

The Symbolic Power of Collectible Design

Mapping a Multifaceted Field

By

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To my four parents—Gabriella and Luca, Margaret and Michel

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Introduction

The idea for this book stems from a growing awareness of the increasing manifestation of collectible design within both market practices and cultural discourse. As special design objects continue to gain attention as coveted items, the expression “collectible design” is becoming ever more frequent, appearing in exhibitions, auctions, and media outlets as a trending topic. The proliferation of specialised commercial galleries, high-profile design fairs, a constellation of Design Weeks and events taking place globally, alongside specialised collectors’ communities, indicate that collectible design is rapidly gaining momentum, reflecting shifts in the valuation and consumption of design.

However, despite its rising presence and visibility and the interest it garners, the precise definition of collectible design remains ambiguous. The term is used loosely, with varying interpretations that range from contemporary unique or limited edition pieces to historical rare objects, leaving a gap in the understanding of its precise meaning. A pertinent exemplification is provided by Rome based Museum of Contemporary Art’s (Macro) definition of its special collectible design section: “The Collectible Design category encompasses a sector of contemporary design where the designers do not merely create a sketch to be handed over to a company for production. Instead, they directly engage in bringing the piece to fruition, resulting in a unique specimen or a limited series. Often commissioned, these works occupy the intersection between artistic expression and functional product, prioritising the transmission of conceptual content and personal exploration over the mere utility of the object. Vases, chairs, lamps and fountains, born from sophisticated compositions of handmade elements, preserve an individuality that contributes to their intrinsic value” (Macro, 2025). This definition, while conveying elements largely shared, in the contemporary common dissemination of the

concept, firmly posits that collectible design pertains to contemporary design, thereby contrasting with numerous other perspectives which situate it in relation to historic design, or to both contemporary and iconic productions.

This lack of clarity is compounded by the scarcity of academic research addressing the topic in a structured and analytical manner. As a result, while the term circulates widely, both the market and scholarly communities have yet to coalesce around a coherent definition.

This book aims to fill that gap by providing a systematic exploration of collectible design and the practice of design collecting through the lens of symbolic value, while offering a deeper understanding of its cultural, social, and market dimensions. By doing so, it seeks to define and contextualise collectible design.

The thesis of this book is that concept of collectible design is best understood when examined through symbolic value, where objects transcend their functional purposes and acquire meanings that resonate culturally, socially, and aesthetically. Collectible design, often viewed as a bridge between art and utility, gains its distinctiveness from the symbolic narratives that elevate it beyond ordinary design.

By focusing on the symbolic power of these objects, this book aims to explore the complex interplay between design, value creation, and cultural significance. Thus, it provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted field, highlighting key themes such as the evolution of design objects into cultural symbols, the role of collectors and marketplaces in shaping their value, and the impact of broader societal trends on the collectible design market. This approach not only contributes to define the ground but also aims at mapping the symbolic forces at play and at offering new insights into the ways design operates within today's art markets and creative and cultural economies.

Creative industries (including their sub-sectors or related frameworks within cultural industries and creative economy) encompass firms that produce and exchange goods of elevated symbolic rather than material value while being characterised by artistic creativity, and often by uniqueness or limited reproducibility (Caves, 2000; Hirsch, 1972; Howkins, 2001).

As for the most relevant official definitions of the creative industries (Ernst & Young, 2015; United Nations, 2010), design is considered a creative industries' sub-sector and design commodities belong to the above-mentioned category of goods. The concept of creative industry itself is closely linked to the increasing production and consumption of symbolic goods (Markusen et al., 2008; Strielkowski, 2018). Scholars define creative industries as those that generate symbolic goods (such as ideas, experiences, and images) whose initial value is rooted in their symbolic significance. The worth of these goods and services is ultimately determined by the end consumer, whether a viewer, audience, reader, or buyer. However, the perceived value of symbolic goods often makes their value difficult to translate into financial terms. Hartley (2005) emphasises that such a creative industries' interpretation is particularly insightful as it underscores the non-profit aspects of creative output and the interplay between a product's meaning and its symbolic form. In any case, this perspective makes the investigation of design items as symbolic goods particularly interesting.

