On Materialism

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On a bright day in late summer, I was walking around in the sun when a window on Bleecker Street attracted my attention. It was a high-end antique dealer's shop displaying tables, chairs, lamps, and dressers in sundry combinations of bronze, wood, and glass. I guessed that some of these pieces would have been produced around the same time that important designer-artists like Frederick Keisler and Marianne Brandt were making work, and that these objects might have been created in response to their influence. But some guiding intelligence of origin that should have given a similar historical value to the pieces was missing. Their forms seemed too flamboyant for the authentic opulence of their materials. Yet their wrongness was alluring to me: technically sophisticated, but somehow unbalanced.

In a fateful mood, I entered the dark showroom through an open door. The lobby had high ceilings and was lit by dim chandeliers. I remember wide wood panels in a rich coal, and walls tiled in polished black marble. Later that year at the Met I saw a room of Art Deco jewelry with a similar Citizen Kane vibe; the jewels were displayed in transparent cubes in a dark marble room with a giant metallic mosaic depicting a Hellenistic motif, and were spotlit from an invisible fixture high above.

There was a dining table and chair set constructed of thin, finely carved wooden bars, and a living room chair cast in translucent orange resin. A pair of kidney-shaped sofas in dusty grey velvet with cylindrical brass columns for legs stood before a miniature coffee table of circular wood with a chunky ornamental base. Beneath lay an oversized area rug made of long white fur. There were tastefully small note cards next to each piece noting the date of manufacture and name of the designer – an elegant and seductive mix. On the cabinet drawers of a dresser, smooth panels framed a natural wood centre with arboreal knots and the stub of a branch carved in relief. Its door handles were little griffon heads. A pair of narrow arched mirrors with Art Deco ornamentation hung above a heavy brushed-steel dresser with intricate botanical etchings. Many things I saw were in perfect condition: cared for and aged into a pleasing touchability.

A tall, attractive man in his thirties greeted me with an athletic glow and a generous manner. He patiently answered my questions: I was looking at a display of furniture from a loosely-defined group of 20th century "studio artisans" who each produced a distinctive style of handmade furniture that were often collected by connoisseurs, celebrity patrons, and other enthusiasts. Their styles varied from art nouveau psychedelia in smooth curved wood to neo-classical motifs and weird reproductions of Matisse figures in bronze relief. But they had in common an attention to detail and a reverence for quality.

These designers were not unsuccessful or unpopular, but most of their reputations do not transcend their particular era; their work does not only appear dated, but is also deviant. Philip and Kelvin Laverne, for example, often carved miniature scenes into metal tabletops and dresser drawers, and antiqued the bronze and pewter with powders to give it a rusted, mildewy look, or a faux-wood finish. The detailed images I saw were inspired by scenes from Greek pottery. Many of these works have been bought at auction for high prices and are valued by collectors who specialize in design from that era. But, as authors, the Laverne's choices seemed strangely naive.

Though I was clearly in a store, the scene I had just walked through was being billed as an "exhibition" and there was an accompanying coffee table book, published by Rizzoli - an expensive hardcover book that a strange impulse moved me to buy without hesitation. Later that day I showed the book to a friend. He gestured to a portrait of one of the designers—a guy with weird-shaped glasses and a mini goatee—and commented that maybe the objects looked creepy because they expressed the sexual hang-ups of their makers.

At first I thought these designers had screwed up. By creating their own worlds of style, they had relinquished an opportunity for self-reflection in exchange for a mistaken idea of "creative freedom" that seemed only to amount to a lack of mental discipline. Their works were defective as art because they only flaunted the likes and pleasures of their makers. In an attempt to express themselves, these designers were using form too liberally. The exhibition catalogue called their work "functional art" — decorative objects for the home, for sitting, and for gathering around, and for living—but to me, it all seemed profoundly dysfunctional.

I did notice that despite their low status relative to avant-garde design movements like the Bauhaus, the furniture had been made with care; the pieces were durable enough to age. Maybe, in their time, they had only been an ersatz expression of a more cohesive and dignified history; but seeing them displayed in this dim, museum-like setting seemed to soften the apparent misguidedness of their creators' will. As my impression of the artists' flaws of taste faded, and with a new appreciation for the lasting materials with which the pieces had been created — the specially-chosen block of wood, the hand-finished bronze— I began to perceive a twisted sense of wisdom in their stupid formations. If these formations had once been loud formal expressions of the psychological faults of their makers, they had now, without changing shape, somehow healed themselves of their dysfunctional origins. I almost began to feel that some of these objects were as sublime as a work of really good art: that they had moved beyond the struggle of their creators.

The articles started out as fantastical objects workeding against a sense of realism, but in the years since they had been made, these objects had been forced to exist: kept by owners in homes and workplaces, and among other objects. I had never before thought about art or design objects as having a life. I always evaluated them when they were brand new, or as if they were perpetually new, and judged them according to their success or failure as innovations: the more innovative the better, and the less innovative, the loser.

These items should have been losers. I remember calling them "low iq" in a conversation later that day: they were "original" and "quality" but didn't have the same value as historically acknowledged work. By lasting as long as they had, though, they had an advantage: they were still attractive the way their makers had wanted them to be, but now they were also attractive to someone picky like me. Maybe any object that stayed around long enough can continue to increase its iq over time. No matter how inadequate a work might have seemed when it was made, it has a chance to escape its unhappy beginnings by growing away from its creator with distance and age.