

Cultural uses of the term “design” in French

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In his *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes* (Interviews on the lives and work of the most excellent ancient and modern painters), published between 1666 and 1688, André Félibien, Louis XIV’s historiographer and Secretary of the Academy of Architecture regularly uses the term “dessigner” to mean “dessiner” (drawing), a spelling that in the 18th century Furetière would have qualified as rare but still appears under the letter D in his dictionary a few lines before “dessin” and “dessiner”. In the same way, the pages in Diderot’s *Encyclopaedia* on drawing bear the legends “Dessein” – both words are based on the Latin *designare* that means “to represent in concrete terms” a term that passed in to Italian at the Renaissance as *disegnare*, literally meaning “to trace the contours of something” or figuratively to “form a project”. This double dimension is present at the origins of the word, that of “dessin à dessein”, a meaning that has been lost in the French but has remained in English from drawing to design.

As we know design is an Anglicism in French that appeared in France at the end of the fifties using only one of the three meanings of the English term design – as in the *Cambridge Dictionary* this term has three definitions which correspond exactly to that of “dessein” in French in the 18th century: it

denotes first of all the plans for a project (in the technical sense of the term), the intention and the motif. Design in the French meaning is in principle based on the first idea, that is to say a plan or project “to make or draw plans for something, for example clothes or buildings” while retaining a trace of the other meanings in the background. However, the term is much more interesting than its academic definition and the point of the reflection that follows is to show how the term design can simultaneously refer to a number of things – practices, objects or judgements of taste according to the context and also according to whether it is used as a noun or an adjective.

Point number one: the word is used for everything from the “Philosophy of design” to Braun’s advertising a clock radio as a “Radio-réveil design” for 19,99 € in a supermarket catalogue not to mention Ikea’s self-proclaimed “innovative design” or “Les Puces du design” (The Design flea market) that takes place in Paris twice a year. Point number two: while the term has many meanings, it is nonetheless quite ambiguous and the term design is almost always used to valorise something. In other words, it has not (as of yet), taken on a negative connotation, and working in design is not considered pejorative as is the case with the expression in French “faire de la décoration” – that has since been replaced with “architecture d’intérieur” or more precisely by the term “design d’intérieur”, a slightly literal translation of the English term interior design. But this word whose contexts refer to a number of uses and the different interpretations in French of the term design is evidence of our link with the notion of an industrial aesthetic and common taste in terms of objects. So there are three interpretations that say the following: when we speak of design as a practice (“c’est le design”), referring to an object (“c’est du design”) or to qualify taste (“c’est design”).

“C’est le design”: design as a practice

The main use of the term design is to define a certain number of practices that mainly come under the umbrella of what would have been the “applied arts” – precisely “dessins à desseins” (drawings to designs) – of which design is really just the industrial branch, that is to say, by playing with the term, an applied art, applied to industrial levels of production/reproduction and distribution, where the term “art appliqué” usually applies to craftsmanship. It is at this point that the term “dessin à dessein” gives rise to design: where the first term covers all of the applied arts from carpeting to door knobs the second retains from “dessin à dessein” the idea of someone who works in an industrial framework, in the studio of the engineer-designer or on an architect’s drawing board. We should also note that there is not, in France in any case, a notion of design in expensive jewellery, art books or stained glass window restoration but more an idea of creation or “artisanat d’art” (craftsman/artist) – a term that is on many levels a perfect counterpoint to design. The first characteristic of the term design in French is that it arrived at the moment when the object was developing an industrial dimension and where it was, as a result, conditioned by this.