Anecdotal data show that the practice of design collecting is undoubtedly rising, and design creations are the objects of this practice. Just as these creations can concomitantly be perceived and valued as design objects, but also as cultural artefacts, art objects, or applied art forms, the design collecting practice itself amply crosses and intersects with art collecting and the art market. This view depends on many different factors, including aspects linked to the creative or production context (e.g., a product designer turning into a designer of sculp-

tural or conceptual creations uniquely realised in limited editions, or an artist developing unique furniture pieces), consumer perception issues (e.g., perceiving a Murano glass vase as a veritable artwork instead of a functional object to contain flowers), and market dynamics (e.g., the fact that design objects and furniture are increasingly and mainly traded through the art market). The propensity to conflate art and design may hence manifest itself in both the creative production process and the perception-reception process. Furthermore, this pattern can be both involuntary and voluntary when, for example, it represents a precise marketing strategy among professionals seeking to enhance users' attraction. As a result, these factors mutually affect each other, enforcing the aforementioned trend.

Though there are no specific collectible design indexes, art indexes such as Artprice include the collectible design items that are traded through auctions. Along with additional practical evidence, these indexes show that in the last few decades, the demand for unique or rare important historical and contemporary items has gradually risen and that these objects' economic value is growing (Artprice, 2025).

Whilst auction results demonstrate a consistent increase in both auction base prices and sale outcomes for these traded items, concurrent anecdotal evidence pertaining to the market and public cultural sphere indicates a proliferation of specialised actors and events centred on such objects (e.g., museums, galleries, auction houses, e-commerce platforms, exhibitions, auction sales, Biennials, fairs, Design Weeks, publications, etc.).

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence pertaining to the cultural discourse indicates an increase in the presence of the specific expression "collectible design" across various settings (e.g., social media, etc.).

Despite its provenance from diverse sources, the evidence of this topic's increasing prevalence and significance further underscores

the necessity to examine what appears to be an emerging yet evolving and ill-defined field, particularly given the paucity of scholarly research on the subject.

This book's choice to adopt the lens of symbolic value as a central analytical framework depends on the fact that symbolic value, rooted in sociological and cultural theories, provides a comprehensive approach for understanding how design objects transcend their functional purposes to embody cultural, social, and aesthetic significance. By focusing on the symbolic dimensions of collectible design, we can explore how these objects are imbued with meanings that shape their desirability, influence market dynamics, and reflect broader cultural trends.

This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the term "collectible design", acknowledging its role not only as a material good but also as a powerful medium for symbolic exchange in art markets and society at large.

Whilst the consumption of visual art mostly relates to hedonic (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), aesthetic (Holbrook, 1980), and symbolic consumption (Hirschman, 1981; Hirschman, 1986; Park et al., 1986), design commodities are inherently functional therefore potentially consumed primarily for utilitarian benefits. In principle, the embedded functionality asset represents the discriminant factor for distinguishing design goods from visual art goods.

Users of collectible design, however, in addition to valuing these commodities for their functional and utilitarian benefits (e.g., the need for a sofa to sit or a lamp to illuminate a room) may also be, and perhaps more significantly, motivated by the desire to satisfy their emotional needs, aesthetic preferences, or symbolic requirements associated with, for instance, self-image and social identification.

With regard to symbolic needs, specifically, numerous rare or unique works function within the art market, which, due to its inherent characteristics, is itself perceived as highly symbolic (Codignola, 2019; Graw, 2009; Velthuis, 2005, among others).

Consequently, in relation to collectible design pieces, it can be posited that users' requirements may be primarily, or at least additionally, symbolic, rather than purely functional. Nevertheless, even when these objects serve a practical purpose, their functionality may become symbolic. Designers frequently imbue functional items with symbolism through aesthetic choices, materials, and cultural references. Thus, users may perceive these elements as conveyors of symbols that they deem more significant than the components fulfilling the object's utilitarian function.

Some of these pieces are purely decorative or conceptual and may not have a practical function at all. Nevertheless, even in these cases, buyers and amateurs might purchase or appreciate these goods, for instance, primarily for their aesthetic, artistic, cultural, and historical significance. Given these implications, one can argue that collectible design creations can be considered as hybrid objects existing in a hybrid space that blurs the lines between function and symbolism.

