

Why a Culture of Design in France Never Took Off

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At the Centre Georges Pompidou, the main French contemporary art center and museum located in Paris, one of the last outstanding exhibitions related to design was devoted to Patrick Jouin, a contemporary French designer. Everyone feels free to express their mood and their opinion about such exhibitions, and they usually enjoy doing so, dropping a comment on a specific book near the exit. Although using these comments in an article of this sort might seem inappropriate, my experience and viewing distance as a design historian allows me to examine an event of this type to deal with the question of design culture in France. Here, “Design Versus Design” and “Tiffany” were recently displayed at the Grand Palais and at the Musée du Luxembourg, respectively—the most recent significant shows on design in Paris. More widely, these exhibits offer an opportunity to practice a critical analysis of the situation in France—resulting in both a negative assessment, as well as an understanding of some of the reasons for significant delays vis-à-vis other countries (especially from Northern Europe) and for some of the malfunctions in the cultural dissemination of design in France.

The Fundamental Issue?

Can a basic or fundamental problem be identified? For 20 years, England (primarily because of the Victoria and Albert Museum), Germany (through the Vitra museum at Wahl-am-Rhein), the Scandinavian countries (e.g., Finland) and the United States (through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, and the Bard Graduate Center in New York) developed leading programs of exhibitions on design and decorative arts. Such development was based on the desire to give the general public a substantial knowledge of these areas, and to achieve the same quality of display as the major exhibitions on art generally seen at the Grand Palais, the Louvre, Musée d’Orsay, and Pompidou Centre, or at the National Gallery in London or in Washington. To achieve this goal, each institution relied on extensive research, both from a scientific point of view and from the museum’s own experience and achievements.

Meanwhile, what was happening in France? Except for some specialized exhibitions here and there (e.g., at the Musée d'Orsay in small rooms, at the Galliera museum for fashion only, and at the museum of Decorative Arts), often without substantial catalogues, France has been quite removed from such an outcome. In fact, in France we are still eager to *explain* design, while our neighbors are exploring and developing all of its refined and elaborated facets. To illustrate, the intention for the exhibition on Patrick Jouin was to demonstrate to the public what industrial design is, using the personal itinerary of the creator; in 2008, the exhibition titled "Design Versus Design" at the Grand Palais (which we discuss in detail later) aimed to provide a panorama of creative furniture; finally, at the Musée du Luxembourg in 2010, one could find only a poor presentation on Tiffany, despite the various informative and consistent aspects that might have been explored in the work of the famous glass designer and entrepreneur. Furthermore, when considering the situation over a quite longer period, the state of affairs becomes even more alarming: It gives the strange impression that design remains at the same place or, even worse, regresses in terms of the education of the public about the decorative arts/design; the consequences, then, affect the development of design itself.

Despite the opportunities available from having exceptional structures of diffusion, including the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais or the Musée du Luxembourg, many opportunities for forward progress have been lost. In 1993, "Design, Mirror of the Century," hastily organized, showed the paradox of, on the one hand, a strong publication through the catalog and, on the other hand, of a puzzled and puzzling display of the objects during the show. Exhibitions on the decorative arts have included the following: "A Golden Age of the Decorative Arts, 1814-1848" in 1994; in 2000, the exhibition "1900," which was a very confused exhibition on the Art Nouveau, compared to its equivalent in London at the same time; and finally, in 2002, "A Time of Exuberance—the decorative arts under Louis XIII," which was limited to the connoisseurs of the seventeenth century decorative arts.

The Art/Design Divide from the 1950s

Different explanations help to shed light on the reasons for such failures. First, we still suffer from the academic complex that divides major arts and minor arts and that always (alas!) gives priority to the former over the latter. Indeed, exhibitions on art are still highly visual, while design is part of a technical culture—more austere, less able to distract the public. Second, education on the history of design and decorative arts in France is still embryonic, including the education provided in design schools. Such

teaching rarely involves scholars, rather discredited in France; meanwhile in China, for example, because of the long tradition of the mandarins, design scholars are routinely invited to reveal their point of view, which is considered to be “the most neutral and the most expert.” Design schools and professionals in France prefer social sciences readings, which tend to be generated under a theory combining—loosely (and uninterestingly)—aesthetic, philosophical, semiotic, psychological, and sociological verbiage, often based on outdated publications.

