The Home as an Object: Material Culture in the Age of IKEA

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THE HOME AS AN OBJECT: MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE AGE OF IKEA

A Senior Thesis Presented by Maxwell Fertik

To the Art History Department
In Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in Art History
Advisor: Professor Alden Gordon

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Introduction

Home is an extension of the self, the other side of the mirror, a state of mind. Home is what frames your personal belongings, an identifier. Home is a still life painting in movement, a place for your curated cluster of special objects, artifacts and memories. Home is where order and chaos mingle flirtatiously, forming a domesticity of their own. Home is where sadness is as welcomed as happiness, where daily masks are set aside, emotions and sentiments at their most heightened and assuaged. Home is our confessional, our self-revelatory hiding place, our retreat. Home is a space for affection and reflection - it is where we stay in and where we gather. Home is for passionate exchange, in music, in dancing, in love, in sharing. Or so it should be¹. A version of this passage was written in Danish to introduce a show called “Home” by Danish conceptual design firm Pettersen & Hein. The essay delves into the sphere of what a home is. What values are at play? What is the hierarchy between functionality and non-functionality? How do we use the objects with which we surround ourselves? It sees home from the sculptural perspective, removed from functional value.

By using polished mirrors on most of their curvy, surreal-looking furniture, Pettersen & Hein make the reflection of the floor and surrounding space a part of each work, dematerializing the solidity of the thing. “In this home, the furniture represents who we are both physically and mentally².” The logic of furniture made of mirrors is simple, they reflect the space, objects and figures around them. In the same way, inhabitants reflect their habitat, showing pieces of themselves in the material data surrounding them. In Japan, this occurs through objects and interiors that reflect a care for playfulness and simplicity. In Denmark, this occurs through through objects and interiors that reflect a care for narrative and austerity. This is the spiritual, powerful effect that occurs when we meditate on the concept of dwelling among the objects in our home. Such a meditation requires an in-depth treatment of the state of material culture in

² Andersen Etage Projects, 2017
the West and the influence that Japan and Denmark have had on it. We also will look at ancient motives for design, the trends in consumption that have lead to such an accumulation of things, and the state in which these leave us during the age of IKEA and disposable culture.

France

Every home more or less reflects the people who dwell within it. Picture two French country houses, Versailles and E-1027. One, a 17th Century Château 20 km south of Paris. The other, a modernist villa in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. It is here that we draw our first example.

Versailles is one of the greatest achievements in French 17th century art. Built as a mere hunting lodge for Louis XIII (1601-1643) and then transformed by Louis XIV (1638-1715) into a court, Versailles is one of the single most extravagant structures made by man. But while it was a home, it was a home like no other since it represented God-given monarchy for its owner. This was a place where the ritual of monarchy was performed, a caricature of life characterized by civility and grandeur. Nothing that happened there was random and everything was ordained by strict rules of precedence. Lavish banquets would be held in the gardens where exotic foods were consumed and these events were recorded through engravings. So what the public saw were these perfected, curated ceremonies, marriages, funerals which only increased the dramatic fantasy of life in the palace. Appearances were far more important than comfort or practicality.

The main floor of Versailles, in the late 17th Century, consisted of two symmetrical apartments with Italian-style grottos designed by Louis Le Vau (1612-1670). Overlooking geometric gardens, an orangerie and a zoo designed by Andre Le Notre (1613-1700). The king’s private apartments on the main floor have an iconography centered around the deification of the king, as Apollo himself, the sun king. The interior was designed by Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), the principle designer/artist of France. Le
Brun crafted ornate walls and ceilings working with an extraordinarily large team of craftsmen. The room displayed statues, plaques of marble, trophies of achievement, tapestries and later, the Hall of Mirrors.

Following the death of Le Vau in 1670, the King hired the young architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646-1708) and expanded his beloved palace into the most rich example of material culture. Mirrors larger than pocket size were difficult to fabricate in the 17th Century. Additionally, Venice was the great glass manufacturer of the world at this time and mirrors were one of their most expensive items to purchase at the time. Due to mercantile regulations, all the decor for Versailles had to be made in France. Thus, a team of Venetian workers was enticed to move to Paris to produce the enormous number of mirrors to cover the walls. All were made at the Manufacture royale de glaces de miroirs. After its completion in the 1680s, this room’s lavish display of grandeur was used for court and state functions. Its ceiling was decorated with allegorical and history paintings to glorify the political and military victories of the King. The ceiling features Le Brun’s “The King Governs By Himself” in which the Sun-King is shown sitting surrounded by the Gods approving of the King’s rule. The Hall of Mirrors focuses on the military prowess and good governance of Louis XIV, whereas the rest of Versailles depicts the King allegorically as Apollo.

Parallel to the King’s apartment is the Queen’s, occupied first by Queen Maria Theresa (1717-1780). It is in the restored Queen’s bedchamber today that we see some of the finest furniture in all of Versailles. Much like the King’s famous morning routine, the Queen’s life was controlled by courtly etiquette and the interior reflected this. The partitions on the ceiling (fig. 1) date back to the reign of Louis XIV.

3 Manufacture royale de glaces de miroirs was a mirror factory founded in 1665, at the origin of Saint-Gobain. They produced the mirrors of the Hall of Mirrors of Louis XIV. “The Hall of Mirrors.” Palace of Versailles, 6 Dec. 2018, en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/estate/palace/hall-mirrors#the-hall-of-mirrors.
4 The wife of Louis XIV
5 A strict routine built on etiquette and ceremonial rituals. Mornings would consist of callers to the King’s bedchamber for wash, shave and doctor check up and then many would spectate as he ate breakfast. Next would be a procession through the Hall of Mirrors, a mass in the chapel, and finally, high council was held in his chamber to address the progress of works. Afternoons would consist of leisure (hunting, walking, indoor entertainment once it was dark) and the reading of important paperwork in the chamber. Finally, a heavily spectated dinner would be attended at the Royal Table. He then would retire to converse with the Royal Family and friends. He would then go to bed in the reverse ritual of getting up.
of Maria Theresa but many pieces were added by Queen Marie Leszczyńska (1703-1768) like the gray
scale Boucher painting (fig. 2) and added to by Marie Antoinette (1755-1793). Marie-Antoinette’s jewelry
cabinet by Schwerdfeger (1734-1818)⁶ (fig. 3) and a sofa made for the Marie-Antoinette’s sister-in law
(fig. 4). The fabrics hanging on the bed and walls were re-woven in Lyon using the original patterns and
the bed and balustrade have been remade using ancient documents.

In the 1780s, for the Noble’s Antechamber, Marie-Antoinette entrusted Robert Mique
(1728-1794) with design and due to the fact that she was not fond of the Louis-XIV style of the room,
utilized architect Richard Mique with completely redecorating it, except for the ceiling. The walls were
hung with apple-green damask bordered with a wide gold stripe (fig. 5). New, extremely modern and
refined furniture was delivered. For example, when making the majestic commodes and corner cupboards
(fig. 6) for the room, the cabinetmaker Riesener⁷ (1734-1806) abandoned the customary marquetry in
favour of large panels of mahogany. Likewise, the gilded bronze decoration and the small tables in Bleu
Turquin marble in this magnificent collection matched the decoration on the fireplace, which was also
new. The Queen’s Guard Room (fig. 6) is the only room in the Apartments in which the 17th-century
decoration has been fully preserved, since the Queen never spent time here and there was, therefore, no
need to modernise it. For this reason, it still contains the marble panelling characteristic of the State
Apartments’ original condition, as well as the paintings which were brought here in 1680 from the old
Jupiter Room, later replaced by the Hall of War (fig. 7).

Nonetheless, both apartments reflect total decoration, an absolute celebration of material culture
with overt political purpose. The 17th century representation of the home had a very targeted purpose and
was made for the elite sector of the larger society of monarchical Europe. Almost 300 years later, this
dynamic display of a character through design endures through the age of Modernism.

⁶ A renowned German cabinetmaker
⁷ Marie-Antoinette's favorite cabinetmaker, Riesener is the undisputed master of Louis XVI furniture. He also completed, for
Louis XV, one of the most fabulous furniture in the world: the office of his interior cabinet at Versailles.
Eileen Gray (1878-1976) captured the essence of what a house represents. Gray’s representation of home had no such intention. Her work stripped-down the home of gratuitous decor and created luxury and spiritual value by holding back. In response to Le Corbusier’s famous concept of architecture “machine à habiter”, In 1927, Gray declared “A house is not a machine to live in. It is the shell of man, his extension, his release, his spiritual emanation, not only its visual harmony but its organization as a whole, the whole work combined together, make it human in the most profound sense.” More than merely a place providing for the necessities of life and a place of residence, a house is a home, a symbolic arrangement of mental furniture and reflection of the designer’s concept of ideal dwelling.

In her iconic, E-1027 villa built in 1929 (fig. 8), overlooking the Mediterranean at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, the Irish designer perfectly blended purist architecture and highly personalized decoration with a great deal of personal narrative. Trained in cabinet-making and Japanese lacquerwork in London, Gray came at architecture at a unique angle. Gray designed E-1027 (with help from her lover Jean Badovici) to be a peaceful retreat. With this in mind, they made it both open and compact, forming an L-shaped plan, extravagant floor-to-ceiling mirrors and a spiral stairway. Gray also designed the furniture. Most notably her tubular steel table, her chubby, Neotenic Bibendum chair (fig. 9), her Oval Cabinet (fig. 10) with Swivel Drawers, and a variety of hand-picked rugs (fig. 11), and flexible lighting fixtures (fig. 12). But unlike many modernists who treated each object they built as a manifesto, as a temple-like building through which bold statements could be made, Gray chose a more playful and

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8 an accomplished Irish modernist architect-designer working in the UK for private clients.
9 Made in Le Corbusier’s seminal work Toward an Architecture (1923) where he laid out his manifesto for a generation of modernist architects. This work epitomized his functionalist vision for the future of domestic design and laid out his Five Points of Architecture which will be discussed in detail later.
10 Peter Adam quotes her for saying this in his Eileen Gray: Architect/Designer and this truly resonates when one sees her work. It is the essence of gestalt (the whole is greater than the sum of its parts) but each part is so precisely designed to serve the user. Her work allowed her to explore humanist or social design (Moore, The Guardian, 2013).
11 She even encoded the two of their initials in the name using its number in the alphabet, ‘E’ standing for Eileen, ‘10’ Jean, ‘2’ Badovici, ‘7’ Gray. The encoded name was Eileen Grey's way of showing their relationship as lovers at the time when built, Grays name physically embracing that of Badovici’s (Moore, The Guardian, 2013).
subtle style attuned to the elements\textsuperscript{12}. E-1027 should still be noted for its grace and mastery in a male-dominated field\textsuperscript{13}. In essence, these two dwellings, Versailles and E-1027 are not in any way the typical home. In fact they are quite the opposite, they are spaces of unparalleled mastery in design. They also are fully transformed versions of Gray’s concept of man’s “shell and spiritual emanation.” The soul of Louis XIV shines intensely out of the maximalist ornament of Versailles, it is absorbed in every cushion, every stucco bas relief, every chandelier, whole is greater than the sum of its parts. They celebrate France, but equally they deify the king to Apollo status and beautifully praise both his war victories and his diplomacy, a performance of royalty. Similarly, E-1027, in both its splendor and disrepair, embodies the spiritual, living energy of Gray, Badovici and Le Corbusier. It captures the design mastery of Gray but also the fierce state of sexism in the era of modernism. But both remain dwellings, saturated in spirit and narrative.

### Consumption

Before defining the decorative arts, it is important to note the factors that actually led us to assign everyday goods with value. As with anything fashionable, rises and falls in consumption can affect the popularity of an object. But while more consumption reflects demand, it should not be confused with intrinsic or long-term value. Through this innate human desire to possess, make, consume and the artificially adopted urge to remain current, we learn that the world we live in is just a school of how to consume correctly and this we must acknowledge throughout this essay.

\textsuperscript{12} Le Corbusier, a friend of Badovici, actually stayed at E-1027 following the break up of Gray and Badovici and vandalized the interior with garish murals ((while naked), many have maintained that this was his attempt at establishing dominion over the female-designed masterpiece.) Gray was furious but Le Corbusier did not stop there; in 1951, the rival architect built a cabin extremely nearby E-1027 and lived there until his death in 1965. Gray outlived him by over 10 years. Regrettably, the vulgar murals still dominate and due to the weight of Le Corbusier’s name, the images would never be removed. Thankfully, after a couple failed attempts to restore the home, an interest in Gray’s work has been revitalized by a recent film about her and Le Corbusier’s lives and much of the profits will go to support a restoration of E-1027 to its original state. But the building still remains cursed by this creative conflict and has not retained its former glory (Moore, \textit{The Guardian}, 2013).

Though it may seem like a time and a culture entirely foreign to us, most of our habits of consumption derive from the 16th century, Elizabethan England. At the same time, this began the trend of acquiring the new rather than preserving or revering old furnishings. When Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) would impulsively engage in excessive consumption of lavish decor, clothing and food from foreign lands, the noblemen who lived for her approval were forced to follow suit just to remain in court status. As the tastemakers, noblemen set the standard for what was acceptable for the rest of society. Such behavior sparked a renewal of standards in England and began a spending boom by the middle class that would only increase with time. When Elizabeth I would set a new style, the noblemen followed suit. The Queen’s example was no longer affordable for the middle class. Plus, they no longer had an intermediary between them and the Queen. Thus, in her attempt to make the government more of a spectacle, much like the courts of France and Italy, the Queen used her expenditures as a political tool, a way to control the fashion of the masses. Initially, she drew inspiration from Renaissance Italy. The Medici, Sforza, Barbaro and Farnese Families spent massive amounts on art commissions and used astonishing decor to rise in power. Elizabeth wanted this too and continued to spend, making noblemen increasingly reliant on her money to afford anything “contemporary.” This was the only way if they wanted to survive in the aristocracy.

Social changes began to occur from the top down solely in the interest of establishing “family status.” By buying into this lifestyle, noblemen could theoretically buy themselves and their families into aristocracy but only until the fashion changed. In other words, it became more important for many during this period to remain on trend even if it meant going years and years into debt leaving this liability for

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14 This was asserted by Grant McCracken in his *Culture and Consumption (1990)* as a beginning for his argument on this trend toward novelty, department stores, fast fashion etc. He believes that the state we are in today is directly due to the influence and spending habits of Elizabeth I.

15 These families respectively controlled the tastes of Florence, Milan, Venice and Rome. They made their wealth respectively through banking, mercenaries, salt trade and landownership and are collectively responsible for some of the greatest art and design commissions ever. In an effort to boost their influence in respective regions, they built lavish palazzos, churches and cardinal court buildings with only the finest artists and designers on the payroll. This set the standard for wealth and good taste during the Renaissance. Eventually these families put popes, cardinals even Queens into power and showing it through the most luxurious aesthetics.
future generations to pay off. Previously, these trends were not actually in buying the newest of the new. Before the 16th century, consumers were much more concerned with acquiring old, inherited goods that would gain value or “patina” over time (fig. 13). As the 16th Century came around, common people had to find income elsewhere since the noblemen no longer bought locally. Instead they preferred expensive, novel and imported goods that the Queen took interest in. Such activity, once adopted by locale determined aesthetic preferences and attitudes ultimately created this top down system of consumption that many would argue we still have today. Similarly, King Louis XIV, in the 18th century, would create this concept of fashion in France and eventually change our behavior towards common goods. On the opposite end, French patrons and designers, even those who had never been to Rome and Greece adopted a refined classicism associated with Louis XIV. Many of these luxury objects utilized Neoclassical ornaments or in “a la greque” manner. (fig. 14). But novelty would quickly take the place of antiquity. People had no time to waste on goods that would gain value decades down the road.

Sixteenth century English Society was broken up into the superordinate and subordinate classes, divided by attitudinal and social differences. In the same way that Queen Elizabeth I and Louis XIV created the concept of fashion, the superordinate classes determined taste at the top of the hierarchy with the assumption that the taste would be adopted by the subordinate classes. Ultimately, this would cause animosity between the two. At the very top, Elizabeth I used these tensions to her advantage for political control. She used consumption as a means of creating an aggrandize her power as a monarch. Not only did she control the state but she also controlled her subjects through their reactive spending that she

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16 One example of secular furniture that would have been bought and kept (and possibly exported to England as their manufacturing was still lacking at this point) would be a French Buffet (c 1500). This piece was a type of sideboard which developed from altar furnishing and was adapted to both serve and display a family’s precious metal tablewares. The center panel bears the royal emblem of France, carved in walnut, a wood that offered far more crisp detail than oak which was commonly used in European luxury furniture of this period. Such an item would gain value with time. (Kirkham and Weber History of Design, 2013)

demanded of them through laws and economic force\textsuperscript{18}. This kind of behavior and collective impatience forever impacted the furniture market.