This perspective reinforces specific inferences associated with the concept of "value" and its corresponding valuation mechanisms. The idea of "value" (Porter, 1985), in its diverse interpretations across various disciplines, provides a substantive foundation for analysing any product category. In the context of academic discourse on the conflicting logics of art and economics, the dual framework of economic versus symbolic value has been efficaciously applied, demonstrating that within the art world, symbolic value frequently exerts influence on economic value (Velthuis, 2005).

While objective methodologies exist for evaluating the economic value of art and, by extension, of design (e.g., Baumol, 1986), this book endeavours to explore collectible design specifically through the theoretical examination of its symbolic value. Indeed, if symbolic value serves as the primary determinant of collectible design items' attractiveness, it could potentially exert a positive influence on their economic value.

In accordance with this objective and in order to investigate the symbolic meanings embedded in these objects, this work examines the theoretical framework of symbolic consumption.

Symbolic consumption is considered an evolution of conspicuous consumption, following its "dematerialisation that is socially, as much as ecologically, driven" (Shipman, 2004, p. 1). In high-income economies, conspicuity has shifted from quantity to quality, and from the possession of materially valued goods to the appreciation of culturally valued goods (Shipman, 2004). This perspective is collectively endorsed by scholars from diverse fields such as consumer behaviour (e.g., Holbrook & Hirschman; Holt; 1998), anthropology (e.g., Belk, 1995; McCracken, 1988), and sociology (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; duGay, 1997), who concur that consumers are increasingly acquiring goods for their embedded meanings, not only for their practical functions. In essence, consumers interpret goods as symbolic representations. The possession and use of these symbols mirror, exhibit, and communicate the practices of self-identity, social construction, or social relationships. As a consequence, consumers increasingly desire goods for their own symbolic value. Interdisciplinary literature agrees that the symbolic value of products is formed by the cultural and social meanings imbued with them, allowing consumers to express their individual and social identities through product consumption. Understanding the meanings associated with products enables firms to recognise, value, and use those that consumers perceive as more

attractive. Nevertheless, by further showing how symbolic consumption and symbolic value are dramatically intertwined, it emerges how the symbolic value of products also depends on their enclosure of consumption processes and patterns.

The interdisciplinary nature of the symbolic consumption concept is of particular significance, as the concept itself draws from diverse frameworks and disciplines that analyse the complex relationships between consumers, products, culture, and identity. Due to the inherent complexity of symbolic consumption, scholars frequently integrate insights from multiple disciplines to provide a comprehensive understanding of how symbolic meanings are constructed and consumed within the context of contemporary consumer culture (Arnauld & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1990; Trigg, 2001; Warde et al., 1999). For example, the symbolic consumption framework, by interpreting products through their symbolic value, reinforces the notion that symbolic attributes significantly influence the economic valuation of art objects (Throsby, 2008; Velthuis, 2005).

Extending this perspective to collecting practices, Belk (1995) defines collecting as a form of consumption, highlighting how individuals derive meaning and identity through the acquisition of objects. Expanding on this foundation, Codignola and Mariani (2021) show that art collecting is deeply rooted in symbolic consumption, where an artwork's symbolic value plays a crucial role in shaping its market appeal and economic worth.

Given these insights, the use of the symbolic consumption and the symbolic value frameworks to investigate collectible design offers a valuable perspective for understanding its multifaceted nature, one that intertwines aesthetic, cultural, and economic dimensions, whilst also elucidating the reception processes that shape its desirability and perceived value (Khaire, 2019). Indeed, comprehending how products are consumed facilitates recognition of their role in identity forma-

tion, social construction, and cultural practices. These three conditions constitute the conceptual foundation of the symbolic value of products (Arnauld & Thomson, 2005; Hatch, 1993; Miller, 1995).

In this regard, this book examines the creation, dissemination, and assimilation of collectible design symbols in individual, group, and social practices (Hirschman, 1986). To achieve this, it identifies the principal actors and the main dimensions that constitute the collectible design system through which the meanings of collectible design are constructed. As a result, this work recognises the key meanings of collectible design and discusses how these can be interpreted as the symbols underlying its symbolic value. By doing so, it contributes to the development of a cohesive framework apt to develop a collective understanding of this growing field. These findings will help define the boundaries of this sector, which is often perceived as a widening segment within the art market.

