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Main Article:

Developing Expertise and Connoisseurship Through Handling Objects of ‘Good Design’: Example of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection

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Abstract

This article takes an existing collection of design objects, the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection, to discuss issues of expertise, connoisseurship, and taste-formation. The article examines how the discipline of design history provides appropriate methodologies which explain expertise and connoisseurship in design with reference to the taste agenda informing the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection. The investigation focuses on disentangling and appraising the collection’s dual identity: as the repository of a historically-contained notion of taste and as an active educational agent, being currently utilized in the University of the Arts London as a learning resource. The article proposes “handling” as a relevant research perspective. Handling’s particular advantages in investigating material culture are presented with reference to the increased importance of object-based learning and the need to extend the dominance of vision and language as the main learning modalities. The conclusion argues that while taste-formation on the principles of “good design” proved a flawed project, the practice of handling objects is of unique pedagogical value and fosters the development of expertise and connoisseurship in design.

Index Terms: design history; material culture; pedagogical practice; object-based learning; sensory engagement; cultural capital; connoisseurial knowledge

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1. Context of the Research

The Inner London Education Authority (I.L.E.A.)/Camberwell Collection comprises about 8,000 objects of domestic design and craft, 600 of which have been catalogued (Figures 1 and 2). The Collection has been held at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London, since the Inner London Education Authority was disbanded in 1990. Today the Collection has a dual function: (a) as an archive, a repository of material culture from the post-war period and (b) as a teaching resource utilized in the University of the Arts London to enhance object-based learning. One significant aspect of its educational usage concerns the act of “handling.” Having used objects in this collection in my own teaching at the University of the Arts London, I adopt the handling of objects as a distinct research methodology to my ongoing research. This article discusses how handling objects may enhance the knowledge and expertise of the Collection’s users regarding the artefact in a distinct manner not afforded by other modalities and immaterial resources (Figure 3). In other words, the article investigates the extent to which individual agents, who have contributed, managed, or used the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection, have developed expertise and have gained a degree of connoisseurship as a result. Foregrounding matters of expertise and connoisseurship through reflection/reflexivity sheds light on the archival aspects of the research and draws attention to the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection as a dynamic resource for the present and the future.



Figure 1. Design for tableware: Uncatalogued photograph from the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection archive © Camberwell College of Arts.



Figure 2. The I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection in storage at Camberwell College of Arts, May 2012. © Maria Georgaki.

In this pursuit, I view myself as a researcher and educator who reflects on her actions and adjusts them accordingly as a result of reflection (Schön, 1983). That is to follow Bourdieu's (1988) *Homo Academicus* in which he examines his own reflexivity on French academia from a sociological viewpoint. Apart from an analysis of the university as a locus of reflexivity, "a second, the deeper object: the reflexive turn entailed in objectivizing one's own universe" is to be sought (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 67). Academics often fail to recognize that their discourse "is not the object but their relation to the object" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 69). These remarks define the relationship between the resource and the researcher/educator, setting out to offer insights into a collection that has evolved as a result of my own and others' teaching and research.



Figure 3. Handling session with students on the MA Designer Maker course at Camberwell College of Arts, using artefacts from the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection, May 2013. © Camberwell College of Arts

I situate my research in the disciplinary field of design history, a discipline that seeks “to explain the artefact” (Hannah & Putnam, 1996, p. 134). By doing so, expertise and connoisseurship can be conceived as sides of the same prism through which the artefact can be viewed and analysed. Expertise concerns primarily the maker whilst connoisseurship is about the observer of the “made.” In this article, the “made” is concerned with material artefacts only, not ascribing to a wide definition including the non-material.

While expertise is highly praised in the crafts as a demarcation of expert skill and making proficiency (Crawford, 2009; Dormer, 1997; Pye, 1968; Sennett, 2008), connoisseurship privileges “a practiced eye, visual memory, sensitivity to quality” (Ebitz, 1988, p. 208), since its paramount concern is the certification of authenticity. Connoisseurship is highly regarded in areas of cultural life, as for example within the fine art market where there is vested interest in the placement of a work in the high-end of the production spectrum given that such placement increases its monetary value (Friedlander, 1942). Design is not immune from this affliction. In many respects, the design market mirrors the fine art market and reproduces its methods, as in the case of design collectibles.

