

“Traditionally, ornament and decoration were an expression of craftsmen’s skill and virtuosity in working precious and delicate materials, a visible indication of **economic** and **aesthetic** value”

The culture I live in promotes boasting high economic and aesthetic value, and obtaining power and status. Possessing elaborately decorated items and expensive looking goods signifies you as successful by association with the product. Ads of the 1950’s enforce this idea. Handmacher’s female business suit advertisements portray the identity and ability of female workers as lying in the appearance represented by their brand, no doubt, one that would get you the job (2). The intense magnifying power of commercialized mass production on ornamental and decorative design has created the opportunity to purchase nearly any combination of form and function that expresses your success.

People are newly empowered with the ability to realize their desires in countless configurations. No longer is the dining set you want limited to as far as a horse drawn carriage can carry one in a day. The availability of information relating to nearly any product an average consumer could imagine (at anytime) is a powerful tool in making purchasing decisions, especially when combined with the ability to pay with **Pay Pal**, and have **FedEx** deliver it in one day from Oslo, Norway. The Internet however can make the process of making a decision on any purchase as complicated as designing any given product one might **Google**.

A good designer will consider the applications of the product when designing it, and take into consideration who should be able to purchase it at the given price that the materials and processes dictate. This decision making process does not have one solution. There might be as many solutions to the problem as there are attempts to solve it. Eventually creating as much variety as consumers’ desire.

When consumers show interest in something today’s globalized world market provides a cornucopia of choices for every demographic. When consumers research products on the web they are bombarded with choices. These choices if explored reveal that almost every product they desire, in one manifestation, has been designed with them in mind. **Google** ‘pink polka dot underwear’ and there is no shortage of options to consider, although you might be distracted by the discovery of a disposable variety, or a link to a **Facebook** page, you’ll be sure to find what you want in form or function. More importantly you’ll be able to find the combination of form and function that fits you specifically, it just might take longer than you planned due to the number of reviews on Amazon.

Designers know who you are; they’ve clumped you into demographics that anticipate your every move. When a company markets a product they have an intended result, and the product, if produced properly with the help of a designer, is analyzed throughout every stage of realization to determine if you will buy it. Empowered with the knowledge of market trends and predictions companies decide if you are a profitable audience to aim their efforts. As long as there are other people who share the same desires as you, companies will see you as targets.

Not every company will want to sell you their product. Designers help businesses realize what market is open according to opportunities within the industry. A certain company might use decorative silk ribbons spun from endangered snails, and they know you don’t care, and can’t afford it, but they also know there’s someone else who can’t get enough of it. There’s another company with a designer who

knows you, and you want cotton, and you want to be comfortable, and you don't want to have to contemplate the price. But there's also a company, maybe even the same one, who knows sometime when you feel special, or you've got a little extra cash, you're going to want to try a decorative cotton-silk blend, that looks great and feels right. John Heskett points out that Henry Cole, in the mid-nineteenth century, saw design as having an obligation to promote the utility of the object and the beautifying or ornamenting of that utility, the problem Heskett would say is the harmony between the two (1, p. 20-22). Harmony is defined by the individual, and individuality demands variety. When a product is designed function and form should be considered in relation to the specific context in which it exists, or intends to.

Certain objects that serve one function are good for demonstrating this point. A light switch serves the function of changing the current setting of lights from on to off or the opposite. There are many different situations where this object is found in various contexts. The majority of the time no decoration is given to a light switch or the wall mount surrounding it. Most of the time no ornamentation is needed, but as long as a context can be imagined in which an ornamented light switch could serve some purpose then it is appropriate. The application of ornamentation to any given design can be considered as a possibility.

The possibility of the ornamentation of a Colt .36 revolver of 1851 to be presented to a Veteran of a war is one worth considering. The ornamentation of every 1851 Colt .36 revolver issued to the U.S. Navy is an unreasonable possibility. In both cases the gun still functions as a firearm, but the gun of the veteran must have a secondary function representing achievement. Similarly, M. Singer's first sewing machine of 1851 served the same function as his 'New Family' model of 1870, but the New Family model could function not only as a sewing machine but as a piece of furniture aesthetically acceptable in the home of that time period (1, p.56). Designs favoring utilitarian functionality are no more valid than a design of the same product that caters to the desires of eclectic roaming pink polka dot loving gypsies. The context in which a given design is applied is an important consideration that should be thoroughly analyzed.