In conclusion, drawing on anecdotal evidence and a multi-theoretical approach rooted in collectible design, symbolic consumption, and symbolic value studies, this book examines and frames this trending, yet relatively unexplored field by probing the symbolic value of its commodities and questioning whether symbolic value might represent the primary driver of users' attractiveness. It investigates whether these objects transcend their utilitarian functions to serve as powerful symbols of culture, identity, and social status.

In pursuing this book's objectives and elucidating the complex relationships between symbolic consumption, value, and collectible design, this volume demonstrates that its pieces convey multifaceted meanings inextricably linked to cultural contexts, social participation, and individual identity formation.

This book, therefore, not only provides valuable insights into the ways design transcends functionality to become a powerful medium

for expression and communication. It also contributes to the academic fields of symbolic consumption, symbolic value, and cultural consumption whilst elucidating the complex interplay between culture, art, design, symbolism, and consumer behaviour. Furthermore, this work advances the investigation and definition of a growing field, offering practitioners and marketers a more comprehensive understanding of how to leverage symbolic value to enhance the appeal and marketability of its objects.

Chapter 1

Defining collectible design

Before delving into the evidence of the market and cultural presence of collectible design, this chapter aims to show how different perspectives can contribute to the attempt of its definition. This approach, in fact, provides a conceptual foundation to enhance the comprehension of the term within its context before exploring practical implications.

A clear definition is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it allows for a common language among researchers, practitioners, and collectors, facilitating discussions that are informed and meaningful. Without a shared understanding, the term “collectible design” can become ambiguous, leading to varied interpretations that may dilute the concept’s significance within both academic and practical realms. Secondly, defining collectible design helps establish boundaries which differentiate it from adjacent fields, such as industrial or product design, and traditional art objects. This distinction can be essential for researchers and marketers alike, as it informs strategies for categorisation, pricing, and positioning within the marketplace. Understanding what qualifies as “collectible design”, can in fact enable stakeholders to navigate the complexities of the art and design markets which are often overlapping.

Moreover, a well-articulated definition can illuminate the underlying principles and values that drive consumer interest and engagement with collectible design. By examining the characteristics that contribute to an item’s collectability, such as rarity, craftsmanship, cultural relevance, and emotional connection, this chapter will elucidate the factors that make certain design pieces desirable not only as functional objects but also as symbols of identity, status, and cultural capital.

Finally, establishing a definition of collectible design lays the groundwork for subsequent exploration of market dynamics, including pricing trends and media visibility. It is indeed through this composite lens that it is possible to analyse how collectible design has evolved and gained prominence in contemporary discourse, ultimately enriching our understanding of its role within the broader contexts of art and design.

However, in order to approach the task of defining collectible design, a critical assessment of the concept of “design” is essential.

Understanding design: A contextual overview

Complexities surrounding the definition of design

The concept of “design” encompasses a broad spectrum of interpretations, influenced by various disciplines and contexts. Auernhammer and Ford suggest that the “semantic categorization of a specific way of acting or thinking into “design” is used in diverse disciplines”. As a result, design “corresponds to bundles of interpredictable attributes”. In fact, “the consideration of what is design must also examine the fuzzy peripheral boundaries that make it difficult to have a shared definition” (Auernhammer & Ford, 2022, p. 2).

In their study, Auernhammer and Ford have developed a word frequency analysis to identify key shared terms among various definitions of design, such as “design”, “making”, “plan”, “process”, “things”, “using”, “arts”, “new”, “purpose”, “human”, “problem”, “products”, “industrial”, “forms”, “function”, “materials”, “solutions”, “means”, “objects”, “creating”, etc. The analysis highlights that “making” is related to the act of creating meaning and objects, “plan” refers to the pre-action phase of design, and “process” represents the sequence of steps toward achieving a specific goal. However, despite

identifying shared terms, the authors state that a universal conceptualisation of design remains elusive and that only a small percentage of definitions overlap in terms. More precisely, in their study, Auernhammer and Ford have identified five key themes: firstly, through the “complexity dilemma” they show that design’s flexibility and adaptability make it resistant to rigid definitions, and that the evolving nature of creative practices often leads to its mythification; secondly, through the “Zeitgeist dilemma” they explain that design is tied to historical and cultural contexts, constantly evolving with new technologies and values; thirdly, by the “expertise dilemma” they assess that design spans both everyday activities and professional practices, making it hard to determine who qualifies as a designer; fourthly, through the “identity dilemma” they observe that design’s distinction from both art and science creates ambiguity about its position, with scholars debating whether it is a combination of the two or a separate discipline entirely; fifthly, by the “disciplinary perspective dilemma” they ascertain how different disciplines (e.g., engineering, art, communication) approach design from varying perspectives, making a unified definition difficult to find (Auernhammer and Ford, 2022).

