

DEFINING DECORATIVE, EXAMINING DESIGN

One of the ways a civilization defines itself is in its material culture: its infrastructure, architecture, art, furnishings, tools, technologies, ephemera. Through objects, cultures are recorded, providing us with tangible evidence concerning transformations in values and politics.

—Wendy Kaplan, *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885–1945* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

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, images, and environments in everyday life.

What do we mean by design? The term has many definitions. It can be used in a broad sense to describe the aesthetic and functional characteristics of an object. For example, "design" can refer to the surface decoration of a chair as well as to the physical characteristics of the chair legs, seat, and back. Design can also refer to the overall visual representation of an artwork, including both the composition and style. A chair dating from the early twentieth century, for example, may be described as "modern," meaning it has the attributes of modernism, such as clean lines and simplicity of form. Design can also be used as a verb to describe the planning of the construction of something, like a building, article of clothing, or piece of furniture.

Decorative arts, also known as "minor arts," "applied arts," and "useful arts," describes functional and ornamental objects, and traditionally includes furniture, ceramics, glass, metalwork, and textiles. In Western art, it has typically been defined in contrast to the "fine arts" of painting, drawing, and sculpture.

THESE CURRICULUM MATERIALS TAKE A WIDER VIEW of decorative arts and design. Craft, design, folk art, and decorative art are actually linked to fine art in that they are also expressions of creativity in everyday life. A seventeenth-century Korean lacquer box with mother-of-pearl inlay, for example, holds value, both for its usefulness in storing objects as well as for the aesthetics of its surface decoration. Chairs—a common object in our daily lives—are often reflective of the time and place in which they were created. A chair like *Saint Peter's Throne*, which survives from eighteenth-century colonial Latin America, demonstrates the merging of indigenous and European cultures. Architects often think about design on a larger scale and seek to create environments that encompass a building, its furnishings, and its settings as a unified whole. A fireplace surround from a Chicago home designed in 1901 demonstrates the total design aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts movement. And a vanity designed by architect Rudolph Schindler represents early twentieth-century modernism.

Art historians often categorize artistic styles or trends prevalent in the work of a number of artists from a particular period as an art movement. Design movements can also reflect both individual and societal interests. For example, the fireplace surround in this curriculum represents the Arts and Crafts movement, which developed in Britain in the late nineteenth century in response to a century of unprecedented change, including industrialization and the expansion of cities. Committed to correcting the problems they perceived in society, a group of reformers, including artists, politicians, and philosophers, rallied around the movement with the intention of improving people's lives. Through the design and creation of furniture, ceramics, metalwork, and textiles, artists strove for a variety of changes in art, industry, and society.

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 four artworks featured in these materials represent a wide range of cultures and time periods. Through the study of these objects, we learn some general information about the lives of people in seventeenth-century Korea, eighteenth-century Latin America, and twentieth-century United States, as well as their aesthetic preferences.

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

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

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 hand-crafted? 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.

Equally important is the person or people responsible for making the work. Designers are often commissioned to create objects, architectural features, or residential designs, as we will see in the examples of George Washington Maher and Rudolph Schindler. The planning process for each designer differs: some use drawing materials to sketch ideas, others assemble materials into three-dimensional models to develop their ideas further. Whichever way the design process takes shape, it is fueled by experimentation, innovation, and creative problem solving.

Box with Floral Scrolls and Cartouche Containing Birds and Blossoming Plum

KOREA, JOSEON DYNASTY (1392–1910), LATE 16TH–17TH CENTURY



What do you see?

An intricate pattern of flowers, winding stems, and leaves covers most of the surface of this box. Look closely at the top. The rectangular frame in the center, which is called a cartouche, contains two birds sitting on the branches of a plum tree. Can you see the plums? They are the round shapes in clusters on the branches. At the base of the plum tree, look for long, narrow leaves—these are bamboo. At the top of the cartouche you may be able to spot clouds (irregular shapes behind the branches) and a sun (partly hidden by the clouds).

