

DEFINING DECORATIVE, EXAMINING DESIGN

DESIGN IS ALL AROUND US. FROM SMALL-SCALE HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS TO massive architectural features, decorative and functional objects effect our daily lives and reflect our societal values. By studying these objects, we learn about the forms, uses, and meanings of objects, designs, and environments in everyday life.

When we explore the decorative arts and design, we consider a number of factors, including the artists' choices about subject, style, material, and function. To begin an exploration of decorative arts and design with students, pose the following questions:

What do you see?

Collect visual information. What is the central subject or focus of this work? What are the surrounding details? Artists think carefully about the appearance of their designs. Consider the artist's choice of color, size, shape, surface pattern, and texture. The artworks featured in these materials represent a wide range of cultures and time periods.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

What are the intended uses or functions of these objects? How can we tell? What do these items imply about the time and place in which they were created, or about the people who may have used them? By carefully examining works of art, we can also understand the historical, cultural, and geographical influences of the periods in which they were made.

How was it made?

What material is the artwork made of? What factors may have influenced the artists' choice of materials? What historical events took place around the time this artwork was made? What technology was available at that time? Was the object mass produced or handcrafted? Many factors influence the choice of materials, including cost, durability, weight, flexibility, availability, the manufacturing and engineering processes, and the scale of production. International trade of ideas, materials, and techniques also influences the production of decorative arts and design. Whichever way the design process takes shape, it is fueled by experimentation, innovation, and creative problem solving.

BOXES

THE FOLLOWING WORKS OF ART ARE HIGHLY DECORATIVE STORAGE CONTAINERS. Some of these boxes were designed to hold special objects, others were intended as symbols of luxury and social status.

As you view each box ask yourself:

- What do you see?
- What was it used for? Who may have used it?
- How was it made?

Suggested Prompts and Activities:

- What words would you use to describe these boxes? How are they similar to or different from furniture you have seen before?
- Identify some of the symbols that you can see on these boxes. What are some other symbols that you are familiar with? What do they represent?
- Consider the values that are important to you. How might you encompass those ideas in one image? Design your own symbol that represents your idea.
- Do you have a collection of small objects? What type of things do you collect? Where do you store or display them? Draw a special object that you have at home. Then draw the design for a container that might store the object. What design features will you include?



Box with Floral Scrolls and Cartouche Containing Birds and Blossoming Plum, Korea, Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), late 16th–17th century, Brown lacquer on wood core with mother-of-pearl inlay and brass fittings, 7¼ x 18 x 14¼ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with Museum Funds, M.2000.15.148. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- An intricate pattern of flowers, winding stems, and leaves covers most of the surface of this box.
- The cartouche, or rectangular frame in the center of the box, contains two birds sitting on the branches of a plum tree, clouds, and a sun.
- Each image is a symbol that reveals the values of eighteenth-century upper-class Korean society.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- Many art historians believe this box belonged to a noble woman who used it to store special wedding garments or keepsakes.
- The elaborate design, excellent craftsmanship, and precious materials indicate that it was probably an heirloom that would have been passed from one generation to the next.

How was it made?

- This box is made of lacquer and inlaid with mother-of-pearl.
- There is a long tradition of inlaid lacquer in East Asia.



Mochizuki Hanzan (Japan, c. 1743–c. 1790), *Stationery Box with Pheasant Design*, c. 1780, Cedar or male mulberry wood with lacquer and various inlays, including pottery, mother-of-pearl, horn, pewter, and stag antler, $4\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{8} \times 11\frac{7}{8}$ in. overall; a) lid: $1\frac{1}{4} \times 10\frac{7}{8} \times 11\frac{7}{8}$ in.; b) box: $3\frac{7}{8} \times 10\frac{7}{8} \times 11\frac{7}{8}$ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Far Eastern Art Council and friends of Virginia Atchley in honor of her ninetieth birthday, M.2002.4a–b. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- On the cover of this wooden box is a pheasant pecking at the ground amid a spring scene. Dandelions, young ferns, and red flowers surround the pheasant and extend up the sides of the box.
- In Japan, the pheasant is a symbol of nobility. When paired with spring plants, like those on this box, it signifies richness and abundance.
- The interior of the box features a silver-and-gold design of three crows and cherry trees on a windy day.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This is a stationery box that was designed to hold writing materials.
- The motif of the birds and flowers symbolizing fortune is typically found on Japanese stationery boxes and other objects associated with writing due to the importance of the written word in East Asian cultures.

How was it made?

- This box was created from a piece of heavily knotted cedar or mulberry wood and features a variety of inlay materials and lacquer techniques.
- The artist Mochizuki Hanzan was inspired by earlier masters of inlay who created three-dimensional effects in lacquer design.