However, at this stage, the use of the term is not innocent. The term design in French with no other qualifying term generally refers only to object design and more often, the interior of an object, or a utilitarian object – from the TGV to a coffee maker –, only very rarely covering the other fields of creativity or design in industry such as traffic lights, commercial scenography or clothes. And once it refers to a field beyond that of the utilitarian object, design is automatically used in tandem with another term to qualify the practice in question: graphic

design, environmental design, fashion design, interior design, web design, landscape design, textile design, etc., whereas in English the syntagmatic construction happens systematically and in English the terms industrial design or product design are used for utilitarian objects. The term design, when used alone in French to qualify applied creativity in industrial conditions (“Le design”), in fact only covers a tiny part, that of the object produced as a series. This is a revealing nuance of the status of design in the French creative field that introduces a hierarchical dimension to the professions: design in the French meaning subsumes all possible meanings of the word in favour of a unique notion, albeit limiting in the creative sphere of the design of industrial objects – that is to say the creation of utilitarian objects that include a “machinic” principle of functioning, either because they fulfil the role of the machine (a pair of scissors, a stool), or because they are themselves machines (a car, a food mixer). The others are not considered to be “du design” but “du design de”¹.

As a result, the term design when used alone does not include “non-machinic” objects (a vase, a dress, a book cover), which leads to a classification between the apparently complex forms of the notion of design (as long as they have the machinic dimension) and the “simplified” forms that are purely ornamental and non-complex in appearance (even if of course this is not the case). This distinction between design and “design de” adds an implicit hierarchical dimension to practices that are nonetheless similar: the term design when used alone in French is the continuation of an “art de l’ingénieur” (art of the engineer), a notion that itself derives from the quarrel between mechanical arts and liberal arts in the 18th century. As a mechanical art brought up to the level of the liberal arts, this interpretation of design locates it, like architecture,

between art and technique, that is to say both a technique and an art form. Simultaneously an artist and an engineer, the “pure” designer can lay claim to the status in the “Leonardo-esque” tradition of the complete talent, as a “*deus ex machina*” in the literal sense. This is how we must understand the vague disdain among certain designers for their colleagues that do not deal with the constraints of the machine – whether they are graphic artists, fashion stylists or landscapers: the Millau viaduct, the Bubu stool, the Mégane car, yes; the logo of the musée d’Orsay, Chanel’s 2005 or the André-Citroën park in Paris, no.

To employ the term design only for “industrial design” or “product design”, is to prop up the hierarchy between the person who designs a machine (whether it be “to sit on”, or “to live in” as was often mentioned in the twenties, the founding era of the practice in France) and the person who designs an object that is just to be looked at.

All designers are not equal in the argument, and those who benefit from the term designer alone are implicitly credited with a dimension of accomplishment that he or she whose practice is qualified by an additional term (“graphic designer”, “fashion designer”, “interior designer”, etc.) lacks. This hierarchy is far from obsolete if we are to look at the way in which the figure of designer-engineer is mentioned relative to a designer-artist in the discourse on design – whether this comes from the designers themselves or from commentators. If we dig a little, we find the hierarchy that often exists between engineers between “hard” techniques and “soft” techniques, itself comes from a value system that has its roots in an ancient notion of materials. So underneath this implicit hierarchy between designers and “designers de”, there is also a hierarchy between different types of material, from metal – the Promethean material at the top of the ladder – down to fabric and

paper – simple matter rather than real materials without hold or substance right down at the bottom of the ladder.

Curiously thus the concept of the “Beautiful and useful”², which was the motto for the followers of the decorative arts in the 19th century (“Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be *useful*, or believe to be *beautiful*” as William Morris said), found itself reduced by the definition of design in the first half of the 20th century. In fact, the decorative arts movement aimed to encompass all of the elements of everyday life – from architecture to the teaspoon via wallpaper and printed fabrics – with the idea in mind of a “synthesis of the arts” that bloomed in England with the Arts and Crafts movement and in France with the École de Nancy. French design thus retained only the industrial object from this vast movement, casting aside other fields of the applied arts which remained very much alive in other countries. Textile design that was important in France and England in the first two decades of the 20th century (as was the case with Russia’s Wuthemas and Germany’s Bauhaus), moved to Northern Europe and the other side of the Atlantic in the fifties while it became marginalised in France and with its close neighbours. The concept of “beautiful and useful” very quickly came to concern only the machine, even though in a broader sense, while other domains of the applied arts fell back on to arts and crafts, and besides the French “beau pour tous” movement in the sixties – like the work of Denise Fayolle and Maïmé Arnodin for Prisunic for example – the decorative object began to separate itself, in France in any case, from the notion of design it came from originally.