In academic research, design history acknowledges the contribution of connoisseurship, which may be built over years of experience and is the type of knowledge that can bridge the known with the assumed. However, connoisseurship in design history is a contested skill. The discipline recognizes the need to implement connoisseurial knowledge in order

to authenticate collections, yet connoisseurship's associations with the elite art object problematizes design historical discourses of mass production. In its pursuit to overcome layers of contextualization based on value systems beyond the object, design history utilizes object analysis as a preferred methodology (Clark & Brody, 2009). Keeping research rooted in the materiality of the object, Elliott et al. (1994) urge that "rather than succumbing to the temptation to consult printed or written works when confronted with an unknown object, . . . the material historian should develop a grammar in order to read the artefact" (p. 115). Such "grammars" have been proposed by design historians and researchers in material cultures. For example, Prown's (1982) object analysis grounds the artefact in its observable qualities and presents a set of rationalized criteria as a first level of interpretation. Sensory engagement with the artefact yields observable data and while "handling" is not required as a strict necessity of object analysis, it facilitates and enhances the process.

My research aligns handling with haptic knowledge that is defined as understanding derived from touching and handling material objects. The word *handling* is in preference to *touch*, because of my intention to extend the notion of touch by including the action of holding, which the terms such as *touch*, *tactile*, *tactit*, and *haptic* do not necessarily imply. As a design historian, I use handling as an aspect of object analysis. This approach allows me to resist contextually imposed hierarchies of connoisseurship where culturally dependent factors (e.g., rarity) locate the object within a value system that either excludes, or awards low status to, multiples or products of mass production. Material culture strategies contribute to freeing connoisseurship from its elitist associations. Such approaches also make possible educational opportunities, which question Bourdieusian perspectives on the processes of inculcating dominant cultural values in formal education (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991, 1996). Using his early ethnographic concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977), Bourdieu (1984) elucidates the role of education in formulating and reproducing class inequalities. Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) extend the notion of capital to argue that these class inequalities are made manifest through the possession, or lack of, cultural capital, and analysed how museums and their collections present a field more accessible to those in possession of high cultural capital.

The complication of hierarchical location on a taste axis is a constant problematic in researching the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection, in both the historical and the contemporary contexts. The history of the Collection is inextricably bound with the premise of "good design," framing a rigid set of value judgements.

1.1. History of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection

A linear history of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection identifies it as one of numerous government schemes that aimed at educating the taste of the general public (Council for Art and Industry, 1937; Romans, 2005). The Collection was instigated by the Council of Industrial Design and the London County Council in the aftermath of the 1951 Festival of Britain (Conekin, 2003). The Greater London Council and its Education Authority superseded the London County Council in 1963, and in 1965 the Inner London Education Authority (I.L.E.A.) was set up. The Collection was initially referred to as "the Experiment in Design Appreciation," and its implementation belongs to a long history of

the British state acting as an arbiter of taste with the objective of improving the output of manufacture (Foott, 1969; Quinn, 2011).

The Collection's two founders, the Council of Industrial Design and the London County Council, had a specific taste agenda about good design that may be best described as design aligned to modernism in its functionalist version: the aesthetic that purported fitness for purpose and rejected superfluous decorative elements (Gooden, 1947). In its capacity as custodian of the message of good design, the Council of Industrial Design needs to be identified as a patriarchal institution that was mostly made up of male designers, critics, and captains of industry (for the Council of Industrial Design's original membership, refer to House of Commons, 1944).

The Council's first chairman was Gordon Russell, the celebrated designer who had produced much of the furniture for the Utility scheme during the Second World War. Russell's profile is fairly typical of the designer/hero model that modernism favoured during its "pioneering" and "disseminated" phases (Greenhalgh, 1990). Keeping this chronology in mind helps to consolidate the boundaries of modernism for the purpose of this discussion, and follows design historical consensus regarding the trajectory of modernism (MacCarthy, 1979; Stewart, 1987; Woodham, 1997).

The relationship between the named designer and the product, as this relationship is acted out in the professional field, reveals design history's fundamental paradox. In its effort to emancipate itself from the parent discipline of art history, design history rejected the elite object and its engendering hierarchies. However, this has not been a clear-cut distinction; design historical accounts often favour an adherence to the designer-hero and the superior object, and promote a set of values that inevitably mimics connoisseurish aspects of fine art (Bailey, 1979; Pevsner, 1991). Biographies and monographs of designers mainly embrace the rhetoric of the creative visionary who leads taste—disparate personalities such as William Morris, Buckminster Fuller, or Peter Behrens have been written about in this tradition (Heskett, 1980; Lucie-Smith, 1983).

