Design and Beauty: Functional Style

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Abstract: This paper seeks to characterize the particular ways in which design beauty arises and is assessed, distinguishing design appreciation on a number of grounds, including the 'functional style' of design, which integrates form and function in ways unique to designed objects. Making four central distinctions—between notions of design *vs* art; aesthetic *vs* instrumental judgements; function *vs* use; and ornamentation *vs* mere decoration—the paper suggests that aesthetic judgements of design require recognition and assessment of the play of form and function in the design decisions that achieve the creation of an object within acknowledged functional constraints.

Keywords: function, style, ornamentation, decoration, aesthetic judgement

Beauty is the original focus of philosophical aesthetics, and has a complicated history, as being connected from as far back as Plato with both truth and moral goodness. Even shorn of these connections, as in most of 20th century philosophy, beauty retains a positive meaning: if an object is beautiful, it is worthy of attention, contemplation, appreciation and preservation. The experience of beauty is said to be intrinsically pleasurable somehow, even if no longer considered to be morally or cognitively uplifting. And much of the history of aesthetics has been an attempt to produce what I call a unified theory of beauty—defining what it 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, but there have been many others.[1] William Hogarth, for instance, identified beauty as line and form that can be directly seen; and Clive Bell claimed that beauty, as significant form, was instead experienced through a particular aesthetic emotion, that he likened to a kind of exaltation that transcended regular human perceptions.[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 landscape, 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, homogeneous, sui generis, or of its own particular kind, and, 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 a singular value that is the same in all objects in the world.

I won't debate the merits of a unified theory of beauty in this paper, but I do want to point out that relying on such a theory does little to help us understand the specific role of aesthetics in evaluating and appreciating design in particular. And, as philosophy spends a lot of its time making ever finer distinctions, I will make a few of my own here, and see if they can help us in understanding how the aesthetic is implicated in, and important for, our evaluations of designed objects. I am writing here

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from the point of view of a user, consumer and spectator of designed things, rather than a creator, manufacturer or marketer of them—essentially, from the point of view of an aesthetic subject, who has aesthetic experiences of design. And I think that we *do* have aesthetic experiences of design beauty, and that these experiences are importantly different from our experiences of nature and art. It is what these amount to that is the focus of my consideration.

In one sense, the unified theory is not wrong: I can go to a museum, such as the Louvre, or the Museum of Modern Art in New York, or the Design Museum in Copenhagen, and look through protective glass at delicate porcelain, at silver snuff boxes, at 18th century inlaid desks, at tapestries and chairs, 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 (Ak. 5:229), and it can apply to anything.

But I want to suggest that 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. This leads to my first distinction: we are not in this regard treating these things expressly *as* works of design, but we are aestheticizing them, in effect moving them from one category of object to another. Now, categories 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, Native Canadian beadwork, or early Christian altarpieces. There are no hard and fast ontological differences here. Similarly—distinction number two—we can also make a number of different kinds of judgements or assessments about the very same object: for instance, I can judge a painting for its financial or investment value, or prudentially as to whether hanging it *over there* will cover a hole in my wall; I can judge a shoe ethically as to the labour practices involved in its manufacture, or instrumentally as to its comfort, or *purely* aesthetically as to its elegance in shape, colour and form. Kinds or types of judgements are equally fluid and mutable. What I am interested in investigating is the kind of aesthetic judgements we make of objects of design when they are taken *as* design, rather than *as* art or *as* conversation piece, or *as* marketing tool, and when those judgements are not instrumental or economic or moral, but when they are directly and aesthetically evaluating and appreciating design *as* design.

Now, regarding my first distinction, when we want to focus 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 I want to argue that their functions are relevant to our appreciation of them. Because, regarding my second distinction, 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.

So, for simplicity's sake, we can say that designed objects have (at least) two important elements for the consumer or user: form and function, and our task becomes one of understanding how these elements come together in a 'properly' 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] This, as I have noted, amounts to the aestheticization of design, where our appraisals of an object's beauty are restricted to its formal elements alone. 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 the appreciation of art and nature, 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] 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, I will sketch a proposal for 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'.

To lay out this sketch, I need to first say something about function, and here is my third distinction: 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 ontological 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.[7] The categorization of an object—what it *is*—is grounded in, and determined by, some originating function that gives it a stable identity. Uses to which an object may be put, no matter by how many or how frequently, do not have the ability to alter its ontological status as being a thing of a certain kind. In the 1980s in Canada, for instance, milk crates were ubiquitous in student apartments and rooms: these square open-topped sturdy and stackable plastic boxes made for transporting cartons of milk to stores from dairies were the perfect size and shape for bookcases, bedside stands and coffee tables. Even so, they did not *become* bookcases, even when used as them, by however many people, as though by some kind of informal consensus. They remained identifiably milk crates, imaginatively and economically recycled (or more often stolen).

So my third distinction contains the first two: we need to know what ontological category in which to place the object, i.e. as a work of design, in order to be able to make a specifically aesthetic judgement about it, as opposed to some other kind. 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." (Ak. 5:204–5). An instrumental assessment, such as a painting being useful to cover a hole in my 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 I seek to make of it—a carpet, a photograph, a mirror would be interchangeably useful in this regard. Similarly, economic judgements may well depend more on market forces than object categorization; 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.