The origins of this split are diverse and varied, but it is probable that it happened mainly due to the divorce in the thirties between modernist theorists and their rejection of the “joli/pretty” – modernity, as we know,

made a huge effort to classify decor as a minor activity and the nostalgic defenders of traditional French “great taste”. As early as the forties the split was consummated between an internal ethic of function, yet again reinforced by the economic and production necessities demanded by the reconstructive effort after the war, and a France of Colbertian nostalgia that wanted to retain the heritage of the “bel objet” (the beautiful object). This divorce still has repercussions today as is evident from the tetchy relationship between the luxury object and the so-called “intelligent” object: the minute the French luxury product ventures into the field of design in terms of the form/function, it rarely manages to produce more than a cover (a crocodile skin iPod holder), or at worst a gadget (the champagne box that becomes an ice bucket). From the beginning of design in France in any case (or because of its beginning), French “great taste” demanded a distinctiveness in reaction against the democratic aesthetic of North American design, thus accelerating the separation between the product by the engineer/conceptor and the “object of taste” by the artist/craftsman. “Dessin” split from “dessein” and “beautiful and useful” became just a beautiful tool.

“C’est du design”: design as a noun in French

Indeed, utility is at the heart of the contemporary meanings of the term design. What is useful in this version of the object as machine – and the intelligent machine? Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince’s theory was that “It must be useful as it is so pretty”, but design on the contrary means that an object is pretty because it is useful, an equation between form and function that is doubtless one of the most important inherited concepts – and not the easiest to maintain – of the modernity of the object. Adolf Loos used to say that “beauty to us

means the highest level of perfection. As a result, it is not possible for an object that is not practical to be considered beautiful. The basic condition an object must fulfil to be considered “beautiful” is to conform to its finality”³. The finality not only took precedence over the form as we know but also, as the theory of design is voluble on the subject, is the very source of the form.

However, the theorists of function did not predict how this quite restrictive definition of design would end up dictating (and restricting) the field of objects it would come to designate. Let me explain: given that the term design in French is used to qualify a specific way of qualifying the object from a form/function angle and the finality of a machine-object, it is quite normal that it came to evoke through pure metonymy, the very object that results from it. The term design thus refers both to a practice but even more often to a range of objects that have in common the fact that they all conform to the “basic condition”, that of their “finality” to use Adolf Loos’ expression. To say “c’est du design” means to designate an object that claims a certain intelligence relative to a function far from the mere canons of being decorative and pretty. This goes for all public equipment (transport, urban furniture), consumer goods (cars, electronic goods, household appliances) but also and above all for furniture: design, through catachreses, can mean “an object that has been designed” and is used to designate the objects themselves as well as positioning a part of the range of products for the home, from Ikea to Capellini via the “Contemporaines” from the furniture company Roche-Bobois.

When extended to the field of the object, the term design in France ends up meaning – and this is not the strangest of its avatars – a “historical” style of furniture that came to be with the founders of the notion, whether

they be French (Le Corbusier, Robert Mallet-Stevens, René Herbst) or foreign (Josef Hoffmann, Charles Mackintosh, Eileen Grey, Marcel Breuer) and continued after the war, in particular with the Americans (Florence Knoll, Charles and Ray Eames), the Italians (Gio Ponti, Ettore Sottsass), the Scandinavians (Poul Kjaerholm, Arne Jacobsen) but also the French (Jean Prouvé, Pierre Paulin). This historical style stretches from the twenties to today while remaining quite restricted in style by its own characteristics – because at each stage it consorts with other styles that are generally neo-classic or stemming from the “bel objet”. So it is telling that in some Parisian auction houses there are two departments, the first known as “Arts décoratifs” that proposes furniture by “decorators” and cabinet makers up until the fifties and sixties (Jean-Michel Frank, Paul Dupré-Lafon, Alexandre Noll); and a second called precisely “Design”, that proposes furniture from the same era (and other more recent eras) but that were designed differently and as such appear different, from Gerrit Rietveld to Joe Colombo – both giving rise to separate catalogues and sales. Its as if the 19th century department of the same auction house decided to split into two separate sales, on the one hand, the one-off pieces from quality craftsmen like a piece by Jacob-Desmalter or a bowl by Froment-Meurice; and on the other objects that are also from quality craftsmen but produced in “series”, such as an earthenware piece from Hauchecorne, a Sèvres biscuit or a Meissonier bronze, incidentally referred to by the Goncourt brothers as “marvellous industrial art” – or was it “design” before its time?

