

Research Article

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Design, It's Not What It Looks Like!

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Abstract: The main purpose of this paper is to explore the different ways in which materials are used to deceive, the reasons behind these practices, and what they say about society. Starting off from the premises that by choosing a medium one also implies a message due to the inherent personality of the materials, we will first take a swift look at the history of deceiving through artistic practices. Further on we shall take into consideration the shift in paradigm noticeable in contemporary design as we explain the motivations and the strategies behind creating objects that seem made out of plastic and yet they are not. Touching on subjects such as sustainable design and commodification, we will try to conclude whether the eco-friendly design is indeed working or if it is just another successful marketing strategy.

Keywords: materials, affectionate design, throwaway culture, commodification, Anthora

Premises

This research is rooted in Marshall McLuhan's famous theory in communication that boldly, yet unceremoniously states that the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964: 1), which was here translated to the creation of material goods. Considering objects and their creation as a form of visual communication there is no reason why the theory should not still stand when applied to this area. The material that one chooses to work with ends up as being one of the defining characteristics of the final product and the choice is never taken lightly or without consideration. This being said, it's quite obvious that a truthful and

more complete reading of any material work should have in mind the medium in which it was created. By taking notice of this process we can piece together a much ampler story about the maker's intentions, and on a deeper level, we also find out more about the social context of both the work and its "users". Considering that societies consist not only of people but also of artifacts which do, in fact, have politics (Winner, 1980), and that objects are the embodiment of human intentions, we realize objects fulfill more than one role since they can appear as a cause, a medium, and a consequence of social relationships (Riggins, 1994: 1), thus analyzing them is relevant for the better understanding of society and its habits.

Meaning of Materials and a Brief History of Deceiving Uses

When looking at various forms of artistic expression it becomes quite clear why some materials were chosen over others, despite immediate availability or even functionality, and also why some materials became famed and desirable, which in turn added to their symbolism. It is easy to see that the immense monuments of the Antiquity, carved in resilient materials such as marble, were created by rich societies preoccupied by permanence, remembrance, and opulence; their function was symbolic: the projection of an intimidating image, a show of power and wealth. Continuing this analogy, at the opposite end of the spectrum, we can give as an example the intentional usage of very frail glass for creating icons in certain parts of Eastern Europe. These became a specific Christian Orthodox tradition in a time of religious intolerance, as the support was inexpensive and easy to come by, the resulting icon was rather small in size and not at all bulky so it could be transported. Glass also had the added bonus of being easily disposable and virtually untraceable so they could be destroyed if needed. Examples of artifacts where medium is the key multiply,

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or rather become more clear, in the Postmodern era where mockery and subversive messages abound: from Warhol's serial serigraphies that take advantage of consumerism, to the massive trend in 21st century sculpture brought to light in Richard Flood's *Unmonumental* (Flood, 2007) we see a lot of artist using the medium in a conceptual manner.

The fact that materials each have their own personalities that eventually get embedded in the final product is quite clear and needs no further discussion, the focus of this paper however is the widespread practice of faking certain materials, practices that have been going on for centuries especially in the decorative arts. This comes precisely by way of consequence from the fact that materials are carriers of certain information, and faking them speaks volumes about the socio-economical context in which the objects were created and about their respective owners. Made to deceive and look like something they are not, the spell was mostly broken when the object was touched, or even upon closer visual inspection, which must mean that the trick was not meant to be long-standing, the lie was not meant to be permanent. This is possibly what makes these actions seem practical rather than untruthful as they were not passing off fakes as originals, like some might when it comes to jewelry for example, and this is what saves them from being disconsidered.

Historically speaking, we notice that the so-called noble materials were the ones being faked, which is perfectly understandable because of a series of pragmatic reasons. They were, after all the most expensive, rare, and difficult to work with, more time was spent in creating the pieces, which ultimately raises the costs even higher. Those materials were the most desirable, precisely because of the message of wealth they implied. However, faking them was not in any way considered a cheap trick, but instead a more accessible way of achieving luxury and it was certainly not for the masses.

