

Inter- reflexiveness of
ART^{and}**DESIGN**

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Student Urmila Mohan
Video SLPEP

Guide Punam Zutshi
Co ordinator Tridip Suhrud

*P Zutshi
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*MS
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Introduction

The development of modern design as an activity definedly distinct from art and the attempt to construct an identity specific to design, compels us to consider what in the dominant culture distinguishes 'Design' and 'Art'. Often art and design (as category of thought), by their very nature convey a tension between the two. Art is ideologically identified with the aspect of singularity of its creation and design with the aspect of multiplicity in production. Within the framework of semiotics one could say the very meaning of art tends to be located within the symbol like quality (that is an aspect of ambivalence and a range of meanings associated within the culture) while design has a sign like quality where the meaning is specific. However sign and symbols together constitute a system of communication like language in any given culture (Leach 1976). What is the language-like larger context in which art and design operate? If signs and symbols together make possible the creation of metaphors by which language communicates, then what could be derived from the relationship between art (symbol) and design (sign)?

In this paper I intend to examine the inter-reflexive nature of art and design and what is signified by the dynamics of art and design as mutually transformable categories. As Barthes' analysis in 'Mythologies' indicates, signifier and signified create a significant myth or history within the culture. If the symbol and sign interact to construct a mythified history, is it possible to say that art and design (through technology), over a period of time, create a myth like phenomena manifested and embodied in the flourishing of various 'styles'/schools of design?

This conceptual framework makes possible the critical consideration of how culture and history treat art (symbol) and design (sign) – not as fixed categorical meanings but constructed and shifted meanings due to inter-reflexiveness that establishes distinct 'styles'.¹ Much like the use of sign and symbol creates a distinct metaphoric system and style, poetry too is distinctive in any given language.² This also raises the issue of whether design and its identity can exist without ultimately becoming a sign of itself.

What ideological forces operate to make the design (sign) a signifier of and metaphor of an aspect associated with art (symbolic)? Perhaps consideration of style and implicit history could yield in its semiotic analysis a paradigmatic and synchronic process whereby design becomes art, and art becomes design. This transformation in fact makes possible within a given culture, communication that is above and beyond mere verbal communication (Leach 1976, Berger 1972). So the manner in which we dress, eat, or perform rituals is encoded in patterned sets, similar to the way we use sounds, words and sentences in a language.

Language and Meaning

Non-verbal communication replicates the structure of language as it is used in verbal communication. As grammatical rules structure words to make meanings within a sentence, there is a grammatical ordering of say, clothing as a system of communication. For example, a wedding dress is distinguished from what is to be worn for mourning. Like the relationship of grammatical structure to tense (time and verb relations) it is not culturally endorsed to serve 'breakfast' at

¹ Refer Boas, 1955 on the role of style in relation to art forms and designed objects within North West coastal art. A similar argument is evident in Levi-Strauss's analysis of face tattooing in parts of Asia and Oceania *Structural Anthropology* 1994

² It is precisely this nature of relationship that makes it possible to recognize Tagore's Bangla poetry as different from the poetry of Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape* Delhi 1967

‘dinner time’. Just as the written musical score (sign) is transformed when the composed piece is played and conducted (symbolic) so too is ‘speech’ (symbolic) transformed by the rules of grammar into the written text of a ‘language’ (sign). Each mode of communication is a transformation of levels within itself as well as being interpretable across the levels. For example, consider the South Indian classical tradition of dance performance. It transforms the signs of Abhinaya (performance, enactment) in relation to recited poetry (structured in grammar like Ragas³) set to the (sign like structured) Taals⁴. However, who actually performs a particular piece indicates the particular symbolic quality of the individual performer. Here all the signs transform within themselves, at the level of words, sounds and acts, but create a symbolic experience in terms of a total performance that can be distinguished in terms of an individual’s style of performance. Identical themes could be symbolically performed in different styles of classical Indian dance styles or schools. For example we can comprehend the praise of Ganapati⁵ as Ganapati being signified as a sign but symbolically its communication is subject to a range of diversity across Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam or Odissi.⁶

