

ICONS AND ARCHETYPES MOVING FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Archetypes and iconic products along with their creators have inspired many of us to enter the design field. As designers we aspire to a lifestyle filled with these bits of perfection, and we hope that the clarity of vision that ushered in these works will be a part of our own legacy. Although many iconic works sit atop pedestals in museums, many other designs far more humble are part of everyday life. Jasper Morrison and Naoto Fukasawa's magnificent book *Super Normal, Sensations of the Ordinary* direct us to take note of these everyday genius designs that lie at our feet, designs that likely cannot be improved upon. Yet as designers we are constantly called upon to innovate, create new works, and challenge the standard. This paper proposes that many archetypes in everyday products should not be tossed out for they possess an important underpinning to culture. The proposition that an entirely new design denies an understanding and a sacred power that people of that place recognize and cherish their familiarity. The familiarity of icons and archetypes are what we as designers should indeed cherish and perpetuate, moving them forward with subtle enhancements while retaining their legacy. We can each call up an image of iconic forms such as the Coca-Cola bottle, Ray-Ban sunglasses, or the humble canning jar.

The concept of product icons and archetypes were proposed to a graduate class of fifteen students. They were tasked with finding a humble existing archetype from their region of origin, and perform subtle updates to this vernacular form casting it in ceramic slip.

Keywords: Archetype, icon, innovation, graduate study.

1 INTRODUCTION

Design has many definitions but the one that captures much of its meaning is the phrase 'moving from the existing to the preferred'. Professionally, Industrial Design has an enthusiasm for creating objects that work better, offer better user experience, and are better looking. Whether designing from the ground up for an entirely new product, or improving upon what already exists, design seeks to make changes either through fresh introduction, re-imagining or a continuation of existing products. We, in the profession, champion ourselves as being an integral part of this creation and flow of innovative consumer goods across the globe and therefore habitually feel the right to examine and improve these everyday objects, thereby feeding back into this cycle of creation. Despite the endless pursuit of innovation, there are already many wonderful objects within our cultures that have remained largely untouched but are not immune from being swept away by the field's deafening cry to constantly innovate. This paper thus poses the question: Is innovation a danger to the valuable and iconic cultural products and the archetypes that we take pleasure in?

Dieter Rams places "good design is innovative" as the first rule of his ten rules of good design [1]. This longstanding rule of Rams is representative of the field, and versions thereof are likely part of any school that teaches design thinking. Design thinking includes tactics of brainstorming new ideas as a valued starting point of any product or service nowadays, big or small. The method has become so prevalent beyond the circles of design that it is also followed in management and engineering departments of various institutions[2]. So, is the dizzying call to innovate over and over again while flooding the market with new releases of products much more than we humans can handle? If the principle of design thinking is to be human-centered, isn't then the culture of those humans central to this thinking?

As humans, we ground our culture in objects that root us to the past, objects from which we take pleasure and meaning. In our daily lives we interact with products of our culture that are iconic and archetypal. Iconic products are ones that a culture has come to recognize and embrace, some of which were created long ago while others are innovations of recent times. Be it something as humble as a pepper grinder or as grand and technical as an iPod, objects that make up our culture potentially hold an important link to our collective the past. Being culturally sensitive is incredibly important platform of good design.

While as humans we unknowingly cherish many product designs as iconic, holding something of a unique place in our lives even though they might be placed living among others on the self. Sometimes these objects come with great acclaim or ceremony and more often they do what they need to and go unnoticed. These designs may have been innovative at one time, or humbly grown to be part of what we have come to accept as everyday, having grown to be the archetypes in our culture. This concept—that icons and archetypes are both humble everyday as well as deeply cherished—was born out in a project for students. Students looked at archetypes from their own culture as a source of inspiration through the lens of cultural sensitivity. Posed as a problem, the first-year graduate students of our Industrial Design program discussed specific icons and archetypes as a springboard for a design, using them as a source for generating a set of works. This project description is examined later in this paper.

2 ICONS, ARCHETYPES, AND CLASSICS

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an archetype as ‘The original pattern or model from which copies are made,’ while the word iconic is described as ‘designating a person or thing regarded as representative of a culture or movement’. Products with history are also referred to by the word ‘classic’ which is defined as ‘constituting an acknowledged standard or model; of enduring interest and value’[3]. When examined closely, all the three words are interrelated on many levels, especially when it comes to objects.