We see this kind of approach very early on in illusionistic painting from the Ancient Roman times such as the frescoes found in Pompeii and the *trompe l'oeil* tradition was continued in by the Renaissance painters. The painted motifs are generally architectural elements that have the double role of enriching the decorum while at the same time creating a separation between the different narrative scenes of the frescoes. The technique involved is rich in details so that the result resembles actual marble or other textures and makes the elements seem as though carved from stone. During the Renaissance the examples are countless from Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, where he painted not only architectural elements but also marble statues that frame his larger scenes, to Mantegna's

playful yet spectacular foreshortenings in the *Camera degli Sposi* in Mantua, to Michelangelo's *tour de force* in the Sixtine Chapel, where his architectural elements make the room seem more vaulted than it actually is. These examples are merely the extraordinary ones, but the practice itself was extensive so there is no shortage of examples of painted marble walls and fake golden pillars in buildings all over Europe. Becoming an established style in interior decorations the *trompe l'oeil* reached a peak in the Baroque era, while in the Rococo style painting was mostly replaced by stucco work, or the two techniques were used together.

If we take into consideration the fact that at the time more of a distinction was made between artists, generally considered that the painters used mobile supports for their work, such as wooden panels, and artisans (Henrion, 1985: 1) we might even say that these kind of frescoes belong more to the area of interior design, and thus we can consider the faking of materials more as a characteristic of the decorative arts. This is supported by further evidence as these techniques are used for both aesthetic and functional purposes in the centuries to come.

Along with *trompe l'oeil* frescoes other techniques were being used, such as plasterwork and gilding and by the late 1700s even veneers and *papier-mâché* were used for furniture: a metal framework for support, and painted decoration that imitated the *pietre dure* designs (Riley, Bayer, 2003: 225). Once again it is important to stress that these works were meant for the high classes of society which is partly due to the fact that the interest for what we might call truthful craftsmanship decreased progressively from the Middle Ages onward. Stonemasonry will still be used but not on the same level of detail that we can find in a Gothic cathedral for example, which is not to say that the craftsmen working in stucco were considered to be of a lower quality. Quite the contrary, we might observe that clever imitations, like something off a theater set, were highly appreciated and what we are seeing is merely a change in fashion and a preference for materials that were cheaper and easier to use.

While the functional role of the pieces needs no explanation, the aesthetic motivation behind some of these deceiving decors may come from the desire to imitate some glorious Ancient past. Special attention was paid to the Ancient Roman period which was considered for centuries as the gold-standard and its appreciation through imitation probably peaked right before the rise of modernity, through Neoclassicism. A telling example of these practices is the aptly named *Roman Stool*, dating from approximately 1800, it was created by Marsh & Tatham a British company famous for attracting

aristocratic and royal clientele (Riley, Bayer, 2003: 139). The stool sits on four column-like legs inspired by Roman architecture and it is draped in a heavy cloth with fringes. Although made entirely out of beech, the woodwork was then painted in such a way that it resembles veined white marble, as if the whole chair, drapery and all, was carved out of a stone block.

Changes in Modern Times and Contemporary Design

The situation in this field, like in so many others changed around the middle of the 19th century, when the Industrial Revolution prompted the appearance of the industrial designer, a species closer to what today we call product designers than to the craftsmen and artisans (Asensio, 2002: 22). They faced different challenges and different customers as the rise of the new bourgeoisie increased the interest and demand for objects for the home (Riggins, 1994: 25), and which in turn opened the door to collecting on a larger, more democratic scale. By the 20th century, modernity's obsession with authenticity became the norm, which brought along obvious consequences for the faking of materials. These practices suddenly had negative connotations and were considered in bad taste. Since the most expensive materials were the ones being faked, the cheaper versions were considered to be for the people who couldn't afford a genuine article and, more importantly, who didn't know any better. This particular form of trying to fake your social status by what was considered misusing respected symbols became vilified and the objects themselves came to be considered as kitsch, a most degrading attribute (Greenberg, 1961: 10).

Since the glorification of cheap consumerism that surfaced through Pop Art, a certain kind of high-end kitsch became accepted and respectable since it was perceived as irony. This is embodied in the furniture designs of Gufram, an Italian company that in 1971 created the *Capitello* (Polsten, Neumann, Schuler, Leven, 2006: 211) a stool which looks more or less like a cartoon version of a Roman column. Although in this case the stool quite clearly looks like it's made from plastic and does not deceive through the use of materials, it is still an interesting play on making the Ancient legacy available for households.