According to Grant McCracken (1951-), the 18th century was the true birth of consumerism although roots of it were visible in the 16th century. New ideas of comfort and new everyday practices brought along with them a new demand for more items at a faster rate. With this, came an increased demand for decorative goods as well as a sense of customer loyalty and marketing. Again, much of this can be attributed to social competition. Goods became tokens of status and luxuries became material dignity. This 18th century rise in consumption was also due to a new market growth. Suddenly people had more money to spend. According to the American theorist, Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), people began to spend money on luxury goods in order to indicate their wealth to other members of society in a desperate quest to remain fashionable. Thus each social class began to emulate the fashion of the one above it in order to enhance their respective social status. But theoretically, Veblen states, once this fashion is adopted by lower classes, the fashion is no longer desirable by the higher classes and are thus obligated to find ever more extravagant ways to exercise their wealth. This creates a trickle-down effect. In other words, the wide adoption of style by lower classes invalidates the desirability of that style and prompts a new one to begin from the top\textsuperscript{19}. McCracken uses this theory when referring to superordinate and subordinate groups of society but adds factors of race, gender and age to the equation too. He notes that it is less about one adopting the style of another but about borrowing and maintaining some of its qualities and consequently affecting fashion. This version of trickle-down, lifestyle economics can account for market fluctuations and influence levels of distribution. Naturally this brought changes and made connections between consumption with fashion.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} McCracken, Grant. “Culture and Consumption.” \textit{Indiana University Press}, 1990,

\textsuperscript{19} McCracken, Grant. “Culture and Consumption.” \textit{Indiana University Press}, 1990,

\textsuperscript{20} A cyclical adoption and disposal of fashionable lifestyles is strikingly reminiscent to the world of IKEA and our present day temporal culture.
But there is more to this language of everyday goods. This material language was used to create a new order of social life in the 18th Century. With the influx of advertisement an accumulation of goods meant a new potential for meaning and uniqueness. But in the decorative arts, consumption was used differently. Goods meant to “resocialize” people, change their concept of self, of society and of social aspirations. Goods were used to proselytize, to reform a social group different from one’s own. The consumer revolution also helped people deal with the industrial revolution and the earth-shattering changes that it brought to Western society. Soon came department stores that exposed the most recently imported aesthetics and interiors changed accordingly. In the 19th century, even more attention was given to consumption. If the 18th century was the transition into mass consumption, the 19th century made consumption a way of life. And the home was the receptacle for these objects of agency whether they took form in furniture, interior design or functional appliances. All were reflections of who the homeowner was and who they desired to be.

All of this increased in magnitude with the advent of fashion magazines and advertising. At this point, around the 17th century, an entire sector of the economy existed solely dedicated to awakening want in the consumer and manipulating tastes and means. Aesthetics began to take precedence over utilitarian priorities not just in clothing but in objects; each held a sense of societal novelty. Individuals could now store social identity through their possessions. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1930-) once called it “a cohesive society of perfect strangers” implying that individuals could assume entirely distinct identities through their possessions and purchase lifestyles that were only their own in the artificial sense (McCracken Culture and Consumption 2013). He implies in this that a certain anonymity emerged when goods were given cultural meaning. Constantly replacing the old with the new and devoting more time to consumption, the average citizen had to become an object semiotician to decipher the meaning of certain purchases. Much of this was also due in part to an inflated, romantic definition of the self. With this drastic increase in consumption and subsequent call for marketing, companies took advantage of this in use of phrases like “be all you can be” and “live a little.” These were meant to tempt the consumer with the prospect of a unique lifestyle and get them to pull out their wallets. Brands inflated this collective sense of self by using such deeply troubling fears of being insignificant and worthless. This made them think that by buying their product they were buying the privilege of being autonomous. Such marketing techniques mollify our strongest desires to be attractive, cultured, well-rounded and affluent. This makes consumers at least tell themselves, even if they don’t believe it, that buying their product will buy them a better lifestyle when it certainly takes far more personal measures to do so. Time was also reconfigured to the needs of the consumer. It was in both the best interest of the consumer and the manufacturer to keep stores open after the consumer got out of work, but also on weekends when he had spare time to shop. Consumption also affected the evolution of privacy. Now with the agency to buy on a mass scale with significantly more choices, the individual could actually buy for her/himself furnishing more closed-door rooms by personal preference rather than family necessity. In other words, items were bought for the purpose of gaining cultural meaning and new opportunities for defining self, further isolating oneself from the community. (McCracken Culture and Consumption 2013)

21 It should be noted that in France, during this 18th century consumption revolution, while the common man was emulating the style of the upper classes, the style was not as genuine as that of the actually wealthy. The style was what McCracken calls “chaotic-exotic,” a conglomeration of imported themes and motifs. With the purpose of symbolically expressing anything distant from the ordinary, these fashionable items found themselves in “ornamental delirium.” They crudely expressed an abstract exotic for the sake of commerce. (McCracken Culture and Consumption 2013)
Marketing to people’s innermost desires was now entirely a part of life in the west. Specifically in France, the 1790s showed a shift from private consumption to something much more public in scale and in method. They adopted something of a “courtly model” of consumption. But this phenomenon was supplemented by idea that a lifestyle of aesthetic vision granted a superiority in society, an elite lifestyle that granted aristocracy to those of taste. It was also influenced by the democratic quality that consumption of the everyday objects like furniture possessed. Such consumption did not seek aristocracy but made consumption more accessible and dignified thus making people feel like they were bettering their existence by buying more things. Products sold using these new marketing methods created an ideal of simplicity and dignity all propagated by three key merchants of taste: the 1851 Exposition, the emergence of department stores and cinema.

The former two disseminated products and made them easier to acquire while the latter provided a visual model for how to live life according to modern commercial standards. For centuries, shopping was about need. Arriving at the market, acquiring the target item and either making a fair trade or bargaining a reasonable price. At the inception of the 19th Century, shopping became no longer about immediately purchasing. Retailers now wanted customers to wander a bit and ruminate on what they really wanted making it something ritual and contemplative. They also implemented fixed prices which not only cut down the chances of losing interest while bargaining but also in a way forced consent by encouraging the customer to pay that price. Finally the introduction of credit also made it easier for anyone to buy the previously unobtainable even if it meant being in debt.

In 1838 Paris, *Le Bon Marché* opened as one of the first modern department stores selling a wide variety of high-end goods like lace, ribbons, sheets, mattresses, buttons, umbrellas and even food. Ultimately, *Le Bon Marché* transformed shopping and did so relatively quickly. By putting into action Aristide Boucicaut’s marketing plan of refunds, fixed prices, guarantees, and advertising they were able to have a much wider range of goods and a greater profit too seeing an increase of 500,000 francs in 1852 to
5 million in 1858. In 1879, the floor space increased from 300 sq. meters to 50,000 sq. meters and employees increased from 12 to 1,788. Boucicaut also built into *Le Bon Marché* a reading room for husbands to pass the time while their wives did the shopping and even dormitories upstairs for unmarried employees. *Le Bon Marché* transformed the way we purchase goods making way for *Whiteley’s* (1863) in London, *Stewart’s* (1846) and eventually *Macy’s* (1858) in New York, and *Marshall Field & Company* (1852) in Chicago. Department stores gave a new respectability and certitude to shopping, pouring cultural value into goods, transforming objects into social agents. Class could be proven by dress and by interior furnishing in the same way they could before. Only now goods were significantly easier to purchase for less luxurious classes. Thus fashion moved increasingly faster and created its own energy and dynamic to keep up with the novel needs of the people.

Department stores made values manifest in everyday goods through marketing and life-conducive store design then transformed them into instruments of social change. In turn, this built the dialectical relationship between consumption and social change through the physical locus of the department store, a now permanent feature of modernity. Through Elizabethan England into the early 20th century, the power of the consumer is evident but the dangers must also be noted. 16th century noblemen had to increase their consumption and the opulence just to keep up with the Queen’s luxurious tastes but local family businesses suffered as a result. Previously, noblemen were middlemen between the common man and aristocracy but with this explosion, no longer did noblemen give them the profit they needed. The focus became more about individual benefit rather than community and the superordinate became more insular. The 18th century brought a stage of consumption where the merchant was the market force and their success depended on mastery of communication. More goods were manufactured and distributed from more places causing people to purchase at greater rate. The concept of “patina” no longer meant anything.

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as a status symbol with fashion quickly taking its place. The new, pristine novelty was more important

23 But before moving on, let us return to this idea of “Patina” that constantly comes up in the context of antique objects. “Patina” was another way to encode status in the 18th Century, a way to prove claims of wealth and shun counterfeit claims through material goods. Today this term is almost exclusively used by the extremely wealthy who are evaluating the items of generations past and determining what they are worth. These items epitomize how material culture can create culture and assign social status to both handcrafted and manufactured objects.

By definition, “patina” is the physical and symbolic property of material culture, the small signs of age that accumulate on objects and contact with natural elements that grant character. The function of “patina” is to authenticate status, to provide proof of status rather than claim it. These are not objects that can simply be purchased, these are objects that have been thoroughly owned and used for generations, material symbols of long-standing wealth and ownership. In the 18th Century, if you recall, merchants were suddenly acquiring a high social standing by means of purchase, encouraging social mobility. But the cost of this was that symbolic property could either affirm or betray the owner’s status depending on who was the judge. Though it plays little to no role in controlling contemporary social status in the conventional sense, items with “patina” were visual evidence of authentic wealth and gentility in the 18th Century.

According to Canadian-American sociologist, Erving Goffman (1922-1982), a symbol of status is not a good test of status since objects can easily be used in a fraudulent way. If status can be appropriated by the “correct” display and manipulation of material symbols, then status forgery should not be difficult with the right knowledge. With the emergence of mass consumption, and trickle down economics, there began to be an incentive to produce counterfeit versions of luxury items so that those of lesser means could still have the appearance of being wealthy. And of course, legislation could never be implemented to say what people can and cannot wear, or put in their dining room. In reaction to this, fashion develops, and the importance of patina increases since wealth can no longer be purchased. This separated “in” groups from “out” groups because once an individual made a claim of wealth, it could be checked by the observer to see if they had foundation for the claims by their possessions. With patina says old wealth, without “patina” says new wealth. This code offered not only an immediate mechanism for detecting authenticity but also a social punishment for fraudulence. This denotes that status is better understood by those with long-standing wealth than those without patina is only intelligible to those of true standing. But patina only accrues on objects with financial value, so once they are sold, not only are the objects lost but so is the status they possess. It was a social gatekeeper of sorts. But what theory does McCracken actually use when recounting these beliefs?

With any social inference we make, McCracken notes that the following assumptions must be considered:

1) The object possesses patina in proportion to its age
2) The age stands in proportion to the duration that the family has own the object
3) The duration of the family’s ownership represents the length of time that the family has enjoyed this social status

In this way, we look into the frame of interaction and reckoning that the interior provides. Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), in his Course in General Linguistics (1916) we see an awareness of this relationship between the signifier and the signified, the most basic tenet of semiotics. This thought of denotation, seen most fundamentally in language, used for all communication, says that there is no “natural” connection between the signifier and the signified. Instead, their arbitrary relation comes from their internal structure. For example, no two individuals will have the same mental image of the word “chair” since no two people have the same psychology and experiences. Yet, when we communicate “chair” we can agree upon a consistent image and thus produce an equivalent image. But this connection is still arbitrary. These concepts were at the heart of Structuralism and the work of Levi-Strauss but let us keep this in mind when discussing patina. Patina (the signifier) stands in for status (the signified) but departs from this signifier/signified concept because there is, in fact, a natural connection between the two. It is more than just an abstract agreement like in language. There is a “real” connection between wealth of a person and the physical, economic property they maintain. In the instance that a family owns a luxury item that gains value over a period of time, this could indicate the longevity of their wealth more than anything in their bank account could.

McCracken also cites Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) which promoted resoundingly that clothing and material culture are a “good prima facie evidence of income” (Veblen Theory of the Leisure Class 1899) and that the cost of an item is equivalent to the purchasing power of the consumer. No encoding or decoding was necessary for patina because it finds itself outside of the Structuralist paradigm. We can also look at the work of American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), who looked at icons as “sign(s) that reproduce some of the qualities of the thing it signifies... and “icons are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them.” (Peirce The Essential Peirce, 1992) We can prospectively identify objects with patina as icons since the patina of an object reproduces the duration of the family’s claim to status through its natural wear. It communicates its purpose through its physical qualities (much like how the word “buzz” imitates the sound that a bee makes when flying) making it definitively “iconic.” But the theory is utterly jargon without the conceptual history of patina.
than the old and symbolic antiques that had to be acquired by inheritance. And suddenly, it wasn't just aristocrats. The 19th century established consumption in western society permanently and department stores were its institution. They were places where one could learn how to consume which not only changed the nature of marketing aesthetics but also the meaning that goods possessed. It became an urgent necessity to gain the cultural and symbolic properties of common goods leading ultimately to social turmoil and indeterminacy. People were no longer reticent about the things they curated our lives with, perfectly ready to go into debt for the sake of building a facade of elegance and taste.

Much of what patina provides is a material inheritance of ritual objects used in the past, something the living can share with the dead. Furnishings, objects and even houses themselves become symbolic expressions and interactions with a past reality. New people who move into old, lavish houses adopt the lifestyle of the original owners and bring a new perspective to these everyday goods. But without use, these items become artifacts, afraid of being touched, placed in dusty corners to decompose. The main reason they still exist is due to quality craftsmanship, it certainly would benefit the owner more to use something old and sturdy than that which is new and flimsy. But this will return in far greater detail as we already have discussed, patina was used in the 18th century as a way to combat the unrelenting consumer revolution but what one might ask is, how did it get to that point? Here is the synthesis from what I’ve read. Honor was the most precious possession. And honor was something that could be increased, destroyed or even used in negotiations. Honor was used by individuals to rise and fall in the social hierarchy especially when social order was highly fluid and mobile. But ultimately, the transition from the ungentle to gentle standing was the key to establishing honor. But with this influx of buying, this transition became exceedingly difficult. It required at least five generations to establish sufficient honor and patina was the visual, tactile proof of a family’s stage in this process. In larger society, patina symbolized the process of turning money into status, moving from common to gentle and this 5-year period was merely a means to get one’s foot in the door, an apprenticeship in honor if you will.

The new levels of consumption in 18th century England caused an eclipse in the status of patina. Fashion cycles rapidly sped up, high standing people now found more value in novelty than the antique and since patina controlled misrepresentation, there was now no way to distinguish between the high and the low standing material culture now that anyone with taste and resources could buy status and imitate the bourgeoisie without being detected. Now high standing individuals needed new status markers so they chose the “chase and flight” method of allowing their style to be appropriated then quickly creating new innovations to make to last one obsolete. They became prisoners to fashion without their first defense against misrepresentation. Now at least it was consistent and people could turn wealth directly into status without necessarily having to wait for things to grow old. There was no time for that anymore. This new system rewarded initiative and talent and benefited those who were born into common status but grew into accomplishment (as opposed to those who already possessed superordinate standing). The patina system was rigid and discouraged mobility thus the end of it transformed the social climate in the West. But by no means did this concept of patina just disappear, it remains the primary reason that certain items still sell for upwards of $25-35 million in some places and the motive for studying the decorative arts. Nonetheless, while patina no longer represents or controls status, it remains a noble servant in its cause. (McCracken Culture and Consumption 2013)
further down the road. Yet we still see the influence of this shift at every corner. It also must be noted how simplified and broad the writing of McCracken and many of his influences can be in describing the nature of these monumental shifts in culture and consumption. But in the interest of seeing the entire picture of how the West came to a head with IKEA and complete appropriation of tradition for the sake of commercial production, it is certainly affective. So where does this leave us in terms of the home aesthetic when we are given the choice of curating our lives with the global dissemination of Swedish exceptionalism or go out of our way to pick out the perfect heritage piece that is a little above our budget but has the strength of quality craftsmanship? What is the ritual quality of something perfectly Scandinavian that you pieced together yourself after ripping it out of its flatpack existence? Is it more conducive to the mobile and anxiety-driven lifestyle of a millennial generation who couldn't care less about an Eames chair even if it was handed to them? Or is this reality just an embrace of some far deeper analysis of contemporary material culture in our attempt to find meaning ourselves? Allow me shift gears for a little and look deeply into the roots of craft in the Wes and then into the two that sparked our move towards simplicity.