Why might this box be decorated with plants and birds? Natural objects are often included in works of art as symbols, or representations that stand for ideas. In the Korean tradition, for example, two birds with white heads represent a married couple growing old together. The plum tree is a symbol of fidelity, or loyalty. Notice the tiny, sculpted turtles on the metal latch of the box—they symbolize longevity, or long life.

- What are some of the symbols that you are familiar with? What do they represent?

- Consider the values that are important to you. How might you communicate those ideas in one image? Design your own symbol that encompasses an idea.

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. It could have contained the dowry, or property a woman brought to her husband at marriage. The elaborate design, excellent craftsmanship, and precious materials used to make this box indicate that it was probably an heirloom that would have been passed on from one generation to the next.

- Do you have a collection of objects? What type of things do you collect? Where do you store 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 1¼ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with Museum Funds M.2000.15.148
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

How was it made?

This box is made of lacquer. Lacquer objects are made from sap extracted from the lacquer tree. The milky white lacquer sap was dyed dark brown and then brushed in layers onto a wood box. To achieve the rich, deep brown color, many layers of lacquer were applied. It could take up to a day for the lacquer to dry between coats. While the last layer was still damp, the artist carved, or incised, a design into the surface of the box and affixed, or inlaid, mother-of-pearl. Another layer of lacquer was applied over the mother-of-pearl. As the surface dried it hardened into a shiny waterproof, heat-resistant, and resilient coating that helped to protect the object.

Mother-of-pearl is the glossy, iridescent lining of the abalone shell. Flakes of various sizes from this fragile, thin membrane were carefully chipped off the shell and then shaped to fit into the carved

outlines. Each piece had to fit exactly, and only a skilled craftsperson could have achieved the precision of the designs on this box.

Lacquer was widely used in Korea for many kinds of objects, including food bowls and water containers. In traditional eighteenth-century upper-class homes, inlaid lacquer often adorned furniture, creating an elegant interior. There is a long tradition of inlaid lacquer in East Asia. Art historians have identified lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay dating from the Shang Dynasty (c.1600–c.1050 BC) in China. In the twelfth century, Chinese artists refined the long-standing tradition and traded luxury objects made with this technique throughout Asia. Artists in each country developed their own unique style and techniques. See the enclosed CD for examples of inlaid boxes from multiple regions.

Saint Peter's Throne (Trono de San Pedro), 1755

ANTONIO MATEO DE LOS REYES (VENEZUELA, ACTIVE 1725–66)



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?

A chair covered with elaborate carving. The entire wood surface seems to be carved. A large red velvet cushion sits on the seat of the chair. An inset rectangle of red velvet on the chair back draws your eye to the decorative carving above it. Even the arms of the chair are covered in red velvet. Rows of fringe hang from the base of the seat.

- *Do you have a favorite chair? What does it look like? What makes it your favorite? Sketch the chair and consider the choices made by the designer in creating it.*

The carving that rises in a triangle shape on the back of the chair is particularly prominent. Can you see the carved oval at the top of the triangle? This oval represents the papal crown, which is worn by the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church. The three-tiered crown is an emblem of the papacy, or office of the Pope, and includes two old-fashioned keys, just below the crown. The keys cross to form an X and are positioned behind a decorative carved piece that symbolizes a shield. The keys are a slightly darker color, contrasting with the soft gold color of the rest of the woodwork.

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. This chair, known as *Saint Peter's Throne (Trono de San Pedro)*, is named for Saint Peter, a leader of the early Christian Church; Peter is recognized in the Roman Catholic tradition as the first Pope. The keys seen in the carving are symbols of the Pope's authority and are referred to as the "keys to the kingdom of heaven."

- *How is this chair similar to or different from chairs you may use every day? How is it like or unlike chairs that are used by important individuals?*

The region known today as Latin America underwent a huge transformation between 1492 (Columbus's first voyage to the New World) and 1820 (the beginning of the modern era). When Spanish explorers arrived in the Americas intent on expanding the Spanish empire and spreading Christianity, they were introduced to the distinct tastes, visual traditions, and religious practices of the indigenous peoples who inhabited the region. The global influences that converged in colonial Latin America resulted in a confluence of cultures and beliefs that is reflected in unique works of art and artistic styles.

