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A Question of Category: Translations between the Decorative Arts, Architecture, and Design at the birth of the Cooper-Hewitt (1963-76)

While we typically understand content as that which undergoes translation from one language to another, translation can also occur when we view a stable set of objects through a new lens. Such a translation occurred at the founding of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, in which the historical decorative arts collection was recast through the new category of design. In the mid-1960s, the Cooper Union reassessed its collection held in the school's Museum for the Arts of Decoration and ultimately found that the collection no longer served its pedagogical aims. The museum was shuttered in 1963, its future uncertain, until the Smithsonian agreed to absorb the collection, moving it from the school to its new home in the Carnegie Mansion in New York City in 1970.

The Cooper-Hewitt opened in 1976 with an inaugural exhibition designed by Austrian Postmodern architect Hans Hollein, entitled "MANtransFORMS". Hollein's proposal was chosen because it most directly reflected the institution's orientation to design by re-reading the existing collection of decorative arts as a corpus of designed objects and reframing them as quotidian and populist. In Hollein's hands, the rarified collections of lace, furniture, architectural fragments and sculpture were joined by collections of everyday objects such as hammers and loaves of bread in order to emphasize the abundance of variation within established types that exemplified his conception of design. The history of the Cooper-Hewitt, the "MANtransFORMS" exhibition, and its attendant publications allow us to understand how a shift in category can recast the significance of a set of objects and the history to which they belong.

We normally understand translation as something like a phase change. In this view there is some essential core to the work or idea that exists and persists apart from its linguistic reality, and the process of translation is much a process of disrobing one language to be clothed in another. However, when the notion of translation is considered with respect to objects, buildings, or practices, yet another sense emerges. Here we can consider the translation that occurs when we view a stable set of objects through a new lens and the resulting translation of significance from one period or paradigm to another. Such a translation occurred at the founding of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, in which the historical *decorative arts* collection was recast through the new category of *design*. This paper will consider the history of the Cooper-Hewitt and the museum's inaugural exhibition "MANtransFORMS" to understand how a shift in category and its corresponding aesthetic strategies can recast the significance of a set of objects and the history to which they belong. Further considerations will seek to unpack the attitudes, orientations, and assumptions that were implicit in the categories of the decorative arts and design, as well as to articulate the differing modes of architecture's inclusion or association therein.

The Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum is one of the nineteen museums administered by the Smithsonian Institution and supported by the United States federal government. Unlike the majority of Smithsonian museums, which are located in Washington D.C., the Cooper-Hewitt is in New York. The museum began its life as the Cooper Union Museum of the Arts of Decoration, and it was housed at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, a private college established in 1859 by the industrialist Peter Cooper. The school is best known today for its first class school of architecture, which rose to prominence under John Hejduk's leadership in the 1960s and its exhibition of student work at the Museum of Modern Art entitled *Education of an Architect* in 1971. While Cooper's vision for the school had always included a museum on one floor of the Foundation Building, this did not come to fruition until 1896 through the efforts of Cooper's three granddaughters: Sarah Cooper Hewitt, Eleanor Garnier Hewitt, and Amy Hewitt Green. They developed a passion for the decorative arts young in life, and their family fortune and connections allowed them to purchase and import a number of important collections from Europe that formed the foundation of the collection. The Cooper Union Museum was modelled after the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, founded in 1877, and the Hewitt sisters were acquainted with the Musée's founders who assisted the fledgling Museum through a gift of plaster casts of the best French ornament in their collection.¹

This association proved to be influential for the shape and the aims of the Cooper Union Museum, and yet the Hewitt sisters departed from the Musée in important ways. The founders of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, a group of artisans and manufacturers, were concerned with the effect of the increasing industrialization of the decorative arts and the lack of formal training for the workers and artisans who produced them. Further, while French luxury products had dominated the decorative

1 Eleanor G. Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum* (New York: Wednesday Afternoon Club, 1919), 10-11.

arts in the 18th century, following the Great Exhibition of 1851, anxiety rose in France for fear of lagging behind England and Germany, where industrialization proliferated more quickly. The Musée sought to address these concerns by providing a place where workers could study quality objects first-hand, a library of reference materials that was located in the artisans' quarter of the city, as well as regular courses of lectures for the workers' edification.²