1851 Western Europe

What exactly are the decorative arts? We still struggle to define this despite how everyday and common they are. At its earliest point, the term “decorative arts” was applied to all mechanical, applied or industrial arts and craft. But this word “craft” is single-handedly the most divisive word in distinguishing the fine arts from folk art. It equates everything that isn't narrative or poetic in nature as something unsophisticated or shallow. But it wasn't until the 18th century and the rise of machines that writers or aesthetic philosophers really took issue with this divide between fine arts and decorative arts. Think about the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment. It was a transformative time both intellectually and
politically but also in the transition from uniquely handmade to manufactured goods. The industrial revolution begins around 1770 in Britain. Between 1770 and 1850, the transition from water power to steam power gave urgency to the general public to evaluate the pace of technology and think profoundly about the growing aesthetic world. More powerful objects were entering the world and entering the home. The decorative arts are not limited to Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779) and items of luxury. This area of study delves into the everyday objects that were designed to facilitate human activity. Thus we must strive to acknowledge the artistic and protean value of objects that blend into the environment. Decorative arts find the balance between form and function, not leaning too much in either direction. The beauty, value, utility, expressiveness and durability of an object are all dependent on this balance. When form and function work in perfect harmony, the value of material culture emerges.

Before the 18th century, most Western writers were in agreement that the decorative arts possessed a unique artistic nature outside of fine art. All arguments when analyzing objects stemmed from the interrelationship between function, material, production and ornamentation because the sophistication and beauty of an object depended on these factors. Some of these writers attempted to explain these relations through invented principles, others tied them to historical revolution or socioeconomic development, some even cited contemporary artistic practice in their theories. But in this premodern era, a consensus was still difficult to attain. They were especially inconclusive on one aesthetic theory to

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24 Thomas Chippendale was born in Otley, Yorkshire, UK to a family of carpenters. At 30, he moved to London where he set up as a cabinet-maker, married and had a large family. While there, he published *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director (1754)*, a pattern book that secured his position as one of the most important cabinet-makers of the 18th century. Chippendale’s workshop was on St Martins Lane, the newly fashionable centre of the furniture making trade in London. From this studio he undertook many large-scale furnishing projects for grand British houses. With the increasing demand for luxury goods in the 18th century, *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director* was a resounding success among aristocrats and cabinet makers even reissuing in in 1762 to add Neo-classical designs. His designs were so influential in Britain and throughout Europe and America that ‘Chippendale’ became a shorthand for any furniture similar to his designs (fig. 15).

While pattern books had been occasionally published before 1754, Chippendale’s *Director* was the first publication on such a large scale. It included designs in the ‘Gothic, Chinese and Modern Taste’ – the last meaning French Rococo style. Many commissions would even combine designs to create their visions. By 1755, his team was comprised of 40–50 artisans, with cabinet-makers, upholsterers and carvers as Chippendale would not have made furniture or managed the brand himself. His role probably involved making designs, cultivating clients and promoting the business. A total designer nonetheless. (Victoria and Albert Museum *Chippendale 2013*)
encompass both the fine and decorative arts. Eventually, they understood that there was a clear hierarchy that placed fine arts above those of mechanical conception. But due to the fact that the latter possesses a physical function and democratic, social meaning makes the decorative arts a greater tool of tracing aesthetic trends. But this idea did not begin in the 18th Century. Even as far back as 800 BCE, after what is known as the Greek Dark Ages (1200-800 BCE) ended and began the Archaic Period (800-480 BCE), historians were already discussing this question of utility versus ornament.

Classical Greek writers did not distinguish between fine arts and decorative arts. Both were considered utilitarian, decorative and thus, craft. But they felt that poetry, music and painting were learned arts. Medieval theorists as well divided mechanical arts from liberal arts, distinguishing the physical labor from conceptual labor. The former included military equipment design and architecture but also painting and sculpture. But eventually, since the conceptual, poetry and music, required more education, it was looked at more seriously. Renaissance humanists attempted to challenge this by bringing painting, sculpture and architecture into the realm of academic art. This directed funds into art education, further ostracizing the mechanical arts. While these Renaissance thinkers took into account the imaginative claims of visual artists in theory, they still did not link these claims to beauty. In the 15th Century, Leonardo Da Vinci and his studio were the perfect bridge between these two disciplines as they designed both mechanical concepts in addition to the fine art he became known for. This obsession with form and beauty took precedence and became the new aesthetic focus moving forward. This Pan-European set of humanist values of good versus evil, the beauty of natural order and a broadly

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25 This assertion is made by Isabelle Frank in her introduction that classical greek writers were discussing the differences between utilitarian arts and fine arts but chooses not to go any deeper than this. What we do learn from this assertion is that there was a time when fine arts, primarily sculpture, were also considered within the realm of decoration. Poetry, painting and music were still considered superior though. (Frank Theory of Dec. Art, 2000)

26 Similarly asserted by Frank in summary as a means of progressing this history. By the time of the Renaissance, painting, sculpture and architecture were moved more into the realm of fine arts. (Frank Theory of Dec. Art, 2000)

classicizing style dominated design through the 16th and 17th centuries but drastic changes refused to occur until the boom of manufactured goods.

In 1851, London’s “Great Exhibition” (fig. 16) happened and sparked a vast international interest in the decorative arts. It was commissioned by Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1819-1861) and Queen Victoria of England (1819-1891), two of the most important names in patronage to this day. The exhibition was housed within a magnificent glass and iron palace. Enormous galleries of industrially manufactured goods were displayed alongside fine art and cultural artifacts. This was a huge development as the majority of previous world expositions, predominantly organized by France since 1790, had consisted of handicrafts and handmade goods. This was the first time that the “artistry” of manufactured goods was celebrated. Albert originally conceived of this idea not only as a celebration of international industry but to promote world peace through cultural exchange. This obviously was not successful as WWI would begin soon after in 1914. But The Great Exhibition of 1851 was an attempt of Albert’s to cement Britain’s role as an industrial superior. The Crystal Palace certainly sparked an interest in writing about the decorative arts and sharpened competition between Britain, Austria, Germany and France for industry dominance. Suddenly schools, museums and journals with a focus in industrial arts began to

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28 Designed and directed by Joseph Paxton (1803-1865) and Owen Jones (1809-1874) to be a test bed for their innovative glass and steel architectural techniques. This sheer amount of glass was only possible due to an immense tax drop on glass. Paxton was a member of Parliament and an architect and after mentioning his plans to a fellow parliament member, he presented his rough sketches to the commission. Victoria and Albert had already received 245 designs, only two of which were viable and had considered Paxton as a possibility. He completed the plans and presented them to the Commission, but there was opposition from some members, since another design was well into its planning stage. Paxton decided to bypass the Commission and published the design in the Illustrated London News to universal acclaim.

Its novelty was its modular, prefabricated design and use of glass. Glazing was carried out from special trolleys, and was fast: one man managed to fix 108 panes in a single day. The Palace was 1,848 ft long, 408 ft wide and 108 ft (33 m) high. It required 4,500 tons of iron, 60,000 sq ft (5,600 m2) of timber and needed over 293,000 panes of glass. Yet it took 2,000 men a mere eight months to build, and cost just £79,800. Unlike any other building, it was itself a demonstration of British technology in iron and glass. In its construction, Paxton was assisted by Charles Fox, also of Derby for the iron framework, and William Cubitt, Chairman of the Building Committee. All three were knighted. After the exhibition they were employed by the Crystal Palace Company to move it to Sydenham where it was destroyed in 1936 by a fire. (Mattie, Erik, and Lynn George. World’s Fairs. Princeton Architectural Press, 1998.)
emerge and practitioners like Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) and John Ruskin (1819-1900) began to write about this push and pull of beauty and functionality.

But nonetheless, this previous emphasis on beauty in objects and spaces placed a division between the fine and mechanical arts. While this huge gross domestic product increase did spark a greater interest in manufactured goods, people struggled to understand the nature of these manufactured goods. Only the human touch could imbue a work with worth. The British writers Pugin and Ruskin initiated change through reform each deriving their own set of standards with which design had to follow discussing how liberally or not ornament could be applied. These are two of the many standards of design we will bring up.

In sum, these two discussed the confused state of contemporary building, promoting Egyptian and Moorish influence in Romanesque and Gothic architecture. Augustus Pugin (1812-1852), a distinguished architect and designer himself, in his book *Contrasts (1836)* promoted the revival of Gothic style and spoke extensively about the relation of ornament to function. Specifically, he says style cannot simply be revived solely through ornament and thus ornament should only be used only if it reveals the form itself. In other words, ornament should not be applied liberally. He also sharply condemned this influx of mechanized production on both moral and artistic grounds since it did not directly involve the human hand and dehumanized the applied sculpture that dominated design to date.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), a British draughtsman and painter as well as an art critic, was interested in the function of decoration and the factors that established it’s status. Ruskin identified these as the influence of the surface on its utility, its frequency of use, and its visibility. In other words, visible, religious, frequently used objects were coveted. Specifically Christian imagery and ornament is what he

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29 Although these two are discussing the exterior, their ideas are fully applicable as they treat the building and dwelling as an object in itself. They realize their standards on building as objects that contain the act of dwelling, both beautiful and functional.
refers to or that which has a spiritual function. Ruskin also emphasized the importance of considering the type of decor, labor time, and material richness when appraising an object’s status. In many ways this implies that moral principles govern the artistic and material features of an object. In his *Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849)*, Ruskin applied his own Christian virtues to the making of art. Ruskin broke these down into seven moral demands that good architecture had to meet. These demands were 1) sacrifice and proof of obedience to God; 2) truth to display and handcrafted materials, avoiding the whimsical and illegible; 3) objects should evoke power and channel a sense of divine sublimity; 4) aspire for beauty drawn from nature; 5) objects have to be made by living hands; 6) objects should evoke memory of earlier cultures; 7) no originality for the sake of originality, but should look to English tradition for inspiration. And with these, Ruskin felt that buildings and objects could succeed aesthetically and true, natural beauty could emerge. Beauty was something that cannot be learned, only helped into fruition. But this beauty, Ruskin claimed, could only be appreciated when the viewer is in repose. A sense of repose is a state of being when the senses are absent of want. These were were his *preconditions* for appreciating art or objects. British architect and theorist Owen Jones (1809-1874), however, in his *Grammar of Ornament (1856)* attempted to establish his governing principles by saying simply that repose was a *result* of contemplating good art.

What Jones means by this is that after experiencing good art and contemplating it successfully, the viewer will find themself utterly tranquil as a result. He says this with the caveat that beauty resides in the absence of want, when nothing is deleted from or added to the whole. While Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) applied this theory to good architecture during the Renaissance, Jones applies it to ornament specifically. Previously, ornament was something believed could be simply added or taken away, something only applied to an exterior once the basic structure was fully composed. Jones instead treats

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ornament as something independently creative, something detached from the functional object. This liberated the object from the fluctuating pressures of functional and material requirements that Pugin and Ruskin were concerned with. In this way, Jones set specific standards for design, isolating ornament from the object and requiring a sense of repose for quality work.

Another arbiter of decorative arts was William Morris (1834-1896), the British thinker and designer and champion of the Arts and Crafts movement. Morris, moving away from ornament, brought the conversation back to the production of the object and how the decorative arts should be used. Morris argued for the democracy of the decorative arts as a discipline, defending handiwork and craft as collaborative practices that combined mechanical skills and a curious inquiry of design. In many ways, Morris took Ruskin’s views and radicalized them by adding a social hierarchy to art and function. Morris stating that only works made with pleasure and “imprinted with spirit and humanity” could bring spirit and humanity into the idle lives of their users. He was openly critical of new modes of production that were emerging in the 19th Century. Now that production of goods was almost fully industrialized in England, companies theoretically only needed one designer. Craftsmen became obsolete. Academies suddenly began to distinguish between the artist and craftsman, deepening this ever-present rift. Morris objected to this new norm. In protest, Morris lamented the plight of the worker from a socialist perspective inquiring “how could an object evoke pleasure from an assembly line?” In his The Lesser Arts (1878), Revival of Handicrafts (1888) and Arts and Crafts of Today (1889), one resounding point was that industry simply couldn’t make art and that guilds and unions must resist the pressures of commerce. Thus, Morris’ blend of socialist utopianism, Ruskin’s idealism and Pugin’s material reform

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certainly struck a chord in artists and designers in 19th century England. These envisioned futures were irresistible to disillusioned creatives in the midst of capitalism. Such writings fueled reform movements called the Arts and Crafts movement. This movement flourished in Europe and America between about 1880 and 1920. A similar sentiment even emerged in Japan in the 1920s as the Mingei movement standing for traditional craftsmanship using simple forms, and often used medieval, romantic, or folk styles of decoration. This will be addressed shortly. But things changed a bit when German and Austrian writers, in the midst of the Viennese Secession and Jugendstil were gaining momentum.

Following The Great Exhibition of 1851, respectively German and Austrian historians, Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) and Alois Riegl (1858-1905) used the past to inform the present in their aesthetic theory. Their answer to industry was that manufactured goods only produced “novelty without beauty, or beauty without intelligence.” Gottfried Semper inquired into the fundamental principles of dwelling that could possibly explain the decorative arts.

To give some some background, Semper was an architect as well as a writer during his life known ultimately for his redesigning of the Vienna Ringstrasse (1865) and the main operahouse in Dresden, Germany. He is also notable for his concern with classical and Moorish architecture. As with many others, Semper was nudged into action by The Great Exhibition of 1851 and in response wrote his seminal Four Elements of Architecture (1851). The following four elements are an attempt at a universal theory of architecture stressing functionalism as a prerequisite to intentionality: the hearth (including metal and ceramic work), the roof (carpentry), the enclosure (textiles), and the mound (earthwork). He

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43 In fact he assisted in designing the displays for Sweden, Canada, Denmark and Egypt. (Frank, The Theory of Decorative Art, 2000)
considers the assemblies and systems of these four elements to be universal in all indigenous “primitive”
structures and thus are the basis of our instinct to build. But we will go into this further later. In Four
Elements he also discusses the origins of decay, affirming that it stems from an alienation between
technique and material. With this he dives deeply into material, archaeological and prehistoric origins of
design and why we look to them for most non-figural motifs. Semper’s writing inspired many in
materialist theory in German-speaking areas but infuriated Alois Riegl.

Since art history as a discipline was relatively new in the mid 19th Century, essentially started by
the writings of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), when Alois Riegl’s Problems of Style: foundations for a
history of ornament (1893) posed considerable parallels between the conceptual origins of art and
design. Of all the aesthetic theorists of this period, Riegl’s work on the conceptual origins of ornament
was the closest attempt to tie this data in with art history. In this seminal book, no longer are we tied to
tenets of function, material and technique. Riegl instead concerned himself with human intent and the
direct expression of creativity that decorative arts provides. In fact, he even goes as far as saying that this
intent is more than that of painting or sculpture. Decorative arts employs a pure visual play of color and
form in space. Rather than putting the two on the same level, Riegl redefined both of them. He did this
by writing a continuous history of ornament and how it is informed by our weltanschauung or
“worldview”.

45 Frank, Isabelle. The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European & American Writings, 1750-1940. Yale University
47 Frank, The Theory of Decorative Art, 2000
48 If we are to understand the agency of objects and space it is important that we briefly parse through Riegl’s points and areas
where he differs from Semper. He starts by using the allegory for art history of a four-spire cathedral, one central spire is
architecture, painting and sculpture are in the front and applied arts are in the back. These four parts grew taller but ever so out of
touch and Riegl feels as if they should unify in art history to justify their collective aesthetic existence. These four elements are
not yet in unity but are the transitory pieces that lead to a culmination of the ultimate directing factor of all artistic creativity.
Because of this we must look into their evolutionary histories.

In any language, if you simply want to speak or understand it, you don't actually need to know grammar. Only if one is seeking
an answer to “why?” do they require grammar, if they want to comprehend something scientifically. Riegl applies this theory to
art and objects. Think of a terra-cotta cup. Its practical function is to be a vessel. Its material is terra-cotta. The technique of
making it was either on a wheel or in a coiling method. In this way we can decipher the form and ornament of everyday objects,
in the same way we would a marble Statue of Artemis.
First, he states that the same outside factors are present in both fine arts and decorative arts but more importantly, they are both subordinate to the will of the maker. This he called *kunstwollen* or “the historically contingent tendency of an age or a nation that drove stylistic development without respect to mimetic or technological concerns.” He also made clear that the design is not an end unto itself. Or that principles guide developments in style in all arts of any given culture. What this means is that every stylistic phase has a Renaissance and Baroque, creating problems in one and solving them in the next in a prophetic cycle of conflict and answer. Development is compelled to move in the direction that it moves.

Its function? None that are physically practical unless we count worship. Material and technique? Marble and probably an intricate series of carving and chiseling of a sizeable team. Then we can add the question of what does the statue imply? It is a Goddess personified, brought into the physical Earth. In an oil painting of a landscape on copper too. Its function? None practical, only for viewing and contemplation. The influence of material and technique are less evident in two-dimensional painting. Riegl felt that Semper only spoke of function in a literal sense, limiting his theory just to applied arts. Riegl’s plan attempts to encompass both high arts and applied arts, thinking of function more freely.