Chairs were originally considered symbols of authority and dignity. It was not until the sixteenth century that chairs became more widely used and were constructed in a broad range of styles. Previously, ordinary people sat on benches and stools. When used in a ceremonial context for a king or an administrative or ecclesiastical dignitary, strict protocol informed their structure and placement. A chair often was situated at an elevated position and was accompanied by accoutrements, or related accessories, such as a footstool, a cloth hanging, and a canopy to denote the importance of the sitter.

- *Imagine someone important sitting in this chair. What might the wall hangings, footstools, and other objects around the chair look like? Write a description or sketch your ideas.*

How was it made?

From the beginning of the conquest, European artisans established themselves in the new settlement and began producing household goods and furniture. Carpenters frequently came to Latin America as part of a ship's crew, employed to maintain and repair the boats they sailed on. As a result, carpentry was one of the first trades to be practiced in the New World. In addition, carpentry flourished in connection with fine art; artists contributed to the crafting of frames, furniture, and elaborately carved altarpieces. Latin American artists followed European methods, standards, and customs, and established guilds on the model of those formed in Spain and Portugal. In these workshops, indigenous workers were hired and trained by European craftsmen who introduced them to nails, iron tools, and other new technologies.

The artist Antonio Mateo de Los Reyes, who carved this chair, had a successful career and was even appointed chief master carpenter of his native city of Caracas, Venezuela, in 1756. Mateo de los Reyes often collaborated with gilder Pedro Juan Alvarez Carneiro, who gilded many of the pieces the artist carved. In gilding, thin sheets of gold, silver, or other metals are applied to the surface of works of art or architecture. This chair is made of gilded cedar and upholstered in red velvet, which was and still is considered a luxury material. While the chair maintains the structure of Spanish chairs of the sixteenth century, the eclectic combination of technical and ornamental features lends this chair a New Spanish character.

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



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 is inset into a massive wooden frame. The mosaic is made of small glass squares of various shades of blue, green, pink, gold, and white. The wood of this fireplace surround is stained a dark color and contrasts with the shimmering surface of the mosaic.

Do you notice the two plants that appear to be growing from the base of the fireplace? These are stylized thistles. A thistle is a type of flowering plant characterized by prickles, sharp-pointed projections on the outer surface of the stems and the flat parts of the leaves. The thistles appear to exuberantly spread their sharp, spiky leaves in luminous tones of blue, green, and gold.

Look carefully. The same thistle design is repeated in the carved horizontal panels on either side of the mantle.

Symmetry, or the balance of parts of a composition, is an important feature of this design. For example, the thistle motif on the left side of the fireplace mirrors the thistle motif on the right. Multiple bands of decorative mosaic tile form a pattern on the perimeter of the fireplace, unifying the design. The structure itself is a carefully balanced geometric shape.

- *Imagine if there were a fire in this fireplace. What would that look like?*

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. Originally situated in the entrance hall of the King house, the fireplace served as a welcoming beacon to the home and reflected the ambience of warmth, comfort, harmony, and inspired aesthetic living that defined the Arts and Crafts lifestyle. Maher, and other Midwest architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, were members of the Prairie School, one of several regional branches of the Arts and Crafts movement.

- *How do we select the objects we live with? What makes them important or valuable?*

The Arts and Crafts movement developed in Britain in the late 1800s 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 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. Maher was one of several architects in the United States who subscribed to this philosophy known as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art).

How was it made?

Architect Louis Sullivan (1856–1924), one of the leaders of the Prairie School, originated the idea of "organic" architecture. Beginning in the 1880s, he advocated the creation of a new American architecture that used simplified forms and ornamentation based on plants. George Washington Maher, who trained as an architect, worked for Sullivan before establishing his own practice in 1888. An advocate for unified design, Maher created a special motif for each commission, repeating it throughout the interior and exterior spaces. He called this the "motif rhythm theory," which involved the constant repetition of a motif drawn from nature, preferably one unique to the site or meaningful to the client. The stylized thistle that appears so prominently on the fireplace surround was repeated throughout the interior of the King house. In their dense, dynamic, and organic appearance, King's designs are similar to Sullivan's. See the enclosed CD for examples of Sullivan's work and that of other Arts and Crafts artists.

