

Of precious artefacts, utilitarian metaphors and archetypal shapes: Psychological insights into the aesthetic experience of art, design and craft

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1. INTRODUCTION

Some aesthetic theories suggest that works of art developed from a search for *Orthomorphy*, that is, an appropriate correspondence between form and content.¹ The best known of these theories is perhaps that of the German philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), for whom the outward shaping of form in art goes from a *Symbolic Form*, whose expressiveness is yet in search to be appropriate, to a *Classical Form* that has achieved an adequate expression, and from here to a *Romantic Form* whose nature goes against the previous achievement.² This way of understanding the changes in form and content became so important during the 19th-century that even scholars from the Decorative Arts enunciated what they thought to be “evolutionary” cannons or stages for the aesthetic development of utilitarian objects.³

This line of thought made a special turn in the 20th century when aestheticians, philosophers and anthropologists began to coincide on the idea that “creative” human actions aiming to transform matter were able to convey aesthetic values similar to those of art.⁴ Thus art, craft and design began to be studied as closely-related aesthetic phenomena, up to the point of placing the difference between artistic and

utilitarian objects in the way their aesthetic forces manifest.⁵ That is to say, as internal forces manifesting outside, for artistic objects, and as external forces projected upon the inside, for utilitarian objects. These ideas brought along an understanding of our *aesthetic awareness* as a way to seize different segments of reality,⁶ and focused our understanding of the **aesthetic experiences** afforded by man-made objects on the decisions and practices related to their creation.

Thus, we came to realize that the objects of craft, design and art are part of a single aesthetic continuum whose roots are either on the aesthetic division of labor or in some sort of “evolutionary” process.⁷ Within this continuum, craft objects are seen as working around the discovery and aesthetic elaboration of archetypal forms to satisfy practical and sometimes religious ends, with a margin of chance.⁸ Design objects, on the other hand, are defined as new ways to envisage and refine the practicality of existing and new objects in metaphorical terms for the most part, since designs lead us to understand and experience practical things in terms of other things.⁹ Indeed, some authors have described designing as “an exploration, a test to see if certain ideas

are feasible”.¹⁰ Differently to craft and design, the works of art are characterized within this theoretical continuum as “precious artifacts”, that is, over-refined man-made objects not by virtue of their content nor by their “pure” form, but by their content having become form. Indeed, they are defined as “...the result of the transformation of a given content (actual or historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole... through a reshaping of language, perception and understanding”.¹¹

Standing on the idea that craft, design and art are part of a common sphere despite of their differences, the present paper attempts to elucidate the possible differences among them based on psychological evidence.

2. TOWARDS A CHARACTERISATION OF “AESTHETIC OBJECTS”

One way to approach the aesthetic experiences of craft, design and art is through the characterization of their “aesthetic objects”, that is to say, the sort of subjects on which our attention is mostly focused during an aesthetic experience.¹² By these we refer, for instance, to the appearance of an axe instead of its materiality or the abstractions of human actions instead of the actual actions encapsulated as part of that axe. This is the reason why aesthetic objects are considered as “make-believe objects”, that is, as having “...something lacking in them that keeps them from being quite real, from achieving the full status of things”.¹³

There are three ways in which *aesthetic objects* are defined in psychology: as aesthetic motives different from other motives (e.g. intellectual, moral, religious), in terms of their effects (e.g. entertainment), or based on our attitude toward things.¹⁴ This sort of considerations has given place to the establishment of aesthetic categories like those of Charles Lalo (1948) – who

enunciated the beautiful, sublime, spiritual, magnificent, tragic, comic, charming, dramatic and ridiculous as such – or those categories proposed by Étienne Wolff (1948) in the form of pairs of oppositions, that is, sublime and grotesque, beautiful and ugly, charming and funny.¹⁵ This trend to organize our aesthetic experiences into categories is nowadays summarised as comprising four dual categories: beautiful-ugly, tragic-funny, sublime-trivial, and typical-novel (1999).¹⁶ Since they are applied with different intensity to assess the products of craft, design and art, we could say that the typical-novel category is the most common in the evaluation of craft, sublime-trivial in the assessment of design, and beautiful-ugly in the appreciation of art.

Other authors prefer to approach our aesthetic experiences and their aesthetic objects as compounds of mental faculties.¹⁷ Some of them have even suggested the presence of dimensions in our aesthetic experience of things. Among them we ought to mention: a *perceptual dimension* (i.e. sensing the physicality of objects in terms of their composition), an *emotional dimension* (i.e. the power to produce emotion, portray and elicit feelings), an *intellectual dimension* (i.e. the cognition behind the discovery and categorization of things), and a *communicative dimension* (i.e. the exchange of thoughts and feelings during the aesthetic experience).¹⁸ Similarly to the aesthetic categories previously outlined, these dimensions can be used to characterize the main “aesthetic objects” in the aesthetic experiences of craft, design and art based on the prevalence of one dimension over the others. Bearing in mind our characterization of craft as dealing with archetypal shapes, designs as functional metaphors and art as precious artifacts, it can be said that in the “aesthetic objects” of craft, design and art prevail respectively the intellectual, the communicative and the emotional dimensions.