Box, c. 1640, Turkey, Ottoman, Wood inlaid with ivory, tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, ebony, and bone, 8¾ x 13 x 8¾ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Art Museum Council in honor of the museum's fortieth anniversary through the 2005 Collectors Committee, M.2005.125. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A motif showing three overlapping circles covers the surface of this box.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- The design, excellent craftsmanship, and precious materials suggest that it may have served as a furnishing for the Topkapi Palace, the seventeenth-century royal residence and seat of imperial Ottoman authority in the region now known today as Istanbul, Turkey.
- The same circular motif appeared on the window shutters and doors of the Ottoman royal pavilion.

How was it made?

- This inlaid wood box was made by highly skilled craftsmen and is an example of art found in the Ottoman high court.
- This box is adorned with mother-of-pearl and thin sections of tortoiseshell laid over gold foil.



Fall-Front Cabinet (including details), c. 1650–70, India, Gujarat, or Pakistan, Sindh, South Asia, Rosewood inlaid with ivory; brass fittings, 15¹/₈ x 21³/₄ x 16 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Jane and Marc Nathanson, Bill and Dee Grinnell, Greg and Mechas Grinnell, and Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross through the 2007 Collectors Committee, M.2007.56. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A design of flowering plants, including lilies, poppies, and tulips covers the surface of this box.
- The plants are arranged in rows bordered by geometric patterns.
- This cabinet has a front panel that opens to reveal seven drawers.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- Cabinets like this had many uses. They were portable and were designed to hold jewelry, important documents, and other valuable objects.
- They also functioned as writing desks. The front panel, when open, provides a flat surface on which to write.

How was it made?

- This cabinet was made during the middle of the seventeenth century, in the region that is present-day India. The Mughal Empire, which ruled this area from the early sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, had a longstanding appreciation for floral decoration.
- This cabinet reflects multiple influences. The form is from sixteenth-century Europe, the decorative motifs are Mughal, and it is made with Indian materials and techniques.



Sewing Box (Costurero), Peru or Philippines, late 17th–early 18th century, Incised mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, and painted wood, $6\frac{1}{2} \times 13\frac{3}{8} \times 16\frac{7}{8}$ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas, L.2006.13.6. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- The mother-of-pearl surface of this box appears to shimmer. Each piece of mother-of-pearl is outlined with a thin strip of tortoiseshell. The borders are also decorated with tortoiseshell.
- An intricate pattern of flower-filled vases, flowers, and leaves covers the surface of this box.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This is a sewing box. Inside the box are small drawers and compartments for sewing accessories.
- Because of their value and luxury status, sewing boxes like this often were treated as art objects.

How was it made?

- Decorative boxes and furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl were among the most coveted luxury goods imported to the Americas from the Philippines.
- In various regions, including Peru, artists adapted this inlay technique to create an array of exquisite objects, such as this lavish sewing box.

CHAIRS

CHAIRS—A COMMON OBJECT IN OUR DAILY LIVES—OFTEN REFLECT THE TIME AND place in which they were created.

As you view each chair ask yourself:

- What do you see?
- What was it used for? Who may have used it?
- How was it made?

Suggested Prompts and Activities:

- How is this chair like chairs you use at school or at home? How is it different? Can a piece of furniture be a work of art? What qualities make it art?
- Imagine this chair in someone's home. What might the furnishings around the chair look like? Write a description or sketch your ideas.
- Do you have a favorite chair? What does it look like? What makes it your favorite? Sketch the chair and consider the choices the designer made when creating it.



Antonio Mateo de Los Reyes (Venezuela, active 1725–66), *Saint Peter's Throne (Trono de San Pedro)*, 1755, Gilded cedar, upholstered in velvet, 55¹/₈ x 32³/₄ x 25¹/₂ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, Caracas, L.2006.13.25a–c. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- An elaborately carved chair with a red velvet seat and armrests.
- A three-tiered crown and crossed keys are carved into the back of the chair. These are symbols of the Pope, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- Chairs like this that survive from the colonial period (1492–1820) in Latin America were primarily created for ecclesiastical, or religious, use.

How was it made?

- Artist Antonio Mateo de Los Reyes was the chief master carpenter of the city of Caracas, Venezuela, in 1756. He often collaborated with gilder Pedro Juan Alvarez Carneiro who may have worked on this chair too.



