinct from use, and we need to know what ontological category in which to place an object in order to be able to make a specifically aesthetic judgement about it. Aesthetic assessment is grounded in the identification of the object, if we seek to appraise it *qua* design. For a unified theory, or a judgement of 'pure' beauty, what the object is does not matter: as Kant has noted, in these judgements "one does not want to know whether there is anything that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation (intuition or reflection):"—that is, on the basis of the mere appearance of a representation to the mind when we are "indifferent" with regard to the "real existence of the object of this representation." [8] An instrumental assessment, such as a painting being useful to cover a hole in the wall, equally does not have this strong requirement of knowing the object's originating function: it doesn't matter in this case that it is a painting, just that it is the right size and shape to perform the use we seek to make of it. But to make an aesthetic appraisal of a design, it must be understood to *be* a designed object, first, and second to be a particular object that can be identified as such in order for evaluation to get off the ground.

Further, knowledge of a design's function must be *direct* rather than theoretical. Reading about the physics of balance and load, the manufacture of metals and plastics, cold and heat resistance, and so on, will not help me assess a particular snow shovel unless (i) I am directly acquainted with snow and its removal, and (ii) I actually hold, touch and work with the shovel in my hands. The consequence of this direct knowledge is that aesthetic evaluation of a design will be historically and culturally specific: those who can appreciate a design will be those who are from a place and time where the object is directly relevant to their daily lives. And this relevance will count for nothing without hands-on experience. We cannot appraise a desk, a mask or a shovel by merely looking at it behind glass in a museum: what I have called the 'aestheticization' of design on the lines of a unified theory of beauty is also an *alienation* of the object from our lives, that forces us to consider its formal properties alone. Equally, knowing the originating function of a design is also not enough: when we appreciate an object, we are concerned with its *success* in fulfilling its function: we do not award merit to, appreciate—or

intentionally purchase—designs that fail, or work poorly, or are inferior in doing what they were meant to do. Kant called this the requirement of 'perfection' in his discussion of dependent beauty, but what he seems to have meant was that we need to know not only what kind of object a thing is meant to be, but whether or not it is also a *good* thing of its kind. Someone who has no experience of clearing 60 cm of snow on a February morning will be ill-equipped to appraise a shovel's design without getting outside and using it. But if one *can* appreciate it, then when they do, it will be because, in part, the shovel works very well, or fulfills its (known) purpose. Thus, to appreciate a given design, we need to ask of the object in front of us, "what is it?", and when we do, we do so in terms of the auxiliary questions of "what is it meant to be?", or "what is it for?", and finally, we ask "is it any good?", and those competent to give this assessment will require direct, hands-on experience with the design in question. Knowledge of originating function is a necessary condition for the aesthetic appreciation of design.

But this gets us only so far. After all, the knowledge requirement on its own does not seem to be so much *aesthetic* as cognitive and it is not yet clear what it has to do with a design's beauty. It is also, in part, a merely negative constraint: it suggests that we will not find failed or poor designs to be aesthetically valuable, even if they can be beautiful in the pure or free sense of the term. But, conversely, even if something works very well, like a hammer does in driving in nails, this does not *on its own* make it aesthetically praiseworthy: success in function may be necessary, but it is not sufficient, for aesthetic value. A further step is needed to complete this sketch, and here we can make use of the notion of 'functional style' through a distinction between ornamentation and decoration.

By 'style', I will follow the philosopher Leonard B. Meyer and define it quite narrowly as "a series of choices made within some set of constraints" [9], and we have already seen that success in function is one constraint upon the beauty or aesthetic value of a design. But within that constraint, there is choice about the *way* a design fulfills its function, and this directly involves its form as well. While the specific function of an object is determined on an intentionalist account, form is importantly *underdetermined* and herein lies room for differing aesthetic judgements of design. The function of an object gives it ontological stability, and our knowledge of that function, even while culturally and historically specific, grounds the aesthetic appraisals we make of it as a design. But this cognitive element lacks, and even perhaps seems to impede, the normativity of aesthetic evaluation, with all of its room for disagreement and variety. One easy way out of such an impasse is to suggest that the aesthetic element of design rests solely on its form; I reject this as a reversion to the unified theory. Instead, functional style must take up both form and function in aesthetic appraisal, while allowing for a breadth of responses.