Riegl breaks function down into three types: utilitarian, ornamental and imaginative.
- Utilitarian function supplies the needs to our five senses. Take our cup again for example. It is for drinking, something our bodies require. It is not made with artistic intention but could be considered applied art.
- Ornamental function fills the void. Tattoos would go under ornamental as they have no utilitarian function because it satisfies no physical or sensory needs. Ornament responds to the needs of the mind. The eye conveys impressions to the mind and allows us to contemplate the aesthetic value and mastery. In the same way that a statue wasn’t made to fill space, a cup was not made for decoration. There is art in both yet neither is fully art. Ornament is decorative. It fills the gap between high and applied art as it serves both practical and aesthetic needs.
- Imaginative function is made to arouse an idea in the viewer. It appeals to something “higher” than the senses. We are tempted to align this with artistic function it is not identical. Some decorative art supplies imaginative function but not always. This is where decorative and fine arts overlap in function.

The bottom line is that our will to create is based in a competition with nature. Since we depend on it, humans are bound to the prototypes of nature no matter what. It is around and within us. But it isn’t ever fully an imitation, reproduction, or illusion. We can never truly reproduce nature in art. But from imagination we can strive to. This effort to compete with and improve upon nature is because we perpetually yearn for happiness and ultimately, the harmony that nature has perfected.

This harmony is constantly endangered and threatened by natural phenomena because conflict is a part of natural order. But if nature were truly as it appears, we could never achieve harmony. It exists in chaos. So we design an idealized nature through art and objects to escape this unrest, to bring order to this chaos and feel as if we have some kind of control. We fashion a nature for ourselves where we are safe from danger (or the wrath of God for some) that lulls us into an imagined harmony that we consciously chose. But this affects our relation to everything. Man to man. Man to nature. It affects our weltanschauung or “worldview.” Our eagerness to behold nature’s essence in tangible form is what Riegl cites as the source of all artistic and mechanic creation.

Artistic creation is a creative competition with nature. Our life through our objects expresses a seemingly harmonious world. One could even assert that this is the ultimate function of art and design. Art is a cultural phenomenon that depends largely on weltanschauung, depending entirely on context: time, place, culture etc. Nonetheless we must become acquainted with this harmonious world we have created. It is an invented view of nature, culturally relative to how much a culture looks to nature for improvement. All of this can be found in the way we dwell in the world. (Riegl and Binstock, *Problems of Style* 2004.)

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This theory was at once revolutionary and controversial as it refutes any possibility of absolute aesthetic norms or assumptions. The fuel for Riegl’s principles, once again, was human intent rather than material and technique, ultimately concluding that our will to curate our lives is derived from a desire to compete with nature. Modernism would fundamentally challenge almost all of the above.

Right around the turn of the 19th to 20th Century, with the industrial growth of the 19th evolving into the machine as a part of everyday life, design became an instrument for improving man’s life, beauty losing out to efficient manufacturing and functionalism. One essential question that Modernism deals with in terms of the decorative arts is the following: does a capitalist, mechanized society declare ornament “superfluous?” Can a society focused on standardizing, simplifying and cleansing produce objects that have artistic value? William Morris would have said “no, it cannot.” Morris, as we have already discussed, believed that true objects of material desire can only be made by hand while those made by machine were strictly functional, stripped of any ornamental value. Modernists on the converse would have said that ornament was undermining the object and taking away its essential value. But the continued success of mechanically produced ornament transformed these discussions of ornament in terms of style. Through Modernism, this question of form versus function began to redefine the conditions that could be used to judge material culture. Suddenly a more international style began to emerge with the rise of Bauhaus ideals. This meant no more applied sculpture in design, no exterior decoration of buildings, and an acute awareness of spaces and voids to build a simpler, slimmed-down design.

On the side of Functionalism came the American Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) and Swiss Le Corbusier (1887-1965) who led the cult of function and material over ornament. Though the former eventually embraced the International Style and ornament in the 1920s, the latter became the most

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quotable and significant proponent of Modernism and the synthesized stripping down of design to a purified, Vitruvian standard.

In 1927, Le Corbusier made the statement that a house is a “machine à habiter” or a “living machine.” As a modernist and co-designer of France’s famously purist pavilion at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Le Corbusier rejected ornament and celebrated a future of well-designed, functional architecture, furniture and decor. Along with many others who were shaped by Bauhaus ideals, Czech architect Adolf Loos (1870-1933) in his *Ornament and Crime* (1913)\(^{52}\) wrote that “the evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects.”\(^{53}\) This meant avoiding the traditional for sleek, minimalist designs that served this essential function of living. In his manifesto *Towards an Architecture* (1923)\(^{54}\), Le Corbusier layed out these five tenets of contemporary domiciles to be free from structural conventions and historical precedence:

- “Pilotis” (columns) used to lift up buildings and create open spaces
- Free-form interior designs, enabled by structural columns
- Free-form facade designs, liberated from load-bearing functions
- Horizontal windows to provide even daylight across rooms
- Rooftop gardens on flat roofs to protect concrete and create space

These terms make tangible the ideals that made modernist architecture the perfect symbol of this utilitarian future and return to classical ideals of structure preceding beauty. Ornament was superfluous unless it added to the usefulness of a building or object. Theorists like Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Marc Léopold Benjamin Bloch (1886-1944) and Norbert Elias (1897-1990) explored how decor could give an object social meaning and at what point could an object synthesize aesthetic and utilitarian needs. They agreed on the point that only usefulness was a true asset when it came to analyzing an object’s

\(^{53}\) Frank, The Theory of Decorative Art, 2000
anthropological value because unlike fine arts. In other words, objects have the ability to trace directly the history of social practices. This continued to develop until WWII when decorative arts completely disappeared from artistic vocabulary. At this point, function had completely superseded form becoming simply “industrial design” or just “design,” free of any ornament. The study of style also disappeared, in this time of complete modernization, decor was generally considered to be frivolous and deceptive. Following the war, art historians became skeptical of the study of style and the discipline never returned to the depth it reached in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Since then, there has been significantly less inquiry into the protean nature of artistic creation and response to aesthetic mastery in common objects.

Into this attempt to beautify everyday material culture and revise the aesthetic standards with which we judge the worldview and trace the roots of consumption, we can see clearly the organic foundation of these instincts. Though we see the world around us as something humans have built, the tangible world is merely a shell that reflects our will to create. The desire that humans have to design their homes is a fine metaphor for this restless need to improve upon nature and imitate God. Next, we will dissect the material relationship to the fundamental habitat, what this can reveal about our instinct of shelter/dwelling-in-the-world and our ritual importance to the objects “hearth” and “altar.”

Settlement

“The first sign of settlement and rest after the hunt, the battle, and wandering in the desert is today, as when the first men lost paradise, the setting up of the fireplace and the lighting of the

55 The following quotation from French poet Paul Valéry’s (1871-1945) Pièces sur L’Art (1928) synthesizes these ideas better than any and should be noted:

“Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.”
reviving, warming, and food preparing flame. Around the hearth the first groups formed: around the hearth the first groups assembled; around it the first alliances formed; around it the first crude religious concepts were put into the customs of a cult... Throughout all phases of society the hearth formed that sacred focus around which took order and shape. It is the first and most important element of architecture. Around it were grouped the other three elements: the roof, the enclosure, and the mound. The protecting negations or defenders of the hearths flame against three hostile elements of nature.

Semper’s focus on the hearth as a cultural and moral symbol of social institutions is an ideal starting point for a chapter on dwelling and primordial culture. It is the domestic material epicenter. Semper designates “hearth” with the signifieds of “nucleus” or “embryo” of civilization. We can also recognize that fire and warmth have consistently and remain associated with comfort, gathering and social engagement. The physical function of the hearth is to provide warmth, light and ultimately, a space for communities to gather, share stories, drink wine, cook food and even sleep. Much later, many even defined the dinner table hierarchy upon closeness to the fireplace. Each culture has a unique association with the hearth and all can agree upon its basic significance. By using the cultural value of social activities surrounding a single object, like the hearth we can derive moral value from an object. A similar dissection can be done with something like an altar.

Initially, altars were surfaces upon which religious sacrifices were performed. The altar is the religious material epicenter. In most religions in both the East and West the altar plays a central role. In Judaism, the altar houses the Torah and acts as a place to perform rituals of the Sabbath, readings from the Torah and ceremonies like Bar/Bat Mitzvah or weddings. In Christianity, the altar takes a variety of forms but in essence is a raised surface on which the Eucharist is consecrated, the sermon is performed and around which communal worship occurs. Sometimes these are placed in the center but more commonly they are placed in the apse of a church, at the furthest end of the nave. Outside of the church, personal altars can also be used for worship and can be as simple as a candle on the floor or a sconce on the wall.

and used for personal prayer. In less populated Western faiths of Norse Paganism, Wicca and Druidism, an altar of some form has a central place in all ceremonies and ritual practices. In Eastern faiths, the altar plays a crucial role too. In Hinduism, the altar is used as both a shrine to certain Gods within a religious building or as a more accessible, personal temple inside the home. Again, these can be as simple as a candle and a picture or as ornate as a system of statues, lamps and other ritual objects. In Taoism, Buddhism and Shintoism as well, the altar is the locus of worship and can possess a variety of social and moral associations. Though exhaustive, this account of the universality of altars is crucial to understanding the vast reaches of material culture. In a time of clutter and overproduction of objects, this singular object has possibly the widest reach than any other object. It also transcends modern and ancient history. Due to its universality, the altar is responsible for the daily habits and rituals of so many people in the world. In this way we give agency to the object. It has the power to control our lives if we give it the chance. Thus, it is vital to understand that no matter when or where, every object possesses cultural and moral content and the spiritual energy of all who have used it and/or lived with it.

What I mean to ask is if a home can act as a place of worship, if the same rites can be performed in front of an altar adjacent to the kitchen as can be performed in temple, why can’t we apply the same kind of ritual value to an IKEA chair? A couch in a college dorm? A table in your mother’s living room? Material culture extends far beyond the altar and far beyond the hearth. It is the study of the aesthetic world that we build around our lives. This drives us to question, what stands in as the hearth or altar in the modern home?

The desire to design is a basic instinct of humans. At the most fundamental level, humans desire to imitate nature, to create, and to develop. In some of the earliest civilizations, while survival and shelter was of the utmost importance, there is evidence that even 44,000 years ago, in what is now Ukraine, Neanderthals built houses out of woolly mammoth bones and skin, the earliest non-cave dwellings ever discovered (fig. 16). The home was apparently built in two parts. The base was made by assembling large
mammoth bones to support the whole structure, which was 26 feet across at its widest. The bones themselves were likely obtained both through collecting those found on the ground and by killing the large beasts directly for this purpose. The Neanderthals who built the structure also had to have lived in it for quite some time as 25 different pits for a fire were found inside. The researchers suggest that the house was once topped by wood or other material the builders were able to find. Those who built the house demonstrated an ability to live in a rather barren place, living in homes they had constructed while cooking and eating mammoth to survive. It also suggests that Neanderthals were capable of working and living together in groups in established communities. Perhaps even more interesting was the fact that some of the bones used to build the house had decorative carvings and added pigments, clearly showing that those that built the house, were in fact, building a home (fig. 17)\(^57\). An early instinct to imitate the sheltering function of a cave or a tree are evident. But these were people living in barren regions had to make do with what they had so they built an object that both represented their earthly dominance but at the same time kept them safe from elements beyond their control. In this way, the Ukrainian bone homes represent both dwelling in the world, sheltered from danger, building a feeling of harmony in a world of chaos. Owen Jones (1809-1874) would have agreed, in his *Grammar of Ornament (1856)* with this assertion that the earliest ambition of man is to design.

Jones examines the sources from which many decorative motifs derive and our basic instinct to imitate nature. Tattooing of the face and body in an effort to increase one’s power of expression to enemies is one early example he uses. Body art is a realm of decorative arts often looked over but crucial nonetheless. It is corporeal decoration, the surface implementation of a new beauty by its owner. This extends to the basic hut and the decoration of such a dwelling in an attempt to bring beauty into our immediate space and at least appear to “change” the world according to our sensibilities. Our highest ambition is to make our personal stamp on the Earth and to find harmony in some way or another. Jones

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observes also that the efforts of early civilizations to find truth in the world are far more profound than those we find later in art and design history. He celebrates the graceful tenacity that neolithic designs have in their tireless want for power and truth in the world. Citing the work of Cimabue and Raphael, Jones asserts that the former has a far greater sense of searching than the latter proclaiming “when art struggles it succeeds; when celebrating its success, it fails” While I don’t completely agree with the latter half of this statement, the sentiment is clear that in searching for truth, its vulnerable striving, humans create their best creations. We are at once charmed and surprised by the whole-hearted intention of early settlements and the ingeniously simple process it utilized. What we seek in creating anything is evidence of mind and a purpose that motivates. But along with this power of production proportionally comes a decrease of individuality. Nonetheless, our instinct to design and animate our immediate worlds is evidence of a much larger instinct to find truth and harmony. This defines “dwelling” in a markedly Heideggerian sense. What I am referring to is the idea of “dwelling” that Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) brings up often in his writing in its relation to Being. While we won’t go deeply into Heidegger, it is difficult not to acknowledge the importance of his Building Dwelling Thinking (from his 1971 book ‘Poetry, Language, Thought’) in our investigation and analysis of the home.

The essay begins with the seemingly obvious statement that structures are designed for man’s dwelling but quickly he undermines it by saying that not all buildings are designed for dwelling when we consider factories, office, buildings. Thus, we obtain the framework for the essay: what it means to dwell, how does the home where we dwell relate to dwelling and what does the building do to accomodate. In the modern world, written in the wake of World War II, when Germany experienced a severe housing shortage, Heidegger offers a curious divide between the words “building” and “being” (in German, ‘bauen’ meaning ‘to build,’ once also meant ‘to be’) and argues that through this initial definition, the manner in which we dwell is the manner in which we exist in the world; our dwellings are an extension of

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our identity and who we are. It should be noted also that, in his *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger discusses “Being-in-the-world” which is, in essence, the experience of being absorbed within the immediate, honest realities of human existence and mortality. This absorption in the world is what he calls “dwelling.” He argues that dwelling relates to this “Being-in-the-world” and that problems of building are also problems of dwelling. In doing so, he asserts that dwelling is the manner in which human beings exist on earth, our homes suggesting something which draws from ideas both natural and man-made.

He proceeds by stating that modern times have confused our understanding of the building/dwelling relation. But dwelling is about more than this fundamental need for shelter but is built with others to experience a mutual sense of the present informed by a distant past of shelter and an abstract future. In Heidegger’s words, “the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve… dwelling itself is always a staying with things.”

Ultimately, Heidegger makes the point that the relation between man and space assumes the form of dwelling. When a room is built, it gives form to dwelling, condenses it and allows us to live within it. He sums this up by discussing the Black Forest farm house. This simple, pastoral home is sheltered from the elements but with a closeness to natural resources. It also has a central hearth, a communal table and an altar. He doesn’t insist that this type of dwelling is the only way but asserts that the Black Forest farm possesses the elements necessary for dwelling. “The essence of building is letting dwell … if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.” It shows how building can allow for dwelling and allow for people to have a sense of place. In other words, through the building of spaces, we perpetually learn more about what it means to be in the world as the former derives the latter. By building and cultivating a

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60 he even mentions a coffin and a crib to make reference to both the unborn and the deceased

home, allowing oneself to become completely absorbed in its design, the home becomes a space where
dwelling in the world can ideally take place. Quite possibly this is one reason why we spend so much time
curating our homes in a way that is suitable for living. It also explains why we spend so much time inside
pursuing leisure and contemplation. These possess ritual qualities that bring us closer to finding that
harmony with the natural world, they we can design something adequate. Shelter provides safety. Home
provides solace. Dwelling provides essence. But after considering exhaustively the state of material
culture in the West from the 16th century through Modernism, we have to briefly make note of what was
happening in the East. Clearly Western culture was in dire need of new perspectives. These came through
trade and of course, the mass appropriation of colonialism. Here we will discuss one of the more positive
relationships and one that has cultivated one of the most sophisticated perspectives on design in the world.

Japan

In Japan, the traditional house does not have an assigned use for each room like we do in the
West. The exceptions of this are the entrance area, kitchen, bathroom, and toilet. Any room can be used as
a living room, dining room, study, or bedroom. This is feasible because all the necessary furniture is
portable, and storable in a small section of the house used for storage. It is important to note that in Japan,
living room is expressed as “ima” or “living space”. This is because the size of a room can easily be
changed by moving the walls. Large traditional houses often have only one “ima” in the main structure
while kitchen, bathroom, and toilet can be attached on the side of the house as extensions62.

