

Art and Design

Art and Design:

History, Theory, Practice

Edited by

Peter Stupples and Jane Venis

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
Jane Venis	
Chapter One.....	11
Disegno: <i>Art, Design and a Priceless Pillowcase</i> Peter Stupples	
Chapter Two	27
<i>Viennese Art and Design Practices and the Problematic Interface between Philosophy and Reality</i> Monica Lausch	
Chapter Three	43
<i>A Man of Many Arts: Bookending Leo Bensemann's Graphic Art and Book Design</i> Noel Waite	
Chapter Four.....	61
<i>Art and Design: An Evolutionary and Cognitive Approach</i> Lesley Kaiser	
Chapter Five	77
<i>Thinking Works: Art & Design in the Work of Alex Selenitsch</i> Greg Missingham	
Chapter Six	95
<i>The Architect's Drawing in the Postmodern Era</i> Yvette Putra	

Chapter Seven.....	111
<i>Art & Chinese Gardens & Design & Abstract Painting & Craig Easton</i>	
Chapter Eight.....	129
<i>The Fondation Louis Vuitton Alexandra Kennedy</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	145
<i>The Good-Morrow: Twin Hemispheres of Art and Design Kate Tregloan and Kit Wise</i>	
Chapter Ten	163
<i>The Eureka Salon: Use, Usefulness, and the “Unuseless” Object Jane Venis</i>	
Chapter Eleven	177
<i>Conceptual Fashion: Towards Fashion in the Expanded Field Simon Swale</i>	
Chapter Twelve	193
<i>Art-Educated Design Educators Jane Malthus, Col Fay, Matthew Galloway, Megan Brassel-Jones, Margo Barton, Gavin O’Brien and Caroline McCaw</i>	
Chapter Thirteen.....	207
<i>Te Hokinga Mai o nga Taonga Tuku Iho: The Return of our Old Treasures Roka Hurihia Ngarimu-Cameron</i>	
Contributors.....	215

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

All measurements in centimetres

- Fig. 1-1. Michelangelo, *Study for Adam*, 1510-11, 19.3 x 25.9, red chalk over graphite, London, British Museum, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).
- Fig. 1-2. Kazimir Malevich, pillow with Suprematist design at Second Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art (Verbovka), December 1917. Photo: Oliver M. Sayler (1917), courtesy of Charlotte Douglas, New York.
- Fig 1-3. Kazimir Malevich, *Untitled*, 1915, oil on canvas, 53 x 53, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Acquisition confirmed in 2009 by agreement with the Heirs of Kazimir Malevich.
- Fig. 2-1. Josef Hoffmann, Design of Kabarett Fledermaus, Vienna, c. 1910. Photo: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Bildarchiv. Copyright: ÖNB/Wien, 80.287-B.
- Fig. 2-2. Design for Adolf Loos's Goldman and Salatsch House on the Michaelerplatz (also known as the Looshaus), with window boxes added by an office staff member authorised by the City of Vienna on 3 May 1912 (according to the stamped information added to the drawing). Pencil on tracing paper. 500 x 435. Source: Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.
- Fig, 2-3. Friedensreich Hundertwasser, *Public Toilet in Kawakawa* (2000). Photo: Shirley Williams. Source: *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand*.
- Fig. 3-1. These "Typographical designs" featured in *A Second Book of Leo Bensemann's Work* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1952). They include Bensemann's design for a classical logotype for the Press, and an arrangement of letters used on the 1948 *Printing Types: A Second Specimen Book* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1948). Possession of the author.
- Fig. 3-2. Cover (left) and title page (right) of *Man to Be* by Rewi Alley (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1970). Possession of the author.

- Fig. 3-3. Cover (left) and photograph of publications (right) from *A Caxton Book List 64* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1964). Possession of the author.
- Fig. 4-1. Lesley Kaiser, *POST ART, ceramic plates (Limited edition)*. ART + DESIGN exhibition at the H.D. Skinner Annex, Otago Museum, 2015.
- Fig. 4-2. Lesley Kaiser, *POST ART, ceramic plates, 2008 (Limited edition)*, showing the signed edition of ten *Never tell the Trouble what the TROUBLE is* glazed plates.
- Fig. 4-3. Lesley Kaiser, *POST ART, 2008, ceramic plates (Limited edition)*, showing the artist's name and the verbal aphorism glazed on the back of the plate.
- Fig. 5-1. Six Experimental Sequences in Alex Selenitsch's art.
- Fig. 5-2. Matrix for considering Alex Selenitsch's art.
- Fig. 5-3. Examples of Alex Selenitsch's calligraphic art.
- Fig. 7-1. *Mod Lang*, 2012, Melbourne; Yu Yuan, Shanghai. Photo: Craig Easton.
- Fig. 7-2. Zhuozheng Yuan, Suzhou; *Now & Then/Here & There*, 2013, Melbourne. Photo: Craig Easton.
- Fig. 7-3. Lan Yuan, Dunedin; Wangshi Yuan, Suzhou; *50 Variations*, 2013, Melbourne, mixed media. Photo: Craig Easton.
- Fig. 7-4. Wangshi Yuan: *50 Variations*, 2013, mixed media. Inset: Ou Yuan Suzhou, embroidered window; *Listening to the Rain/Wave Pavilion*, 2013, Melbourne, video with sound. Photo: Craig Easton.
- Fig. 8-1. View of the Eiffel Tower from the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, Paris. Photo: Alexandra Kennedy.
- Fig. 8-2. View of the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, Paris. Photo: Alexandra Kennedy.
- Fig. 8-3. View of the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, Paris. Photo: Alexandra Kennedy.
- Fig. 8-4. BGL, *Canadassimo*, 2014, work in progress (detail), Canadian Pavilion, *la Biennale di Venezia*, 2015. Photo: Alexandra Kennedy.
- Fig. 8-5. Armando Lulaj, *Albanian Trilogy, A Series of Devious Stratagems* (detail), Albanian Pavilion, *La Biennale di Venezia*, 2015. Photo: Alexandra Kennedy.
- Fig. 8-6. Daniele Accossato, Group Exhibition, *Sweet Death* (detail), Guatemalan Pavilion, *La Biennale di Venezia*, 2015. Photo: Alexandra Kennedy.
- Fig. 8-7. Ruth Evans, from the project *Dangerous Voltage, Abundance* series, 2014, copper wire, cellphone circuit board, 5 x 3 x 4. Photo credit: Ruth Evans.