For a time though (between 1850 and 1950), the public along with the designers (named then “industrial artists” and afterward “decoreurs”) were familiar with the styles (we would speak today about a history of objects). Such familiarity was a result of the fierce activism of the creators of objects, supported by journalists, writers, and culture officials—none of whom could tolerate anymore the disdainful and persistent academic gap that penalized the decorative arts, despite the increasing presence of objects in the everyday environment. (Also from this age was invented the expression “decorative arts” as a counterpart to “fine arts.”) This span of decades was the time of historicism, Art Nouveau, and finally Art Deco. Unfortunately, in the 1960s, the designers—new players in the decorative arts field—expressed an absolute desire for modernity. They found it convenient to denigrate a knowledge of styles, connected to the domain of the “decoreurs” from the previous generation, instead of taking advantage of the advertising offered by their elders. Thus, design culture had to start over, exactly as if the century of promotional efforts had been useless.

One evidence of this failure to thrive can be found in the absence of a literature dedicated to design or decorative arts; the production of such literature has significantly decreased in terms of the number of new issues, compared to the wide range of publications on styles and decoration at the beginning of the twentieth century. Now, a strong concentration of survey books simply introduces design for the education of the public, but very few books specialize on the topic and stress questions from the field. In addition, very few periodicals specialize in design, and none focus on research.

As a result, the old but persistent academic system had an easy time taking over, in a country where the overwhelming presence of the fine arts contributes to their cultural domination. In such conditions, we understand better why significant exhibits on design or decorative arts in France still provide some definitions, often emphasizing the scenography, as in the Starck and Ron Arad shows, to attract the public. Such an impressive display, although more or less successful, sometimes appears to hide the poverty of the content or of the curator’s capacity to reflect on the content. Meanwhile, in the other countries mentioned, the motivation for and recognition of the technical culture and the lack of such a great

heritage in painting generate a wider interest in the design and decorative arts from the public. Objects seduce and stimulate the intellect, without any need to use subterfuge.

This situation is precisely the one that faced nineteenth-century France, as northern nations already were motivated to focus more on the production of everyday objects. And just as in the nineteenth century, one can find in France, since the 1980s, the paradox of both a successful breakthrough in industrial design (including at an international level interior decor, car design, animation graphics, and stars such as Philippe Starck)—which nevertheless suffers from a poor understanding—and a difficulty with institutional and academic representativeness.

However, this weakness or difficulty is not only a cultural problem; it also has important implications for the design development actors, who remain mostly unknown to the general public and whose interest and taste for design are not much encouraged. Economic issues inevitably follow: a tight market in home furniture design, whose customers belong to an upper-class elite; some risk of market losses because of the difficulty in promoting French products internationally (with the exception of the luxury sector, which appears to be the mirror of France abroad since the end of the seventeenth century); and an underdeveloped infrastructure for the preservation and the culture of design, which deprives the sectors of tourism and communication of possible job opportunities and incomes (with the exception of some initiatives, such as the Saint-Etienne cluster and its City of Design, the Lace Museum in Calais (northern France), and the museum of Decorative Arts in Paris). Because the richness of this heritage is vast and encompasses techniques as different as the arts of ceramic and glass; of wood, textiles, and paper; of metal; and of plastic—and this since the Middle Ages—it largely surpasses the potential of the fine arts in terms of the numbers of artifacts, expressions of creativity, and implications for the economic and industrial worlds.

More insidiously, we can see that, in place of weaker institutions, the art market now controls the heritage of decorative arts and design. To understand, we can recognize their recent acknowledgment by collectors and dealers, which has caused the objects of designers and decorators of the twentieth century to reach record prices in auctions, including recent works from the art-design creators. (A table conceived in the 1980s was sold for 111,000 euros [U.S. \$148,144 approximately] by the French auctioneer, Tajan.) Such success highlights the exclusive interest in decorative arts and furniture, to the detriment of design in general and industrialized objects in particular.