We can smile at the lapses and see how trends mean that certain “decorators” in some sales become “moderns”, such as Jean Royère, or by the same token how certain “moderns” are categorised with the decora-

tors like Pierre Chareau. We should also point out that Anglo-Saxon auction houses such as Sotheby’s or Christie’s have one department only for the two “styles”, both being referred to as 20th Century Decorative Art and Design – a clear sign that the split between “decorators” and “designers” is truly a French one which brings us back to the dialectic heritage between mechanical arts and liberal arts mentioned above. The term design in French, in addition to being a practice, ended up designating an actual formal style (even sometimes referred to as “formalist”) which covers a defined family of objects – a family of objects that we can see how, in every era, has coexisted with other objects and that today refers less to an ethical principle (despite the fact that it does exist) than an aesthetic repertoire. This means we have events such as “Les Puces du design” and other events that propose “design antiques”, which is almost an oxymoron as the term design in principle is meant to evoke a certain contemporary element, even if this is not necessarily its vocation.

“C’est design”: design as a taste judgement

This link to the contemporary has not disappeared, on the contrary, and if design as a noun refers either to a practice that is supposedly timeless – despite its relatively precise date of birth –, or to different objects confined to a certain “historic” time, design as an adjective (in French) refers almost always to the contemporary – or better, to the new, the current. This is the third and last but not least use of the term design in the French language, the one that is used to evoke a notion of the “now” that is both vague and generalised: to use the expression “c’est design” really means to say “it’s modern”, “it’s today”, even “it’s trendy”. In any case, that is the meaning to be gleaned from the passably invocatory uses of the

word when it is used to denote a product, from couches to alarm clocks, and whose marketing pitch (whether it comes from the brand, the retailer or the press) is the first to use. Design, in this context, is used not so much to describe the creative process or an aesthetic field but to categorise the object which benefits from the judgement of taste, strictly defined in the 'now'. In the end, when design is used adjectivally as in "c'est design", it takes on a certain flavour of the month aspect.

So this use of the term design in French, when it designates the "nowness" of an object, refers to the taste of the time. This is precisely what the titles of the Pompidou centres' exhibition *D. Day, Design d'aujourd'hui*, the special edition *Design d'aujourd'hui* from *Beaux-Arts magazine* or *Design Now* from Taschen are playing with. This "design of today", all mixed up together includes Christophe Pillet, Matali Crasset, Radi designers, Ora-ïto and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec to name five references often mentioned when the theme of "today" in contemporary French design is brought up – just like Philippe Starck was in the eighties and nineties. The flavour of the month in terms of a formal repertoire, this type of design refers to the "now" but established to the extent that it becomes a style that serves to qualify a place and time, which means probably that which will remain of French style from the first half of the twenty first century. To speak today of a "fauteuil design" (armchair) or a "canapé design" (couch) – whether they come from Ikea or from Capellini –, means implicitly that it is of this specific style, in tune with the moment.