Scroll-Back Klismos Side Chair with Grecian Front Legs, 1810–20, United States, New York, New York, Mahogany, ash, brass, fabric, $32\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{5}{8} \times 19\frac{1}{2}$ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Alice Braunfeld in memory of Murray Braunfeld, M.82.125. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A chair with a curved back and padded cushion.
- Carved into the center of the back rail are American symbols. There is an eagle with outstretched wings and a cornucopia overflowing with fruits and nuts symbolizing abundance.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This chair was made in New York, between 1810 and 1820, in a period of war and national optimism. The War of 1812, against Britain, challenged Americans to fight for their new country. At the same time, America was expanding westward, which helped create a mood of optimism about the future of the growing nation.

How was it made?

- Known as the Klismos chair, it was made in the Neoclassical style and derives its inspiration from ancient Greece and Rome.
- By mimicking the styles of Greek and Roman furniture and architecture, Americans modeled themselves and the young democracy on the ancient cultures.



Gerard Van de Groenekan (Holland, 1904–1994) and Gerrit Rietveld (Holland, 1888–1964), *Red-Blue Chair (prototype)*, 1918, manufactured c. 1950, Painted wood, 23⁵/₈ x 33 x 33 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Merle Oberon, M.86.258. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- Geometric forms in red, yellow, blue, and black create the structure of this chair.
- Each element of the chair is treated as an individual part: the seat, back, arms, and legs of the chair are all shown to be separate and distinct shapes.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This chair is an embodiment of the principles of a Dutch art movement called de Stijl, meaning "the style." Founded in 1917, the movement included Dutch architects, artists, designers, and writers, who were dedicated to designs that emphasized straight lines, solid planes, right angles, and primary colors.

How was it made?

- This chair was designed in Holland by Dutch architect and cabinetmaker Gerrit Rietveld. About forty years after he designed the chair, it was actually built by another person, Gerard van de Groenekan.



Rudolph Schindler (Austria, 1887–1953), *Pair of Dining Chairs from the Skolnik Commission, Los Angeles, 1950–52*, Plywood, original fabric upholstery, 28 x 26 x 20 in. each, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of David and Patricia Gebhard, AC1998.178.1.1–2. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A pair of chairs composed of simple, geometric shapes.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- These chairs were part of a larger commission that modern architect and designer Rudolph Schindler made for the Skolnik House (1950–52) in Los Angeles, California.

How was it made?

- California was the center of America's wartime economic boom and continued its spectacular growth after 1945. Many architects, like Schindler, were drawn to Los Angeles where they contributed to a uniquely Southern California architectural style.



Frank Gehry (Canada, b. 1929), *The Bubbles Lounge Chair*, 1987, Corrugated cardboard, birch, and metal interior supports, 30 x 81 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Robert H. Halff, M.87.302. © Frank O. Gehry. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA.

What do you see?

- Curvy shapes form the base of this chair.
- Made almost entirely of corrugated cardboard, the chair appears to have a rough, somewhat uneven texture.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- In the late 1960s and early 1970s, and again in the late 1980s and early 1990s, architect Frank O. Gehry created furniture made of cardboard.

How was it made?

- While cardboard is relatively malleable as single sheets, Gehry was interested in the idea that the material would gain strength when layered. His curiosity led him to glue together several sheets of the stacked, corrugated cardboard often used in ordinary packing boxes; from these sheets he created desks, chairs, tables, and chaise lounges.

THE ARTS & CRAFTS MOVEMENT

THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT DEVELOPED IN BRITAIN IN THE LATE NINETEENTH century in response to a century of unprecedented change including the rapid development of industry and the expansion of cities. Through the design and creation of furniture, ceramics, metalwork, and textiles, artists strove for a broad range of changes in art, industry, and society. Arts and Crafts advocates favored handcrafting, rustic simplicity, indigenous materials, and motifs inspired by nature. The ultimate aspiration of the Arts and Crafts movement was to incorporate art into every aspect of daily life so that it would not be an isolated or rare experience. Designers and architects sought to create a total work of art, encompassing a building, its furnishings, and its settings as an environmental whole.

Suggested Prompts and Activities

- Geometric shapes play an important role in architectural design. Look carefully at each of the objects included here and identify the geometric shapes.
- How do we select the objects we live with? What makes them important or valuable?
- Most of the objects we live with today are mass-produced, rather than customized for us. What are some of the differences between custom-made and mass-produced objects?
- Take a walk in your neighborhood. Which plants do you see that are native to Southern California? Sketch the plants, paying careful attention to the basic lines and shapes. Consider how you might incorporate these or other natural motifs into a design of an object that is important to you.
- Design a lamp, chest, or chair that could be functional as well as beautiful. What theme or pattern would you incorporate into the design? What materials would you use? Who would use your object and why?