Archetypes very often crossover into the realm of becoming icons. Archetypal traits remind us and reinforce to us the familiar form in new versions, and variations of objects relate back to the original one. The human brain has a preference for skimming through large amounts of information rather than getting caught in details. We complete information by being dependent upon existing icons and symbols on a regular basis. Icons are in some ways abstractions in which the details are alterable. Scott McCloud writes that abstraction in the art of comics brings the reader more in touch with the characters and enjoyment of the story[4]. A similar parallel can be drawn between archetypes, which hold the potential of becoming such icons and ultimately classics. The true archetype will survive the tests of time not by a loud presence but rather by the people who embrace it, giving it meaning through their individual experiences. Through their interactions and personal narratives, people (and ultimately the culture which they form) build and reinforce the archetypes, making an object a classic, even while variations on the form still embody and perhaps reinforce its importance.

3 UTILITY IS CULTURAL

New products are designed to fulfil a utilitarian need, this is the framework in which archetypes are born. Although product archetypes have stood the test of time, there was a time when they did not exist. They are conceived by human ingenuity through the application of technology, and their creation is limited by the laws of physics.

These objects, created from utilitarian need, will become a piece of people’s homes, and their selections projects individual values and makes the home an extension of personality. But when friends visit for dinner and use the same plates, silverware, bathroom faucet, door knobs and other objects in this carefully curated space, hopefully they are able to use these objects with as much ease as they would use similar objects in their own home. Utility and familiarity doesn’t decrease the value of these objects; it demonstrates how utility surpasses every other factor. The utility of these objects, regardless of expressive form, shows why and how archetypes persist over time. Their extreme utility, manifested in an ability to work well consistently to answer daily needs, makes them an archetype. It is their utility, and not their beauty, that makes them an archetype. Objects of utility are unsung heroes, helping us to accomplish our daily goals and tasks. Most of them qualify as objects of the ‘super-normal’. These ‘super-normal’ objects of manufacture are often all around us. They fulfil our needs on a daily basis with simplicity of form and unobtrusive presence. They often make little visual statement, a statement honest need comprised of normal utilitarian cycle. Feeling that design has

drifted away from normality, Jasper Morrison states, “As designers we can aim at achieving the super-normal by being less concerned with visual aspects of an object’s character, by attempting to anticipate the object’s likely impact on the atmosphere and how it will be to live with.”[5] It is this obsession with visual character that often distracts designers, urging them to put a new spin on a super-normal form that already answers cultural needs and cannot be improved.

3.1 Archetypes arise from Function

Most of the pieces in the famous collection of super-normal objects by Morrison and Fukasawa come from a highly functional commonplace use. Some are birthed due to technology with fantastic demand; others are slower to come to hold their place in culture. Taking the concept of the super-normal we can consider an example the Bic Crystal ballpoint pen. Its functional use has pragmatic everyday applications that have persisted in the seventy years since its birth. The Bic crystal pen is so functional in its form, with its hexagonal clear body and a separate cap with a hole in the top, that it remains iconic and need not be improved. After many years of ballpoint pen use in our daily lives and with many manufactures edging for market share, the iconic Bic pen piece still retains half of the global market, because “it just works”[6]. Its iconic form and function, more than its seductive beauty, has landed the humble Bic in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The technology that created the Bic and made it a museum piece cannot improve upon its functional properties. It is the Bic that continues to define what a ball point pen is.



Figure 1. Anglepoise lamp

Another archetypal design is George Carwardine’s Anglepoise desk lamp. This lamp, espoused as an archetype by Deyan Sudjic, the Director of the Design Museum London, is a form that has . According to Sudjic the Anglepoise’s value lies in its function ‘as much an important aesthetic aspect of a design” [7]. The Anglepoise innovation is the birth of the articulating desk lamp. With a simple set of four-bar mechanisms this lamp became the standard of many who worked on large desk or drafting table creating architecture, engineering, creative works, or simply putting graphite to paper. What many of us know at the Luxo lamp, the Anglepoise played a critical functional and also aesthetic role in the working environment, that now is an everyday archetype. Sudjic, describes the interactions with Anglepoise as almost ritualistic in nature, and declares the lamps ability to adjust in form are what makes it an archetype.

3.2 Archetypes are Natural

Objects whose working nature has evolved along with human culture have certain characteristics that persist, regardless of how much designers might want to flout convention. Furthermore, humankind is intrinsically a part of nature and even the most futuristic object is still grounded somewhere within the natural experience. This grounding is not a conscious effort but rather embedded deep within each of us.