In order to liberate and distance design from this model, we need to keep in mind that design has unalienable ties to usage and normally cannot exist outside the marketplace. While aspects of its value are dependent on consumption, it succumbs, for example, to the law of supply and demand. Forty (1995), replying to Margolin's (1992) attack on design history's pre-occupation with good design, points out that "far from being trivial and connoisseurish, the whole question of judging quality in design, of discriminating between good and bad design, is essential to the entire activity of design" (p. 16). Forty uses the term *connoisseurish* as having negative connotations. His call for value judgments contributes to a crucial distinguishing parameter that has implications on our understanding of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection. To think of the objects as simply "designed" is not particularly helpful, because the notion of design is broad and the word *design* defies a singular taxonomy. Yet, to think of the objects as not merely designed but as "well designed," opens up the possibility of locating them on a taste nexus. Good design may be approached with an awareness of how the cultural dynamics of particular fields inform the discourse on taste and how a collection may have diverse significations depending on where and how it is used.

When on show in a dedicated space, the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection exemplifies good design within the enclave of the “consecrated” location of gallery and museum (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 289). In a gallery situation, the collection becomes a vehicle for the connoisseurship of good design (Sandino & Georgaki, 2014) (Figure 4). On the other hand, the Collection as a learning resource enables students to approach good design critically and to examine how the formulation of ideas about taste is a process of complicity between objective and internalized structures (Bourdieu, 1984). Critical appraisals facilitated by handling allow the learner to participate as co-constructor of knowledge, and at the same time deepen expertise on the artefact at hand.



Figure 4. Plastics from the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection: “A Good Design?” exhibition, 2014. © Daisy McMullan, Chelsea Space Gallery, University of the Arts London

The following section explores how the context of good design in connection with the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection may be analysed as a historically situated project. This example will highlight the temporal and cultural limitations of the discourse on connoisseurship.

2. Pedagogy of Good Design

The I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection functioned as a teaching resource, circulating in London secondary schools between 1951 and 1976 with the explicit aim of teaching schoolchildren, “the consumers of tomorrow,” the principles of “good design” (Woodham, 1996, p. 16). Circulation started with only three displays of textiles, pottery, and wood in 1951. Initially, these travelled only in London secondary schools “that enjoyed art teaching of outstanding quality” as judged by the London County Council’s art inspectorate (Stevens, 1967). By the late 1960s, the project had expanded and individual displays numbered 58 (Carolis, 1966). Right from the stage of its inception,

the scheme was meant for non-specialist's "handling." Few sporadic remarks, like that found scribbled on the back of an original photograph, bear evidence of how design appreciation was achieved through the action of handling: "particularly with the wooden object, the first instincts of the child was to feel" (Anonymous photograph "John Morley and Class at Bow Secondary School," n.d.).

One example of how displays anticipated handling is the textiles case, which included fabric pieces loosely attached to the display, known as "feelies." The term was an invitation for the samples to be touched and it was scribbled as an annotation found on the back of the photograph "John Morley and Class at Bow Secondary School" (Figure 5). Handling necessitated large quantities of multiples and these are still present in the Collection; more fragile items such as glass and porcelain in particular, are found in large numbers. The appreciation of good design was supplemented by written panels that aimed to communicate good design principles, often using the technique of extracting answers through a series of questions. In the set entitled "Materials and Design," made of three displays, the text invited pupils to think about the context of usefulness that informed design:

When you are deciding whether a thing is well designed it is helpful to ask yourself questions like these: does it do its job well? Is it easy to clean? Does it take up too much room when not in use? Is it likely to last? (Anonymous photograph "Materials and Design," n.d.)



Figure 5. The 1950s schoolchildren handling a textiles display, part of the Experiment in Design Appreciation, later the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection. © Design Council Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives

This remarkable consistency with the terminology of functionalism and faith in the inescapability of good design, is perhaps the overriding characteristic of the early stages of the scheme and the main criterion for object selection. However, the history of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection discloses the historical boundaries that confine the message of good design in the immediate post-war period. By the mid 1960s, good design's associations with functionalism were rendered largely irrelevant, as evidenced by the flourishing of pop culture (Bayley, 1983; MacCarthy, 1979). As the 1960s advanced, the dilution of the message of good design was observable in the comparison of early displays with later ones. The sombre monochrome textiles in Figure 5 were joined by a kaleidoscope of colour evident in the graphics and textiles seen in Figure 6. The taste shift affected not only the Inner London Education Authority, but also the visual and applied arts in general. It was connected to a rapidly changing cultural field that reflected changing social structures in areas like gender equality, distribution of wealth, education, immigration—changes which occurred on a large enough scale to impact on society in its whole (Hebdige, 1988). So while good design had been endorsed as a straightforward and unproblematic frame for the scheme in the minds of its instigators, historical scrutiny across time highlighted considerable deviation from its original objectives, to the point where good design became an entirely different proposition by the late 1960s (MacCarthy, 1979).