Every mode of communication has a language aspect, which is constituted by significant synthesis (transformation) of signs and symbols, verbal and visual, spoken and written, speech and grammar. In fact Language and Culture through communication perform a signifying function. They represent the categories of a society and the categories that make up the worldview of the given society and culture.⁷ Language and Culture could be regarded as identical structures in order to understand the nature of communication in any given society. Similarly both art and design in a given society, have a language that uses signs and symbols to communicate within a cultural context. For example in the cultural universe of Hinduism, Ganapati, as considered in the foregoing discussion on styles of performance, could be a symbol installed in a home to keep misfortune away. But as a sign printed on a sheet of paper (wedding invitation), it indicates an auspicious message. Symbols are metaphorical indices and signs are metonymical indices. In actual discourse (visual, verbal) the two are often combined, although the meaning of one may predominate over the other. In this constant process of transformation from symbol to sign and sign to symbol, lies our perception and definition of what constitutes art or design. This exchange between symbol and sign, metaphor and metonym, paradigm and syntagm is the aspect of change, social transformation, ideology and history. In other words, art and design, symbol and sign, are about the Society and Culture.

Within the forms of art and design, the influences of society are present and within a society the influences of art and design are also located. Similarly in a language, the culture is present and in any given culture, language is present. To use Barthes’ notion of Mythology- language, art and design are ‘signifiers’ and ‘signified’ and what they all signify is, the significant ideology of creativity and the use of conceptualization and imagination to convey meaning.⁸ Art with its symbolic value performs the function of ‘representing’ reality while design with its sign like quality, ‘signifies’ reality. Barthes illustrates these two activities, citing classical poetry as a form of art, with the poet directly representing reality. The staging of a play from a story becomes a

³ Modal scale

⁴ Rhythm cycle

⁵ Elephant headed Hindu God

⁶ Different Indian classical dance styles or schools

⁷ Refer B.L. Whorf in An Introduction to Anthropology 1966, also selected writings of Edward Sapir in Culture, Language and Personality 1964

⁸ S. Balam Product Symbolism of Gandhi and its Connections with Indian Mythology Design Issues vol 5 no 2 Spring 1989, an analysis of communication designed by M.K. Gandhi based on the Krishna as significant, signified by Gandhi himself. Somewhat similar is the role of significance of conceptualization suggested by M.P. Ranjan Design Visualisation 1997 within NID’s context.

form of design, signifying reality through an interpretation of a writer's script. This difference in the level of meaning between symbolic and sign like activity is what creates the sense of 'derived' ness of design within the language of art.

In art, meaning is conveyed through the form and the ideas associated with form i.e. the language of art have an ideological and formal component. The existence of art as a language is the impetus to produce things that satisfy through their form. A process is acknowledged as art when a certain standard of excellence is reached and typical forms are produced. Whether using older standardized forms or imaginative developments of them, the will to create aesthetic beauty cannot exist without a form. Thus the arts owe much of their emotional value to the representative and symbolic values of form. The firmer the associations between idea and form, the greater the expressionistic character of the art. For example, Islamic architectural ceramics uses the form of color in a symbolic manner; the seven colors not only signify themselves but also represent the seven heavenly bodies and the poetic myth associated with them. The Persian usage imposed the traditional name of 'Haft Rang' or seven colors because the number seven was held to correspond to that of the sanctified seven heavenly bodies of importance: Saturn- black, Sun- yellow, Moon- green, Mars- red, Mercury- blue, Jupiter- brown and Venus- white. A further layer of meaning is found in the verse romance of the 'Brides of the seven climes', written in A.D. 1197 by the Persian poet Nezami. According to the poet the ancient king Bahram-Gur, wedded seven different brides from seven different lands. The tales they tell him on seven successive nights together yield the symbolic key (the colors mirror the cosmic order) to the seven colors used by mediaeval Persian ceramists.⁹

Sharing the same syntax, a piece of art or design is assessed for the idea and the semiological value of its form. What differentiates art and design is our perception of the predominance of one over the other. Within a cultural context, art is perceived as being predominantly symbol like (possessing many meanings that can be interpreted) while design is defined as a metonymical activity, creating and being constructed out of signs (the interpretation of meanings is channeled and limited). This hierarchy in levels of meaning leads to the symbol encompassing the sign. Depending on the cultural context, the symbol can be interpreted as sign and symbol (the 'symbol' red stands for itself and the cosmic order in Islamic architecture) as the sign is just one of its many meanings, but although it can be transformed, a sign cannot be viewed as both simultaneously (the 'sign' red signifies only itself i.e. as a color). Design as an activity involves the creation of signs to communicate within a 'system of signs' which in turn derives its meaning from a symbolic order.