Fig. 9-1. Image from authors' spoken word performance indicating; location of speaker (by justification of text); author's own photograph from the site; text reference; and emergent theme in parentheses.

Fig. 9-2. Image from authors' spoken word performance indicating location of speaker (by justification of text); author's own photograph from the site with date; and emergent theme in parentheses overlaid on the timeline.

Fig. 9-3. Image from authors' spoken word performance, indicating location of speaker (by justification of text); authors' video recording (with sound) from the site; and emergent theme in parentheses overlaid on an indication of the timeline.

Fig. 11-1. Conceptual Fashion in the Expanded Field.

Fig. 13-1. Flaying of Kekeno (seal). Photo: author.

Figs. 13-2 and 13-3. Hoiho (Yellow-Eyed Penguin) Cloak, back and front. Photo: author.

Fig. 13-4. Kekeno (sealskin cloak). Photo: author.

Fig. 13-5. Kete Hoiho (Penguin Basket) Photo: author.

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INTRODUCTION

The “grey area” between art and design is ever shifting, as are boundaries within the traditional art and design disciplines. New technologies are at the forefront of much contemporary practice, which creates challenges as practitioners are propelled into new ways of thinking and making as new and sub-disciplines evolve. In an effort to locate and discuss the types of practices that might inhabit the active area between art and design, and to evaluate how each discipline may enrich the other, writers of the following chapters have employed a variety of devices and approaches. Conversely, some have taken the attitude that any notion of separate disciplines is not even relevant in contemporary practice today. I will not present a synopsis of all chapters in this introduction, but outline some key themes, questions and ideas that are reflective of the range of approaches in this book.

I begin with a brief historical overview of the emergence of art, craft and design as separate disciplines.

In the 1950s Paul Oskar Kristeller proposed that the Western concept of art (as separate to craft) emerged in the eighteenth century as painters and sculptors became separated out from the craftsmen of the guilds who made more functional objects.¹ Kristeller’s notion that fine art was elevated in status above that of craft from that particular time was the catalyst for Larry. E. Shiner’s well-known text, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, in which he proposed that fine art is a modern concept.

The modern system of art is not an essence or a fate but something we have made. Art as we have generally understood it is a European invention barely two hundred years old.²

This shift of status began in the early Renaissance as “artists” started to see themselves as part of the liberal arts, which also included music and the humanities, rather than remaining part of craftsmen’s guilds. However, the roots of Western art are much older and can be traced back to ancient Greece where we can consider the writings of Plato and Aristotle as fundamental not only to our contemporary understanding of art, but also to the connections between art practice and art theory today.

It is in Aristotle that we find the basis for something like the modern opposition between *epistēmē* as pure theory and *technē* as practice. Yet even Aristotle refers to *technē* or craft as itself also *epistēmē* or knowledge because it is a practice grounded in an “account”—something involving theoretical understanding.³

Plato also, in his exhaustive theory of forms, “an arch example of pure theoretical knowledge,”⁴ is captivated by the possibility of a type of *technē* informed by an awareness and knowledge of forms.⁵ This notion of practice “grounded in an account”⁶ is very relevant to Western contemporary teaching (and practice) of both art and design in many institutions today, whereby theory and practice inform each other providing intellectual rigour within studio practice. However, it is worth noting that *technē* in ancient Greece was used in a much broader context than art, craft or design today. For example in Plato’s *Republic*, skills as diverse as horsemanship and medicine were considered to be *technē*.⁷

The influence of Greek art is also very relevant to the emergence of art history as a discipline, which first rose into prominence in the 18th century when archaeological explorations began to unearth classical sculptures. At this time German archaeologist Johann Winckelmann became recognised as the first art historian, as his writings influenced popular taste towards an interest in classical art, particularly that of Greece.⁸