Fireplace Surround from the Patrick J. King House, Chicago, Illinois, 1901, Designed by George Washington Maher (United States, 1864–1926), Made by Louis Millet of Healy and Millet, Chicago, Illinois, Oak, glass mosaic, and enamel, 58 x 81½ x 12½ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Max Palevsky and Jodie Evans in honor of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary, M.89.151.8a–d. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A brightly colored mosaic made of small glass squares of various shades of blue, green, pink, gold, and white is inset into a massive wooden frame.
- A flowering plant, known as a thistle, appears on either side of the mosaic fireplace. The same thistle motif is carved into the wood.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This fireplace surround was designed by architect George Washington Maher in 1901 for the Patrick J. King house in Chicago, Illinois.

How was it made?

- An advocate for unified design, Maher created a special motif for each commission, repeating it throughout the interior and exterior spaces.
- The stylized thistle that appears so prominently on the fireplace surround was repeated throughout the interior of the King house.



Louis Henri Sullivan (United States, 1856–1924), manufactured by Winslow Brothers Co., *Baluster*, 1898–99, Copper-plated cast iron, 34½ x 9¾ x 1⁷/₈ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Max Palevsky and Jodie Evans, M.91.375.72. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- An intricate piece of decorative metalwork with a balanced composition.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This is a baluster, or post, that when placed alongside a series of similar balusters would support a stair rail or other architectural feature.

How was it made?

- The designer of this baluster was Louis Sullivan, one of the leaders of the Prairie School of architecture. Sullivan invented the idea of "organic" architecture. Beginning in the 1880s, he advocated for the creation of a new American architecture that used simplified forms and ornamentation based on plants.



Zulma Steele (United States, 1881–1979) *Drawings for the Byrdcliffe Desk*, c. 1904, 1) Graphite on tracing paper; 2) graphite on manila paper; Dimensions vary, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mark and Jill Willcox, AC1998.166.1.1–.3. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Zulma Steele (United States, 1881–1979), Byrdcliffe Colony; hardware probably made by Edward Thatcher, *Desk*, 1904, Oak, paint, and brass hardware, 51¼ x 44½ x 16⁷/₈ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Max Palevsky, AC1993.176.15.1. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A wooden piece of furniture with brass hardware.
- At the top of the desk is a rectangular band painted with a natural motif.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- Upstate New York was an important center of the Arts and Crafts movement. At the Byrdcliffe Colony in Woodstock, where this was made, pottery, textiles, metalwork and furniture were produced by a community of craftsmen in the countryside, which they considered to be a more natural, healthful, and inspirational setting than the city.

How was it made?

- This desk was designed by artist Zulma Steele. LACMA has three of the artist's drawings for this desk in the museum's collection.



Vase, 1906, Made by Newcomb College Pottery, New Orleans, Louisiana, Decorated by Mazie Teresa Ryan (United States, 1880–1946), Thrown by Joseph Fortune Meyer (France, 1848–1931), Earthenware, Height 12⁷/₈ in.; diameter: 8¹/₈ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Max Palevsky and Jodie Evans, M.91.375.31. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A small vase decorated with flowers and leaves. The soft yellow flowers and green leaves are stylized geraniums and stand out against the blue background.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This ceramic vase is a product of Newcomb Pottery, founded in 1886 at Sophie Newcomb College, the women's college of Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana.

How was it made?

- The colors and flora of the southern landscape inspired the pottery's decoration and local clay was used to make it.
- In some ways, Newcomb Pottery reflected older attitudes about the division of labor while still espousing Arts and Crafts ideals. A conservative view of gender roles meant that men were hired to actually "throw" the wares or form their shape; women were the designers and decorators of the pottery.



Frank Lloyd Wright (United States, 1867–1959), manufactured by Barker Brothers Co. *Table from the Aline Barnsdall Hollyhock House, Los Angeles*, c. 1920, Oak, 24¹/₈ x 28 x 22 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Harold and Jetta Goudal Grieve, M.2001.141.2. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

- A compact wooden table.
- The two grooved decorative elements on the table are stylized hollyhocks, a type of flower. This same motif was repeated throughout the home's interior and exterior including the roofline, walls, columns, and other furnishings.

What was it used for? Who may have used it?

- This table was designed by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright about one hundred years ago for Aline Barnsdall's Hollyhock house in Los Angeles. The Hollyhock house was Wright's first Los Angeles project.
- Like many of his contemporaries, Wright believed in complete design unity, meaning that he felt a building, its settings, and everything inside it should create one look.

How was it made?

- Built between 1919 and 1921, the Hollyhock house represents Wright's earliest efforts to develop a regionally appropriate style of architecture for Southern California.

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