In contemporary design today there still exists a school of thought that considers materials must be used in an honest manner according to their specific properties, and that disguise and deception is not only unwanted, but downright unacceptable (Ashby, Johnson, 2003: 30). This desire to return to the roots of craftsmanship is

expressed by using materials in a way that exposes their natural appearance and is also noticeable by the growing interest for traditional materials such as wood, pottery, porcelain, and glass (Asensio, 2002: 232). Despite this belief in the truthfulness of materials, we can also still see them used in a deceiving manner, but with a crucial shift in paradigm concerning which ones are faked. Instead of using cheaper materials and making them look like more expensive ones, we began to notice an increase in objects that are created in reverse, namely they are made out of glass or porcelain, but made to look like plastic.

The motivations behind these practices are multiple and complex and although the results initiated from designers' criticism over consumerism and the throwaway culture, the pieces seem to ironically respond to the consumers' wishes. The use of specific design strategies is what makes these objects popular and successful and precisely the fact that they break some of the rules is what makes them worthy of a second look.

Deceiving Objects: Examples, Uses, and Strategies

Chronologically speaking, the very first time we see this kind of action is in the piece called *La Siesta* created by the design collective comprised of Alberto Martinez, Raky Martinez, and Héctor Serrano (Asensio, 2002: 204). It is a terracotta drinking vessel that combines the look of a plastic bottle with that of a traditional Spanish *botijo*, these were originally made from clay as it was known to keep the water cool even in hot weather. The combined characteristics of the object make for a different drinking experience which marked the beginning of the ecologically friendly designs that gained momentum as the contemporary society became increasingly obsessed with reducing waste and readapting more traditional solutions.

Ecodesign began to make an appearance in the 60s but it was only in the late 90s that it really took off (Barbero, Cozzo, 2012: 10) probably due to several socio-economical factors that highlighted the strain put on Earth's resources through industrial production. The public's increased perception of massive overconsumption, or the recent climate changes prompted the designers to use their skills for tackling social problems on a larger scale (Tromp, Hekkert, Verbeek, 2011: 3) marking a decisive change in design habits that hope to offer solutions rather than just adapting to the market's desires. Designers saw the problems created by the throwaway society's predilection for disposing rather than reusing items (Jones, 2008:

26) and many decided that the most efficient way to act against this was to use its same exact symbols in an opposite manner.

They took the mundane, perishable objects that surrounded us and transferred them to a more permanent setting, thus making them more noticeable and increasing their value. The most ubiquitous, single-use plastic items that are taken for granted were suddenly celebrated for their functionality and their often simplistic, yet not unpleasant design. These items entered the spotlight as they were made from a more durable and precious material, the classic shape of a plastic water bottle can even become transformed into an elegant conversation piece when made out of glass. This can also be explained by the fact that some materials, such as plastic, are just not used for fine dining. Plastic tableware is acceptable only during picnics and otherwise considered ‘tacky’ and thus cheap, because as it turns out, texture is a highly important attribute (Fisher, 2004: 23). Glass and porcelain are classier and so their use is not accompanied by a sense of shame, this coupled with the novelty of the product, even increase the pride of the owner and user.

The attention is drawn to the harmful actions of the throwaway culture through different and inventive strategies. When we consider the *Crinkle Cup* created in 1975 by Rob Brandt it’s easy to notice that by presenting a crushed plastic cup, the designer emphasizes its short lifespan and at the same time it makes us take notice of a gesture that has become almost an automatism. Made out of solid ceramic, the cup is left as a bittersweet testimony of the treatment applied to its plastic counterparts.

In a different attempt to prompt responsibility and changes in consumer behavior we have the product called *I Am Not a Paper Cup*, which despite looking exactly like a paper cup is made out of heat-resistant porcelain and its to-go lid is molded from durable silicone. This is currently advertised as an eco-friendly, green design alternative and of course as being more economical in the long run since one will no longer need to spend money on single-use cups, which explains the item’s price.

Even though the ecological factor was behind the initial impulse of faking materials, it is now no longer the only reason, which is not to say that the sustainability message is no longer embedded in such objects, just that more often than not it is doubled by something more. Seeing as though the objects that are being copied were all initially designed in the same era, mostly in the decades between the 50s and 70s when the wonderful qualities of plastic boosted both the industry and the fervent consumerism, we can detect that designers use nostalgia as a strategy in their creations. This nostalgia is manifested

either towards a more prosperous time in relatively recent history, or towards the consumer’s own childhood, and for products that have since fallen out of fashion and/or production such is the case of the porcelain TV-Dinner tray. This strategy of creating an affectionate connection offers a double result: firstly it greatly increases the consumer’s desire to own the item which is of utmost importance (Bofinger, 2011: 6), and secondly if the connection and affection towards it is strong enough, they are less likely to throw it away (Morris, 2009: 89).