The addition and subtraction of meaning from the concept to create myth and meta language, the process of 'transformation' from metaphor to metonym is what constantly changes our perception and hence creates new boundaries within the same continuous framework of language. For example, artists like Andy Warhol use images like Coca- Cola and Marilyn Monroe in a 'sign' like fashion to create 'symbolic' pop art. The process of transformation is a state of flux that reveals to us not only the motivating cultural forces (ideologies), but the manner in which we use language to construct new meanings i.e. an ideology or culture initiates and is signified in the actual process of transformation. The quality of continuity of the role of a culture and its ideology in the context of an evolving language can be equated to or regarded as style, as an established meaning subject to social and cultural changes.

⁹ Barry, Michael Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture Thames and Hudson London 1996

Style and Meaning

A style evolves from an established system of signs (cf Boas 1955), therefore becoming a derivative within a Language of which art (symbolic) and design (sign) are aspects. This makes the Language of a culture akin to 'meta language' in which art, design and style are subsumed and generates new boundaries between forms of art and design. However the boundaries are not hard but permeable. This makes transformations possible and the meanings of art and design, mutually reflexive. Much like Barthes' (1993) treatment of meaning- myth is placed within a metalanguage, which subsumes signifier and signified.

The differentiation of various art forms through styles is an example of the importance of sign systems in art. Based on our perception of style, we are able to differentiate the work of an artist, craftsman or designer. Style is also an important internal indicator of the cultural changes motivating the evolution of the language of art. Since design is an activity of sign constructions, the change in design ideology is easily traced through its style implications. The design schools of Minimalism, Hi tech, Archetypal, Memphis etc. are identifiable through their styles. A good example of the importance of the language of style/sign for design ideology is Archetypal design, for example Scandinavian furniture derives its style by collecting and combining human perceptions of existing signs.

Borrowing of styles can inter relate our perceptions whether of folk and fine art (influence of Kalighat paintings on the work of Jamini Roy), craft and art (the metal sculptures of Meera Mukherjee and the craft of lost wax metal casting of the Bastar tribals) or art and design (Memphis schools of design) demonstrating the flow of language and meaning from one form to the other. This appropriation of interpretation of style is necessary for the development of the language and can result in entirely new forms of art. The Persian miniature is the outcome of an 'artistic misunderstanding' of Chinese art by the Islamic artists.¹⁰ Used to illustrate romantic subjects from Sasanian lore it is a combination of Arabic and Chinese styles. The use of Chinese symbols without considering their inspiration (Taoism) transforms them into signs reinterpreted through the artist's Neoplatonic view for a successful combination of Arabic calligraphy, Islamic geometry and chinoiserie style. In a further appropriation, the Indian artist G.M. Sheikh uses the language of Mughal miniature painting to protest against the emergency in his 'Speechless City' 1975.

A culture's definition of what it perceives as metaphorical and metonymical is affected by the previous context of use of the language and the transformed cultural context. This in turn redefines the culture's perception of art, design and craft. For example, one of the most significant uses of pottery is to be found in the 'Chanoyu' tea ceremony of Japan. Chanoyu is the appreciation of art and worship of nature through the tea ceremony. Based on the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, the tea ceremony associates various arts and crafts like calligraphy, architecture, ceramics, ikebana, metalwork etc. The potter in the case designs the making of the craft/art ceramics for a symbolic, religious ceremony. Design and art, function and form are perfectly integrated in this event, symbolizing the link between culture and nature. By virtue of the context of use of the pottery, the artisan potter can be perceived as both an artist and a designer.

