

## **Beyond Functionalism: The Lost Meaning of Objects**

**By Marcus Fairs**

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**What do you give the society that has everything? It is a question occupying many designers working in post-industrial nations today: the need to provide affordable, useful goods for the home that drove the profession for much of the last century has largely evaporated in these times of plenty. It is like the dilemma you face when choosing a birthday present for a rich friend: nearly every need and every want is already met.**

**Instead, vanguard designers are now busily addressing the neglected non-utilitarian aspects of our domestic culture. The emerging post-functional landscape is dotted with avant-garde design movements that are less concerned with what an object will do *for* the user than what it does *to* them, addressing the brain, the senses and the emotions instead of merely performing a task.**

**The best established of these movements is “conceptual” design – an approach pioneered by the Droog group of Dutch designers that emerged in the early nineties and which has had a profound influence on contemporary design. This catchall title implies that the designer is addressing an issue besides mere function when developing a product; a political statement, a social observation, a scientific principle or even a joke informs the object.**

**A classic example is Jurgen Bey’s 1999 Light Shade Shade, which consists of a cylinder of reflective plastic foil containing a found chandelier. The chandelier is invisible until it is switched on, at which point the foil becomes transparent, revealing the antique light within. Thus the sleekly modern shade suddenly transforms into something from another era, confounding expectations and raising a host of issues including the lack of any real difference between an old light and a new one beyond its form, and the absurdity of style that this implies.**

**In the way that it plays on the incongruity between expectation and reality, this product is also an icon of “ironic” design – a sub-set of conceptual design in which the designer commits a form of sacrilege by poking fun at function.**

**Droog-style conceptualism has opened the door to a host of other related approaches including “narrative” design, in which a story is embedded within an object. Stuart**

Haygarth's Tide chandeliers, which are composed of flotsam scavenged on coastal walks, or his Millennium assemblages of party popper cartridges collected after New Year's Eve celebrations, are recent and spectacular examples of this school.

What all these approaches have in common is the way they give the user something more than just an object they can use: Haygarth's lights and Bey's furniture are things that trigger an intellectual, or an emotional, response – or both. Haygarth's work, for example, is often interpreted as being a comment on environmental issues and while this was never his intention, the fact that it initiates such a debate confirms that Tide is doing something more than merely lighting a room. (In fact, the false mythology of its green credentials adds yet another layer of meaning to the object.)

More recently, designers have started to move away from functional considerations altogether and focus instead on the suggestive power of objects. "Interactive" design is a broad term most commonly used in relation to technological products but in the hands of Moritz Waldemeyer, technology becomes something evocative and mysterious. His By Royal Appointment chairs contain sensors and LED lights that read the colour of the sitter's clothing and project it onto a wall, creating "a personal aura, evoking images of religious icons and kings."

This is not so much a chair upon which merely to sit but instead to engage in a kind of performance. It paints in light something that everyone experiences – namely the force of human personality – but never actually sees. (If you choose to read it this way, that is: it can equally be interpreted as a frivolity. Conceptual design does not demand that the user buys into the concept; you can still use Waldemeyer's chair as a chair if you choose to.)

The "critical" design pioneered by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, however, takes conceptualism a significant step further away from functionalism. The London-based duo identify human frailties such as a fear of terrorism or paranoia over mobile phone radiation and, rather than seeking to overcome them, they instead design objects that draw attention to them.

Dunne & Raby's 2003 Hide Away Furniture is a series of objects created in conjunction with Michael Anastassiades that includes a timber box constructed around the shape of The Naked Maja, the reclining nude in Goya's famous painting. Its purpose is ostensibly therapeutic: someone with an acute fear of abduction could hide in this beautifully crafted casket while adopting the stance of a universal symbol of alluring

self-confidence. But the primary aim of the piece is perhaps to expose as fallacy the utopian belief that, through design, society can rid itself of its problems.

While this is an extreme example, it is nonetheless representative of a major new direction contemporary design is taking. The Modernism-inspired obsession with function that dominated the discipline in the last century so successfully purged objects of any other kind of meaning that they came to be seen as emotionally inert and culturally sterile.

Yet as a visit to any archaeological museum shows, objects have always been inextricably linked to ritual, symbolism, myth and superstition. With their decorations and inscriptions and their patina of reverent use, relics like Greek vases and Roman oil lamps appear almost sacred. And they probably *were* considered quasi-sacred: the gift of food or light was the gift of life itself.

As the standard of living in the Western world has risen, human hopes and fears have changed dramatically. But they have not disappeared, and today's best designers are striving once again to imbue objects with meaning appropriate for our times.