Much like a modern workplace, partitions within the house are created by “fusuma,” or sliding,
portable doors made from wood and paper. “Fusuma” can seal each partition from top to bottom creating
smaller rooms within the house. On the edge of a house are “rōka” or wooden floored passages, that are

Tuttle Company, 1886.
essentially hallways. “Rōka” and “ima” are partitioned by “shōji,” sliding and portable doors that are also made from paper and wood. Unlike that of “fusuma, the paper used for “shōji” is incredibly thin so outside light can shine into and through the house. This practice was begun long before glass started being used for sliding doors. “Rōka” and the exterior of the house are partitioned by either walls or portable wooden boards that can be used to seal the house overnight. Extended roofs protect the “rōka” from getting wet when it rains. During the rainy season, the house gets sealed completely. Traditional roofs in Japan are made of wood and clay, with tiles or thatched areas on top. For gatherings, the partitions can be removed to create one large meeting room. Normally, partitions are used to create smaller and more efficient living spaces. Therefore, kitchen, bathroom, toilet and “genkan” with one multipurpose living space create one complete Japanese housing unit. Often these are communal. Therefore, the minimum Japanese housing arrangement, which is still possible to find if one is looking for the cheapest room to rent, consists of just a “genkan” and one living room/space. With this short summary of the traditional Japanese house, we can now inquire into the trajectory of Japanese material culture.

From 1615 to 1868, the Tokugawa Shogunate ruled Japan during what is known as the Edo Period. This was a time of relative stability. The political system was mostly made up of regional lords or daimyo who taxed villages in rice. The social hierarchy placed warriors at the top and beneath them were peasants, artisans and merchants in that order. But once industrialization arrived around 1855, there was vast transformation. Occupations blurred with new technology, production changed, and trade with the west increased. But through it, traditional material culture in the home remained relatively stagnant. Within the villages, life materialized through ornate trays (fig. 18), storage boxes (fig. 19), baskets (fig. 20), kimonos (fig. 21), and lanterns (fig. 22). In more agrarian villages one could find most objects made

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64 90% of 18th Century Japan resided in this rural setting. (Kirkham and Weber History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture, 1400-2000, 2013. 324-337)
of either lacquered wood, bamboo or straw. And as the rural folk mostly practiced shintoism, this was reflected in the imagery on ceramic wares, pot hangers that resembled the roof of a temple (fig. 23), and the general simplicity of form and decoration in all aesthetics.

Before industrialization, common goods were mostly acquired from local craftsmen who made objects using simple tools and materials purchased from peasant farmers. In this way, there was a collaboration with the wealthy merchants and the working class peasants. Much of this handiwork was in silk weaving, dyeing and embroidery and households would sell these goods in order to pay taxes to the shogun. If you were wealthy enough, expensive goods could be purchased from travelling peddlers. But with the influx of manufactured goods, this system of rice taxes for the Tokugawa came to a gradual end. With the increase of manufacturing came an increase in entrepreneurship and a decrease in agriculture. This made the Tokugawa enforce the Kansei reforms\(^6\) which distribution of goods without taxation\(^6\).

As a result of the Kansei reforms, the *daimyo* had to split time between the city of Edo (now Tokyo) and smaller “castle towns” with prominent markets. These towns were ruled by Samurai and populated by tradesmen. Most of what these communities produced were roof tiles, screens, metal and stonewares, and tatami mats, items every Edo person needed. Luxury items like decorated vests (fig. 24), swords/sword-fittings (fig. 25) and woodblock prints were also produced for the Samurai classes\(^6\). The craftsmanship was mostly done by men but quickly adopted more machine-powered manufacturing. Primarily these were steam-powered due to early the European influence in the late 1850s. Kyoto became

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\(^6\) Kansei reforms were a series of conservative measures promoted (during 1789–1801) by the Japanese statesman, Matsudaira Sadanobu between 1787 and 1793 to restore the sinking financial and moral condition of the Tokugawa government. Commerce was restricted, even in the West while agriculture was elevated. Restrictions were placed on the migration of farmers to the cities, and debts to merchants sustained by retainers of the Tokugawa shogun, or hereditary military dictator of Japan, were either reduced or cancelled. Sadanobu also initiated a policy of frugality and restricted expenditures of all classes. Confucianism was promoted as the head school of philosophy, and publications were rigorously censored. Although these resulted in improved famine conditions and temporarily fortified governmental finances, the reforms were gradually undone after Sadanobu was dismissed from office (Soranaka, Isao. "The Kansei Reforms-Success or Failure?" *Monumenta Nipponica* 33, no. 2 (1978): 151-64, doi:10.2307/2384123.)


\(^6\) Another luxury class implemented for legislation in rural regions, high regarded (Kirkham and Weber, 2013)
the first of these “castle towns” to become known for its artisans of shinto objects. Here, shops began to flaunt logos to advertise their product which we see evidence of in prints around 1858. But soon this artisanal skill moved to other urban areas. Kaga became known for the weaving prowess of its farmers who used winter as a time to supplement income. Kaga even imported looms from China to build the first textile factory in the region. But with such a vast Samurai population and daimyo demand, Kaga did perfectly fine selling their goods locally without needing to export much abroad just yet. And now that the upper classes desired novelty, especially items from West, cottage taste shifted to factory taste and items like Portuguese wind-up dolls left by missionaries as well as clocks (fig. 26) and guns began to turn up in Japan. Quickly, local craftsmen like Ono Benkichi (1801-1870) started to copy these Western designs (fig. 27). With the help of the wealthy Maeda family patronage, he was able to quickly disseminate them. He eventually would build a workshop of his own in Kanazawa. This curiosity with the natural world and mechanics was getting progressively stronger in these smaller urban areas. The passion for decorative arts was waning. Adaptation of foreign design and knowledge proved difficult but ultimately something that would push Japan ahead technologically

In the mid 18th century, though unknown outside of Japan, Edo was the largest city in the world with over 1 million people. This was mostly because Daimyo class were required to live there permanently but travelled around as much as possible. Though Kyoto still thrived, the city Osaka suddenly became the epicenter of luxury goods manufacturing. This growth expanded the once miso shop, Mitsui Echigoya into the first real Japanese department store. They exported silks to Edo via Kyoto and popularized unusual and stylish accessories among the high classes. Instead of commissioning, now the wealthy could easily shop for beauty and novelty. The typical clothing style was a kimono with floral and geometric patterns with shinto and poetic allusions (fig. 28). Embroidered layers of silk crepe would be worn underneath. For men, a netsuke or decorative toggle could be attached to the kimono to

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symbolize refinement and taste (fig. 29). These also were used as a connection to indigenous, shinto values and to be a keepsake of sorts. Inside the home, it was common to decorate by carefully placing items around with the intention of impressing guests (called zashiki kazari). Items could range from scrolls to vases or incense burners eventually adding paintings and sculpture to animate the space (fig. 30).

Outside the home, in the fashionable Yoshiwara district of Edo, Kabuki theater, calligraphy and other “transient pleasures” of ukiyo-e or the spirit world were commonly practiced. Eventually, as Western powers began to expand into Asia from the late 1850s into the 1880s, the Tokugawa signed several massive trade agreements with them. One of these made Yokohama one of the largest port cities in Japan due to its location. This change would heavily impact Japanese material culture. As a result, Western traders brought back huge amounts of Japanese furniture and silk due to high demand in respective nations. In the same way, Western furniture began to turn up in homes in Yokohama and Kobe (fig. 31). Japanese goods even made an appearance at the London International Exhibition in 1862 showing baskets, prints and lacquerwork. This sparked the beginning of “Japonisme” in Europe and the obsession over Asian aesthetics.

In 1868, after facing pressure and severe inflation due to anti-foreigner sentiment, the Tokugawa were overthrown after their 265 year shogunate after a brutal civil war, reemphasizing the emperor over Shogun rule. But the resultant Meiji Restoration made huge changes. One of these changes was to centralize the ministry, monarchy, and public assembly under one emperor in 1889. No more was there a status system for Samurai rule and they could no longer carry weapons around at ease. Also, Daimyo could no longer afford the handcrafted luxury goods they once cherished. Thus, local craft economies dropped significantly for sword and lacquerware makers. Japan again attended the International Exhibition in 1878, conveying both a strong sense of cultural literacy but adapted adapted significantly

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69 Kirkham and Weber, 2013. 324-337
more for a Western market. One notable craftsman was Suzuki Chokichi (1848-1919) who was known for his lifelike detail and poetic naturalism in his cast bronze incense burners (fig. 32). This style of organic motifs ingrained with intellectual heritage and advanced technical skills was the preferred aesthetic for foreign buyers. This market would ultimately fund advances in Japanese machinery. Such advances led to an enormous production boom and the inception of a Board of Commerce for Product Design and a Tokyo School of Arts in 1886. The school employed master professors of both Eastern and Western styles that would produce many skilled court painters and designers. The Meiji Restoration caused massive changes especially in terms of Western influence on fashion and interior design but kimonos, tatami mats and lacquered trays would remained in most households.  

Foreign trade quickly became a way of life as the 20th century edged closer. Industries for raw goods like metals and paper had to increase accordingly to keep up with Western demands. Japanese bureaucrats travelled to the West often to study their habits and accordingly shifted their research and production. Once, when the French complained about the silk quality, Kaga and Kyoto changed their operations and built bigger and better factories and even started a school of engineering. Infrastructure also developed due to this increase too; banks and railroads were renovated to look more Western. Ceramics was always a huge domestic industry but when German researcher, Gottfried Wagener (1831-1892) came to Japan in 1868, he heavily advised the Arita region on new processes and materials. The Arita commercial pottery workshop would soon become known for its Western influence in dress, tapestries and interiors even sending weavers to France to bring Western looms back. In essence, huge sociopolitical and culture changes in Japan are evident in material culture trends.

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By the 1890s, Japan was saturated with luxury foreign goods and technology, deep changes were occurring. With increased foreign trade, Japan not only boosted their craft industry but also their reputation as a civilized nation. Without the daimyo market and less luxury goods, most of the income was derived from foreign exports and merchants became the wealthiest group of people. Lacquerware and other traditions eventually were forced to evolve. Powerlooms expanded weaving production and photography decreased print production but the design in rural areas remained relatively unchanged. With the government in the 20th century fighting hard for craft manufacturing as a matter of national importance, good design became thereafter associated with Japan.

In modern Japan, as in most industrialized nations, the old and the new coexist. The 20th century consisted of local manufacturers producing familiar objects in traditional materials alongside modernists working in international styles using new techniques and materials. Some sought to meld the past and the present with design and consumers purchased and used these goods in ways that reflected their varying social identities. As the century progressed, craft declined and manufacturing gained power. So much so that today lacquerware and metalwork are considerably endangered. Handcraft remained important nonetheless. Trained one-off designers and engineers were responsible for many things “made in Japan” during the 20th century.

Today, Japan is one of the most rapidly growing and imitated design cultures globally. It’s a place both strongly attached to its traditional past and a playful naïveté that never ceases to surprise. Oki Sato (1977-) is a contemporary Japanese designer who, despite being born in Toronto, grew up on Manga comics and video games even getting so good at Puyo Puyo (a Tetris like game) that he became the Tokyo Regional Champion. Eventually he would attend Waseda University in Tokyo for architecture.

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Today, he heads nendo, one of the most highly-respected design companies in the densely populated Tokyo. The brand aims to “Give people small “!” moments by reconstituting the everyday and by collecting and reshaping them into something playful and easy to understand. Sato feels that focus is the key to good design especially in a company dealing with 400 projects at any given time. If he were working on only three at a time, he says, he would obsess, lose focus and think too much. Focus is the key to coming up with good ideas quickly and it is in this spontaneity that nendo gets its charm.

“Nendo” in Japanese, means “clay.” Clay of course is the fundamental motif of creation. Thus, by calling themselves “nendo,” the brand strives to remodel the standards of design. Our focus on nendo will be start with their high-end furniture collaboration with Danish Fritz Hansen (1872) and Italian Minotti (1948) firms. But it should be known that nendo’s work ranges from $4 pens and cups to Hermes storefronts, futuristic parks, museum spaces and even the interior of Paris’ new high speed train. Sato found, as he arrived on the scene in 2003, that within the design world there is a certain freedom. Fashion designers were doing interiors, architects were making teacups, illustrators were making furniture. Disciplines were as blended as ever and it’s in this democratic light that nendo functions. Sato gives everyday objects a feeling of playfulness and spontaneity, something integral to both traditional and modern Japanese culture.

Japanese ideas have influenced Western style from about 1861 to 2019. Whether it was through poetry, textiles, furniture, or simply this “rustic exoticism,” Europe and America has been massively influenced by Japanese culture. Today it surrounds us. Muji’s minimalist, brandless housewares are almost addictive to buy; UNIQLO’s alluringly plain and affordable clothing is in every young New Yorker’s wardrobe and of course, Marie Kondo’s “Japanese art” of decluttering as a means of escape

75 Alt, “Oki Sato: The Surprise Artist.” 2019
76 an everything store
77 clothing brand
78 Netflix self-help personality
has obtained a cult following. Western culture embraces this simplicity as an antidote for our overscheduled, over-curated lives. Sato’s *Manga Chairs (2016)* (fig. 33) epitomise this clean, simplicity that holds true for most Japanese art but shrugs any rigidity using abstract spokes of polished, stainless steel that recall the popular comics Sato obsessed over as a child. These spokes illustrate emotions, thought bubbles, even sweat and fear in the Manga comics but also the ukiyo-e prints of the Edo period. The mirror finish also opens up new spatial layers too, enveloping the environment it lives in, cleanly dematerializing it like the *Pettersen & Hein* chairs. Equally, *nendo’s Shivering Bowls (2012)* (fig. 34), made of a molded jelly material, shown at Milan’s Triennale Museum, are so perfectly surprising and strange. Something we trust to be sturdy and ceramic is suddenly so flimsy that even the slightest blow of a fan makes it quiver. It was with this fan that they were presented. When commissioned, Sato seeks to surprise the patron instead of simply delivering what is expected, he gives you something you never knew you wanted. *Sinking About Furniture (2003)* (fig. 35), is at once punning the way many Japanese speakers pronounce “thinking” but also making furniture that appears to be sinking into the floor. Each piece is cut off at different points to make this effect. A chair with one sinking leg, and a sofa sinking backwards, a shelf sinking sideways. Through this treatment, its original function is deleted but forces us to ponder other possibilities as a whimsical, angular object in a space. Sato makes the viewer question if there is also a contemplative function of furniture. Asking how far can we take this idea of “chair” from its utilitarian function before it stops being a chair?

One object that is particularly striking is *Cabbage Chair (2018)* (fig. 36) which supposedly is a product of fashion designer Issey Miyake (1938-), known for his innovative work in pleated paper. Apparently he approached Sato asking if he would consider using recycled paper for furniture. So, in response, with massive rolls of unused, pleated paper*79*, *nendo* transformed a single roll into a chair that emerges naturally as you peel away its outside layers, one at a time. Resins added during the original

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79 produced in mass amounts during the process of making pleated fabric, and usually abandoned as an unwanted by-product.
paper production process add strength and memory to forms, and the pleats themselves give the chair elasticity and a springy resilience. The overall effect looks rough, but gives the user a soft, comfortable seating experience. Since the production process is so simple, *nendo* sends the unpeeled roll to the customer to peel themselves, no need for any Allen wrench or screws. Its crude design also responds to fabrication and distribution costs and environmental concerns, the kinds of issues that face most 21st century consumers. Thus, the cabbage chair fits the active, optimistic and forward-moving 21st century person, the kind of people who, as Miyake has said, “don’t just wear clothes, but shed their skin.” Oki Sato is the essence of both the calculated perfectionism of Japanese tradition but also the playful whimsy that reminds us of childhood, never sacrificing fun for formality.

The trajectory of Japanese design from pastoral craftsmanship to austere, innovation has clearly impacted Western lifestyle significantly and moved our interior lives steadily more towards simplicity and mindfulness. The holistic and spiritual way in which everyday objects and everyday spaces are treated in Japan can easily be imitated in the west but never fully adopted. As much as we want to, this instinct of living simply and *not* filling each room with ephemeral things is something Western culture severely lacks. Instead of contemplating the agency and spiritual function of a table or a vase in a room, we often focus just on what the object will provide rather than seeing the entire space as something of an object in itself. Every space is subject to change and capable of affecting those who exist within it. The modern home in Japan is simple, low to the ground and blends both old and new, often including one or two luxury items to enliven the space, a small plant or two, either tatami mats or pillows beside a central table and minimal artificial lighting if any. In retrospect, the West discovered the value of space and rational Japanese design through the filter of Western modernism, an era that lauded simplicity and stripped down design. In contrast to the generally over-decorated Western dwellings, the pristine constructions that value refinement and fine and fewer materials become an exemplar for clean, progressive dwelling in the West.