Equally good bicycles, for instance, can be widely different, as having hand brakes, or brakes in their rear wheels, as having 12 gears or none, as being upright or recumbent, and so on. These reflect stylistic choices in how a given design will fulfill its function. What makes one more aesthetically valuable than another? When we appraise a design, we appreciate its style—the visual, auditory and tactile *result* of choices made within functional constraints that have created *this* thing in front of us instead of something else, or as Robert Wicks put it, "the *contingency* of the way the object realizes its purpose so very well." [10] The properties that make an object a good member of its kind are actually

aesthetically relevant in our judgements because they are apparent to us, and they *show up*: they are not merely background knowledge which we need to have, that we can then ignore in order to go on and have an aesthetic experience of a bicycle's formal elements alone; they are part of our assessments of a bicycle's aesthetic value. This also means that, unlike in cases of the pure beauty of a seashell, the complex beauty of design will always have a cognitive basis, and will always involve comparative judgements—how this bicycle achieved its goal as opposed to that one, what choices this object displays as opposed to another: "we compare alternative means to a single purpose, as we reflect upon the contingency of an object's form as this form realizes the object's purpose." [11] When we appraise a design's style, we make an aesthetic judgement about the way it achieves its purpose, and how that way is clear in the finished product. Two bicycles may be equally good for riding, even if vastly different in the way that they achieve their function. Our aesthetic appraisal of one as more beautiful or aesthetically valuable than another will involve (i) our knowledge that it is a functional bicycle, and (ii) our perception of the way that it fulfills its function, or the choices the designer made in its conception, or the style it displays as a result of those choices, in contrast with other choices, other styles, other innovations in objects of the same type or kind. The formal elements of a design reflect these stylistic choices and can lead to widely differing results. We respond to these differences and when we do, we are not responding to form alone but to the play of form and function in the finished product.

It was Kant who made a distinction between ornamentation and decoration which might sound strange to us now, as we tend to use the terms interchangeably in English, but the distinction is useful to elaborate on this notion of style [12]. Ornament, Kant claimed, can add to our aesthetic pleasure, through a play between function and form; while it is subordinate to function, it is not simply applied after the fact but is integral to our aesthetic experience of the object. Decoration, he dismissed as superficially adding mere charm or emotion, and hence as *irrelevant* to an object's beauty, or in fact perhaps even hindering it, as it speaks to merely subjective preferences at best, or even at times to the manipulation of them.[1] Ornament need not always highlight a design's function, or make it look most fit to fulfill its purpose—fittingness, or seeming fit to perform a function, is too rigid a normative standard for design appreciation. Ornamentation can play with, question, down-play, or even partly conceal an object's function—but in any case, it is always taking up and *responding to* what the object is meant to be in its resultant stylistic choices. Consider the many different colours, intensities, and shapes of bicycle lights, for example. These are design choices that are nevertheless still related to the limitations of a bicycle needing a light of some kind (by law, in Canada) as part of its basic function. These are part of the functional style of the finished product but they also exhibit a great deal of latitude in ornamental details. And here aesthetic disagreement can occur: some may think that magnetic clip-on bicycle lights are an elegant solution to more cumbersome permanent structures that ruin the lines of a bike's frame; others may find they are too likely to fall off, get stolen or be too dim. Some find the bluish tint of LED lights not visible enough; others find halogen lights too blindingly bright. Within the parameters of function, style involves formal decisions but these are not *only*

[1] Kant's example was of a gilt frame around a painting as a way of making an inferior work seem more appealing by obscuring the object of our intended appraisal with its decorative casing.

formal, or purely about form, as they emerge from, and make reference to, functional requirements, and in the Kantian sense are ornament rather than mere decorative touches. Some may find the elegance of magnetic lights a suitable price to pay for their fragility; some may prefer the boxy look of permanent structures. We can—and do, especially in design competitions—discuss, and disagree about, the advantages and disadvantages of stylistic choices in our aesthetic appraisals. And these involve ornamentation in the Kantian sense of the term.

To be clear, there are also designs with no ornamentation at all. As such, they will have no style: the possible aesthetic choices within the object's functional constraints were simply overlooked or ignored. Without style, these objects will not have aesthetic value, even if they work particularly well—their value will be functional at best. Similarly, there are designs that are decorated or even highly decorated, where formal decisions have taken precedence over the objects' functions, or even ignored them altogether—and these will also lack aesthetic value as designs. For example, what makes most hammers aesthetically indifferent to us is their utter lack of ornament: they appear exactly as the utilitarian functional tools that they are, without style of any kind. They simply drive in nails, do it very well, and have not appreciably changed since their modern incarnation. But if we consider a recent North American trend of marketing pink tools (presumably to appeal to female customers) we find an example of mere decoration: their colour is completely incidental to, and unconnected with, their function, and in this case is, perhaps, even manipulative. Decoration is indeed Pye's 'useless work on useful things', while ornamentation is the visual result of style choices that take up, and respond to, the challenge of how an object might realize its function. Ornament is never merely contingent or extraneous, and is not simply decorative.

This distinction is helpful. First, while it shows that David Pye is wrong in his claim that form and function are unrelated, it also does not suggest that form merely *follows* function. Designer Stephen Bayley writes of Dieter Rams that he "admitted to making last-minute adjustments to a razor design because…[it] did not achieve the effect he had in mind. He did not admit to having *styled* it, but that was what he meant" [13, 53]. Rams was concerned with how the look, or the form, of the razor would play with its purpose and how that style would achieve aesthetic effect. Even for an avowed functionalist like Rams, form mattered *as* ornamentation and *as* integral to his design rather than as mere subsequent aesthetic detail.