Figure 6. Pop-folk-modern: Uncatalogued photograph from the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection archive. © Camberwell College of Arts

The I.L.E.A./Camberwell display “Pop-Folk-Modern” of 1968 (Figure 6) clearly signifies that the pre-eminence of functionalism was by that time under threat and even the arbiters could no longer recognize one single standard of taste. Walker (1990) describes how “a disturbing relativity of values became evident and disagreements between different factions about what constituted good taste and good design became fiercer” (p. 191). “Kitsch” or “camp” became desirable and absorbed into “pop”—a word which loosely defined the taste of a new post-war generation (Seago, 1995). The display “Pop-Folk-Modern” can be viewed as a response to this new perception of design.

Evidence such as this led me to an awareness of the Collection’s limitations as an educational channel that would, or even could, inculcate the preference for a specific “modernity” on the “consumers of tomorrow.” The trajectory of good design as this is observed in the history of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection suggests that connoisseurship’s success is dependent on a fixed frame of reference. Teaching students to recognize good design became irrelevant when the whole context of good taste was in flux.

Information on the I.L.E.A. scheme has been remarkably one-sided, with very little existing evidence regarding the schools as end users. In the context of didactic attitudes and motivations prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s, it is not surprising that no systematic attempt was made to obtain feedback. One instance where the dissonance between intentions and practice became apparent was the question of how extensively the collection was implemented as a handling resource in accordance to its founding principles. Alongside the fragments of documentation aforementioned, my own oral history research produced a surprising finding that handling at the time of the collection’s circulation (1951-1977) was limited (P. Gregory, personal communication, March 12, 2013). This finding may be attributed to the canonical behaviours dictated by the school environment in the 1950s and 1960s. Evidence suggests that the scheme unequivocally encouraged handling of the exhibits; for example, annotations on surviving Record Cards accompanying the “Looking at Glass” display claim that several objects went “missing” over the years which may be interpreted as the objects having been taken out of their display cases (Record Cards, 1966, 1968, 1976). My own oral history research, however, indicates that teachers were reluctant to allow it (P. Gregory, personal communication, March 12, 2013). This may be understood in its historical context that during the 1950s handling museum-grade objects would be a transgression of how teachers had themselves been taught to behave. There was limited familiarity with nascent ideas about object-based learning and visual appreciation remained dominant in art pedagogy and discourse (Harrison, 1973). Lack of a larger volume of qualitative feedback prevents me from drawing secure conclusions regarding the extent to which handling was implemented, despite testimonials discussed above and publicity photographs showing schoolchildren’s handling (Figure 5).

3. Handling as a Method of Extending Expertise

Understanding good design’s limitations allows for a broader perspective of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection’s educational legacy. As the previous discussion has shown, expertise gained through the use of the Collection as an archival body of objects, transcends the confinements of good design. I propose that this collection’s value and

strength lies in its function as a “handling” resource, especially in the present educational context where commitment to object-based learning is gaining momentum (Candlin, 2010; Chatterjee, 2008; Hein, 1998).

Handling is a universally accessible modality and can inform expertise through engagement with material culture (Candlin, 2010). The deceptive obviousness of this statement conceals a long and contested discourse on the relationship between the individual and the material world. An inside/outside ontological dichotomy lurks behind the apparent matter-of-factness of claims that sensory engagement yields knowledge. This dichotomy foregrounds a long-standing ontological problem concerning perception’s reliance on representation. Grounding handling with reference to phenomenological philosophy enables me to argue handling’s necessity in our understanding of the material world. Merleau-Ponty (2002) explains in *Phenomenology of Perception* that Descartes and Kant detach the subject, or consciousness, from the material world. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the concurrence of cognition and experience, revealing the role of our bodily existence in giving meaning to the world we perceive and thus being an important advocate for handling: “I can not possibly apprehend anything as existing unless I first of all experience myself as existing in the act of apprehending it” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. v). Handling as a research methodology embraces the experience of the prior condition, the condition of “innocent accessibility” that Merleau-Ponty (2002) calls “primordial silence”; he says: “Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence” (p. 214).