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Today, this elegantly restrained style is a signifier of humble wealth, sumptuous but not showy, simple and clean cut, equally tied to both the past and present. Such a brief engagement into Japan is certainly a tease but the essence has revealed itself. The reason for bringing up Japan is not only to draw from an Eastern culture but to see a different response to very similar circumstances. Dwelling is something Japan is acutely aware of and constantly revising. Much of this is based in their ties to Shintoism and agriculture but the way Japan curates the home is concerned more with longevity than novelty. The home as an object goes far beyond minimalism. It is playful, serene and functional and stripped of any excess. Attention to materials both natural and artificial is crucial whether it is a living room or a sleek, austere packaging. But ultimately it is a harmonious respect for nature that keeps Japanese aesthetics grounded, an awareness of the soul that exists in material culture. Another culture that has trended Western culture away from clutter and into simplified dwelling is that of Denmark. While all of Scandinavia will be discussed broadly, especially that of the Swedish IKEA which exists in a globally accepted all-Scandinavian compound, Denmark and their modernist movement will be the focus.

Scandinavia

We hear the words hygge, lagom and functionalism all the time but they typically get blended together as something broadly Scandinavian. Let us take a moment to summarize the essential values that make up Nordic, Swedish and Danish design whether it is in the home or just the environment. At the root of generalized Scandinavian design are simplicity, functionality and beauty. Additionally, the notion of democratic design is key. The things have to be accessible and affordable too, drawing inspiration from simple forms of nature to produce an effect of practicality, durability and comfort. Materials are also fundamental to the Scandinavian design philosophy. They prefer unrefined materials like wood, leather, hemp, or clay over heavy, artificial ones. Only what is needed is used. This is the essence. But talking
about Scandinavian values as a whole is exactly the issue. Broadly, the region can vouch for certain sweeping aesthetic claims but each country also boasts their own distinct values.

Norway’s identity continues this trend of durability, beauty, functionality, simplicity and natural forms but due to its melancholic seasonal darkness and resulting existence in the shadows, interiors decidedly take advantage of pale colors and warm lighting to create a comfortable ambience. In comparison to its neighbors, Norwegian design is less style-conscious but more concerned with innovative, modernist ideas. Along with this comes a strong minimalist aesthetic as well choosing clean, linear designs and pale woods to create an unusual but fresh look. Hans-Christian Bauer (1980-) is one Norwegian designer who exemplifies these values in his ribbed ceramic vases that exude warmth and simple innovation (fig. 37). Of course, today HC Bauer practices in Copenhagen like many of the biggest furniture designers. Regardless, his pieces are still definitively Nordic in their rational proportions and strong material integrity (fig. 38). Finally, it should be noted that Nordic interiors will often be found with furs and blankets thrown over furniture and plenty of innovative lighting to fill the space. Sweden also finds itself enduring long winters and constantly in need of natural, pale light.

Sweden is epitomized by all things light, airy and radiant. The word *lagom*, meaning “just the right amount” or “enough, sufficient, just right” is quintessential to Swedish culture. It encapsulates their value of balance and moderation not only in the home but in food, clothing and industrial design. Within the home, utilizing pale walls, floors and furniture to reflect natural light, the Swedish interior is cheerful and inviting on dark winter days. Another priority is efficiency. So naturally, the furniture is fairly minimalist, employing diverse ideas of form to challenge traditional methods. Interiors focus on a clean and light aesthetic, using plenty of white, black and blue with an occasional pastel pink, yellow or green to mix things up. The furniture utilizes straight lines and gentle curves and ranges from simple objects like stick-back chairs to more sophisticated feats of craft. Bruno Mathsson (1907-1988) was one Swedish furniture designer and architect who highlighted these notions, known for his functional modernist
approach in making woven, curvilinear chairs that fit the shape of a body (fig. 39). Ultimately, Swedish
design is notable for calm, muted interiors but also objects that employ glass and leather channelling the
country’s strong tradition of craft. Finally, Denmark has gotten more credit than its neighbors for its
material culture and sense of comfort within and out of the home.

*Hygge* is a word quickly used when Danish design is mentioned. Generally, it denotes a mood of
coziness and comfortable living along with feelings of wellness and warmth. But Danish design goes far
beyond *hygge*. Even in the mass-produced furniture of Muuto (fig. 41), we immediately feel this
atmosphere of warmth and comfort but also the necessity of innovation. Muuto combines industrial
technologies with traditional concepts of simplicity and functionalism. As far as decor, homes in
Denmark are sparsely decorated, preferring open, uncluttered space. The style of 1950s Denmark objects
is influenced immensely by the Bauhaus School, which closed in the 1930s, but embracing local materials
and functional forms. In a way, these attempt to unify art, craft and technology, implementing semiotics
and color theory too. Later, Bauhaus was criticized for its lack of recognition of the human element,
shunned for focusing too much on mechanistic views of human nature and not on how a home *actually*
functions. But this is not present in Denmark’s adoption of these ideas. They have taken the most sincere
parts of Bauhaus and made them their own. But one cannot talk about Danish design without addressing
Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971), one of the most iconic modernist designers of his time. Jacobsen’s *Egg*
(1958) (fig. 42) and *Swan* (1958) (fig. 43) chairs epitomize a chubby, curvy, futuristic Danish look that

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81 Since the 1970s, Finland has also been developing a distinctive design style, heavily influenced by nature.
Granted it is less known than its neighbors but certainly must be mentioned. Known mostly for their furniture and
glass designs, Finnish designers are known for their material sensibility and ecologically astute design techniques.
One of the best known contemporary design companies to have come out of Finland, Artek was launched in 1935 by
four young Finns: Alvar and Aino Aalto, Maire Gullichsen and Nils-Gustav Hahl. Their business concept was to
‘sell furniture and to promote a modern culture of habitation by exhibitions and other educational means.’ With this
mission, they stood for a new kind of design environment, emphasizing the significance of everyday life and the
synthesis of art, architecture and design. Their vision continues today. Artek is still known for its innovative
contribution to contemporary design and its ethical values of aesthetics and ecology. Key elements of all Artek
designs are functionality and timelessness; the company still produces many of the founders’ original designs from
the 1930s (fig. 40). Artek continue to extend their range of designs, collaborating with Finnish and international
artists, designers and architects. (England, *Culture Trip*, 2014)
adds a distinct sense of whimsy to any room. Homes in Denmark feel extremely spacious no matter their actual physical size, supplemented by clean lines and minimalist furnishings. Emphasis is usually on windows and lamps, mellow colors to add to the whole of sleek, simple and practical. Of course there are threads between these three design identities but noting the distinctions is key in the conversation of ritual space in the home. Scandinavian culture values the home aesthetic in a way few cultures have.

The success of specifically Danish modern furniture comes not from a striving for essential beauty but from an attempt to construct a meaningful narrative from an object. The 1950s were essentially when this concept of Danish design made its breakthrough. Some would argue that its growth came solely from the increased incomes of the Danish people in the 1950s due to the booming import market. Others would simply say that this style of furniture sells itself due to its easy, functional beauty. But the two main reasons cited by scholars are the fact that each piece of furniture contains a framed, material narrative and that the social network of craftsmen and architects in Denmark promoted these narratives.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), continuing off of McCracken, calls this system the “fashion system.” The consumer buys the chair not because it is functional or beautiful but because it is fashionable. As we mentioned before, objects have the power to distinguish between class, status, age and even lifestyle of a person. By purchasing Danish modern furniture, a person is purchasing a certain lifestyle and inherently a narrative to theoretically live by. But in order to analyze this phenomenon, we have to know the history.

Kaare Klint (1888-1954) was the head of the furniture design department at KADK (The Royal Danish Academy of Art and Design). His method was considered to be a more “scientific” alternative to Bauhaus culture. Function came before form for Klint, putting aesthetics behind and raising up scientific theory to maximize function. This was Klint’s idea of modernity based on progress and objective goals.

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rather than catering to fashion. This he felt Bauhaus already did too much. Klint distinguished his style from any foreign traditions as well as any norms of the past. As a result, we get some of the most foundational Danish designs like *Safari Chair (1969)* (fig. 44) noted for its archetypal design transformed into a collapsible modern masterpiece. And through his students’ work, the mind of Klint permeated Danish material culture long after his death.

In 1927, at the Cabinet Makers Guild Exhibition in Copenhagen, a monumental thing happened. Historically, these exhibitions were for craftsmen to show off and sell their finest traditional work but as modernism came around, the new masses of functionalist architects began to dislike this kind of work. However, these were the most gifted craftsmen in Denmark. So the architects, those with the ideas and the money, decided to employ these craftsmen to build their radical modernist concepts since most manufacturers wouldn’t go near them. These cabinet makers knew how to work with wood better than anyone, plus this would contrast the growing trend towards the steel, cold, unnaturally manufactured look of Bauhaus furniture. With skilled craftsman, these heady designers could not only pay less to produce their ideas but also maintain a truly organic, handmade feel to their work. This relationship between educated designers and skilled handworkers is the basis for the distinct aesthetic of Danish modern with its impeccable branding of the style. By the late 1930s, the style had gone international, making appearances at the New York World's Fair in 1939, emanating an essence of “homeliness”83 and precise, man-made craftsmanship. This struck a chord for many buyers who wanted an escape from the fast-paced, rapidly industrializing West. It was even noted that with Danish modern, these design teams combined both the functionalist needs of modernism and the demand for rustic, homemade goods.

There is no question that the Cabinet Guild Show cemented the designer/maker relationship and promoted the functional, honest craftsmanship of these objects. But the furniture industry and consumers

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took some time to accept this new style. But eventually, with the influx of furniture stores, popularity began to grow. *Den Permanente* was one of these stores in Copenhagen that existed from the 1930s to the 1980s (fig. 45). It was really more than a store though, it was a collective of designers and artisans who built a place to promote the best in Danish modern. And for many years it was the preeminent source for the finest Danish furniture, home accessories, lighting, jewelry, textiles and other crafts in the world. *Den Permanente* started as a medium sized room in a second floor exhibition space in the Versterport office building next to the Central Railway Station. Originally, 126 exhibitors were shown in the space. The store moved around a bit – to the ground floor in 1937, to a different spot in 1940, and then out altogether when the Nazis took occupation of the building in 1944 – before finally settling in a two-story space facing Vesterbrogade, the main shopping street in the Vesterbro district. *Den Permanente* hugely influenced the growth of Danish modern especially for American tourists. The store offered something exquisitely Danish or exported items from Japan, and provided the option of shipping purchases to their homes.\

Architect and editor of the Danish School of Arts and Crafts journal, Viggo Sten Moller (1897-1990) was also a prominent promoter of this design mode. He promoted a radical break from traditional patterns as a reform of cultural meaning without imitating the past. Naturally, this also opposed manufactured production. But in reality, Industrial manufacturers like *Wegner + Juhl (1947)* (fig. 46) and *Jacobsen + Kjaerholm* (fig. 47) were what made Danish modern internationally known, not those from the Klint School. This was mostly due to the latter’s exorbitantly expensive materials and the former’s ability to make more products in less time. Some were even beginning to use steel (*J+K*) to closer resemble the International Style. Once a model had been created, then it could be mass produced. But

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nonetheless, these items were still certainly made for the stylistically sophisticated, regardless of these changes.

Through marketing and social engineering, Danish modern promoted a better life to consumers through better homes. Now, with department stores emerging in the West, growing income, more homes, more lifestyle magazines and more young couples, the qualities of simple, unique, functional and honest became increasingly appealing to a post-Depression America. This appealed mostly to educated, middle class groups who wanted to show their good taste in art and culture in their spaces of dwelling. Thus, the US was the ideal market for Danish modern. *Den Permanente* sent a wide variety of luxury items to the US, and even the Museum of Modern Art in New York, were hugely instrumental in this movement. The MoMA even hosted a series between 1950 and 1955 called *Good Design* celebrating the work of Finn Juhl (1912-1989), Hans Wegner (1914-2007) and many others displaying what was current and on-trend. 650,000 people attended it. Since American industry relied almost entirely on manufactured objects and unskilled labor, these handcrafted items possessed a certain allure and mystique for wealthy collectors. *The New York Times* and *Interiors* even promoted Danish modern above Bauhaus style in the late 1950s. But this obsession in the US was not limited to the stunning craftsmanship. Danish design provided this visage of clarity, peace and order to Americans that they needed these qualities in their lives. They sold individuality, self-expression and a sculptural alternative to the cold lines of International Modernism. It was a luxurious alternative to the consumerism and efficiency that had taken over the States. To buy Danish modern was to buy a lifestyle of distinction representing a larger struggle in cultivation of reason and success. These items were signifiers of modern lifestyle for those who consumed them.

But soon enough, this beautiful narrative encountered issues. By the late 1950s about 50% of Danish furniture exports were going to the US. It became much more about commercial opportunities

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than authenticity. Knockoffs began to emerge in the 1960s and though a few more Danophile shows happened, the hype was clearly past its peak. Industrialized furniture began to win out. Even Finn Juhl and Georg Jensen (1904-) stopped selling in the US for a while. Handicraft and industry began to blur and since manufacturing was cheaper, cabinetmakers struggled to retain their relationships with designers. Many cabinet makers left the furniture industry entirely. Neither manufacturers nor designers in Denmark adopted new methods or materials falling back on old formulae. Suddenly, Denmark could not keep up with the innovations of Italy and Finland. Verner Panton (1926-1998) and Poul Kjaerholm (1929-1980) (fig. 48) would eventually adopt plastic and steel designs, breaking from the original ideals of Danish modern\textsuperscript{86}. They were not handcrafted and they lacked the warmth, informality and craftsmanship that the style once possessed.

By the 1970s, consumers had much higher expectations for designs. Suddenly, companies like Bang + Olufsen (1925-) were forced to inlay their television sets with rosewood just to keep their aesthetic within the Danish canon. Consumers often noted Danish modern to be quite unfashionable. The main transformation being that people did not want to keep furniture for as long as they once did and thus had less of a chance of investing in handcrafted masterworks. Den Permanente still had the monopoly in Denmark but eventually had to start selling manufactured pieces due to demand. Many cabinetmakers left the collective and started Danish Cabinetmaker’s Furniture which hurt Den Permanente deeply. Den Permanente closed in 1989 but its legacy of easily purchased furniture is one that many brands would emulate in the future. The Danish School of Arts and Crafts fell into disagreement over how much they would succumb to commercialism, some wanting to submit to fashion and others stubbornly remaining in tradition. The art of selling had superseded the art of creating.\textsuperscript{87} But nonetheless, this tradition will always remain, even if quietly, in manufactured furniture and will forever be a Danish tradition.


\textsuperscript{87} Hansen, “Networks, Narratives, and New Markets” 2006, ibid.
By the end of the 20th century, despite its inevitable fall from grace, Danish modern was one of the single most renowned international styles and its influence is uncontested. As functional sculptures, these furniture pieces both embrace the tradition of comfort, craftsmanship, and appreciation of materials but equally a timeless sense of narrative, each piece with a unique expression of everyday aesthetics. Not only did these pieces provide a service but they provided decoration to a space. Within the modern dwelling, these objects make a definitive statement about the owner and the interior both enlivening the space and injecting a certain poetry into the frame of living. In the second half of the 21st century, we find Copenhagen to be one of the strongest design cities in the world, not only in tradition but in innovation.

Perhaps one of the most unique members of the continuing Danish canon is Thomas Poulsen (1971-) better known by his moniker, FOS. Virtually invisible online, the artist and designer investigates, in his recent book Gestalt, how the language of objects and space define us as social beings. FOS is interested in promoting “Social Design.” He defines this as a concern with the design of objects that improve human livelihood. Social design can be manifested in a lot of ways. These objects can be furniture, common functional tools, or even spaces that promote an interplay between the user and the object. Through this lens, FOS plays with the relationship of the object and greater world contexts where design is not merely an attempt at serving the few, and the many simultaneously. FOS takes this Danish tradition of democratic design and looks inward and analyzes who we become in certain spaces when certain objects are present. He believes interiors are frames for interactions to take place.88 Let it be known that these pieces are primarily one-offs and bought almost exclusively by galleries and private patrons. His work is distinctly different than any other traditional or modern Danish work one will ever see. Without attempting to be strange or analytical, these works evoke eons of primordial elements combined with manufactured design in their appearance. They are renewed conceptualizations of what functional furniture can be, bridging the gap between art and everyday object. His pieces are at once

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confusing and nostalgic, ritual and secular. He sees the art of dwelling in the world both as an instinct and a means of comprehending. FOS is a prophet of material culture.

