

Gallery of Craft and Design theme panels

Making

This section looks at the origins of objects, and what it takes to create an object of desire. From the materials used to make them to the people who produce them, every object has its own creation story.

Designers are faced with a huge range of materials, and must select the one that best suits the job. They can experiment with techniques, pushing them to their limits and beyond. Ideas about an object's appearance and function can be recycled from previous times, or plucked fresh from unexpected sources. Here we show some of the choices designers make about the look and feel of things.

Many objects are also designed and made to appeal to a customer's taste and budget. Whether it's a wildly decorative porcelain vase, or a sturdy and functional wooden table, once the making stage is finished the rest of the object's life begins.

Clay

Clay is an ancient, universal material.
Dug out of the ground, it is basic stuff,
formed by the elements, earth, water, air and fire.
Its use is one of the oldest human artforms.

Clay responds to the touch of your hand,
it can be pushed and pulled, squeezed and pinched.
Clay has no natural form of its own,
and can be shaped into almost anything.
It is tactile, inviting, immediate and intimate.
When soft, it is marked by the slightest touch,
yet once fired, it becomes fixed and permanent.
A clay pot will survive for thousands of years,
bearing the thumbprint of the potter who made it.

Some makers are drawn by clay's physical appeal,
its sensuous and tactile qualities.
For others it is simply a means to an end,
an incredibly diverse and expressive medium
with the potential to do almost anything.

Glass

Glass making has always had an aura of mystery. The process of heating basic raw ingredients, of shaping and cooling the flowing molten liquid to create solid, yet fragile, translucent objects, invites associations with alchemy and magic.

Ever since the first recipe for glass was invented, glassmakers' experiments and happy accidents have expanded the amazing range of ways of forming, colouring, and decorating glass.

Hot techniques of shaping glass such as blowing are dependent on dexterity, speed, and rhythm. The blower must harness the fluidity of the material whilst manipulating it to achieve the desired form.

Once cooled, glass can also be worked and adorned to refine the design, or add new spectacular effects. The unique qualities of this super-cooled liquid continue to magnify, reflect, and decorate the world.

Metal

Metal has always been associated with strength. In peacetime, it is a symbol of wealth and power; in times of war, it is forged into deadly weapons or used to protect the human body from harm. Its surface can be pierced into intricate patterns without weakening the internal structure. The strongest metals can be used for moving parts and to reinforce or join other components.

Metal is also one of the most versatile materials. Pure metals can be combined to form alloys, with varying decorative qualities and uses. Liquid metal can be poured into moulds to make casts sheet metal can be cut, beaten and welded into objects or drawn into fine wire to weave a delicate mesh.

Makers can work metal on a large or tiny scale, shape it into sharp angles or soft organic curves, give it a matt texture or polished mirror-like sheen... or even melt it down and start all over again.

Wood

Wood is a living material, it comes from trees.
From floorboards and doors to tables and chairs,
every piece of wood that you touch
once carried food for leaves, flowers and fruit.
Working with wood is a partnership with nature.

The life story of a tree can be seen in its wood,
the grain of it marking each year of new growth.
Burrs, knots and bark, heartwood and sapwood,
the effects of good summers, drought and disease,
provide colour and pattern, texture and tone.
Wood is a material with a life of its own,
it splits and stretches, contracts and expands,
is wet when first cut and distorts as it dries.

Yet wood is incredibly versatile.
It can be carved and turned, woven and bent,
even steamed, pressed and pulped into paper.
It is strong yet flexible, warm and responsive,
and our most important renewable resource.

Material Look-alikes

Nature and science provide designers and makers with a vast choice of possible materials from curious organics to modern synthetics.

In the display case to your left some of the objects are made from materials deliberately disguised to look like others.

Can you spot the impostors?

The answers are on the labels or in the folder below.

Colour

Wild patterns and bizarre shapes have no place here. Only elegant and simple forms are permitted, allowing the beauty of colour to radiate through.

Colour plays a powerful role in everyone's lives, from fashion and advertising to religious symbolism. Specific colours embody significant meanings as well as expressing different emotional states; red for anger, blue for tranquility, black for sorrow . . .

Creating vibrant glazes has fascinated potters throughout the ages, in countries near and far. Experimentation with metallic oxides, from copper and iron to manganese and titanium, can unleash some of the most beautiful colours. Tweaking the oxygen content or heat of the furnace will determine the depth, shade, tone or hue. Some of those colourful discoveries can be seen here, working in perfect harmony with the potted shapes, celebrating the power and glory of colour.

Pattern

Patterns come in many different guises, from the simple stripe to the flourishing flower. Whether abstract or natural, simple or complicated, patterns can elevate the ordinary and functional into an object of beauty and delight.

Some patterns are chosen to exaggerate the shape, to flow with the curves or sharpen the edges, to slim the body or fatten it up, to create optical effects, making you look twice. Others are chosen to show off the material, emphasising its possibilities and individual qualities. But patterns also embody the maker's own interests, from nature and music to history and religion.

The pots in our cupboards, the vases on our shelves, the clothes on our backs, the shoes on our feet are all everyday objects in everybody's lives. They each provide a surface for pattern, constantly changing with time and tastes of the day.

Shape

Shapes are often defined by their function:

a teapot must have a handle and a spout.

But by breaking away from the usual conventions designers and makers can reveal new possibilities, create new forms and make us think again.

They can transform the teapot into a pineapple, or a simple, curvaceous, abstract shape.

Through time, makers have used their imagination, their ingenuity and even their sense of humour to transform ordinary and everyday objects into appealing shapes inspired by our surroundings.

Some shapes are designed to reflect their use, others are made as a novelty or decorative item: cows for a cream jug, giraffes for a mantelpiece. Many are created out of a desire to experiment, to see what can be done with different materials. This display brings together a menagerie of shapes showing the possibilities available to the maker.

Marks and Marketing

Logos, hallmarks, signatures and factory stamps all play their part in creating desirable goods. From the Ancient Greeks to designer diffusion ranges producers of objects have sought out ways of finding the right market for their wares.

Makers and manufacturer's marks on objects can add value and guarantee authenticity, while emblems of quality such as hallmarks affirm an object's purity and place of origin. All of these signs help to deter fakes and forgeries, testifying that their product is 'the real thing'.

The status of objects is constructed and enhanced by advertising and packaging the right message. Designers' names are sold as part of the deal, appealing to our good taste and sense of style. Encouraged to develop brand loyalty and trust in a world-wide bazaar of global goods, we are increasingly represented by what we buy.

Chairline

Chairs are for everyone and everywhere, from palaces and churches to homes and offices. They serve a basic but important function, whether simply designed or fantastically ornate.

But they are also more than just somewhere to sit. Chairs reflect individual tastes, different lifestyles, a person's status, power and authority. They embody the fashions and styles of the day as well as the designer's own artistic ideas, sometimes even their social and political concerns.

The challenge of new materials and new technology offers designers and makers exciting opportunities to re-invent the chair, its shape and form. Inspired and innovative designs are often the result encapsulating the spirit of their time. This display offers a selection of chairs through history, illustrating the infinite possibilities available in the design of one simple form, the chair.

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