These principles of affectionate design are becoming increasingly important for the creative industry since it was noticed that the emotional side of a design can be more critical to a product’s success than even its practical elements (Norman, 2004: 5). The creation of a bond between the consumer and the object is seen as the main purpose of design in the same way that sustainable design made a purpose out of using only the most suitable resources. The result is that sometimes designers even change the initial function of one object only to use its form in the creation of a new, lovable object, with a different function. There are many examples such as a clay vase that looks like a paper bag, or a glass version of the zip-lock bag that really defies its initial function whatsoever, or a porcelain tetrapack that of course no longer works in the same way it was originally intended. All of these however look familiar and above all they speak to consumers of the concept of home, which is what ultimately makes them desirable.

Despite the fact that these designs are based on disposable items and their current functions are precisely the opposite, we can’t help but notice that the objects would not have been quite so successful if they were not so recognizable. The truth is that the simple, rather functionalist designs of the original items, through their massive presence and use, became part of our collective consciousness. It seems that even though they were produced out of rational and economical purposes and are considered to be boring and neutral (Asensio, 2002: 30-32), they are still strong enough to create an impact. These initial items that were the symbols of conformist consumer society, when transferred to a different material become, once again, opposites from their original intention. This is an explanation as to why the designers are not preoccupied with necessarily rethinking the ergonomics of a bottle, except maybe for the novelty impact, and instead use what the consumer is already familiar with. The idea behind this practice is that the message transmitted through the material will come across stronger and the chances of actually changing the consumer behavior will be higher if it comes from a known object.

Another explanation for the use of materials in a deceiving manner is just the fact that in order to create an object that is both socially-responsible and lovable at the same time, most designers employ humor and surprise, strategies that generally contradict the truthful use of materials. It appears that humor alongside nostalgia creates a much more immediate response from the mass of consumers as opposed to the more “elitist” theory of truthful craftsmanship that impacts a smaller group. The hidden novelty, as it came to be classified (Ludden, Schifferstein, Hekkert, 2008: 30), elevates the object to a different status and the surprise is generated precisely because of the previous experiences user have with other objects that look the same. Their expectancies will be broken upon touching, and this kind of surprise can only be generated if the consumers have come in contact with the original objects, which is an easy task since we seem to be surrounded by them. It was stated that using this strategy may result in disappointment (Ludden, Schifferstein, Hekkert, 2008: 37) after one becomes aware of the unexpected properties of the object and thus resulting in the designer’s failure, but from the extensive popularity of these items it is safe to assume this is not the case and that through the use of humor the objects become highly enjoyable and are made to really stand out.

The Journey of the *Anthora*

Besides the many objects already mentioned as examples of the strategies used when it comes to faking materials, there is one item whose transfer into ceramic is the final step in its consecration, a step that we can see as inherently ironic. The *Anthora* paper cup was designed in 1923 by Leslie Buck, a Holocaust refugee with no designer training (Fox, 2010) and it was an instant success which paved its way towards becoming a recognizable symbol of New York City for the following decades. The design itself was an attempt at appropriating the Greek cultural heritage and even the name is a play on the word ‘amphora’. The reason for this was the fact that most of New York’s coffee shops and diners were, at that time, run by Greek immigrants (Walker, 2013) which is what, in turn, assured the immense popularity of the cup.

The white and blue colors of the Modern Greek flag are accompanied by an Ancient Greek-inspired font that spells ‘we are happy to serve you’ and by a rather sketchy image of an amphora. Although the lettering and the vase were cheap and cartoon looking they seemed to be suited for the overall kitsch establishments that sold them,

which were often decorated with Greek statuary and gold leaf (Denker, 2007: 45), choices that reflect the profile of both the entrepreneurs and their clientele. The first time the cup made its way into a higher culture environment was in 1994 when it appeared in an exhibition entitled *The Persistence of Classicism* at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts (Gill, 2005), however the version presented there was not even Buck’s original design but one that had the image of a *Discuss Thrower* instead of the amphora.