New design and advertising techniques have been intensely explored in every facet of every industry due to a realization that the power of suggestive visual advertisement and effective communication of brand identity is related to the increased ability to reach consumers. (3)

Products are designed with the lifestyles of the targeted market in consideration, with the help of test marketing, tastes implied by television viewing habits, previous success of products, and more in-depth research into human behavior. The amount of commercialized variety we experience is a result of the communication between consumers and industries, which is more powerful today than ever.

Today's informed consumers demand consumption of all flavors, and sizes. It can be argued that the lifestyles being catered to today are left over from the days of French court life. Did the excess that the introduction of mass production allowed dilute the real desires of purity and emptiness that underlie human existence? Did we ask for mass produced goods to be given to us in countless forms or did mass production create our desire for such a thing? Have we gone mad spending hours on the Internet comparing styles of underwear and cell phone technology?

Situationist **Guy Deboard** says we are living the life of the spectacle, the spectacle says, “**nothing more than that which appears is good, that which is good appears.**” Deboard also says that:

WE HAVE CEASED TO EXIST, WE HAVE BEEN DEGRADED INTO THAT OF MERELY HAVING,
AND HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM EVEN THAT AND NOW WE JUST APPEAR. (4)

The slow acceptance of the ideas of the **De Stijl** movement and **The Bauhaus**, to me reflects this spectacle. **Rietveld's** Schroder House is an environment in which form attempts to allow the greatest functionality. A habit of using materials and processes efficient for cost and quality production while incorporating ergonomic principals into construction, is being adopted at the same rate or slower than the avant-garde of past art movements. The outward appearance of things has become more important, to many, than the way things function. In this aspect ornamentation can be seen as a negative quality in design, confusing people about important issues.

Ornamentation can convolute true intentions; a sturdy steel or iron bench may not be that at all, but instead a brittle aluminum bench, and that box of **Post Blueberry Morning** you thought you bought might turn out to be **Ralph's Honey Crisp Medley** when you wake up the next morning. There is ornamentation in all design contexts; architecture, industry, urban planning, acoustics, motion print adverts, television commercials, packaging, brands identities, everything. The influence of ornamentation has shaped what we have come to expect in the commercialized environment we live in. Ornamentation in places like print ads, tv commercials and brand identities create complex, repeating, variations of forms, to stimulate the mind and as **Nam June Paik** might deduce creating intensity due to the sheer amount of variability (5).

Consumers don't just buy products, they buy brands, and they experience the identities of brands, which can be ornamented to a high level of intensity. About the concept of brand **Alina Wheeler** says it, 'is the promise, the big idea, and the expectations that reside in each customer's mind', brand is in your mind, its what you want, 'you can touch it[s identity], hold it[s identity], hear it[s identity], watch it[s identity] move' and be its identity if you pay for it (6). Intense ornamentation facilitates a brands survival; consumers relate with brands that signify similar ideals, easily signified through identity ornamentation. Mass produced commercialized ornamentation does not however, alter ones true identity.

Ornamentation can serve many purposes, and it can lie. I lean towards the material efficiency of **The Bauhaus** as opposed to ornamented conglomerates, and I lean towards saying that we have all gone mad, and we are living the life of the spectacle. Regardless of the true nature of things, ornamentation will exist as long as a desire for it exists... and so will functional tubular steel chairs.

- (1) *Industrial Design*, Heskett John, Thames and Hudson, 1980. Various noted pages.
- (2) *U.S. Design in the Service of Commerce - and Alternatives*, from *Clean New World: Culture Politics, and Graphic Design*, Lavin, Maud. MIT press. 2001. Paragraph 15.
- (3) *A Consumer Society and Its Discontents*, from *Twentieth Century Limited, Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939*, Meikle, Jeffrey K. Temple University Press. 1992. Page 10.
- (4) *The Long Walk of The Situationist International*, Marcus, Greil, from *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, McDonough, Tom. MIT Press. 2002. Page 9-10.
- (5) *The Beginning of Video Art*, from *Paik Video*, Decker-Philips, Edith. 1998. Barrytown Ltd. Page 30.
- (6) *Designing Brand Identity*, Wheeler, Alina, John Wiley + Sons. 2006. Page 4-6