The authors’ findings, however, along with evidencing an inherent complexity, assess that design can be conceptualised as a set of specific activities, processes, and ways of thinking. Moreover, they show how design is linked to creating new and purposeful changes, solving problems, and making sense of the world.

But the fact remains that defining design is made problematic by its vague and ambiguous boundaries, often linked to its identity dilemmas. Design at its core involves multiple fields such as creativity, planning, and meaning-making. Moreover, its definition varies widely depending on specific disciplines and contexts; and multifaceted as it is, stays, in sum, elusive.

Some viable theoretical frameworks

To understand collectible design and its unique positioning within the broader design landscape, it is essential to explore some of the key theoretical frameworks that shape how design is perceived and valued.

Collectible design's positioning within the comprehensive design field is fundamental. Hence, this subsection identifies specific backgrounds that appear particularly appropriate to the analysis of design as a cultural, aesthetic, and economic phenomenon.

While the exploration of design through frameworks such as design thinking, creative industries, industrial design, product design, functionality, aesthetics, cultural and economic sociology, communication studies, marketing management, and consumer behaviour can be central to the understanding collectible design, other disciplines, such as computer science, software design, engineering, fashion design, etc. do not directly contribute to the conceptual construction necessary for such exploration.

Design Thinking. As shown by Auernhammer and Ford, design, at its core, is often understood as a process of intentional problem-solving that aims to create objects, systems, or experiences that fulfil specific functions or meet particular needs (Auernhammer & Ford, 2022). In this perception, the concept of “design” is embedded in the managerial perspective through the theoretical framework of design thinking.

Design thinking emphasises the importance of empathy, ideation, and prototyping in the design process. This outlook views design not just as a technical or artistic endeavour but as a strategic tool for innovation and problem-solving within organisations. According to Brown, design thinking fosters a human-centred approach that encourages collaboration across disciplines and focuses on understanding user

needs (Brown, 2009). Integrating design thinking into organizational practices can lead to the development of products and services that are not only functional but also resonate emotionally with users. As highlighted by Elsbach and Hargadon, organisations that embrace design thinking are better equipped to foster creativity and drive innovation (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006).

Moreover, design thinking promotes a culture of experimentation and iteration, which is essential in today's fast-paced market environment. As highlighted by Meinel and Leifer (2011), this strategy encourages organisations to learn from failures and adapt quickly to changing consumer needs and preferences. Approaching the specific context of design, such a managerial perspective on design thinking might underscore the significance of aligning product development or product marketing and communication with cultural trends and consumer behaviours.

Creative Industries. For an interpretation of design, it is valuable to examine how and why design goods are viewed through the lens of the creative industries. The creative industries, along with related frameworks such as the cultural industries and the creative economy, encompass various sub-sectors, including design. Design goods are therefore understood as products whose creation, distribution, and reception are shaped by the distinctive dynamics of the creative industries. The creative industries, as outlined by the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2001), encompass those industries that originate from individual creativity, skill, and talent, and focus on the use of creativity and intellectual property as drivers of economic growth and innovation. As of 2015, the DCMS definition recognises various creative sectors and sub-sectors, among which one can find architecture, crafts, visual arts, the art and antiques market, and design, including its sub-fields of graphic design, fashion design, and product design (DCMS, 2015).

An interesting conceptual refinement of the 2001's DCMS list comes from Hesmondhalgh, who condenses it into what he defines as the "core cultural industries", including only those industries that create texts or cultural artefacts and involve some form of industrial reproduction (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). In contrast to this view, Caves's economic property of "infinite variety" in the creative industries refers to the idea that these products are differentiated by quality and uniqueness, with each product being a distinct combination of inputs, leading to virtually infinite variety (Caves, 2000). Within these frameworks, design goods can be seen as both products and cultural artefacts that convey individual creativity while also reflecting societal values, norms, and aspirations. As Hesmondhalgh contends, the cultural industries involve the production of goods and services rooted in cultural values (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Similarly, Caves argues that design not only serves functional purposes but also embodies cultural significance, contributing to identity formation and social cohesion (Caves, 2000). This dual role emphasises the importance of understanding design through both aesthetic and cultural lenses.