Poulsen begins his philosophy by noting that public, open space is overloaded with stimuli. It is ephemeral and in constant fluxus. But the physical interior is different. The interior is where memory can be stored, a temporary refuge from the world where contemplation and repose can occur. FOS is interested in what happens within these walls, in a confined space with no connections to the outside world, only with those and that which already exist within the space. The interactions that happen inside can also stand in as a metaphor for those that happen in the world. There can be systems, economies and culture within it. Arguments, promises, exchanges and fights happen within the home. Many happen within the bedroom or kitchen. FOS strives to bring the nature of the world into the social realm by isolating these interactions. By building spaces and objects, we are reminded what we are, mortal and temporary. But our potential is great. We have the opportunity to create, to say something and ultimately make declarations that resonate. In furniture, we design objects that manipulate the body and mind but equally free us of prescribed action. Inside, we create a non-space, a bubble, sheltered from the natural elements but providing a frame for interactions that occur naturally in the world. FOS analyzes how our instinct to be and create in the world is a symptom of our ethnically controlled social behaviour – and thereby how space defines our way of interacting. In other words these walls, this interior can be as specific as a home or as broad as border walls. The spaces we design for ourselves define the way we act. His spaces foster a dialogue on freedom and control and how human identity is dictated by cultural, material rhetoric in our surroundings. “A freedom that will dissolve the strangling ropes of identity, opening up space for interpretations.”

One example of FOS’ work, Mændenes Hjem (2006) or The Men’s Home (fig. 50), is a home for struggling male addicts that deals with the anguish and restlessness of an addict through social design. He

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addresses in *Mændenes Hjem* the fact that anxiety can drive us to do anything and it is something that can afflict all people. But where there is pressure, there is action. In other words, out of anxiety can come change. So with this in mind, FOS and urban planner Kenneth Balfelt (1966-) set out to create an interior that promoted more fruitful, safer and less hierarchical dialogues than in a typical halfway house. The objective was to play down the ‘patient–doctor’ relationship and instead create a dialogue based on equality. 90 Two things they did to accomplish this were to make the home resemble a trailer so that it felt temporary and familiar to the men, and second, to make the doors notably heavy in order to make the men more aware of the act of entering and exiting the home. Before, this rehab center had a very unwelcoming interior and conflict-creating reception area. Most of the violent incidents happen in the reception. At the entrance was one open room with a café on one side and a dining area on the other. The café had a low bar counter and the staff was among the users. The reception went from a control situation to a “people being together” situation91. *Mændenes Hjem* is a most raw example of how a space can have agency when seen as a moldable object. Parts of *Mændenes Hjem* now live in the National Gallery of Denmark.

FOS also concerns himself with the objects we accumulate throughout our lives. He is known for often speaking on the obsession of hoarders. People who fill their dwellings with items from the outside either out of fear of the apocalypse (the future) or out of fear of losing their hold on the past (nostalgia). In this way, everyday goods, furniture, papers, even novelty items become signifiers for less immediate times. Both agents of memory and of a distant future. Keeping items for a long period of time injects values and tradition into them whether they are displayed or kept in a dark storage space. These items still exist in our homes and evoke feelings of a different time. A souvenir from a past vacation, a sconce from an ancestor, an upholstered wingback chair, a can of beans, an inherited vase from a grandparent. Each item exists in the present but is tied to another time and place. Objects develop an environment through

90 Poulsen, Thomas. *Gestalt: (1 to 116), (A to Z).* InOtherWords, 2017.
91 Poulsen, Thomas. *Gestalt: (1 to 116), (A to Z).* InOtherWords, 2017.
accumulation. In his *Ice Cream Stand (2004)* (no image available), FOS built a functional ice cream stand fully out of accumulated rubbish from the galleries at Frieze Art Fair in London giving agency and function to forgotten remnants of objects. In his *Oslo (2011)* (fig. 51), an immersive public sculpture outfitted with a bar, stage, and radio station, the artwork is activated and fully realized only through its use by visitors. In this way, the accumulation of people in the space alludes to this theory about hoarders. FOS hoards people to derive meaning in the piece.

His *Mountain Vase (2017)* (fig. 52) series best represents these ideas by being an everyday object but one with organic, almost surreal qualities. Though it could be used for holding plants, it easily stands alone as a sculptural object. It both exists in the present but evokes a roughness of the mountains and a frantic vision of the future. Finally, during his series for French Fashion house *Celine*, FOS’s *Street Lamp (2007)* (fig. 53) which uses a wooden stand, brass shade and raw concrete base makes a visceral statement on furniture by using worn, rough materials and polished luxury elements that appear at once primordial and futurist. This lamp juxtaposes two unlikely elements and illuminates any space with a rustic allure. It also provides a rich ecosystem to compliment *Celine’s* luxurious collection. Along with his *Diamond Table (2013)* (fig. 54) and *Original Designer’s Workshop (2017)* (fig. 55), these installations explore the ties between our instinctive, prehistoric past and modern design. The first appears to be a massive diamond emerging from the black earth, evoking the feeling of something precious emerging from within the dark, dismal earth, displaying a rigid contrast. The latter allows itself to be fully functional. Their function however is also social: these objects are part of complex feedback systems in which materials, ideas, things, symbols, and situations are active communicators, aligning the natural forces for design with the human evolution. They take on the shape of some of the earliest design objects: the primordial stone axe, arrowheads and soap, products of urban settlements which demanded social cooperation. They stand as a testament to the statement “design is primordial.”

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Thus FOS creates a physical connection with his users with his socially inspired objects and environments using audience interaction and acute attention to materials. By engaging both the user and the object, he creates truly humanist work that rejects convention, engages with fundamental ideals of dwelling and the powerful role that objects play in space. His pieces possess at once an ancient and distinctly new aesthetic. They act as place holders and as metaphors for the interactions that occur in the world. They are functional artifacts that transform furniture into more than just practical objects but sculptural agents of perception. FOS blends the Danish tradition of democratic design with a desire to see the home as a poetic space, a frame for interactions and fundamentally, a shelter from the chaotic world.

IKEA

Now we find ourselves in rooms surrounded by manufactured objects. As we stretch decades beyond postmodernity, the desire for longevity in our furniture has almost completely gone away except in collector communities. The hearth is now the kitchen. The altar is still the altar for some but for many it is probably their phone or TV. Why buy something that takes long to purchase and is old and heavy when you can get something shipped directly to your door for less? In the way we have now looked at the history of consumption, the meaning of dwelling and the universal home as an object, we must look at IKEA. The brand of lifestyle that IKEA sells worldwide is a celebration of peaceful, homogenous, and industrious ideals through mass-produced furniture, a sense of “Swedishness” if you will. But how do we look at something designed, mass-produced, mass-consumed and then mass-disposed as something with artistic merit? We also have to ask how this is changed by the labyrinthine experience of walking through the store, observing these menageries of perfected lifestyles and perfect children. And how does purchasing lifestyles made up of disposable, nondurable goods repeatedly affect our sense of being?

In a letter that prefaces *A Furniture Dealer’s Testament*, the company’s constitutional text, Ingvar Kamprad, the founder, wrote,
“A well-known industrialist/politician once said that IKEA has had a greater impact on the democratization process than many political measures combined.” 93 In other words, through a standardized material culture, IKEA can solve the world’s most persistent issues.

Kamprad (1926-2018) opened his first store in Älmhult, Sweden in the remote, rocky Smaland, a cold region known for exceptionally obstinate and thrifty locals. These are values Kamprad instills into all of his “coworkers.” His grandparents were German immigrants. In 1896, the family bought a large timber estate in Agunnaryd, Sweden and built a farm there. Despite how poetic this sounds, as the story goes, when a local bank rejected the grandfather’s loan for the property, he swiftly killed his dogs then himself. In the wake of his death, his widow ran the farm and eventually passed it down to their son, Feodor. Feodor married the daughter of the country store owner and in 1926, the two had a son named Ingvar. As a child, Ingvar sold old matches from his family store. When this genius little business took off, he expanded to Christmas cards, lingonberries, and garden seeds. It just kept getting bigger and bigger until this entrepreneurial endeavor became an actual business that could no longer be run by just Ingvar. Thus began IKEA. Selling pens, udder balm, and every other small object that an agrarian Swede could buy in bulk, Ingvar made his initial fortune. Only then did he start to sell furniture. His plan was to eliminate the middleman and sell the products for the same price or less than what he bought them for. First and foremost, Kamprad started to use a catalogue in 1943 to tempt people to come to the warehouse almost like an exhibition. And like a trendy gallery opening, Kamprad lured people into these “shops” where people could physically see and use the furniture they were intending to buy. They could live in it before fully committing to it. 94

Ten years later, IKEA had expanded so drastically that German executives at the company accidentally opened a store in Konstanz when they had meant to open one in Koblenz. 95 But despite this

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95 Collins, Lauren. “House Perfect.” 2017
rapid growth, the brand still claims to retain its fundamental Swedish values. For one, all employees are required to know about the first 60 years of Kamprad’s life. This history is given to them on a DVD when they are hired. Strange, maybe. But this sense of thrift and efficiency pervades the way IKEA looks after their workers and makes sure they know that even their billionaire founder, Kamprad still drives around in a beat-up Volvo. *Lista* or “making do” is one Swedish concept they take seriously. Most notably they “make do” by using employees as models for catalogues. But ultimately, *Folkhemmet* meaning “the people’s home” symbolic of a harmonious, classless Sweden, is something IKEA has mass-appropriated for its brand. *Folkhemmet* envisions a world in which beautiful things are made accessible to everyone through mass production, an idyllic and socialist perspective but undoubtedly a tenet of what IKEA hopes to produce. IKEA has commercialized this *folkhemmet* concept, standardized it to make it more digestible for more people, and sold it as this ideal vision of dwelling. IKEA is LEGO for grown-ups. Building different lifestyle possibilities with furniture as we did with the toys of our childhoods.

Behind the scenes, designers begin with a price and then work inward. This is the pinnacle of “making do” with what is available. For example, the *Lack* table (fig. 56), the most sold and most iconic item at IKEA, sells for $8. A price is determined first. Designers will then figure what can be made for that little. Then, out of wood by-product, made into twenty-two by twenty-two inch squares of particle board and wood veneer exteriors, the *Lack* table emerges. Essentially made of cardboard, *Lack* is light enough to be easily flatpacked and shipped, minimizing damage and maximizing profit. The consumer will assemble it, use it for however many years and then leave it on the curb or for the next owner. In many ways IKEA invented disposable furniture. But this throwaway culture has to do with both the consumers and the company, not one exclusively. According to people who work with IKEA, the brand intends for items to be used and reused by future generations and gain some kind of postmodern patina but this is a bit hard to believe. What we do know is that IKEA furniture is austere, and loyal to its values
but it certainly does not have the same story that an antique desk or sconce would have. Maybe young people are more concerned with dwelling with something that works than something with genuine value.

The IKEA catalogue is also a great primer for seeing this standardized, Scandinavian clean living that they sell. Certainly less aspirational than Architectural Digest, the catalogue is essentially a self-help manual to attain a certain kind of life. In it, one can find a room set up to resemble a Swedish Bed & Breakfast, an inviting scene of rustic countryside. A large dining table in the center surrounded by chairs and a lamp. Board games are neatly (but not too neatly) stacked beside the table. Blankets and furs are draped over the couch, a real burning stove puts smoke in the atmosphere, and ceramic milk pitcher sits on the table with fresh bread and jam. This intricate but perfect scene is inviting to the viewer, this coziness and absolute ease of living, a temple of *hygge* for the non-Scandinavian buyer (fig. 57). IKEA’s vision of life in its environs is a safe and hamish one. In its rooms, people don’t run late, they don’t bicker; they have children, but they don’t have sex. You get the picture.

It should also be noted that Kamprad was briefly a disciple of a Swedish neo-Nazi in 1948. Though before his death, in his biography by Bertil Torekull, he blamed this relationship on naivety and the influence that his German grandmother and father had on his adolescence. The fact that it happened at all is questionable but reflective his Swedish isolation growing up. This news didn't exactly stop people from buying their goods.

But what is IKEA actually doing to this sense of dwelling that all humans strive for? In her iconic *New Yorker* editorial, “House Perfect,” Lauren Collins engages with the realities of this Life Improvement Store. They have three hundred and twenty-six stores in thirty-eight countries. In the fiscal year 2010, it sold $23.1 billion worth of goods, a 7.7-per-cent increase over the year before. The invisible designer of domestic life not only reflects but molds in its ubiquity our routines and attitudes. For example, take the young professional with a job right out of college in a tiny apartment in New York. How many times will

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that person move in the next 10 years? How many IKEA manuals will they flip through in the process of figuring out how they will design their common room? How many of those items will end up on the curb and not in their next apartment?

IKEA offers more than nine thousand products divided into four “style groups”: Traditional, Scandinavian, Modern, and Popular. These are then subdivided into such categories as Continental Dark, Continental Light, Contemporary, and Ethnic. These provide models for the young couple or young professional to curate their life. In a paper called On the Ikeanization of France (2007), a sociologist named Tod Hartman (1978 - 2016) suggests that IKEA resolves the conundrum posed by Georges Perec (1936-1982) in his 1965 novel, Les Choses (1965). 97 This novel is about a young couple consumed with unhappiness at the discrepancy between the dismal home they have and the tasteful one they think they deserve. He ponders on the prospect that home is a stand-in for our expectations for our lives. We curate our homes in a way that our ideal self would enjoy. But IKEA understands that this ideal is never static.

They make their products so affordable that you can’t afford not to buy them. Maybe you even buy two of something. “IKEA offers the serendipity of the yard sale without the mothballs” Collins adds. They offer a menagerie of goods that you simply cannot resist. Bill Moggridge, the director of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, calls IKEA’s aesthetic “global functional minimalism.” It is fundamentally modernist but just neutral enough to avoid local preferences and sell enough products to keep the prices low. In other words, IKEA products are intended to work as well aesthetically in Riyadh as they do in Reykjavík. Like McDonalds, some of the collection is tailored to local culture but 95% of the product range is standardized.

Collins even mentions a quotation from Freud addressed to his future wife, Martha, during their engagement:

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99 Collins, Lauren. “House Perfect.” 2017
“Tables and chairs, beds, mirrors, a clock to remind the happy couple of the passage of time, an armchair for an hour’s pleasant daydreaming, carpets to help the housewife keep the floors clean, linen tied with pretty ribbons in the cupboard and dresses of the latest fashion and hats with artificial flowers, pictures on the wall, glasses for everyday and others for wine and festive occasions. . . . Are we to hang our hearts on such little things? Yes, and without hesitation.\textsuperscript{100}

Choosing a piece of furniture in the 19th century was a serious decision because of the expectation that it was permanent. IKEA has made interiors ephemeral. Its furniture is a placeholder for the inevitable upgrade. It works until it breaks or until its owners decide to break up. It carries no traces, no sense of patina. We can quite easily become servile to the IKEA nesting instinct. We can easily become entranced by the room simulations and imagine ourselves living in them. The Swedish brand designs lifestyles for us to choose for an easy attractive price tag. They enable a liberated self-invention, the ability to design the life that we’ve always wanted with little to no commitment. It invites buyers to design a life of “perfect” dwelling and dispose of it cheaply as soon as they’re bored with it. Some people shun the notion, some people treat it like a human-sized doll house. The buying process of IKEA is provides a museum-like view of these potential lifestyles of idyllic “Swedishness.”

We are guided through the store like curious tourists and encouraged to buy as much as possible. Blue tarpaulin bags beckon to us as we enter, asking us politely to fill them. After we walk up the stairs, we step onto the main aisle that makes us feel like we are indefinitely walking straight until we exit. The main aisle curves every 50 ft\textsuperscript{101} but relies on the curious darting of feet for success. This method is almost comparable to that of an Mediterranean marketplace, a sea of potentially buyable goods with persuasive salesmen yelling buzzwords to catch our attention. The marketing of these objects have the same effect, everpresent, waiting to catch your eye and jump into your blue bag. Specific employees are in charge of


keeping the place tidy and making these interiors look real, making sure each fake computer is dusted, every bed made and every price tag facing out. And then comes the section of cheap goods. IKEA uses a technique here called “bulla bulla,” In this method, an array of items are purposely jumbled in bins, creating the impression of volume and, therefore, inexpensiveness. This is where, if the customer has not bought anything already, they will grab things with relative ease. Not only is there a pillow for everyone but there are big containers, small containers, clocks, plants, little rugs, faux fur rugs, incredibly minimalist, quirky wall posters. The list goes on. At this point, most people will have a relatively full blue bag and ideas of how their new things will enliven their current place in the world.

In the higher price range, the rooms were sold as “living situations.” According to IKEA, these are occupied by eight categories of people: “baby,” “toddler,” “starting school,” “tweens and teens,” “living single/starting out,” “living single/established,” “living together/starting out,” and “living together/established.” They group people in this way to further determine what stage of life their customers are in and therefore what lifestyle to provide for the consumer. Whatever stage of your life, IKEA has a product for you. In this way their objects inject themselves into our lives so that we never “grow out” of IKEA. As long as earth has houses for people, there will be a need for a strong and efficient IKEA. This is the vision of the company—to create a better life for the many.