Collections of “curiosities,” usually exhibited in private collections up until the 17th century, were shown in museums for the first time in the latter part of that century.⁹ During the 1700s the notion of a museum open to the public and charged with displaying and preserving collections of natural history, art treasures and domestic objects—furthered as a result of archaeological explorations—was well underway.¹⁰ By 1765 French philosopher and editor of *Encyclopédie* Denis Diderot developed the concept of a French National Museum to house art treasures.¹¹ Diderot was also recognised as the greatest early art critic before Baudelaire. A key role of the critic in the pre-photographic era was to describe works in immense detail, which he did with knowledge, wit, empathy and a great deal of extravagant imagination.¹² His best-known writings, *The Salon of 1765* and subsequently *The Salon of 1767*, were created at a transitional time in the Enlightenment, existing between the eras of royal patronage and the evolution of the modern art market.¹³

In the West before “the invention of art” (and in many Eastern, African and Pacific societies now) there was no differentiation in status between the various artisans who were skilled practitioners and creators of “consumer goods.” An appreciation of these objects was connected to their usefulness as a part of everyday life.¹⁴

From the time of the industrial revolution everyday functional objects, once made by craftsmen, were turned out of factories in great numbers. The status of craft changed to that of smaller producers of hand-built items. The Arts and Crafts Movement, originating in Great Britain, was started in response to the rapid push of industrialisation.¹⁵ It became an international design movement that encouraged traditional craftsmanship, a truth to materials, and a decorative style echoing traditional folk crafts of the medieval era.¹⁶ A fundamental agenda of the movement was to level the hierarchy and remove the distinction between the fine and applied arts. Pride in workmanship, that was sorely absent for workers in factories turning out badly made products, was also a significant focus.¹⁷ The early Bauhaus was influenced by The Arts and Crafts Movement, though by the mid-1920s this gave way to a clean modernist aesthetic which spoke of its agenda to unite industrial design with a Modernist art influence.¹⁸

Design, a relatively new academic field, initially had its birth in the world of sciences. In his 2001 article *Design as a Discipline*, Nigel Cross points to two key periods in the twentieth century, where the relationship between science and design was formed.¹⁹ In the 1920s there was a search for new scientific design processes, products and materials for the manufacturing industries.²⁰ A second push to “scientise design” emerged as the design methods movement of the 1960s, which fostered the notion of a rational design process.²¹ In 1962 the Conference on Design Methods in London was seen as

the event which marked the launch of design methodology as a subject or field of enquiry. The desire of the new movement was even more strongly than before to base design process (as well as the products of design) on objectivity and rationality.²²

A refreshing challenge to the positivist principles that were fundamental to the “science of design” of the 1960s was Donald Schön’s constructivist approach.²³ Schön’s position was to acknowledge that there were intuitive and reflective approaches to problem solving well suited to creative disciplines. He describes this approach as

an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict.²⁴

Schön’s concept of reflective practice is now a widely used methodology in many areas of design since its inception in the 1980s and further development throughout the 1990s. Clearly there is a wide range of

methodologies used by designers and artists, however, I have chosen in this instance to mention reflective practice as it highlights the on-going discussion as to whether design is regarded as part of the visual arts or sciences. Yet, to analyse “artistic, intuitive processes”²⁵ as existing in a binary with science is not entirely helpful. Using the methodology of reflective practice is not suggesting that, as designers, we embrace irrationality, but engage in a reflective exchange with the “materials” of the design problem. We may achieve this by continually reflecting on the process in order to reframe more useful design questions as part of an iterative problem solving cycle.²⁶ Reflective practice used in tandem with design frameworks, such as user-centred design—commonly used in product design²⁷—is an approach used by many contemporary designers.

Although design is a relatively new academic subject, the root of the word design can be traced back to fourteenth-century Italy. In chapter one Peter Stupples discusses how the term *disegno* was used to denote both drawing and design to describe the process of tracing the floor plans of proposed buildings onto the ground.²⁸ The concept of *disegno* as the drawn floor plan of an intended building is clearly relevant to the notion of what has been traditionally understood to be design, ergo, a plan or blueprint created firstly by a designer and subsequently followed by a third party for industrial production or, in the case of architecture, the eventual realisation of the building. However, many contemporary designers, as Schön suggests, solve vexing problems in intuitive ways, a methodology common to artists who are familiar with chance and spontaneity as a common *modus operandi*.

Some celebrated creative practices reside in this arguably blurred boundary between art and design, such as architect Frank Gehry’s well-documented process of crumpling paper as the beginning point in visualising new building designs. This approach allows him a spontaneous beginning to a possible design outcome without being constrained by the tyranny of straight lines, the effects of loads, and the “real world” difficulties in creating the absurd angles suggested by his crumpled paper “maquettes.” It is perhaps a moment of grace, before the actualities of realising what is truly possible “on the ground” set in.