- *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.*

Bedroom Dresser with Mirror from the Shep Commission, Los Angeles, 1936–38

RUDOLPH SCHINDLER, (AUSTRIA, 1887–1953)



Rudolph Schindler (Austria, 1887–1953)
Bedroom Dresser with Mirror from the Shep Commission, Los Angeles, 1936–38
Gumwood, mirror, 70¾ x 105 in. overall
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Ruth Shep Polen AC1995.81.19.1–10
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

What do you see?

What appear to be wooden crates are stacked on top of one another in the design of this dresser. The geometric shapes are made of lightly stained gumwood. This dresser is low, wide, and horizontal. Behind the wooden structure is a half-circle mirror in three parts. Unlike the Arts and Crafts fireplace, this dresser is completely unadorned by ornamentation and is pristine in its simplicity.

Can you tell how the drawers of this dresser are opened? Architect Rudolph Schindler used undercut grooves to function as drawer pulls. This grooved design was developed by Schindler in 1926 as a response to his belief that hardware “places an object out of reach of a close personal relationship.”

- *How does ornamentation or lack of ornamentation influence a person’s interaction with a piece of furniture? If this dresser had shiny hardware on each drawer would that change your impression? How so?*

Look carefully. Do you notice the rim around the outer edge of the mirror? This 3½-inch frosted rim lights up and illuminates the mirror. Schindler intentionally created an unobtrusive electrical system. He masked ordinary light bulbs with frosted glass and ran the wires neatly behind the legs of the mirror. A tiny switch on the left side operates the lights.

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

The dresser's simplicity of forms, functional design, and lack of ornamentation are representative of early twentieth-century modernism. Architect Rudolph Schindler, who designed it, emigrated to the United States from Vienna, Austria, in 1914, hoping to study with modernist architect Frank Lloyd Wright. By late 1917, Schindler had moved to Chicago to work for Wright and learned first-hand about the Prairie School and the American Arts and Crafts movement. In 1921, Schindler moved to Los Angeles to supervise the completion of Wright's famous Hollyhock House and established his own practice.

This monumental dresser is one of nearly twenty pieces in LACMA's collection that Schindler designed in 1934 for the Silver Lake house of Milton and Ruth Shep. Art historians are unsure of exactly how the Sheps came to know the work of Rudolph Schindler, but Ruth Shep may have attended a lecture give by Schindler in Los Angeles in the early 1930s.

Ruth Shep commissioned Schindler to design and build a suite of furniture to fill an entire house, including a dining room, living room, two bedrooms, and a kitchen nook. She also commissioned him to design the home itself. The furniture was made in 1936, but due to various delays and the Sheps' divorce after World War II, the house was never built. Schindler completed preparatory drawings for the furniture and the residence. See the enclosed CD for examples of other Schindler-designed furniture.

How was it made?

Influenced by the total design concept of the Arts and Crafts movement, modern architects like Schindler designed completely integrated solutions that included buildings and furniture. Schindler said, "The modern architect...sees the house as an organism in which every detail including the furniture is related to the whole." Schindler's furniture, with its simple geometric designs and often even simpler construction, conforms to his overriding concern for the spatial environment as a livable, integrated whole.

The Shep furniture was likely built by a cabinet-maker and then assembled by Schindler at the house. This vanity was designed specifically for the master bedroom and includes a three-way mirror and perfume bar. The two outer mirrors open to reveal shelves approximately six-inches deep. The low, wide, horizontal shape of the dresser is mimicked in the other furniture designed for the house and gave the residents the option to create multiple horizontal planes within the interior of their home. The Shep suite of furniture is one of many examples of how architects design entire spaces, breaking down barriers between architecture and design.

- *The Maher fireplace and Schindler vanity are unusual in that they are custom-made. Most of the objects we live with today are mass-produced, not customized for us. What are some of the differences between custom-made and mass-produced objects?*

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