Furthermore, the intersection of design and culture highlights the role of designers as cultural producers who navigate market demands and cultural narratives. As noted by Throsby, the value of design goods is often derived from their cultural significance rather than merely their functionality or economic utility (Throsby, 2001). This perspective aligns with the idea that design is not just a product category but also a manifestation of cultural expression and identity. Additionally, the creative industry literature emphasises the importance of innovation and collaboration in the design process. As highlighted by Pine and Gilmore, the creation of memorable experiences around design products enhances their symbolic value and market appeal (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

In summary, framing the definition of design within the creative industries literature can enrich our understanding of design as a

complex interplay of functionality, aesthetics, cultural significance, and market dynamics.

Industrial Design. The framework of industrial design primarily emphasises the creation of products that are both functional and aesthetically significant. This discipline underlines the relationship between the user and the manufactured object, aiming to enhance usability while ensuring visual appeal. As noted by Heskett, industrial design marries creativity with practicality, addressing the user's needs and the capabilities of industrial production methods (Heskett, 2005).

Product Design is closely related to industrial design but typically stresses the attributes and functionality of consumer products. According to Bessant and Maher, product design integrates aspects of market research, technology, and user experience to create items that resonate with consumers while being economically viable (Bessant & Maher, 2008).

Functional Design. Emerging from both product design and industrial design literature, some scholars have dealt with the theory of functional design, emphasising the prioritisation of utility and the operational aspects of a product or system. Norman, for instance, underscores the significance of usability and demonstrates how effective design can enhance user interactions with everyday objects (Norman, 2013).

This perspective underscores the critical role of functionality in the design process, often serving as the foundation upon which aesthetic considerations are built. The functionality of a design object (its practical utility) is indeed frequently considered its primary value. While the functionality perspective in design primarily pertains to the fields of industrial design, engineering, and product design, it also intersects with ergonomics and human-computer interaction. These disciplines focus on how design objects serve practical purposes, meet user needs, and improve the usability of products. Functionality as a

design principle emphasises the user's interaction with the object and its practical role in everyday life. Norman's work remains a foundational text on the importance of functionality, positing that well-designed objects should be intuitive and meet the user's needs without sacrificing aesthetics (Norman, 2013). Similarly, Ulrich and Eppinger emphasise that functionality is crucial in determining a product's market success, arguing that successful design balances practicality with aesthetic appeal (Ulrich & Eppinger, 2015).

In design, functionality can enhance the desirability of objects, even when aesthetics and symbolic meaning are emphasised. Products that successfully combine practicality with artistic and symbolic qualities often stand out in terms of consumer desirability and appreciation. Thus, the interplay of functionality and aesthetic appeal is central to market design, as objects that are both functional and visually compelling are more likely to be perceived as valuable and desirable.

Aesthetics. Aesthetics approaches design from a more expressive perspective, wherein the emotional and cultural implications of objects are prioritised. As Bourdieu assessed, aesthetic experiences are deeply embedded in cultural contexts and can convey complex social meanings (Bourdieu, 1984).

This perspective invites a broader interpretation of design, framing it as a medium through which identity, values, and narratives are articulated. The intersection of design with aesthetics has been explored by numerous scholars. Among others, Gadamer posits that the appreciation of beauty in design is inherently tied to cultural and historical contexts (Gadamer, 1975). This emphasis on aesthetic considerations complicates the traditional view of design as solely functional, suggesting a more integrated understanding that encompasses both form and function. Aesthetics, thus, plays a central role in the appeal and symbolic value of design objects. Design, in fact, can be appreci-

ated not only for its functionality but also for its aesthetic qualities, which can elevate it to the status of art.