An example for the nature-based grounding of archetypes lies in the vessels we use. While gravity and its rules put forward certain restraints on how vessels can be handled, the shapes of the vessels still vary based on the beverage they are designed to contain. Their shapes additionally vary based on the cultural outlook towards that liquid. Was the fluid abundant and easily available, or was it scarce and prized in that culture? Drinking whiskey from a tea cup or juice from a wine glass feels culturally inappropriate, diminishing the drinking experience [8]. The vessel’s form, with either straight edges or tapered sides, can convey information about the liquid the vessel is designed to hold even when it is empty. Most cups designed to contain precious liquids taper inwards, as if the object itself is playing a role to avoid spilling. Cups designed to contain plentiful liquids are more liberal with their openings.

This evolution appears to happen independently across cultures; wine glasses and sake cups are cross-cultural examples.

We see other objects that appear to tie us to the natural world even as technology advances. For example, digital clocks and watches have improved functionality over their analogue counterparts. They are less expensive, easier to read, and more accurate. Yet the demand for analog clocks and watches still remains. Sudjic states that the major reason for this ongoing demand is because the art of watchmaking has always been rooted in the trade of jewel making, thus the factor of luxury comes into play in the persistence of this archetype [7]. But there might be more to the ongoing demand for analog time pieces rooted in human connection to the natural world, evolving and manifesting itself as an archetype. The analog clock can be seen as the representation of periodic nature of time on earth. Primitive measuring instruments like sundials, hourglasses, or water clocks also rely on this natural and archetypal element of time as periodic, returning after a day or a year. As the earth moves on its own axis and around the sun, the hands of a clock move in repetition of that archetypal cycle.

That said, while taking inspiration from culture and nature is important, as well as respecting archetypal and classic design, one must also be mindful of the place and time of an object's use before senselessly transposing it into a different cultural milieu. As Papanek profoundly highlights, the natural evolution of objects in an ecosystem through the difference in the design of houses in the east and the west," Fragile, sliding paper walls and tatami give the house definite and significant acoustical properties that have influenced the design and development of musical instruments and even the melodic structure of Japanese speech, poetry, and drama. A piano, designed for the reverberating insulated walls and floors of Western homes and concert halls, cannot be introduced into a Japanese home without reducing the brilliance of a Rachmaninoff concerto to a shrill cacophony. Similarly, the fragile quality of a Japanese samisen cannot be fully appreciated in the reverberating box that constitutes the American house"[9].

3.3 Archetypes connect to the Past

Humans have a romanticism of the past. Today, digital technologies and manufacturing prowess make for extraordinary new possibilities, yet technology can be employed with classic design styling to afford new technologies with an interface, skin, and construction of a classic aesthetic. In such cases, function remains primary, but the aesthetic identifies us with a cultural past.

This trend can be seen in the community of musicians who want to feel an attachment to their history. Although better sounding, lighter, and more affordable musical equipment floods the market, there is a growing desire for the older equipment. Tube amplifiers have cultural staying power, and the desire for these has brought us modern products pretending to be vintage. This warm emotion of familiarity ties musicians to their cultural past with old technology. An example would be the Yamaha THR series of amplifiers that come in a solid steel casing with knobs that project the sturdiness and reliability of vintage musical instruments and equipment, a functional need for the long and rough handling on the road. Rain Noe aptly describes the design as belonging to a retro class of objects, independent of lightweight desires while delivering accolades. The THR amplifier transports us back in time; it would not look out of place at all on the musician's stage of thirty years ago [10].



Figure 2. Yamaha THR amplifier

The THR amplifier's glow from within the grill gives the impression of warm vacuum tubes powered up in an amplifier that woke from a four-decade long sleep. While on the surface or on the first look, the amp really might look like a rare piece from a collector's box with its solid steel casing, thick knobs, and toggle switches, a form speaking of the spirit of the boutique amplifiers. On closer look one, however, can see the USB ports that let it connect to a computer for recording or further audio processing, or spot the snug area for pushing in batteries confirms that the device is indeed a modern one. This is one of the rare times when skeuomorphism does not look bad. The mention of the word itself might raise the alarm bells in many circles but here is a product that carries it out honestly. It is not like the fake wooden decal on the dashboard of a car; it is a modern amplifier that tells what it does while hinting at what the good old times used to be like, bringing a confidence to a musician seeking something new while also wishing to experiencing (even if only superficially) the beauty from the past.