As members of an industrialist family who founded a school much like the one missing from the French context, the Hewitt sisters articulated the aims of their museum in slightly different terms. While the technical education of artisans would be fulfilled by the school, the Hewitts viewed the Museum's role as a source of an aesthetic education, a place where workers and artisans could develop a true appreciation for the objects they produced. Rather than being concerned with the preservation of national patrimony, the Hewitts sought to encourage American craftsmanship through the use of European example. The museum thus aimed at the development of a 'good taste' that could only be cultivated through direct exposure to quality objects.³ One important conceptual structure that the Hewitts did borrow from the Parisian Musée was their method of classification. The decorative arts were divided into two broad categories: the decoration of edifices, interior and exterior; and the decoration of man and the objects of his use.⁴ Architecture was listed first amongst the decorative arts, such as: woodwork; metalwork; painting; and pottery, which served to decorate its interior. This classification systems seems to have been something of a novelty, as most of the decorative arts museums in Europe utilized Gottfried Semper's system that was developed during his work on the Great Exhibition and articulated in his 1860 *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten*. There he listed six primary categories: furniture; woodwork; textiles; metalwork; ceramics and glass, which, art historian Ian Wolfenden has argued, reflected the contemporaneous structure of craft industries in England.⁵ At the Cooper Union Museum, however, a classificatory system that foregrounded architecture was a more natural fit, given the structure of the school and its emphasis on architectural education.

It is important to keep in mind the nature of the Cooper Union Museum, and indeed the nature of late 19th century museums in comparison to how we understand the nature of the museum today. While most contemporary museums do indeed have a permanent collection, their largest draw is that often temporary exhibitions comprised primarily of loaned works. These may be curated in-house, or they may be travelling shows. Further, the permanent collections of many museums is far larger than may be exhibited at any one time, so even permanently installed collections may rotate. The Cooper Union Museum, however, did not provide for temporary exhibition space until later in its life. Rather, its rooms were divided up according to period and art form, and the total of its holdings

2 Elizabeth Bisland, *Plan of the Proposed Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration* (New York: Cooper Union, 1896), 2.

3 Bisland, *Plan of the Proposed Museum*, 8.

4 Bisland, *Plan of the Proposed Museum*, 3.

5 Ian Wolfenden, "The Applied Arts in the Museum Context," in *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London; New York: Leicester University Press, 1989), 27.

were kept and displayed in those spaces. The relative crowdedness of this situation caused William M. Miliken, writing in 1958, to describe the museum as a "...research archive in the European sense rather than an exhibit and educational center in the practice of American museums."⁶ Indeed the plan of the museum describes a carefully arranged dense storehouse with strategically placed worktables, rather than the open gallery spaces we normally associate with museums. This was fitting for a museum whose primary audience was trade professionals and students of the decorative arts, rather than the general museum-going public.

The location of the Cooper Union Museum within the school was unique and distinguished it from similar institutions, such as the aforementioned Musée or the South Kensington Museum in London, the latter of which became the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Hewitt sisters had hoped for a close relationship between the Museum and the school, yet the reality fell short of these aspirations.

The primary users of the Museum were not students, but rather artisans, professional decorators, and manufacturers of furniture and textiles. A 1949 article about the Museum entitled "Cooper Union: A Designer's Museum", emphasized the Museum's "large study collection, as freely available to the public as it is to students at Cooper Union"⁷ Of especial note were the evening hours, the study rooms where objects could be examined and handled by visitors, as well as a publically accessible card catalogue, all of which were unusual at the time and in New York. Over the years, the museum sought vainly to attract students, at one point publishing an article in the student newspaper, *The Pioneer*, describing its collections and the services it offered.

"The collections and the staff help you in your work and your study, providing material for your primary interest and suggested related material in diverse categories. The museum serves in the study of design and production, of the evolution of style and taste. Its collections, arranged for use, help you compare designs in different media, to analyze the use and combination of materials, to discover design relationship. The collections offer you a springboard to new ideas."⁸

The need to promote the museum, which was housed together with the rest of the school in the Foundation Building, suggests that student use of the museum and its collections was actually quite low. A 1961 essay entitled *Design for Use*, reported that students accounted for only one-fifth of the previous year's attendance, and that figure included students from Parsons and other local institutions as well as Cooper Union students.⁹

The question of the Museum's instrumentality, how it was and could be used, by whom, and toward what end, was inextricably bound up with its fate. In the late 1950s and early -60s, the

6 William M. Miliken, *Report of Evaluation of the Museum of Decorative Arts, February 1958*, Records of the Cooper Union Museum, Cooper Union Archives, 1.

7 Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, "Cooper Union a Designer's Museum," *Interior Decoration and Design* 20:7 (1949).

8 "The Cooper Union Museum," *The Pioneer*, 2 November 1959, 4.