Theories of aesthetics in design are rooted in the concept that beauty and form can significantly influence how design objects are perceived and experienced. In their seminal work of 2015, Crilly et al. discuss how aesthetics contribute to both emotional and cognitive responses to design objects, highlighting its influence on consumer behaviour and product evaluation (Crilly et al., 2015). Additionally, Margolin's work underscores the historical evolution of aesthetics in design, tracing how design aesthetics has shifted from utility to symbolic expressions of culture and identity (Margolin, 1989), while Böhme demonstrates how the aesthetic experience of design is linked to the atmosphere it creates, which can enhance the symbolic and emotional value of objects (Böhme, 2017). This perspective aligns with how design often transcends mere function to evoke a deeper emotional response through its form and materiality.

Cultural Economics and Cultural Sociology. Cultural economics and cultural sociology theories are highly relevant in interpreting design not only as a tool for problem-solving or aesthetic expression but also as a cultural force that reflects and shapes societal values. This perspective considers how design interacts with broader cultural systems and influences social norms, practices, and identities. In his economic and cultural sociology work of 1984, Bourdieu provides a foundational framework for understanding how design objects, akin to art, are utilised to signal cultural capital and social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Design objects frequently serve as status symbols within particular cultural contexts. Furthermore, Julier explores how design operates within cultural economies, emphasising its role in producing and reproducing social norms and values (Julier, 2014). The author posits that design not only meets practical needs but also embodies ideologies and communicates symbolic meaning, which can

be crucial for understanding why certain design objects are considered collectible. Dunne and Raby, in their work, extend the boundaries of traditional design theory by exploring how speculative design can challenge societal norms and envisage alternative futures (Dunne & Raby, 2013).

This perspective is valuable for considering how design might not only reflect current cultural values but also serve as a catalyst for new ideas and cultural shifts.

Communication Studies. Communication studies approach design as well; however, these theories focus on its role in meaning-making, media, and symbolic value. Design is conceptualised not merely as a process of creating functional objects but as a critical medium for constructing meaning and symbolic communication.

The discipline of communication emphasises the role of design in constructing and transmitting messages, particularly how visual and material forms communicate cultural, social, and ideological values to audiences. According to Barnard, design objects are embedded with signs and symbols that facilitate the negotiation of meaning between designers, producers, and consumers (Barnard, 2005). This semiotic approach underscores how design, akin to language, functions as a form of communication that conveys narratives, values, and identities.

The visual and communicative elements of design play a crucial role in branding and identity creation, as noted by Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling (2006). As exemplified by the 1988 book title from Teri Seidman and Sherry Suib Cohen, *Decorating Rich: How to Achieve a Monied Look Without Spending a Fortune*, this perspective is particularly pertinent when the symbolic value of objects frequently supersedes their functional utility, transforming them into cultural artefacts that convey status, taste, and personal identity. Therefore, from a communication standpoint, the aesthetic and material choices embedded in works

may function as messages that users interpret and employ to express, for example, their own identity, social, or cultural positionings.

Design, particularly in the context of visual communication, is also approached as a form of media that shapes how we perceive and interact with the world. In the discipline of media and communication, design is analysed in terms of its capacity to mediate cultural and social messages. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that design objects, through their visual grammar, communicate complex ideas and values that are interpreted by audiences (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Their approach highlights the importance of understanding how design elements such as colour, shape, texture, and composition function as tools of visual rhetoric, shaping the reception and interpretation of design goods.

The role of media in amplifying the visibility and cultural relevance of design, particularly through digital platforms and social media, has become a central focus in communication studies. As noted by Jenkins (2006), the digital era has transformed the way design is shared, circulated, and consumed. In the context of design, media platforms enable the widespread dissemination of design narratives, thereby increasing the symbolic capital of selected objects by amplifying their cultural and social presence.

Marketing and Management. The consumption perspective on design is embedded in the discipline of marketing and management, wherein design plays a critical role in both consumer acceptance and the overall market success of a product (Gemser & Leenders, 2001; Hung & Chen, 2012).

Attention to design is essential for firms aiming to maintain a strong market orientation (Moll et al., 2007) and, from a managerial standpoint, designers add significant value by selecting materials and

shaping products in ways that enhance their appeal to users (Hsiao & Chen, 2006; Redström, 2008).