In Chapter Nine Alex Kennedy writes of Gehry’s 2014 *Fondation Louis Vuitton* building in Paris, another larger than life structure from the Canadian architect that embraces the “Bilbao effect,” where a “signature build has had the capacity to generate cultural tourism for a city or region.”²⁹ The creation of this “pseudo-public building” raises questions about the competing interests of art, architecture and politics, and particularly the power of corporations to create edifices that could be seen to push their own corporate agendas against the prevailing tide of public

opinion. It often seems that these complex ethical dilemmas are smoothed away with a giant budget that has no trouble providing high calibre art and design exhibitions and collections available for the “public good.” Kennedy analyses the *Fondation Louis Vuitton* with regard to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s key work *The Culture Industry* (1944), and notes the number of ways that this building “serves up a consumer spectacle.”³⁰

In contrast to the consumer spectacle of the high-end fashion industry as exemplified by the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, Simon Swale’s chapter focuses on conceptual fashion. He situates the emergence of conceptual fashion as a postmodern practice particular to the 1980s that still offers challenges to the perennial question “what is fashion today?” He proposes that *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*,³¹ the pivotal work of art theorist Rosalind Krauss, can be adapted as a framework to place conceptual fashion practice within an expanded field to articulate the interactions, differences and synergies between art and fashion design in contemporary practice. The notion of expanded fields implies overlapping, as boundaries become less defined. It is indeed a useful process to consider applying the methodologies of one discipline to another, which in this case has yielded some thought provoking discussion.

The benefits of understanding the differing methodologies used in both art and design practices are also threads that run through a collaborative paper developed by a group of art-educated design educators.³² Each panel member drew from their own experience to contribute to the resultant discussion focusing on connections, gaps, and the breadth of perspectives gained from initial (or subsequent) training in art. A range of themes include: the use of iterative workbooks as key to understanding the importance of process; how ambiguity—an accepted part of art practice—can enrich design outcomes; the importance for fashion students of developing an individual voice; and a discussion of a range of working methodologies, including solo and team based approaches, collaboration and a range of studio practices. This chapter ends not with a conclusion but instead invites the reader to tussle with a series of questions regarding the direction of contemporary design education today.

Many chapters in this book have taken a euro-centric approach to the histories of art and design, recognising them as separate disciplines that have at times merged together and at others have distinctly separate trajectories. Monica Lausch investigates this concept through an analysis of the built heritage of three Viennese architects working in the 20th century, namely, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos and Friedensreich Hundertwasser. She contends that a common feature of their radically different styles is the

philosophical significance of the connection between art and design that characterised their respective projects.

However, it is crucial to note that many indigenous cultures have never considered that there is any separation between art and design including iwi Māori in New Zealand whose concept of mahi toi embraces both design and art. A perspective crucial to understanding mahi toi is a third all-encompassing spiritual dimension.³³ Cultural narratives relating to the vital connection between the tipuna (ancestors) through whenua (land) to the present generation are expressed through traditional materials using symbols particular to the iwi or hapu³⁴ to carry meaning.

Roka Hurihia Ngarimu-Cameron's chapter focuses on her project "Te Hokinga Mai" (the return home) in which she created cloaks made of seal and yellow-eyed penguin skins. The animals, which died of natural causes, were shown respect in this body of work that was created to "honour the traditions of Maori ancestors, who used the skins to keep warm."³⁵ Her project is a fusing of traditional and contemporary approaches to mahi toi and also addresses concerns of sustainable practice and societal attitudes to the use of endangered species.

Another chapter that looks beyond a European art perspective is Craig Easton's sideways step from the Western binary perception of art as separated from design. He proposes that Chinese scholar gardens—largely created by painter-poets of the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties—can serve as a viable "alternative space," a different creative model, with which to critically engage. For Easton, the composition of the gardens serves almost as an abstract painting one can enter, a catalyst for considering this creative form as a way to invigorate a discussion of his own reductive painting practice. In common with Swale's approach of considering and adapting methodologies from another discipline, Easton, "without arguing for any direct equivalence,"³⁶ wishes to convey "some sense of the way one medium and methodology folds into its other."³⁷

Lesley Kaiser's chapter also takes this approach, as she utilises an art framework³⁸ to evaluate her own ceramic practice, in particular a body of work that lies in the tension between art and design. However, the primary focus of her chapter is to pose the universal question "what is the *purpose* of art?"³⁹ She reflects on contemporary evolutionary theories that consider why, *if* art has no useful purpose, do we, as a species, take such pleasure in it?

Usefulness, use, uselessness and the apparent pointlessness of some objects, systems and ideas, can be seen as an area of tension between art and design. This premise is the focus of *The Eureka Salon*, a "philosopher's conversation" developed by Jane Venis as a symposium performance. It

comprised a group of actors who played the roles of some key thinkers, artists and designers from the last 150 years. The conversation advances, for the most part, using the characters' own words gleaned from their various key publications. The resultant chapter is presented in the form of a performative text, as the philosophers trip and trap each other with a logic that goes beyond its own inevitable conclusion into the territory of the absurd.

In chapter one Peter Stupples talks of how words are nets that entangle us whenever we think or speak. Words—even if we are not aware of it—function as signs that signal their histories, allowing us to trace ever-changing contexts and perspectives. He speaks of words in this context, as “shapeshifters,” and carefully considers how the presently contested terms of art and design, and—to a lesser extent—art and artisan, have evolved historically.