¹⁰ Barry, Michael Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture Thames and Hudson London 1996

Similarly in Gujarat, the artisan potter transcends the boundary between the definitions of craft and art, multiple and single, by the usage of his work as votive offerings.¹¹ Another transition from craft to art is the studio potter who utilizes the craft of pottery to create singular pieces of art, for example Bernard Leach remains the epitome of the artist/ craftsman/ studio potter, struggling with the issue of survival of crafts against an industrial backdrop.

This duality in the identity of the product, between designed form and artistic creation is by nature present in the cultural meaning and historical ideas we have inherited with the term Design.

The Renaissance period in Western civilization is significant as a point of transition between the mediaeval and the modern but it also marks the split between art and science.¹² This rift between art and science gave birth to two cultures- the scientific, quantifiable, hard and the aesthetic, qualitative, soft. Design arose as an activity bridging the gap between the two.

The etymology of the word design provides an internal connection to art and technique.¹³ In the English language the word 'design' exists as a noun and a verb. As a noun it amounts to 'cunning', 'craftiness'. As a verb it means 'to concoct something'. Derived from the Latin Signum, it means 'to draw a sign'. The words 'design', 'machine' - Greek- machos- a device to aid in deception, 'technique' - Greek- art, 'ars' - Latin- maneuverability, are related to each other. The artist (ars, artifex- conjurer) was one who possessed craftiness. Hence design is seen as an activity involving trickery akin to the design of a lever which outsmarts nature by using a law of nature i.e. gravity. During the Renaissance, a similar notion of representation in art involved using a method of nature to study nature. We find this notion of representation in the art/ design in Leonardo's drawings.¹⁴ He uses the tool of perspective to explore various fields like anatomy, engineering, hydraulics, astronomy and painting. Leonardo saw no antagonism between art and science. Towards this aim, his codices are a documentation of his lifelong struggle with language and the attempt to capture something that lay just beyond his powers of expression.

Another example of a person who is acknowledged as a creative individual is the Indian artist M.F. Husain. Starting as a painter of cinema hoardings, Husain's status as a creative mind is greatly influence by our perception of him as a celebrity. He is an example of an individual who has made the transition from commercial, graphic design to fine art. While his aura identifies his work to us as art, his obvious style render his work into art with a graphic sign like quality. With his series of paintings on the Indian actress Madhuri Dixit, graphic cinema posters too become high art.

Transfer and Transformation as processes of meaning making

The following brief illustrations highlight the points made previously regarding the construction of meaning in a language of communication by culture. The first example traces the evolution of the construction of meaning within the Islamic cultural system in the field of architectural ceramics. The second traces the origin of modern design ideology and its attempt at constructing a language for design distinct from art.

¹¹ Shah, Haku Votive Terracotta of Gujarat Mapin Publications Ahmedabad 1985

¹² Zammatti, Carlo Leonardo the Scientist Mc Graw Hill NY 1980

¹³ Flusser, Vilhem 'On the word Design: An etymological essay' Design Issues Vol 2 no 3 Autumn 1995

¹⁴ Zammatti, Carlo Leonardo the Scientist Mc Graw Hill NY 1980

Titus Burckhardt in 'Mirror of the Intellect' says "In the traditional Islamic world art without craftsmanship and technical prowess without beauty are equally inconceivable."¹⁵

Based in this notion of integration is the story of Islamic architectural ceramics. This uses the two previous points about the symbolic value of the seven colors and the origin of the style of Persian miniature painting.

As religion forbade the use of imagery, abstracted cult art became the sole representational style. Later with the growth of royal patronage, arose the style of figurative court art. The figurative court arts decorated the inner walls of rooms used by the ruler and also started the art of illumination, the illustration of the manuscripts at the court library. Court arts depended solely on the ruler, as there was no large sacerdotal class to encourage its development. The sterilization of the figurative style reflected not so much stricter religious control, as the areas general political and cultural decline. For example the transfer of power to the Ottoman palace in Istanbul attracted the artists from the rest of the empire, snuffing out the schools at Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo. The transfer of creative energy after the fifteenth century, to Turkey, Persian and India encouraged Islam's two most brilliant schools of figurative art. These were the court libraries at Herat and Tabriz. The paintings were a fusion of both abstract cult art and figurative court art, combining the skills of designer pattern maker (literally a 'sign' maker) and the 'painter of souls'. Thus we find record of a court artist "busy making designs for book binders, illuminators, tent makers and tile cutters."¹⁶