4 THE PROJECT

The author used the premise of icons and archetypes as the basis of a graduate course project on form and function. The purpose of the project was to threefold:

1. To consider the unique presence of archetypal objects in culture
2. To make the forms contemporary
3. To consider the effects of material transfer in slip cast ceramic

Students were introduced to the project by a series of select contemporary designed objects. The set of designs presented was inspired by archetypal design objects made contemporary through their use of concept, materials, and form enhancements. Working with these designs as precedents, the students were asked to source archetypes from their country of origin. Defining what was an archetype and icon proved to be a great challenge to them. They struggled to understand what was iconic and what was common; what had a special place in the culture and what was quotidian. When students settled on iconic cultural pieces it was notable that often had a personal or cultural narrative behind them. For example, one choice was a set of plastic salt and pepper shakers common in restaurant diners, which were personally and culturally important to students because of road trips with their family or weekly breakfasts with grandparents. A maple syrup container was attached to the romance of harvesting syrup from maple trees. Others reasons could also be attached to special cultural art form, such as painting Chinese characters. Brush painting characters is a time-honoured art carried out by a traditional brush. Ubiquity to the culture certainly matters, but social status also played a role in the student choices. A student who selected a traditional Middle Eastern coffee pot was one of a distinct social class, and the pot was connected to a narrative of special occasions not common to most classes.

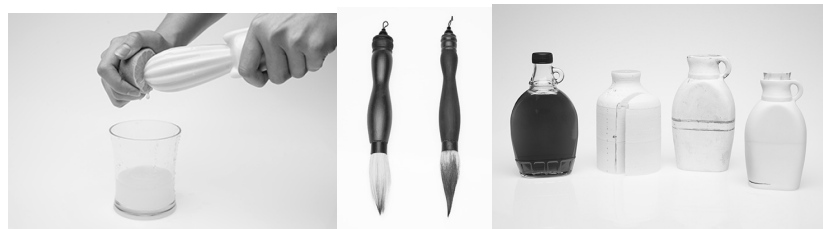


Figure 3. Student work

The next step involved students considering how to enhance this archetype to give it contemporary aesthetics. This was the heart of the project concept, refining the longstanding iconic form without violating its continued roots in culture. Refinements need to be subtle yet perceivable to maintain the object's cultural vitality. There was no attempt to change functionality, as these changes would likely not result in improvement. More importantly, changes to function would likely disrupt its archetypal form, and therefore be a greater failure than an improvement. The challenge was to subtly exercise restraint. Complicating these limitations was the fact that each piece was to be cast into ceramic. Deviating from lines and draft angles dictated some of the form challenges, but more importantly was the question whether the material change added life to the icon or created a differentiating, negative change.

The end result was a series of objects that represented a global perspective and offered students an ability to discuss the importance of the object in their culture and which features of the form they felt

were important to its identity. Students enjoyed the technical process of slip casting, learning to master the process and to generate multiples, affording them the opportunity to explore colour and graphics on form. They also studying the distinctions between contemporary forms and persisting archetypes, as well as the ways materials form a strong basis for an object's identity. The most learning they accomplished was trying to discern what is archetypal in one's own culture, or subset of culture. Some chose forms that prevailed through culture-wide ceremonies while others chose cultural subsets, such as a student who played with the iconic 'Juicy Salif' juicer by Philippe Stark's as an industrial design icon.

5 CONCLUSION

Innovation plays central role in Industrial Design and will continue to garnish our attention and enthusiasm. Raymond Lowey's dictum 'Never leave well enough alone' is part of our field's DNA; innovation will continue to be critical to our success. However, Morrison and Fukasawa have called our attention to the super-normal, reminding us that great designs are in our midst and need not be improved. Designers need to understand that some designs are archetypal and classic, and it's important to leave them alone. While innovation brought to us the Anglepoise lamp, the analog watch, and the humble Bic ball point pen, these designs have become archetypal, and persist despite advances in technology. The longstanding consumption of these products is "about consumers that highly influence the meaning (and related cultural value) of products" [11]. These objects have become part of our culture even as innovation continues moving forward. Culturally humans like to connect to history, especially if it feels classic. The design of the Yamaha THR guitar amplifier rejects innovation (in part) and shows how musicians appreciate the both the haptic feel of knobs and the solid heft of the amp itself, and also how they like to immerse themselves in the rich history of their field that the amplifier symbolizes a connection to the musician community. While objects like these may be disingenuous in that they are seizing on legacy and not reaching toward new iconic design themselves, they also demonstrate the limitations of innovation.

It is important to give students a sense of the limits of the call to innovation. They should be engaged in a dialogue with the historical and cultural role of objects and new technical and cultural innovations. Students need to look at existing designs within our midst and consider how they tie us to a people and place that transcends our individual aspirations and bind us to a greater whole. Archetypes can be embraced by design to continue their legacy, and designers who use their insights to incorporate subtle aesthetic refinements can continue the iconic role of these objects, keeping them from fading into the past.

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