

From the Useful-object to the Object-tool

By André Ricard

Freed from its functional responsibility, useful-objects appear as single-useful formal phenomena whose morphology is used to express a particular message.

If we have a look on the evolution of human behaviour related to their relation with the objects that form their close and daily surroundings, that is, with all those things they need to implement their lives, we see how this relation is undergoing an evident change. It seems like the utilitarian services that things provide are not such an essential aspect anymore. We are possibly entering in a new era where the useful-objects are not purchased nor valued by the service they provide, but above all, by what they mean. And this is not because we do not require a useful value anymore, but because the utility is taken for granted and it is not valued. When the mere utility is considered obvious, new values are imposed on its place. The useful function survives, of course, in the useful-objects but it is not an essential factor anymore.

In this hyper technological era we have entered (where the knowledge field is increased day after day), we have come to suppose that everything is possible, that there is no function that cannot be managed, that it is enough with putting one's mind to something, that the own dynamic of the progress allows the man to reach any functional objective he could imagine. Maybe this would come to be true, but what seems real is that we already act as if it was. This new attitude in our relation with the objects comes from, doubtlessly, the fact that we are in a period where the functional values of the things are considered solved and, consequently, lack interest.

The function has lost its magic; it has stopped delighting us. There is little ingenuity that can surprise us. If someone would tell us that there is a computer able to write down on paper what our mind is thinking, it would seem possible to us. Today everything seems feasible.

Thus, the utility, that was the starting point and justification of the useful-objects, has lost its appreciative responsibility. Other values, in which base a qualification and classification of the objects, have been appearing. Currently, the object, even the purely utilitarian one, is valued according to other criterion. In fact, this criterion is not strictly new because it exists on human culture since the beginning. What is new is its application to a field completely minor until now. There have always existed things whose "use" was precisely meaning. On the prehistoric trinkets or on the sacred ornament, the sign was the function. The peculiar thing of our era is, then, the overflowing of the sign factor to those fields where the object should essentially justify itself by the utility factor. Currently, the useful-object is judged, above all, as an iconographic symbol loaded with meaning. This is a logical consequence of this disregard for the utility that we have noticed.

Free from their functional responsibility, the useful-objects appear as simple formal phenomenon whose morphology is used to express a particular message; in such a way that they put themselves in the symbolic world that each society generates. All we see can be a vehicle of meanings. The objects that form our surroundings are not unaware to this phenomenon. There exist a real language of forms in the same way that exists the signs one. As every language, this one is also established around a code of established conventions, typical of a particular socio-cultural context. Although this language has its own territory, a social or cultural group can also share it. With this connotative language, things, even the most useful and basic ones, “talk” to us, currently, about something else than its own function.

Nowadays, things “say things” about themselves and about who owns them. None of them avoids this classification; even the most austere objects, created with no other ambition than serving discreetly, emit a message when they are recycled by a particular cultural context. Thus, the increased importance that this message acquires reinforces, at the same time, the significant value of the things until the extreme of arriving to “use” an useful-object more due to its significant value than to the real service it offers. The quality of the service is quite often underestimated and an unequivocal symbolic meaning adjusted to the current codes is required. It will be thanks to this extra-utilitarian added value that useful things will end up being valued and negotiated. The “useful-object” has turned into an “object-tool”; or into an “object-object”, if preferred.

It is difficult to detect the effect that this phenomenon could have on the evolution of things. Maybe it would be just a temporary tendency or, on the contrary, it would come to suppose a decisive change in our way of considering the material culture.

Apart from what a far-reaching anthropological lecture could make with this phenomenon, a current and prompt analysis, made from a creative perspective, does not turn out truly favourable. To justify it from an intellectual and from an economic perspective, they usually employ underlying positive values. Nevertheless, what appears clear in the surface, without having to rummage in the arguable arguments of a supposed counter-culture or a current Keynesianism, does not predict positive effects because it does not make any real contribution to the material culture.

One of the risks that this possible new relation with useful things holds is that, due to this magnification of its symbolic and iconographic value, it comes to produce a disregard of the utility and it stops the gradual evolution of basic functional qualities that, despite everything, keep on being the useful-objects’ reason for being “existential”. And this is not making future-fiction, because it is already happening. We just have to see the furniture and essentials where the useful function disappears and they only pretend to be it. The cultural excuse, avant-garde, after which the ones that create and promote it justify themselves, does not seem satisfactory to me. It seems to hide an easy creative way for those who do not know how to make matters worse, skilfully supported by an industry in crisis that needs new paths to direct the merchandises.

The theory that says that everything is said and then we should get lost in the flourish is not acceptable. It is not true that the only thing than can be made with only the logical and coherent form of an object is to dress it up; that the pure form has already solved it all; that

nowadays we can only take it again to make variations on this matter. It is true that over the centuries of human cultural history most of the useful objects that we still need nowadays in our daily life have been masterfully improved. It is true that, consequently, as the essential necessities are covered, there are fewer possibilities of producing with only the form some unexplored variation. It is true that, whenever simpler solutions for the essentials have been discovered, it is more difficult to progress on this path.

But it is also true that there are still possibilities to explore and that we will not find them through those exhibitionist pirouettes. It is true that, on its essential functions, the life of the modern man is very similar to the primitive man's one and, because of that, the wisely improved essentials by generations of users and craftsmen keep on being useful and, in lots of cases, excellent. But there should always exist the possibility of providing to the new particular necessities of our times solutions with the same level of refinement and sobriety means; or to the ones that are only possible with new materials and elaboration techniques.

In the same way we do condemn the hyper technification that tends to motorize unnecessarily functions that can be perfectly solved with manual means, we should also condemn and resist giving a folksy character or dressing up those fine essentials that form our closest daily surroundings. Our period should also be able to provide something sensible and positive, although it may be modest, to the genuinely human culture, made with ingenuity and sobriety. I think that in a world where the scientific high-technology is replacing, in the creation of new products, the ingenuity of simple solutions, designers keep on being the only creative people that are capable of demonstrating that there still exist things to discover, things allocated to improve our quality of life with the only evolution of the forms, using for this a minimum technology and a maximum common sense.

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