The cycle of growth of the Persian miniature is a combination of various styles- Chinese and Arabic, court and cult. It is also a story of the literal physical transfer of languages from one material onto another. The painter observed the forms created by the tiles on the architecture and rendered them on the pages of the manuscript. Centuries later these miniatures were interpreted back onto the North wall of the Lahore fort, for Shah Jehan's 'Wall of Pictures'. From wall to paper to wall, this cycle of transfer is a physical manifestation of a transformation in the language of art. In this transfer lies the importance of society, its culture, its history and its ideology as the 'signified' in the process of transformation.

The definition of design has its roots in the vocabulary of art and technology. The perception of both in pre and post Renaissance times indicates the change in definition of design with respect to art. Both design and art were seen as means of manipulating nature using the tools of nature, the technology created by man. The artist/designer was seen as a manipulator, conjurer, juggler and trickster. The demarcation of the modern designer's role arises with the need for industrial mass manufacture. Hence the connection of design in specific with industrial technology. Combining this definition that arises out of a context of use along with the literal meaning of the word 'design' in Latin, as 'to draw a sign', helps us arrive at our present definition of the activity as industrial art.

The attempt at defining design as an activity separate from that of art while using the vocabulary of art contains the dialectics of constructing new meaning over a period of time. The design movements belonging to the Modernist period faced the issue of redefining boundaries, styles, and usage to construct a new language for design but did they really transcend the metalanguage to which design and art belong? As a result society has falsely regarded design and art as discrete and distinct categories of thought and often ignored the language like context in which the two transform and create meaning that are embodied in socially accepted and established styles, often

¹⁵ Titus Burckhardt Crafts Magazine Crafts Council England Sept/Oct 1995

¹⁶ Barry, Michael Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture Thames and Hudson London 1996

institutionalized as ‘schools’. Perhaps this false consciousness also has ideological connotations whereby each school signifies a particular status and historical and political struggle.

“The aim of nature in man, the aim of man is style.”¹⁷ This prophetic view by Theo Van Doesberg, founder of De Stijl, at the turn of the century echoed the view of the Modernists, who based their belief in the possibilities offered by science and technology of that specific time. Assuming and accepting that goods should be mass-produced, they aligned their ideology with technology, as a symbol of greater freedom and progress. This ideology was different from that of the various handicraft guilds.¹⁸ The stressing on pure objectivity through a subjective use of the language of art created the Machine aesthetic, a combination of a Modernist insistence on ‘pure’ industrially inspired form and a residue of Romantic mysticism.¹⁹ An example of the evolution of such thought in the attempt to create a new language of design was at the Bauhaus school.

Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in 1919 at Weimar. The ideology of the Bauhaus was a reflection of German post-industrialized society and the changes occurring within it. The Bauhaus can be seen as having its roots in the Deutscher Werkbund movement, a movement that was at the heart of German Industrial expansion from 1907 onwards. The ambivalent attitudes of its members was due to the influence of both the arts and crafts movement and those who looked towards industry to provide a universal standard to be practiced in art and design. Some reacted to the excessive individualization of art and its irrelevance to society. Regardless of how they defined Quality, whether as excellence of craftsmanship, artistic perfection or the quality of social life, all members shared the same concern, that in an industrial society all qualities were threatened. Prior to the First World War, the Werkbund believed that all the evils of industrialization could be solved by industry alone. Following the world war, they viewed war as a product of industry. The shifts in the ideology of Walter Gropius (founder of the Bauhaus) were connected to the time of its inception, a post world war I period when urgent problems of social and artistic renewal demanded solutions. Hope seemed to lie in the renewal of handicrafts and the use of craftsmanship in all fields of work to socio-economically recreate the German landscape. In this atmosphere Gropius set up the ‘Bauhaus’ (literally the ‘building hut’ of the middle ages).