The call for handling does not oppose or question the importance of language as a theoretical tool (Vihma, 2007). Handling is proposed as a supplementary method to be utilized in the process of learning through objects in educational institutions and museums, one that enhances and reinforces the benefits of linguistic and visual approaches. Handling extends language-based learning as it allows for the cultivation of another type of connoisseurship to flourish: the connoisseurship that privileges experiential knowledge and transcends the mediation of speech. This is the kind of knowledge that Polanyi (1967) speaks of in *The Tacit Dimension*: “we learn more than we can tell” (p. 16).

As a lecturer at University of the Arts London, I implement learning activities involving handling objects from the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection in order to foster connoisseurship and expertise in students of design. Not only do such objects provide a material anchor for abstract ideas about history, culture, and society to take root into learners’ minds, but they also empower the individual to take ownership of the learning process and advance the development of a sense of entitlement towards artefacts.

In the course of dedicated handling seminars, I have used discussion as formative assessment to establish how students’ expertise was developing as a result of the activity. In response to my open-ended question of “what does the object tell you?” students acknowledged the importance of handling as a guide to verifying or dismissing initial visual impressions. These impressions concerned, for example, the material, weight, and feel of objects, as well as assessments concerning the condition in terms of conservation

needs. Comments such as “I didn’t realize this was ceramic, it looked like metal,” “this is much heavier than it looks, so it must be crystal,” or “smells of mould so it must be organic,” reflected learners’ ability to follow sensory clues that extended their knowledge about the objects. Other avenues of investigation were opened by the engagement with operational or mechanical aspects of the objects (e.g., “you need to place the lid just so for it to be secure” or “the pieces interlock as in a puzzle”). Close scrutiny also made them aware of details such as makers’ stamps and etched accession numbers which provided bridges to research on manufacturers and the archive.

Furthermore, students expressed gratitude for being involved in an immersive activity and given the chance to interact with museum-grade objects. This is of particular significance in relation to collections such as the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection in as far as handling activities counterbalance the subliminal message of connoisseurship as the prerogative of “experts.” Allowing students to handle such artefacts questions the privileged touch normally only afforded to museum curators, conservators, and other highly qualified professionals (Cuno, 2004). In contradistinction to the didactic model adopted in its historical phase, handling the Collection today is not a means for reinforcing rigid aesthetic canons, but creates a democratized space where anyone may gain significant insight in aspects of material culture.

4. Conclusions

I have argued that the “good design” agenda which informed the implementation of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection has been engendered within a particular cultural and historical context. Despite advocating the handling of the objects, the research indicates that in schools, artefacts from the Collection mostly stayed in the purpose-built traveling cases. In its historical phase, the scheme predominantly relied on visual and language-based methods of promoting good design. Future consumers would acquire expertise in good design through familiarity with certain rules of taste handed down by a group of design connoisseurs. This research is situated in the discipline of design history to argue that connoisseurship and expertise are contested fields in design, due to their association with elitism as seen within art historical discourse.

The framing of the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection within the aesthetics of modernism advocated by the scheme’s instigators (i.e., the Council of Industrial Design and the London County Council) demonstrates how the dominant design rhetoric of the post-war period reduced artefacts to a system of “good” and “bad” design semantics, enlisting oversimplified antinomical signifieds. Texts which appeared on the scheme’s display panels reiterated the tenets of modernism through linguistic and visual opposites such as: restrained decoration versus ostentatiousness, the functional versus the impractical, and the quest for durability versus ephemerality.

End users (i.e., pupils in the London schools where the collection circulated) were excluded from the discourse on taste. This research suggests that students were approached as passive receptacles ready to embrace superior aesthetic expertise. This expertise, acquired through contact with the collection, was expected to turn them into compliant advocates of modernism in design. However, examination of later displays

showed that the taste turn of the mid-1960s heralded a crisis in modernism that forced I.L.E.A. to revise its agenda beyond the confines of functionalist products and to embrace polysemic interpretations of good design.

Analysis then focused on how using the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection as a teaching resource today promotes current pedagogical practices which support co-constructive approaches to developing connoisseurship and expertise. Since it was shown that the expectation of the 1950s educators in pursuing a connoisseurial understanding of good design was found to be misjudged and of limited usefulness, there is no educational scope in resurrecting the post-war rhetoric of good design. It can be argued that in order to utilize the collection as a pedagogical resource for now and the future, a shift in the understanding of its educational affordances is required. Proposing “handling” as a research perspective and as a method of extending the language-vision predominance in teaching, liberates the I.L.E.A./Camberwell Collection from the constraints of taste-formation and advances expertise and connoisseurship through experiential and object-based-learning.

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