3. THE NATURE OF OUR EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

In the design scenario there is a neurophysiologic theory that has caught the imagination of many: Paul MacLean's theory of the triune brain. According to this theory, our brain is in reality three brains, each of them capable of dealing with different aspects of our subjective experience. These three brains are commonly summarised as: the *reptilian brain* or that dealing with the instinctive side of our subjective behaviour, the *limbic brain* or that associated with our emotional mind (e.g. that dealing with what is agreeable and disagreeable, and the connection with long-term memories), and the *cortical brain* or that in which our inventions and abstractions take place. The original intention behind MacLean's theory was to dismantle the idea that the neo-cortex or cortical brain "...accounts for all human learning and expression".¹⁹ In this sense, his theory is a defense of the body of subjective knowledge produced from "inside out" against the pervasive "outside in" objective knowledge.²⁰ Thus, it can also be understood as a scientific search for the "cognitio aesthetica" originally enunciated by the Greeks,²¹ and therefore a quite pertinent approach in the light of the present understanding of aesthetics as the "territory of the aisthesis".²²

The fascination with the potential applications of this theory has led designers to use it as a means to explain by analogy: the difference between "operative perfection" and "aesthetic perfection" in design,²³ as well as to locate and illustrate the way in which "archetypal" (i.e. deep structures, collective unconscious, universal), "cultural" (i.e. surface structure, personal unconscious, conventions) and "esoteric" (i.e. dialectic, personal conscious, only for specially initiated) contents interact in designing.²⁴

Donald Norman has recently revived MacLean's theory as a way to explain the three levels of emotion present in design. In his view, emotion in design can be worked at: a *visceral level* focussed on the immediate emotional impact and sensuality of "appearance"; a *behavioural level* working around the pleasure and effectiveness of products' performance; and a *reflective level* whose emphasis is on the overall impression, messages, meanings and cultural side of products.²⁵ Similarly, one could assert that MacLean's theory also encapsulates what gestalt psychologists once described as the *dynamic character of things*, that is, those whose nature is derived from the interplay of behavioural forces between people and objects.²⁶ They are the *physiognomic*, the *functional* and the *demand character*, corresponding to our association of objects with sensorial experiences of recognition, with the activities traditionally linked to our use of objects, and with the potential satisfaction of our needs, respectively.

With these ideas in mind, we can suggest that the aesthetic experience of craft is largely dominated by our reptilian brain and mainly linked to the physiognomic character of objects, the aesthetic experience of design to our limbic brain and the functional character of things, and the aesthetic experience of art to our cortical brain and the demand character of things.

4. THE "FRAME" OF OUR AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

The most obvious way to distinguish the aesthetic experiences of art, craft and design is the context in which they take place. The products of craft, art and design are not only qualified based on their own components and material attributes, but also in terms of their connection with other objects, events, places and particular kinds of people. These "external" connections are like the "frames of paintings" in terms of their capacity to

affirm, hide or distract “beholders” from the aesthetic merits of objects. Indeed, a toaster placed in a museum exhibition is transformed into something closer to art. This happens because the mood felt in museums triggers a sustained and reflective emotional response on us, whereas in a kitchen the same toaster would only elicit a short and reflexive emotional response due to *contextual noise* (as in communication theory).²⁷

The above situation is indeed supported by psychological studies in which researchers have found that a good deal of what people know about objects relies on the sort of context in which those objects are normally placed. Thus, for instance, we tend to associate watches with wrists and television sets with living rooms independently of their intrinsic properties.²⁸ Psychologists have also discovered that the speed at which a single object can be detected in a real-world scene is slower in jumbled than in coherent scenes.²⁹ Such findings suggest that another possible way to differentiate craft, art and design is through the characterization of the environments in which they commonly take place. That is to say, for instance, a folk and traditional environment for the crafts, a diverse and

complex environment for design, and a neutral and serene environment for art. Standing on these sort of environments one could even go further to assert that the aesthetic experiences of craft, design and art are also different in terms of the attention required (global or partial) and the emotional response they unleash. Thus, we can say that craft triggers sustained and reflective emotional responses focused on details, that design generally elicits short and reflexive emotional responses mostly centred on details, and that art triggers sustained, reflective and holistic emotional responses.

5. CONCLUSION: IS A TAXONOMY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES POSSIBLE?

This paper has outlined the idea that there is yet a lot to discover about our subjectivity and the experiences derived from it. We have discussed the ideas proposed by others and some scientific findings in the hope that they could lead us to establish an attempt of taxonomy to describe with more precision the differences among our aesthetic experiences of craft, design and art. This tentative taxonomy can be summarized as follows:

		<i>Archetypal shapes</i>	<i>Functional metaphors</i>	<i>Precious artifacts</i>
ASPECT considered	CRITERIA:	CRAFT	DESIGN	ART
Aesthetic object	Prevalent aesthetic category	Typical-Novel	Sublime-Trivial	Beautiful-Ugly
	Main experiential dimension	Intellectual	Communicative	Emotional
Origin of emotional responses	Main brain level involved	Reptilian	Limbic	Cortical
	Main dynamic object triggering response	Physiognomic	Functional	Demand
Effect of context	Contextual characterization	Folk traditional	Diverse Complex	Neutral Serene
	Contextual emotional response	Sustained Reflective Detail-based	Short Reflexive Detail-based	Sustained Reflective Holistic

Psychological characterization of Aesthetic Experiences according to Lacruz-Rengel (2010)

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