9 Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, "Designed for Use: The Cooper Union Museum," *Museum News* 39, no. 6 (1961), 15.

school's administration began to consider withdrawing support from the institution. This placed the Museum's director and its curators in the unenviable position of having to justify their place in the school, and at this time we can see an increase in publicity in which the Museum asserted its usefulness and relevance to the Cooper Union community. Across the articles and catalogue introductions that comprised this effort, the common line of attack emphasized the historicity of the collection and the importance of historical knowledge for the contemporary designer. For example, in his introduction to an exhibition of historical architectural drawings entitled "The Architect's Eye", selected from the Museum library's extensive collection, the Curator of Drawings and Prints Richard P. Wunder took the school to task for its lack of historical consciousness. He writes: "The tendency to concentrate on contemporary work, to a neglect of the study of the past, is particularly dangerous in the case of the visual arts, for the current criteria of living artists' works can degenerate through simple ignorance of what constitutes the great traditions of the past."¹⁰

Despite these gentle protests, the Trustees of Cooper Union decided to have the Museum evaluated as a first step in ascertaining its fate. In the 1960s, the Museum underwent a series of examinations by outside experts to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the collections, to determine whether the Museum could be improved enough to make it self-sufficient, and to propose courses of action that Cooper Union might pursue. These included an evaluation in 1963 by the curatorial staff of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose own holdings included a large decorative arts collection, and an evaluation by William C. Milliken, who was the Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art and a highly regarded expert in the decorative arts. A third evaluation was undertaken in 1964-65 by an advisory committee from the American Association of Museums. This report was more proscriptive than the first two in that it officially raised the idea of gifting the Museum to the Smithsonian Institution.¹¹

The news that Cooper Union was considering divesting itself of its Museum spread quickly after articles appeared in the New York Times and elsewhere, and cries of protest soon followed from a number of constituencies. Letters poured in to the school from local decorators, artisans and manufacturers who regularly used the museum, as well as from museum curators across the country who wrote less in protest than in sympathy with the pressures the Museum was experiencing. Amidst the outcry, the President of Cooper Union, Richard F. Humphreys, responded to the misinformation that had emerged around the controversy within the school in an essay in *The Cooper Union News*, a newsletter for the faculty and staff of the school. The administration recognized that years of underfunding had caused the Museum to languish. Ultimately, however, the school could not justify its continuing support of an institution that remained largely irrelevant to its educational mission - support that cost the school \$200,000 per year.

¹⁰ Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, *The Architect's Eye* (New York: Cooper Union Museum, 1962), 3.

¹¹ The idea was actually the brainchild of Henry du Pont, the chairman of the Committee to Save the Cooper Union Museum, and he convinced the AAM committee of its viability. *Report of the Committee of Independent Advisors of the American Association of Museums on the Cooper Union Museum*, 24 March 1965, Records of the Cooper Union Museum, Cooper Union Archives, 10-11.

“We have an excellent collection of objects in the decorative arts. It has not been widely used by the public, although it has been of undoubted value to a group of professional designers. Its location on the 4th floor of the Foundation Building is not good; the Museum is cramped for space; we have been unable to give it an acquisitions budget for some 35 years; it is understaffed and badly underbudgeted. On the face of it, this certainly is not giving the public the service that the quality of our collections merits.”¹²

In the same issue of *The Cooper Union News*, Esmond Shaw, Dean of the School of Art and Architecture, addressed the question of pedagogical relevance directly, recalling the influence of the Bauhaus to describe how design had fundamentally changed. Shaw noted the shift in arts education that occurred in the U.S. in the 1930s, when training in a specific material or technique was abandoned in favour of training in ‘design’ writ large. The arts were reconceptualized as a “sovereign federative union” whose members existed in relation to one another through an abstract set of principles that could be utilized irrespective of medium or art form. This shift engendered a corresponding wane of historicism and a changed relationship between contemporary design and historical objects. No longer were past examples looked to as a sources of imitation, but rather they were to be analysed for underlying principles which the artist or architect could then apply with a modern perspective. Indeed the student was no longer taught that her work joined a long and storied tradition; rather, instruction was future-oriented and emphasized the importance of her participation in the *Zeitgeist*.

“The ideal program in art is one which teaches the student to feel that he is a part of the whole ebb and flow of man’s experience. By envisaging the great art of the past and the present as an expression of soaring aspiration, he cannot help but learn that fine art grows out of a dedicated attempt on the part of the artist to be an active participant in the life of his time.”¹³

Cumulatively, this reasoning proved compelling to the Cooper Union Board of Trustees, and the school entered into negotiations with the Smithsonian Institution and its Secretary, S. Dillon Ripley. The Museum was officially transferred in 1968, although the collections remained in the Cooper Union Foundation Building until the Carnegie Mansion was secured as its new home in 1970 and the necessary renovations were completed.