This latter tendency to disregard design has apparently been targeted for correction by the exhibit at the Centre Georges Pompidou on Patrick Jouin—in a new but very unequal confrontation between the Ancients and the Moderns. Somehow, those who

planned the exhibit stood up against the cultural deficit of exhibitions on the subject served up by the Grand Palais blockbuster shows machine, and worked particularly to remedy the failures of “Design Versus Design,” which missed the opportunity—ten years after the failure of “Design: Mirror of the Century”—to offer the public a comprehensive, fair, and exciting view on design. Such an overview would indeed have succeeded in leading the way toward a salutary deepening of understanding and appreciation. However, the public can only be confused when it has been presented design on the one hand as an impressive gallery of amazing and rare items (the operating principle of a collector’s collection) and on the other hand as a panorama everyday life imbued with an almost anonymous beauty (the operating principle of industrial design).

Looking for Links and Continuity

Can we, in fact, identify any continuity or links between the two fields? Following the show on Charlotte Perriand, we can indeed praise a wonderful initiative that emanates from the Ministry of Culture that is the Centre Georges Pompidou and that intends to revive the exhibitions of the former Centre de Creation Industrielle (Industrial Creation Centre) and, in doing so, to sort out the design of its incestuous marriage with the art market. We do so despite the fact that the ministry’s head office has consistently promoted art-design through acquisitions of the FRAC (Fonds Regional d’Art Contemporain), and even through the Design creators granted and hosted by the prestigious Villa Medici in Rome. This effort is also a way to release design from its usual subservience to the services of architecture observable in many institutions, by allowing it to claim its own legitimacy, based on complex and specific questions (similar to the Anglo-Saxon expression of design). If we could include items in styles determined by their context, talk of the “art of furniture” to mean “decorative arts,” underline the connection between house furniture and house construction with the idea that their common technical concern took them away from the visual arts, at the time of the industrial object such a subjection no longer makes sense.

In Japan, one can see a great number of events related to design that meet with great public success. In addition to temporary exhibits organized and displayed in museums, the public discovers design through conferences, festivals, or open house days in companies like Sony or the national television channel, NHK. In addition, a significant number of journals targeting a substantial audience specialize in design (e.g., *Axis* and *Design Research*). These magazines present not just new products but also the design process, including its research aspect. (Readers can learn about semantic mappings and results of consumption tests.) These

journals have no counterpart in France. However, such ways of communicating are complementary to and constitute a complete pedagogical framework.

The inefficiency of the system in France and the lack of dialogue between historians and curators led to some caricatured situations that illustrate a disconnect between France and the advanced results elsewhere in design historical presentations. In 2005, for example, the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs refused to loan some pieces of their collection for an exhibition on Art Deco at the Victoria and Albert Museum, co-organized by Tim and Charlotte Benton and Ghislaine Wood—two scholars and a curator. Despite the display of artwork from Picasso, Leger, Brancusi, and Van Doesburg, the Centre Georges Pompidou nevertheless decided that such a topic was connected to decorative arts, and the decision makers displayed the same disdain designers have toward the *decoreurs* from the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the exhibition was a tremendous success, receiving a Business Prize because so many visitors crossed the Channel on the Eurostar high-speed train to discover it! The catalogue is still considered a valuable reference and has been reprinted four times in its English version. Such interest among the French public demonstrates the possibility of a maturing appreciation for more specialized shows on the history of design. (The exhibition on Patrick Jouin was also a great success, with 377,000 visitors, although how that number is split between foreign tourists and nationals is difficult to say.)

The events that followed at the Victoria and Albert Museum on other periods, such as Modernism, Post-War Modernism, the 1960s, and the 1950s, also have attracted an international (including French) audience. France was the birthplace of Art Deco, and its contribution to the movement was quite significant. Why, then, did such a successful exhibition on Art Deco get organized abroad? France undoubtedly has a long way to go to discover a coherent presentation of design for the general public, as well as to meet international standards for achieving outstanding promotion and development of our cultural domain.