To conclude, I would like to return to Stupples's image of nets. For, if not for nets how can we fish for meanings and hold onto slippery ideas before they slide back into the tide? And at the risk of further drowning in metaphor, yes, we do become entangled, but—as anyone who works with nets will know—we also have to sit patiently and untangle them to investigate the strands. The collection of strands that has become this book offers many perspectives, histories and discussions relating to a diversity of practice. It also acknowledges that many contemporary practitioners today are invigorated through working in the shared terrain that exists between art and design.

Notes

¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12 (1951) 496-527.

² Larry E. Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (University of Chicago Press, 2001) 3.

³ Richard Parry, “Episteme and Techne,” in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), (2014), *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/episteme-techne/> 2014.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Timothy Wilson, “Techne in Aristotle and Plato” (nd).

http://www.academia.edu/4030695/Techne_in_Aristotle_and_Plato.

⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Joachim-Winckelmann>.

⁹ One of the first to be open to the public was the Ashmoleum Museum at Oxford University in 1683 as discussed by: Geoffrey Lewis, “History of Museums,” (2000) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-museums-398827>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art: The Salon of 1767*, Vol. 2 of John Goodman (ed.), *Diderot on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Shiner: 2001, 3.

¹⁵ 1880-1910

¹⁶ Lauren Weingarden, “Aesthetics Politicised: William Morris to the Bauhaus,” *Journal of Architecture Education*, 38:3 (1985) 8-13.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Nigel Cross, “Design as a Discipline: Designerly Ways of Knowing,” *Design Issues*, 17:3, 2001, 49-55.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books: 1983) 49.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Deana McDonagh-Philp and Howard Denton, “The Emotional Domain in Product Design,” *The Design Journal: An International Journal for All Aspects of Design*, 3:1, 2000, 31-43.

²⁸ Tim Anstey, “The Ambiguities of Disegno,” *Journal of Architecture*, 10:3, 2005, 295-306, cited by Peter Stupples in Chapter One of this book.

²⁹ Alex Kennedy, in Chapter 9 of this book

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, 8 (Spring 1979) 36.

³² Developed from a panel discussion presented at the symposium.

³³ http://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/design-thinking/maori-design/te_aranga_principles/guidance/mahi_toi_creative_expression

³⁴ Iwi—tribal group, hapu—sub group of iwi

³⁵ Damien George, "Te Hokinga Mai,"

<http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/penguin-seal-skin-project-about-respect> on 18 October 2015.

³⁶ Craig Easton, Chapter 8 of this book.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dennis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).

³⁹ Art in the sense of the wider context of art and design.

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CHAPTER ONE

DISEGNO:

ART, DESIGN AND A PRICELESS PILLOWCASE

PETER STUPPLES

Words are nets. We get caught up in them every time we think or speak. We are so caught up with the moment that we forget that words, our words, verbal, aural and visible signs, have histories, to which we are more or less in thrall. Like the world of nature, the worlds of language and the concepts for which it acts as signs operate through internal principles of change. Words, meanings and concepts are shapeshifters. They metamorphose and evolve through history and social discourse. As Wittgenstein insisted in *The Blue Book* “if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*.”¹ Two of those words, those signs, those concepts, are “art” and “design.” Both sprawl across the discourses in which they are used. They have meant different things to different people at different times and places, and still do. We are caught in their nets, but those nets are constantly changing their form and the use to which they are put. In order to stand back a little from their entrapment, to emphasise their multivalence for users and listeners, we need to take a closer look at their origins in Western art history and theory, where the words “art” and “design” were often used/understood as a dyad or even in a hierarchy of two, such as Fine Art and Design or, to reveal an unstated further dyad sometimes, certainly historically, contained within their subtexts—Artist and Artisan.

This conceptual split in Western artspeak began in the 15th century. Before that all artists were artisans with the social status of skilled workmen and women. Yet the “work of art” was already placed apart from the making of it and apart again from the mere utilitarian object. Plutarch, for example, in his *Life of Pericles II*, written in 75 AD, declared that “while we delight in the work—(*what we may call ‘art’*), we despise the workman (*the artisan, the one who carried out the design*).”² This was and

remained the view of many cultures in Europe and indeed around the globe into the 21st century.

In Florence before the Renaissance, painters bought their pigments from pharmacists, and so were members of the same guild as doctors and apothecaries. Sculptors were members of the stonemason's guild. The artist-maker was simply an artisan, making images and buildings to order and within the frame of a particular culture and time. However the artisan worked from a design of some sort—the design was neither the work itself, nor the process of making it. The design was the concept, the plan, the sketch, the drawing—the preliminaries before the making of the work.³ First comes the design, then comes the making and finally the artwork, not so much a dyad, as a triadic process. Within the art guilds and workshops of Medieval Europe this triadic relationship was in practical terms seamless—the Master and Patron settled the general design based upon convention, custom and taste, the Master and workmen carried it out and the artwork was delivered to the Patron for use within his or her establishment.