They build a tableaux for consumers to imagine a life dedicated to culture and contemplation, building an image of an intellectual lifestyle of serious reading, cooking, painting etc. Another tableaux that they have is that of the urban farmer using cast-iron pans, thick wooden cutting boards and pine furniture to evoke the idea to guests that the owner grows their own vegetables. When placed into the home, these tableaus make us wonder if IKEA is just a prop shop for consumers to build a theatrical narrative around their life with constantly shifting identities. But ultimately, identities aside, what IKEA wants to evoke is minimalism, citing both Japanese and Scandinavian ideals to create a sense of refuge.

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103 Collins, Lauren. “House Perfect.” 2017
out of simple forms and calming colors. In the hierarchy of taste, minimalism always wins out because it cannot be “disproved.”

But IKEA is globally functional. In France alone, the Swedish brand is the second largest furniture producer, generating about 17 million euros in 2006. The brand has since expanded its practical, design-conscious, and inexpensive goods as far as China, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Romania and Russia developing a kind of corporate and aesthetic dominion over a large chunk of the world. This is IKEA’s idea of modernization. But in places like France, where IKEA can undermine a traditional marriage of spending power and good taste, this globally functional, non-controversial minimalism has a particular resonance.

Many would agree that antique objects and heirlooms cannot coexist with items from IKEA. There is not only a cultural clash but an aesthetic one. Decorative objects gain patina and a meaning independent from the rest of the objects in a space while IKEA objects travel in packs and ostensibly dominate whatever space they enter. Their sense of quirky “Scandinavian-ness” almost mocks the existence of any other decorative object around it. One might recall in this moment McCracken’s account of “The Diderot Effect.” In this, McCracken accounts a story from told by Denis Diderot (1713-1784) where he recounts a time when he bought a fancy new dresser and little by little, he finds himself changing the rest of the room to fit the sophistication of the new item. Suddenly his room, once filled with comforting old objects is now overrun with alien new items that lack the same sense of soul. Many would say that IKEA has a similar effect on a room.

In one example given by Tod Hartman in his On the IKEAization of France (2007), a public sector administrator in her late 20s recounts this exact consequence. She accounts that her tableaux of IKEA evokes “i am an architect-designer” (work lighting, glass top table, Billy bookcase with design books etc.) Meanwhile, her grandfather’s art nouveau bookcase, a weathered leather armchair, an oriental

carpet, and a large home entertainment cabinet from the 1970s feel unstuck in time, out of place in the modern flat. Eventually, she felt compelled to put them in storage. The IKEA set on the other hand, creates a whole system of functionality that gives the appearance, not that the buyer is an architect per say but is someone with friends who have effortless modern taste. “IKEA sets allow the consumer to find comfort in the agency of creating new identities, all the while benefiting from affordable prices.”

Additionally, the idea of having a set of furniture, at least in France was historically something exclusive to non-elite consumers. Elite consumers had the privilege and time to buy a curated assortment of individual pieces that perfectly fit the space.

IKEA democratizes their pieces through self-assembly but also through building a hard-working, disciplined identity through them. The brand is not satisfied with providing their customers with just a leisurely identity. Their lifestyle sets are designed to support consumers who pursue serious creative activities like writing or designing. Or at least build the image of it. Thus, notions of occupation and achievement are promoted in IKEA’s aesthetic reflecting their ideal consumer. This ideal consumer is also one who wastes no time. All their rooms are geared toward productivity. The “work area” of this person, in the IKEA world, would consist of a humble pine desk and maybe a lamp where activity is done and objectives achieved (fig. 58). Rest is then taken in the aforementioned minimalist refuge where objectless activities such as meditation, reflection or catharsis can occur. Any media used (books, TV, music etc) are not leisure activities but possess some kind of intellectual merit. The Benno TV stand has a seriousness that could only hold the engaged consumer’s most educational DVD collection (fig. 59). The engaged consumer who inhabits the IKEA tableaux would never waste time actually shopping. But for the consumer who sees this identity and wants to become this ideal culture God, shopping at IKEA can actually be quite enjoyable. It gives them the agency to pick from a variety of affordable “states of

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becoming\(^{106}\) and envision themselves accomplishing creative things in cohesive spaces. And due to the instinct that *nothing must be ruled out*, the tableau possibilities are constantly regenerating and recreating.

In terms of consumption, epitomizes this desire to purchase a lifestyle. Before disposable furniture, young couples would curate their first nest together and find charm in the inevitable clutter. In the clutter there was character and just by living in the space and using the objects, the character would maintain. But without the wealth to acquire the objects of sophisticated society, this agony of material culture would consume them. IKEA greatly resolved this dilemma by manufacturing bourgeois goods at regular consumer cost. But this is about far more than just wanting what one cannot have. This speaks to the nature of consumption itself. The ideal consumer is what the French refer to as *bobo* or *bourgeois-bohèmes*\(^{107}\), those who both reject capitalism and pursue a “progressive lifestyle” but still have to means to attain a privileged position in society if they so choose. The French often associate *bobo* with writers, artists, designers who do not divide work and leisure. They are free from the constraints of capitalism and actually have time to actualize the design of their home interior. IKEA has democratized the lifestyle of *bourgeois-bohèmes*-ism. Both creative and wealthy. They have time to peruse the IKEA catalog and determine which lifestyle they want to explore next. The brand offers consumers the ability to surround themselves with a faux bohemian lifestyle purely through aesthetics. It also should be questioned whether or not this mass production is even ethical.

Due to its Scandinavian roots and range of campaigns on issues of sustainability, IKEA get away with a veneer of ethical responsibility but in reality, it is still a multinational corporation that hurts local businesses and consumes forests at a massive rate to impose its aesthetic monopoly. But because of this veneer, consumers feel they are also being more responsible by buying IKEA. This helps the consumer upholding a superficial notion that they are “progressive.” Just like how IKEA bundles up its authenticity

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and moral stance into a consumable, flat-packed parcel, the consumer uses this uncontroversial, stripped down furniture to feel more comfortable about their own ethics.

There is also a solitary lifestyle that the IKEA tableaux promotes. It prefers a productive antisociality over a dialectical, socially productive labor. Thus it endorses a disengagement with the collective sphere, a sense that the most productive work is carried out when one is sheltered from, rather than participating in, the social reality. In 2006, during a time of sociopolitical turmoil in France, a time a great national discontent with the cynical candidates for the 2007 election, IKEA entered the politics. In an advertisement they stated:

“Today, France is dragging its feet. France isn’t advancing. France is fed up, France grumbles! France is tired. It must wake up! But to wake up, it has to sleep well, and to sleep well it needs bedrooms that are comfortable and well designed. With Ikea, say ‘yes’ to a dynamic France. Vote Ikea!”

Throughout this, the ad showed a montage of happy families joyfully bouncing on IKEA beds and typical IKEA tableaux of color-coordinated, perfected domesticity. They wanted to present the “well-needed” repose that they felt represented a “renewed” France. At IKEA, one can purchase a chair that imitates the minimalist style of one Philippe Starck (1949-), a ceiling lamp suggesting the modernist simplicity and sleek industrial forms of the Bauhaus, or kitchen accessories redolent of 1950s Americana for a small fraction of the cost of the “actual” thing, the “genuine” lamp, or “real” antiques. Just like shopping at IKEA, which is the next best thing to acquiring these “genuine” objects, voting or holding on to one’s job becomes a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils or the next best thing. IKEA allows the consumer the consolation of being able to acquire the accessories of an existence not bound to any hierarchy; it allows for consumers a transcendence of the opposition between consumer and creator. This grants to anyone

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with spending power the agency to create multiple identities — the next best thing to actually living those identities. Of course none of this brings about any real change. Finally, we must address this transitory, superficial sense of dwelling that IKEA promotes through the short lifespan of their items. Hartman uses the hilariously perfect metaphor of digestion as an easy way to explain how we consume IKEA furniture. First, we enter, as if at a supermarket and the choices are vast and since the items are affordable, the choices are not as difficult. Sometimes we enter without intention, waiting to be inspired by tableaus we see there and leave with a cohesive set of items. We then digest these objects by placing them in our current living space where they can serve their function and suggest a certain lifestyle until the buyer is tired of them and they are excreted (thrown to the curb, given away, replaced by new IKEA items). In other words, these objects would not make good heirlooms as no object will gain patina on the curb. Once they are bought, they essentially become valueless and are typically the items that get left behind or given away when a family moves since the cost of shipping would cost more than the item. The longevity of an IKEA product depends on how long that person is ready to live out their purchased tableaux. As far as minimalism goes, at least in largely shared spaces, one can get quickly bored and will add material “noise” to the space and slowly kill the minimalism. Secondly, as many of these objects suggest artistic or literary accomplishment in the dwelling, the implementation of these objects has little to no effect on the consumer actually accomplishing these things. In other words, IKEA represents a topical, wishful change of lifestyle rather than any fundamental, affective changes.

Ultimately, we must see IKEA for what it is, not an evil force but an aesthetic monopoly. Nonetheless, it is disposable, producing nothing of lasting value and waning between both consumerism and faux global responsibility. Also, it should be noted that while they are still growing, IKEA’s “design

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for all” strategy is limited to the most affluent parts of the world. They are almost fully absent from Latin America and Africa\textsuperscript{111}. In many ways, they represent a global importation of Euro-American taste and sensibility given only to those nations who are privileged with longstanding affluence or have accepted neo-liberalism. IKEA is also a reflection of prosperity and poverty gradients in the world as some regions are ineligible for this vision of this “new dynamic world” that IKEA foresees. We can imagine finally, one last chapter in Roland Barthes’ \textit{Mythologies} that has the obituary of a cheap-but-cheerful \textit{Billy} bookcase. What better metaphor for postmodernity than this? A soulless compromise that is nice temporarily until we are bored of it and can go get a new one\textsuperscript{112}. And here we stand with IKEA in the history of decorative arts. We are accepting but wary in a place where young home-owners would clearly rather buy something to only keep for a few years than something timeless that will last for generations. Why do we settle for a pre-curated set of superficial, replaceable items that prescribe a lifestyle and only have surface resonation with the room when we could easily find timeless items that possess a sense of poetry?

Because we fear that curating our spaces naturally will reflect poorly on us. It will show that we lack taste which many of us fear most. The interiors and mythologies we design are both a refuge from nature and a place for human interactions to occur. We have made ourselves indoor creatures, requiring shelter to survive but in need of nature’s perfection to inspire the design to unfold.

Home is the heart of humanity. It is the embodiment of everything convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, and desirable by people. It is a place of repose and daydreaming. It has the value of a shell, a womb or a skull. Accumulating objects from the outside and housing the essence. By analyzing our dwelling within the home, how we manipulate, design and discuss our surroundings, we learn that dwelling is a signifier of how we exist in the world. Our rituals and desire to accumulate goods of

\textsuperscript{112} Hartman “On the IKEAization of France.” 2007
functional and aesthetic value stand in for our need to take in knowledge, experience and culture in our rapid race toward death. Our material culture keeps us tied to life, the things we are and wish we could be. Dwellings are profound extensions of the self.

Conclusion

The era of antiques is reaching an end for the common consumer because as we learn and observe, young people are afraid of being stagnant. They need their surroundings to change as quickly as their whims. The instinct to reflect who we are through our spaces of dwelling is real and they should still reflect who we are. But they should reflect us honestly not as something we wish to be. The interior is a place for contemplation, for dreaming, for planning, a place to store memories of the outside. We draw our ideals from film, from advertisement, from what our parents taught us. Objects in the interior have a unique agency on the people who live among and manipulate them. They can reflect status, they can imply old wealth versus new wealth and they can hold memories of past traditions through a contemporary scope. So now that the means of judging postmodern material culture is no longer about quality, sustainability, functionality, spirituality or even permanence, to what standards can we hold interior and furniture design? Have we evolved beyond the need for “hearth” and “altar?” A successful object has the ability to take the viewer back to an earlier even primordial time and forward to safe notions of the future.

American millennial designer, Misha Kahn (1989-) might be the perfect encapsulation of the disillusionment that we are experiencing in contemporary material culture. His work is not only based in skilled craftsmanship but recalls both a prehistoric and futuristic period where aesthetics are as fluid as imagination. In his Coffee Table (2015) (fig. 60), we see a Salvador Dali-esque table made of cast bronze. At once prehistoric and alien, this table has a narrative of the original, pastoral designers of humanity, evoking a naive understanding of the world with a lust for discovery. Kahn creates objects whose function
is masked by the strange assemblage of objects he uses to create them. He designs them by hand with unorthodox materials such as pool noodles and fishing wire and often incorporates digital means in the final stages, creating an interplay between the handmade and the technological. “Misha creates work for a parallel wonderland, where traditional perception of material and structure is pushed to the edges of the room to make space for one big party,” designer John Maeda (1966-), who has collaborated with Kahn, has said about the artist. This goes to show how far we can go towards sculpture without losing a sense of reality.

Kahn sees his generation as visually and culturally literate, open to a wide swath of ideas and influences. “We were ’90s babies born in the lap of wealth, buying lots of new things; then suddenly there were a million recessions,” he muses. “Everyone was thrift shopping, which meant revisiting different vintage periods, quickly cycling through all these different references. It spiralled out of control in a really liberating way. I can throw so many references into a piece (and also stuff from my imagination) and my peers will actually entertain that kind of thinking.”

Kahn’s “The Return of Saturn” (2016) (fig. 61) show is less concerned with the physical utility of objects, but with their psychic impact—their ability to absorb our memories, hopes, and fears. The show’s title suggests an opportunity for the designer to reexamine his origins. Like many millennials, he seems both nostalgic and uncertain about the notion of home. Paint-splashed floor tiles, which Kahn created specifically for the gallery space, were inspired by the linoleum floors of his childhood summer house. While these surfaces have a gestural beauty, other pieces in the show seem more sinister. A metallic chandelier overhead resembles a hovering UFO or some abstract divine force. It certainly does not resemble a chandelier. “The Return of Saturn” is the threshold between utilitarian furniture and sculpture, edging ever closer towards the latter. Yet we have to acknowledge that we are conditioned by the objects

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114 which refers to the red planet returning to occupy the same place in the sky as it did at Kahn’s birth
around us and they reflect who we are. Kahn’s work makes us hyper-aware if not utterly bombarded by this idea in his maximalist extravagant design. He is the essence of what we are driving at in this paper.

We can talk about antique decor in 18th century France and what it represents in art history, who Louis XIV wanted to be seen as through it and how he saw himself through his objects. We can talk about how Elizabethan England began our trend towards capitalist consumerism and how our desire to become someone we are not can be the marketing tool in the business. We can talk about how world’s fairs, department stores, and cinema made us want to have the best new thing and leave our old things to get dusty and die. We can talk about the basic human instinct to not only build but to relate to something in the world, to search for harmony and order, to dwell in a place safe from the chaos of nature. We can talk about how the design cultures in specifically Japan and Denmark have impacted a worldwide drive towards simplicity. We can linger on how this effort to declutter, reorganize and curate our homes is our just our way of trying to change ourselves. Or we could compare and contrast the material culture dictatorship of IKEA to the one-off “furniture ideas” by FOS and Misha Kahn. This will force us to question what the home actually is, what furniture is and what design is. One is a multinational furniture empire that sells sustainable, progressive, Scandinavianized lifestyles through furniture sets. They are material consumerism in its raw form trading quality for quantity. The other is closely tied to art. Both are designers in the most fundamental sense but choose to make work that forces viewers to question if furniture has to be simple, wooden and practical. Maybe these are meant for the gallery and only for a very exclusive group of homes but we must acknowledge their statement. FOS channels the world of consumerism by making artifacts. His objects and spaces promote interaction and act as an interior symbol for the chaos of nature, recalling our most basic instinct to build. Within his poetic vision of the primordial design, we find repose. Misha Kahn channels the discomfort of today in his work, creating a frenzy of spastic entanglement to evoke the chaos of the mind. But within this chaos, this empathy with our collective disillusionment and desire to collect, we also find a calmness.
In the end, we don't seek answers but merely a conversation. By talking about domestic material culture and its implications, we expose so much more that lies beneath. As the world increasingly realizes the importance of its natural environment and makes further moves to protect it, the pressure will continue to maximize the potential of all cities where more of the world’s population will reside. As we watch world’s finite resources deplete due to our increasing dependence on consumption, it is important that we look inward to the home. Not only does the home signify the world but it signifies the mind as well. By examining the state of design and its roots we quickly realize how vital it is to be conscious of our dwelling in the world. The home is the extension of the self, our shelter from the world and our place to store memories, a way of dealing and responding to the chaos. The home reveals a deep cerebral longing that resolves a basic human need for order, structure and knowing how the parts relate to the whole. In this resonance, we find serenity.

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