Based on a strong tradition of German handicrafts, it emphasized individuality and personal inspiration in its early years. Later on with the revival of Gropius’ pre war ideal of a modern style of applied arts aesthetically based upon modern technology, the roles of design and industry were cast within the old framework of the idea of revitalizing society through the connection between art and industry. Gropius’ medievalist artisan program at Weimar was changed into the principle of mass production at Dessau. The attempt to construct a language of design led finally to its transformation into a much narrower orientation of a methodical, objective activity. Post Bauhaus evolution in the language of design saw the continuation of the Werkbund work through the school of Ulm and advances in the theory of design. Yet the present day definition of modern design as distinct from art has its cultural base in the Bauhaus.²⁰

The attempt at constructing ‘symbolic’ form by an activity of signs resulted in the tension of constructing metaphorical meaning through design in the Modernist period. Unlike the case of the

¹⁷ Overy, Paul The Great Rietveld and all his Works Crafts Magazine no 86 Crafts Council England May June 1987

¹⁸ Harrod, Tanya Paradise Postponed Crafts Magazine no 140 Crafts Council England May June 1996

¹⁹ This German notion of producing handicraft and its religious mystical implications could be understood in the light of Weber’s formulations about Protestant ethic and the spirit of Capitalism, Introduction to Sociology 1985

²⁰ Burckhardt, Titus The Werkbund The Design Council England 1980

Islamic ceramists who drew upon a stable symbolic universe, the Bauhaus marks the change in the notion of the symbolic between the medieval and the modern. Unable to draw upon the symbolic universe of medieval times, Bauhaus sought to recover its practice of craft. This was coupled with a new language of design in a radically altered world. As a work from the Modernist period, Gerrit Rietveld's 'red blue' chair is a combination of art, craft and design, in a drive towards new symbolic form. A craftsman and designer, Rietveld made furniture that deliberately avoided the mystique of craftsmanship while creating objects of use and symbolic function of great originality. The red blue chair designed around 1917-18 displayed the influence of craft, art, architecture, design and modernism, signifying the idea of reconstruction where a chair is stripped to its basic elements. The chair was an attempt to bring together fine art and design elements, formal and manual intuitions, sculptural and craftsmanship like skills of perception under the ideology of the 'Stijl' movement.

The German Werkbund was motivated by the objective of restoring to commerce and industry the sense of contributing to the culture of the country. It was also motivated by dissatisfaction with the art and industry of that time. A process that started out as an attempt to make industry relevant to society via art was transformed into a conscious construction of the basics for a new language. Hence 'Design' in its modern sense, then became a language, which had its inception within the culture of the Bauhaus.²¹

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that culture and language are inter-related, language is culture and culture is language. The way we categorize our world is reflected in our use of language. Language in its linguistic sense translates into languages of experience and expression. By analogy, design is a language that defines the way we view the world. It thus has its own grammar and vocabulary that allows 'statements' to be made. The struggle to make new statements and even enlarge the scope of the rules is in a sense a way to redefine the world. Bauhaus was a culture, which dissatisfied with the manner in which post industrial Germany constructed its world created a language for modern design from the language of art and industry in order to create a new society. The need and attempt to construct meaning through design or art is thus born out of perceptual changes, born in turn of socio-cultural transformations. Making meanings that are interpretable is in fact the very essence of what constitutes culture.

As mediums of communication, the language of art and design and our use of them reflect and affect culture. This becomes apparent when one searches for any external indicators of change or transformation. The change in fact is within and from the culture itself. The histories of institutionalized style within the system of meta-language are signifiers and signified by the changing times.²² What we term art and design today are definitions born out of an accumulation of meaning. Looking at the way we construct meaning may help reassess and even make redundant attempts to segregate activities, which are actually born of evolution in a continuous chain of meaning making.²³ Instead of being two mutually exclusive categories, art and design are actually inter reflexive states, united on the plane of culture.

²¹ Fransiscono Walter Gropius and the creation of the Bauhaus in Weimar Chicago 1971

²² A similar argument has been put forward by Charles and Ray Eames in The India Report- April 1958 National Institute of Design 1997

²³ In practice, society bridges the difference in perceptions of art and design. The need to perceive even design as art and render symbolic value to it is met by the idea of 'aura' which is transparently value created by social perceptions. Aura whether created by the passage of time or the personality behind the work renders metaphorical value to signs. Aura is also signified by style, allowing us to look at a design from the 'classic', Modernist period as a work of art.

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