Second, the styled choices in response to a design's function, while always relevant, can in fact lead to aesthetic failure, when they seem to, or actually do, violate what a thing is meant to be, and our aesthetic judgements reflect this as well. When the ornamented form of an object plays too much—strays too far into making it look unfit to fulfill its purpose, as when a teapot is shaped like a cat, an armchair, or a toilet, we approach kitsch: the object, while it does work, seems so inappropriate that it cannot sustain our appreciation because it does not appear to be what it is, and does not seem like it *could* work. Shaping a teapot like a cat is not mere decoration after the fact of manufacture, like a painted cat on a standard teapot would be: it is an ornamental stylistic choice in how this teapot in particular will fulfill its function and, because it strays too far, in seeming

to be inutile, or seeming to be a design failure even when not, we reject it, or downgrade it in our assessment of it.[2]

Finally, when the styled choices of a design actually *violate* its function, as with ceramicist Carl Borgeson, who makes deliberately non-functional teapots with their lids glued shut, or architect Katerina Kamprani's open-toed rain boots that let water in, we come to the actually non-functional and will have to exclude these objects from our appraisals of design beauty altogether. Krampani's works, in their extreme questioning of, and commentary on, the purpose of typical consumer products, actually effect a category shift, from design to perhaps work of art, and we respond to them differently by, for example, interpreting them for their meaning. But then they are no longer designs as such, and we are no longer making judgements of their aesthetic value *as* designs. A teapot that does not hold tea, a pair of boots that let in water rather than keeping it out, violate the necessary condition that designs need to work in order for us to even begin to appraise them aesthetically, and work well in order for us to find them beautiful. Lucía Jiménez Sánchez has argued that my exclusion of, for instance, Krampani's work unduly restricts an aesthetic theory of design to objects that are mundane and merely practical. She notes that functional accounts such as mine "are not consistent with design cases in which aesthetic judgements are not entirely supported by the object's practical or functional success." [14, 144] She is correct that my account excludes the impractical and the non-functional alike, but she is misguided to see this as a weakness: the unified theory of beauty applies to all objects, functional or not, and Krampani's work can therefore easily been seen to have aesthetic merit. But, further, Krampani's work can better be appraised, as Favara-Kurkowski notes, as "sculptures or a physical manifestation of a critique of design theory" in that it reflects on the practice and theory of design and expands it towards the overtly conceptual, "sabotaging the user experience" in the service of expressive or symbolic meaning [15]. In this it, again, effects a category shift from bona fide designed object as I have described it, to, perhaps, art itself. This returns us to the beginning: works appraised for their symbolic, expressive or critical meaning are not being appraised *as* quotidian, functional design for their aesthetic value. Design can indeed have these other uses but our responses to it will perforce reflect these and differ accordingly.

The notion of functional style, rather than unduly restricting an aesthetics of design, frees it from operating within the traditional parameters of an aesthetics of nature or free beauty on the one hand, and the appreciation of fine art on the other. To seek to include work such as Krampani's or Borgeson's—to defend design as having a status akin to that of art—in fact serves to reduce its scope: design is more complex than this because it is not always or only an aesthetic object, and our responses to design are more varied

[2] This is not to suggest that all of us do: some like kitsch for its qualities of playfulness or 'fun'. What I am trying to offer here are some general normative criteria for design appreciation that, while subject to disagreement and discussion, do not lapse into purely personal preference or 'liking'. We can imagine someone saying, 'sure it doesn't seem like it works, but it's pretty and I like it anyway'. But that, I maintain, is a purely subjective response that says more about that person than it does about the object being appraised. Aesthetic judgements, as normative, must make some gesture towards critical assessment and possible communication if they are not to be mere preferential or emotive responses.

because of the many ways it intersects with our daily lives. But if we seek to achieve a particularly *aesthetic* theory of design appraisal, then the beauty of design, when taken *as* design, will require the elements I have laid out: that we know what the object is meant to be, that we have direct first-person experience in the use of it, that it is seen as successful in fulfilling its function, and that its aesthetic value is derived from the style in which it does so. Designs without style may be very good and useful but will have no beauty. Adding decoration to them will not make up for, or mask, their lack of style. And ornamentation is that which augments our pleasure—until, and unless, it serves to detract from it. Objects that appear unfit to be used (even if they can be) will fail almost as quickly as those that do not work at all. The sketch I have offered here distinguishes design beauty from that of both nature and fine art, and shows us that a unified theory of aesthetic value is insufficient to account for the unique elements that make up the aesthetic appraisal of design.

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