This third distinction includes a couple of further important notions. First, 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 consequences of this direct knowledge are, further, that properly aesthetic evaluations 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 or a chair, 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 or its look 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 (Ak. 5:230), 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. Those of you who have no experience of clearing 60 centimeters of snow on a February morning will be ill-equipped to appraise a shovel's design without getting outside and using it. And those of you who have never experienced snow at all will be quite incapable of appraising a shovel as a work of design. But if you *can* appreciate it, then when you do, it will be because, in part, the shovel works very well.

So my third distinction, then, can be summarised in the following way. 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, I claim, 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 particularly *aesthetic*—it seems cognitive more than anything, and you might wonder what it has to do with 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 I also want to claim, conversely, that 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. We need to go further to complete this sketch.

Here I will make my fourth and final distinction, between ornamentation and decoration, as I describe the notion of functional style. 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",[8] and I have already argued that success in function is a 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. Let us consider how this can be accomplished.

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, I want to suggest that 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. This means that 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 visible to us, and 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. 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 bicycle (and what a bicycle is meant to be), 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.

Now, it was Kant who made a distinction between ornamentation and decoration (Ak. 5: 226) which might sound strange to us now, as we tend to use the terms interchangeably in English, but the distinction is useful to further explain this notion of style.[9] 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 (Kant's example was of a gilt frame around a painting as a way of making an inferior work seem more appealing). 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 not the rigid normative standard for design appreciation that I am suggesting here. 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. Think of the many different shapes and materials for bicycle seats, or the different colours, intensities, and shapes of bicycle lights. These are design choices that are nevertheless still related to the limitations of a bicycle needing a seat of some kind, and a light of some kind (by law, in Canada) as part of its basic function. 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, be stolen or appear 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* formal, or purely about form, as they emerge from, and make reference to, functional requirements. 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 often involve ornamentation in the Kantian sense of the term.

Now, there are also designs with no ornamentation at all. As such, I claim they have no style: the possible aesthetic choices within the object's functional constraints were simply overlooked or ignored. And without style, these objects will not be beautiful or have aesthetic value, even if they work particularly well—their value will be instrumental 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, and do it very well. But if we consider a recent North American trend of marketing pink tools (presumably to appeal to female consumers) 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. The same is true of pink assault weapons sold in the United States. 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 final distinction also has a couple of important parts. 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 *follows* function, or is merely the expression of 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".[10] 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.

Second, though, the styled choices in response to a design's function, while always relevant, can also lead to aesthetic failure, and detract from its beauty, 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. This is not to suggest that all of us do so: some like kitsch for its qualities of playfulness or 'fun'. What I am trying to offer here are some general normative criteria for aesthetic judgements of design that, while subject to rational 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 com-

munication if they are not to be mere preferential or emotive responses. When we disagree about the toilet-teapot, we can be, philosophically, talking at cross-purposes: making different *kinds* of judgements, (one of aesthetic merit, one of subjective preference), which is why my second distinction is important to keep in mind: we are interested here in specifically *aesthetic* judgements of design *qua* design.

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 as per my first distinction, 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, also violate the necessary condition of my third distinction: 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.

To conclude, designs that are candidates for our aesthetic appreciation are those with functional style—that use ornamentation in the play of form within functional constraints. Designs without style may be very good and useful, but 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 aesthetic pleasure—until, and unless, it serves to detract from it. Objects that appear unfit to be used (even if they can be) will fail aesthetically almost as quickly as those that do not work at all. The particular beauty of design, when taken *as* design, requires all four elements that I have laid out: that we know what an object is meant to be (through having hands-on experience of it); that we are making a judgement of the appropriate kind; that the object is successful in fulfilling its function; and that its beauty is derived from the style in which it does so. It is these elements that distinguish design beauty in particular from that of nature on the one hand, and fine art on the other, and which show us that a unified theory of aesthetic value is insufficient to account for the unique elements that make up the aesthetic appreciation of design.

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Notes

[1] References to Kant in this work are to his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), using the Akademie edition volume and page numbers inserted in parentheses. I make passing mention of Kant here; for a fuller discussion of the application of Kantian theory to design aesthetics, please see my *Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[2] See William Hogarth, *An Analysis of Beauty, Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste*, in *Eighteenth Century Aesthetics*, ed. Dabney Townsend, (Baywood Publishing, 1999): 209-226, and Clive Bell, *Art,* (Capricorn Books, 1958).

[3] Robert Stecker, "Artistic Value Defended", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 70 (2012): 355-362, p. 361.

[4] David Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design.* (Van Norstrand Reinhold, 1978), pp.11, 13.

[5] Dieter Rams, "Omit the Unimportant" in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism,* ed. Victor Margolin, (Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 111-113.

[6] See for example the Industrial Designers Society of America's (IDSA) annual design competition, whose categories include furniture, children's products, sports, packaging and automotive, to name a few. (See https://www.idsa.org/idea-categories).

[7] David Pye, I have argued, is guilty of just such an elision. See my *Aesthetics of Design* (OUP, 2013), pp. 32-3.

[8] Leonard B. Meyer, "Toward a Theory of Style", *The Concept of Style* ed. Berel Lang, (Cornell University Press, 1987): 21-71, p. 21.

[9] See also Aviv Reiter and Ido Geiger, "Kant on Form, Function and Decoration", *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol.7 (2015): 234-245 for a discussion of the relation between ornamentation and function.

[10] Stephen Bayley and Terence Conran, *Design: Intelligence Made Visible* (Firefly Books, 2007), p. 53.

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