In Italy the word *disegno* was used in the fourteenth century to signify both drawing and design, beginning its life as a term to signify the floor plans of buildings literally traced on the ground.⁴ It was in the same century, the fourteenth, that the role of the “artist” became somewhat more elevated, indicating the planner, the one producing the concept of the work, distinct from the Guild or workshop master or, to express it slightly differently the artist began to assume a primary place as the one with the intellectual capacity to conceptualise the work. Following upon conceptualisation the artist and/or his assistants drew up the plans for the work, the cartoon, the basis of the composition, the design, and then he and his assistants or workshop would carry out the task. The “work,” in Late Medieval/Early Renaissance Europe, might be a building—a church, a palace, or sculpture—free standing, bas-relief, or a painting—fresco or wood panel, or indeed any of the products of craft workshops in any medium. Most of these emerging “artists” worked across the fields of what we would now call art and craft.

Yet the most important aspect of their emergence was the value placed upon the “idea,” the concept and the form that concept might take, the forming thought, we might say, Aristotle's *eidōs*. To quote from Armand Marie Leroi: “In *The Parts of Animals* Aristotle considers how a woodcarver might explain his art. He clearly wouldn't just talk about the wood—that's merely the matter out of which it's built. Nor would he just talk about his axe and auger—they're merely tools. Nor would he just talk about the strokes that he makes—that's mere technique. No, if he's really

to convey the origin of the thing he's making he has to talk about the idea that he had when when he began his work—the process by which it will unfold in his hands, its final design and ultimate purpose—he must talk about its *eidōs*.”⁵

In his treatise *On Painting* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72)⁶ laid the foundation for Renaissance art theory based upon the revival of interest in Ancient Greek and Roman culture. For Alberti, and the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti,⁷ original outlining, circumscription, composition, *disegno*, was the basis of an artwork—painting, bas-relief, sculpture and architecture. Alberti understood by “artwork” something more than the traditional products of the guilds and workshops. He was a humanist, a Renaissance man, and had in mind—working in Florence and Rome—civic art, public art, a work of public stature, and with it comes the assumption “that creativity is a social, not an individual, process.”⁸ The subject of such “learned” art should be elevated, based upon an *istoria*, that is, a narrative or story with a significant meaning drawn from ancient or Christian texts.⁹ Public works were like public speaking, therefore comparable with the arts of Greek and Roman rhetoric:¹⁰ figures in artworks were the equivalent of statements, the arrangement of their limbs like words, their embodiment, their contours like letters. Like rhetoric, painting was to serve both an affective and effective purpose, to move the viewer to noble deeds and works, to contemplate the lessons demonstrated by the *istoria* displayed before him or her. The artist's image must

act out spatially, emotionally, and historically consistent stories, which will automatically inspire in the onlooker the proper emotions—emotions that the painter himself has felt beforehand.¹¹

The artist should learn the skills of such rhetorical art—the selection of suitable subject matter (*inventio*), the arrangement of its forms (both *disegno* and *decorum*), and then its exhibition, placement, presentation in a suitable setting acceptable for the benefactor, patron, client. In other words, as Anthony Grafton has pointed out, Alberti

devised what amounted to a new social model for artistic life and practice—one appropriate to the standing of the new, learned artist, whom he saw not as a mere craftsman, who followed traditional recipes, but as the practitioner of a demanding learned discipline.¹²

To test the effectiveness of the composition, the original design, the artist should consult widely among his fellows, even among the general public, changing the preparatory conceptual drawings until he and others felt he

had got it “right.” As Grafton put it: “The actual rendering of the final image merely gave material form to what Alberti saw as the higher work of the artist’s intellect,” which “elegantly showed how to transfer into the realm of painting [the central] practice[s] of humanistic rhetoric.”¹³

In the mind of Alberti, the word *disegno*, in the hands of a “learned artist,” has gone from signifying a plan, an initial drawing, to the concept of a public work of art, particularly an *istoria*, displayed according to the conventions of classical rhetoric.

Those paintings or sculptures of *istoria* were not, in this scenario, to be placed in private collections or museums, but rather had an essentially ritual or exemplary significance in cathedrals and churches, in palaces and *studioli* (the retiring rooms of the Florentine élite) or in public spaces, such as the piazza of the city. The rich and powerful, whom Alberti has in mind as the patrons of such “learned” art, lived very public lives. Their *studioli* were scarcely private. For example, Botticelli’s famous *Primavera* began its social life as part of the decorative schema of a daybed [*lettuccio*].¹⁴ Indeed many Renaissance paintings of *istoria* now hung as autonomous works of art began life, especially in Tuscany, as *spalliere*—part of the decoration of private-public furniture.