Numerous successful products owe their market achievements to a combination of design excellence and innovation, and minor design modifications can have a considerable impact on consumer preferences and purchase intentions (Raghubir & Greenleaf, 2006). Wilner and Huff posit that design contributes to product success in three ways (Wilner & Huff, 2017). Firstly, through functional excellence, where performance, ease of use, and problem-solving capabilities are prioritised (Bloch, 1995). Secondly, through aesthetics, as visually appealing products enhance sensory experiences and evoke positive consumer emotions (Crilly et al., 2004; Rindova & Petkova, 2007), leading to delight, loyalty, and satisfaction (Chitturi et al., 2008). For instance, in luxury markets, where success often hinges on design excellence, aesthetically pleasing products are perceived as both beautiful and meaningful (Beverland, 2005; Veryzer et al., 1998; Wilner & Huff, 2017). Thirdly, the cultural meanings embedded in its design are an additional factor influencing a product's marketplace success. While a product's material properties can convey meaning, these meanings are not inherent but are shaped by cultural interpretations and contexts (Crilly et al., 2004). In Wilner and Huff's view, meaning emerges within a network of relations to other products and consumer experiences (Wilner & Huff, 2017). Thus, product design itself can communicate meaning to consumers and competitors, differentiating it from competitors' offerings and providing symbolic resources for consumers to interpret and personalise (Chen & Venkatesh, 2013).

Consumer Behaviour. From an alternative perspective, consumer behaviour theory provides insights into how individuals interact with and attribute value to design objects, particularly in terms of symbolic and emotional attachment. Understanding these psychological drivers is crucial for examining why certain design objects become collectible.

Hirschman and Holbrook's 1982 work offers a foundational exploration of how consumers seek hedonic and symbolic value in design, often utilising objects as a means of self-expression and status signalling. This perspective is especially relevant when the acquisition of a unique or limited edition item (therefore considered rare) suggests that its original functional purpose has been superseded by its capacity to express personal identity or cultural capital. Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow further investigates how consumers experience profound emotional and psychological engagement with objects that provide both functional and aesthetic value (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This level of engagement is often a key factor in why certain design pieces become prized collectibles, as they offer more than mere practical utility (e.g., they evoke meaningful experiences). Moreover, McCracken's work on cultural categories and meaning emphasises how consumers utilise objects to construct and convey meaning within their social contexts (McCracken, 1986). This concept is thus particularly relevant for understanding how design items may function as cultural symbols and indicators of social status.

Toward a multifaceted definition of design

At the foundation of an attempt to define design lies the precondition that design is an inherently multifaceted domain, encompassing diverse interpretations connected to numerous fields. This complexity reflects the dynamic interplay between functionality, innovation, aesthetics, art, and cultural significance, underscoring the necessity of a more comprehensive approach to understanding collectible design.

On the basis of the theories so far cited, design can thus be defined as a complex process that primarily balances functionality, aesthetics, innovation, and cultural significance while encompassing the creation of products that serve both practical and symbolic purposes. Design

goods, indeed, function as cultural artefacts, communicate meaning, and reflect societal values, norms, and individual identities.

This interplay between usability, aesthetic appeal, and cultural resonance enhances both the symbolic and market value of objects, rendering design products desirable as both functional items and cultural symbols. Such an interpretation of design underscores several significant aspects, each contributing to its complex and dynamic nature. Firstly, the multifaceted nature of design is evident in the variety of elements and approaches it encompasses, ranging from technical precision to creative expression. This versatility enables design to serve multiple purposes and adapt to diverse contexts.

A salient characteristic of design is its inherent equilibrium, the capacity to integrate functionality, aesthetics, and cultural significance. A well-conceived product not only fulfils practical requirements but also appeals visually and resonates with the cultural values of its temporal and societal context. Another critical aspect is the problem-solving nature of design. Fundamentally, design is a process dedicated to addressing specific needs and challenges, offering innovative and efficacious solutions tailored to particular circumstances. Furthermore, design holds profound cultural significance, as it frequently produces goods that function as artefacts reflecting and communicating societal values. Through design, cultural narratives and shared beliefs are both preserved and expressed, imbuing objects with meaning beyond their utility. This leads to the symbolic value of design items. Other than their practical applications, these goods often carry deeper meanings, serving as representations of personal identity or social ideals. This symbolic dimension enhances the role of design in personal and societal expression. Finally, the market dynamics surrounding design products highlight how various economic and social factors influence their desirability and value. The interaction between consumer