This paper cup became established as an icon of New York coffee culture by its omnipresence and its appearance in famous TV shows such as *NYPD Blue* or *Seinfeld*, where it functioned as a constant reminder of the filming location just as much as a shot of the *Statue of Liberty* would have done. The Greek design was a standard throughout the 70s and 80s, but by the time Starbucks arrived in New York in 1994, the Greek dominance over diners had already diminished considerably and this was one of the reasons the *Anthora* fell out of fashion. The appearance of corporations marked the introduction of their own branded coffee cups that helped establish their visual identity, while the smaller, independent businesses either tried to become more hip and design their own cups or just opted for the much cheaper, plain white paper cups, so much so that the *Anthora* is now produced in very small numbers by just one company (Fox, 2010). Since it is still a recognizable piece of ephemera for several generations, the cup still makes appearances on TV or in movies, but this is probably best explained not only through nostalgia over it, but also by producers trying to avoid product placement or the need to pay royalties to large coffee companies.

The iconic status of the *Anthora* was established by entering on display in the Design Department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and by getting on lists such as ‘A History of NY in 50 Objects’ (Roberts, 2012). What makes it relevant for this study is that despite falling out of use years ago and despite the design itself being generally considered kitsch, a ceramic version of the *Anthora* is now being sold in the Museum of Modern Art’s Design Shop. It is viewed as a successful item and many buy it as a piece of New York memorabilia. This is just another confirmation that nostalgia does not really take into account if the original design was good or not, because this comes second to the immense popularity and presence of the object. This is true not only of the *Anthora*, but of all the items in the previous examples.

This paper cup that originally tried to copy, in style and Ancient ceramic vessel, has now been returned to a ceramic material in one of the most twisted examples of

commodification by inferring value to the valueless. The result cannot help but feel ironic especially when we take into consideration that the millions of paper cups that have been sold were not being bought for their design, but for their caffeinated content, and they most certainly were not being kept as mementos, but swiftly discarded. Despite using a principle of kitsch like commodification, it is turned on its head and the resulting objects are not considered as belonging to this category. Quite the contrary, they are now in high fashion due to their upstanding declared policies such as keeping a certain symbol alive or helping save the planet's resources.

Conclusions

Trying to figure out the reasons behind the faking of materials throughout the ages we notice not only the importance of the message transmitted by each material, but also the multiple ways in which deceit is achieved. The contemporary shift in paradigm towards the dishonest use of materials make it acceptable when it is somehow coated by the luster of nostalgia or by society's ever-growing obsession with being ecologically-responsible. In other words, deceiving in order to criticize the consumerist society is a relevant act practiced by designers and even artists, instead faking expensive materials or brands is still considered to be distasteful, as it seeks to deceive on a different scale of social interaction and the surprise it produces is no longer welcomed.

The social logic responsible for the ultimate success of these practices seems pretty sound, especially if one takes into consideration the stated ecological goal of the products. However, despite the fact that the objects became popular precisely because of this initial message, it would be mistake to believe this goal has been followed through until the end. This is to say that no amount of objects imitating those made out of plastic has actually changed society's habits when it comes to consuming, since they are, by now, too deeply rooted in the current lifestyle. Contemporary society, especially if pertaining to an urban culture finds comfort in the functionality of the plastic containers and the same object transferred to any other material no longer offers the same advantages, thus there is a need for a more profound lifestyle change in order to reverse these everyday habits.

The fact that the faking of materials has departed from its initial purpose is clearly seen in objects which no longer function properly in their new setting, as their plastic counterparts would have or ones that are presented in a very glamorous setting. Such is Selab & Alessandro

Zambelli's collection *Estetico Quotidiano* that elevates the humble paper plate, the egg carton, and countless other such items to the rank of fine and precious porcelain, and with a price tag to match their new found glory, they no longer adhere to the sustainable message, but are used merely as novelty items.

We can safely say that although the initial reason was declared to be eco-friendly, the objects themselves are not. The use of humor and the fact that they were marketed as sustainable just turned them into mass-produced items, like countless others. Also it needs to be taken into account that the energy and resources spent to produce them on a large scale are not at all negligible, so it turns out they might as well do more harm than good. It seems that by preying on nostalgia and mass-obsessions which just happened to correspond with the market's desires, these items had simply brought along a new trend that does little more for society than to increase the consumerist attitude. The difference lays in the added bonus of consumers feeling less guilty about the purchases because of the ecological message implied by the use of material.

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