More than a hundred years later, Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* (first edition, 1550, second edition 1568), described *disegno* as “a complex activity based on intellection.”¹⁵ Not unlike Alberti, though with a stronger neo-Platonic emphasis, he claimed that, whilst human sense organs experience particular varieties of phenomena in the world of nature, those possessing a higher quality of mind than ordinary men and women, such as some artists, could conceive or envision the stable, clear and lucid fixed forms, the invariable forms from which objects in the world are mere crude earthly approximations.¹⁶ This contingent duality, between the particular and the ideal, remained a strong feature of Western art theory through the theoretical writing of Bellori in the seventeenth, Reynolds in the eighteenth and Ruskin in the nineteenth centuries. Though nature should be observed through the open window, the *finestra aperta* of Alberti, this worldly experience was to be tempered by the ideal language of mathematics, the measure, that is, of all things, and also by an intuited decorum, a feeling for the right design:

the mind draws to itself that which frees itself from variability...the invariable truth of geometrical figures is found not in patterned floors but in the mind.¹⁷

Painting was the “symbolic embodiment of nature’s intelligible forms.”¹⁸ To put it another way, physical vision (seeing with the eye) is best tempered by a higher ordering vision (seeing with the mind).¹⁹ *Disegno*, in Vasari’s lexicon, is thus not so much a literal image (seeing with the eye), a drawing from nature, as revisualisation of the signified, a concept put into form, the shape that captures the idea, from perception to intellection, the capacity of the intellect to envision the ideal “universal forms,” “the representation of what one comes to know about nature,” a process of cognition not, paradoxically, accessible to sight.²⁰

The Neo-Platonic Florentines considered imitation, seeing with the eye alone, one of the weaknesses of Venetian painting. Nature in itself is not a worthy subject of art, but rather what one comes to know about that enmattered world, hence the low status given to portraits—mere face painting and, when they began to appear in art, landscapes.²¹

It was Federico Zuccaro, writing for the generation after Vasari, who put this distinction between the world out there and the world of the mind into a theoretical frame: “drawing [he wrote] is the external, physical manifestation (*disegno esterno*) of an internal intellectual idea or design (*disegno interno*).”²² In an extreme form this *disegno interno*, this conceptualisation, the idea for the work, the ability to envision the invariable forms, became a reason for comparing some artists with God, the Christian Divine Craftsman and the Ancient Greek Demiourgos. Hadn’t Alberti claimed that “painting possesses a truly divine power”?²³ Some innovative artists, such as, in their different ways, Michelangelo and Raphael, became venerated, regarded as superhuman, not in any sense of physical prowess so much as through the powerful use of both intellect and a moral sensibility. After all the best *disegno interno* carried with it an expectation of *ingegno*—having the capacity to create new meanings, having insight,²⁴ that is to speculate, “to elevate the concrete to the abstract in order to illuminate and understand the concrete itself,”²⁵ a process outside the competence of the artisan. *Ingegno* was indeed a sign of God’s hand, *segno di deo*.²⁶ In his *Ogni Dipinture* Leonardo agreed that “the divinity, which is the science of painting, transmutes the painter’s mind into a resemblance of the divine mind.” Not just *disegno* then but *disegno interno* was the cloud upon which the divine artists attained apotheosis!

There were, of course, many contradictions within this theorising, natural when Neo-Platonism is contesting with Aristotelianism, the twin sources of Renaissance thought. Vitruvian man, the new thinking man—such as Alberti or Leonardo da Vinci, was also a precise and earthly man—measuring the world, elaborating theories of perspective, dissecting bodies, portraying the very special particularities of Renaissance Italy, yet

at the same time comparing himself to God or reaching out for the “divine” forms.

Yet the commercial world of Renaissance Italy, and the wealth of Renaissance Italy was above all based upon international commerce, did not necessarily follow either Alberti or Vasari in their efforts to elevate art, in particular painting, from mundane decoration to *segno di deo*. If the detractors of Michelangelo claimed that he was little better than a master draughtsman, his work limited by his devotion to *disegno*, meaning drawing and design, then Michelangelo was not alone. All Renaissance artists earned their crusts as draughtsmen. The new wealthy wanted their palaces and churches to be full of well-designed and well-made objects, among them paintings, but paintings were not given commercial value above other artistic productions. For example Beth Holman has pointed out that after the death Lorenzo the Magnificent of Florence in 1492 an inventory was made of his belongings. The greatest value was placed upon the Tazza Farnese, a 1st c. BC cameo cup, at 10,000 florins, a gold strongbox was valued at 500 florins, a tapestry with hunting scenes at 100 florins and paintings by Uccello, Pallaiuolo and Donatello at only 20-50 florins each.²⁷ For the Medici the decorative arts were far more valuable than mere paintings! And of course even less value was accorded the drawings, the basis of design. Michelangelo’s work always originated in what is now called Old Master Drawings, in *disegno*, in its earlier double sense of conception and drawing. Artists would work first on paper or parchment to perfect their design before moving onto the canvas. *Disegno* was vital: the act of drawing was not only the art of using line to define form, it was the underpinning of a work whereby an artist could express his inner vision that could, in the hands of a Master, lead to perfection.