But this taste of the day also gives rise to a look, meaning the visual aspect characteristic of fashion – "look du jour" that sometimes covers older objects in order to give them an up to date aspect and leads to logos or colour codes being revamped, a car

shape or a laptop being redesigned, to changing the packaging of a bottle of mineral water or a tube of lipstick. This use of the term design as an adjective is very much oriented towards consumer objects such as "sa nouvelle bouteille design" (the new "design" bottle), "sa nouvelle ligne très design" (the new very "design" line) or even "un look design" (a "design" look), that usually come from the marketing department, most often accompanied by the terms *nouveau* (new), or *dernier* (latest), or *tendance* (trendy). This category also includes all high-tech products (from mobile phones to vacuum cleaners), as well as packaging that is supposed to make a product appear up to date. This is not aimed at innovating the product so much as anchoring the product it wraps in the "air du temps"; this design is essentially a means to communicate: "this is of the now", just like fashion. This is what distinguishes design that means "what will remain of the era" we just mentioned – in theory, as one of the downsides of contemporary design overall over the past twenty years, is to have become a machine that produces communicative and narrative objects rather than really innovative objects, but that's another story. Whatever the case, this "look design", while it bases an object in the "air du temps" and in an image-based reality, also contributes to making it ephemeral to the detriment of the basic function of design which was to make "beauty last". It is still this concept of design that means that certain families of products, helped by "copycatting" find themselves with the exact same design at the same time: this has always been the case for dresses and bags but is also becoming true for mobile phones, vacuum cleaners, car chassis or sofa beds, with terrifying speed – which, we must point out has not always been the case. This "look design" has all of the advantages of the fashion trend (up to dateness, newness, provocation of desire) but also has all

of the faults (homogeneous proposals, low level of risk taking and rapid obsolescence). This paradoxical marriage between design with the notion of fashion doubtless give it more relevance to the era while at the same time wearing out what gives it a legitimacy, meaning the anticipatory and reformatory aspect of what it brings to the table. So these closer links to the question of dressing/wrapping that accompanies its unprecedented integration into the arsenal of marketing tools, progressively makes design a pure sign of the “air du temps” to the detriment of the formal approach of its origins.

So this “look du jour” has given rise to a decorative repertoire that is no longer truly “design”, that is to say an often overloaded and useless neo-modernist vocabulary aimed at “sounding modern” and which fill the stores – metal lamp stands folded in a zig zag position, chromed trompe-l’œil bolts, black triangular plates, green and yellow toasters with big red buttons, pushchairs calibrated like 4x4 jeeps, Goldorak-style hifi systems. This design is purely and simply a decorative repertoire aimed at making people consume “l’air du temps” with no other intentions or aesthetic, no aspirations in the form/function equation, and no intention to last over time. It could be termed in French as “Dessin sans dessein” (Drawing without design), as it constitutes pure ornamentation, paradoxically going back to what the origins of design were supposed to have dispensed with. These gratuitous shapes that are meant to be inspired participate in the strange final detour towards the useless and the anecdotally decorative. It is at this point that the paradox of the term design that has remained synonymous with the ethics of industrial design and simultaneously through its adjectivisation has become the very brand of its decorative and commercial bastardisation. The original split between the art of engineering and that of artist-

craftsman may be less pertinent than at the start of the 20th century, it is nevertheless undergoing a process of reconfiguration right in front of us in an unprecedented manner between the engineer and the advertiser between a design of research largely linked to technology that is concerned with the concrete finality of the object (of which eco design is currently one of the most interesting aspects) and a design of communication largely linked to marketing that deals with the immaterial finality of the object.

At the end of this quick reflection, we should point out that while evolutions in design have been relatively similar all over the consumer-based West, the use of the term in France depicts the situation much more clearly than in English where the term mostly denotes a practice. And while in theory in France the concept of design as a practice remains purely functionalist and industrial separate from the “bel objet”, the polysemic nature of the term design in French means that the repertoire of forms that the term designates (from “c’est du design” to “c’est design”) has slowly invaded the corners of its visibility regime and the aesthetic system of its objects.

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1. The only counter-example: packaging design that, even though it comes from graphic design has not been given a semantic pairing – in French we do not refer to “design de packaging”, perhaps because packaging is seen to be “machinic” and as such has functional characteristics.
2. Taken from the name Yvonne Brunhammer, the ex-Head curator at the musée des Arts décoratifs, gave to her book about the history of the museum (Paris, Gallimard Découvertes, 1992).
3. Adolf Loos, *Chronicle written at the time of the Exhibition for the Viennese jubilee* (1898), in *Puroles dans le vide*, Paris, Ivrea, 1994, p. 35.