In this way, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century the notion of *disegno*, and controversies (*disputi*) about the use of the word and the concepts for which it stood as the sign, were part of the struggle in Europe, but particularly in Italy, for what Bernard Stiegler has called “the organisation of the sensible,” that is the development of mind to make cultural sense of what is apprehended by the senses, and the modes of perception in which this is inscribed.²⁸ Art, and with it design, together a singular irreducible concept, is part of Stiegler’s *technics*, “the framework at once material and transcendental that supports consciousness, meaning and experience.” Carman describes the Renaissance visual imperative, as

contingent upon a metaphoric transference of meaning to form from an inner vision appropriate to reflect the goals of refreshing, reshaping, improving one’s existence (*reformare in melius*),

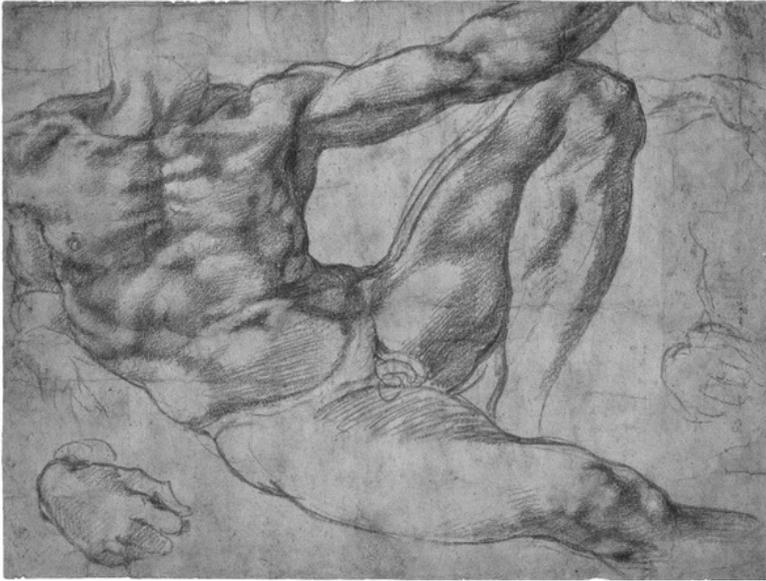


Fig. 1-1. Michelangelo, *Study for Adam*, 1510-11, 19.3 x 25.9, red chalk over graphite, London, British Museum, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

the very goal of Alberti's claims for the best of rhetorical painting.²⁹ Thus *disegno* was used as a tool of cognition, varying its meaning on the uses to which it was put by the parties in the *disputi*, circumstances naturally altering cases.

The human world is above all competitive. Florentine painters disparaged the Venetians and the Venetians despised the Florentines. "Learned painters" disparaged mere artisans, whereas mere artisans laughed all the way to the bank. In all these *disputi* the word *disegno* was used to mean different things and used either as a term of approbation or criticism. Art writers were in many ways less scholars than spin doctors, and, when engaged in ekphrasis, still are.

Alberti and Vasari could be described as kings of the spin doctors. "Learned" painting, sculpture and architecture came to be regarded, partly as a result of their writing, in a totally different light to the other, what are sometimes disparagingly known as the decorative arts, despite their success in the market place. In part this was due to the recognition of the artist-genius whose hand alone could produce a masterpiece, despite the

fact that such masters themselves often relied upon others to assist them, either in the studio/workshop or on the building site.

We are still in the thrall of their writing, more often unconsciously so. Many Renaissance painters are, in our own day, household names, but only rarely do we come across references to tapestry designers, despite the fact that their products were more highly valued in their own day. In the sixteenth century Pieter Coecke van Aelst was famous throughout Europe for his tapestry designs. The production of tapestries themselves was based upon an original design, the “intention” of an artist-painter, such as Pieter Coecke. A contemporary of Vasari and Michelangelo, Coecke followed all the strictures of Alberti in his design of rhetorical *istoria*, such as the *Conversion of Saul* (c. 1529-30). This tapestry was shown in an exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum, New York in 2014-15. The show was called, significantly, “Grand Design: Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry”—respinning the word “design.” Coecke was a member of a painters’ guild, studied the Italians, particularly the frescoes of Giulio Romano in the Palazzo Te in Mantua. He studied anatomy and the decorum of posture. He sketched draft plans (designs), he worked them up into *grands patrons* (cartoons), then worked them down to *petits patrons* for the weavers to work from. All forms of these designs were on display in the exhibition, alongside the final work that measures 4 by over 7 metres. Raphael also created cartoons for tapestries for the same Antwerp weavers.

Not so “grand,” perhaps, were Coecke’s wood-block prints, his plans for stained-glass windows or a nautilus shell cup (*fantazia*). Thus the descent from Fine Arts by acknowledged Masters to the designs for objects, regarded by the Alberti-Vasari theorists as lesser, even if larger and more elaborate, particularly if made more in a workshop by many hands. It is about, perhaps, the balance between *disegno interno*, ideation, and *eterno*, between intellectual concept and manual execution, but in subtle mixed measures of esteem. There was also a strong male bias. Men were the patrons of grand design, women of objects for the table or fashion garments, “more changeable than the moon,” according to Francesco Vecellio (1598), Titian’s elder brother.³⁰ Goldsmiths made drawings. Many of these drawings became templates for their workshops, just as Master painters works’ became the subject of emulation and it became part of the training of a student to copy them.

Thus was constructed a matrix of superiority/inferiority—originality over against emulation, Grand Design against workshop product, even, Art over Design.