The conceptualization of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in its next life as a *design* museum rather than a museum of *decorative arts* seems to have been in place from the outset of the transfer, though it was not without controversy. Indeed, the debate over the identity of the Museum can even be read through the discussions about its name. Immediately upon transfer, the Cooper Union Museum of the Arts of Decoration was renamed as the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design.¹⁴ However, the very next

12 Richard F. Humphreys, “Museum Status and Problems Explained,” *The Cooper Union News* 3, no. 1 (1963), 1.

13 Esmond Shaw, “The Museum and the Contemporary School of Art,” *The Cooper Union News* 3, no. 1 (1963): 3.

14 Smithsonian Institution, *Smithsonian Year: Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968), 21.

year, the Cooper-Hewitt's Advisory Board unanimously voted to change the name of the Museum to the "Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, Smithsonian Institution."¹⁵ Many of the members of the Advisory Board had been affiliated with the Cooper Union Museum, and to their ears the decorative arts label was "...more inclusive and presented a better image to the general public, since design seems technical and professional."¹⁶ This perspective did not persist, however, under the Directorship of Lisa Suter Taylor who succeeded Richard P. Wunder in 1969 and who would go on to head the Museum for nearly twenty years. In an early draft of the Museum's mission statement, Lisa Taylor sought to drop the decorative arts label in favour of 'design' because of its overly historical associations. Responding to a draft, Taylor explained her position to her colleagues:

"I have not meant to eliminate or put down the past, but I want the past (the museum's permanent collection or other changing exhibitions of historical material) to give fresh insight into the relation of historic material to contemporary ideas, needs or production. In other words, with several outstanding decorative arts collections in New York museums and over 800 antique shops in Manhattan alone, we can't just show things because they are old, we either have to relate them to today or the future or to present them with some historical point-of-view."¹⁷

This mission statement was published as a brochure in order to establish the identity and aims of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and to distinguish it from its previous incarnation as the Cooper Union Museum. This required a careful elaboration of what was meant by 'design'. It outlined the Museum's aims according to its unique conception of design, which was carefully defined not as an activity or a class of objects, but as "...that faculty by which men shape matter to a purpose arising from any of an infinite number of human needs and desires."¹⁸ One of the most interesting aspects about the Museum's perspective on design was the relationship posited between design and environment:

"Good design has always had to satisfy two requirements. The first is functional: the object should do well that which it is intended to do. The second is aesthetic: the object by virtue of its form should possess some quality that is pleasing in itself, apart from the material end which it serves. Today there is a third element that has no precedent in history. Design must encompass the whole of human environment. Its ultimate effect on life must be considered in relationship to form, materials, methods of manufacture and use."¹⁹

While the first two criteria could easily describe the characteristics of decorative arts, the third concern with the whole of the man-made environment radically expanded the universe of objects

15 Richard P. Wunder, letter to S. Dillon Ripley, 30 April 1969, box 304, Record Unit 99, S. Dillon Ripley Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives (Washington, D.C.).

16 Minutes of the Advisory Board of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design, 9 April 1969, box 305, Record Unit 99, S. Dillon Ripley Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives (Washington, D.C.).

17 Lisa Taylor, Feedback to employees regarding Cooper-Hewitt brochure, box 32, Record Unit 267, Smithsonian Institution Archives (Washington, D.C.).

18 *Smithsonian Institution: A National Museum of Design*. (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 1976), 3. <https://archive.org/details/nationalmuseumof00smit>.

19 *Smithsonian Institution*, 3.

that the museum would collect and exhibit, from the primarily domestic decorative arts to "...entire landscapes, cities, systems, and ecological complexes".²⁰ A longer, unpublished version of the brochure expanded upon the Museum's populist conception of design. Rather than view the realm of design as a professional endeavour highlighted by star talents producing 'high design', the Cooper-Hewitt sought to frame it as a pervasive condition that occurred across disparate scales and aesthetic manifestations. The brochure explains,

"...most of the world's design is done by people who are not architects, industrial designers, city planners, graphic artists, textile designers or members of any of the other professional classifications. The stunning electronic circuitry of a computer system is designed by physicists and engineers; the street layouts of most communities are designed by politicians and businessmen; most living rooms are designed by the men and women who choose and arrange the furniture in them; for that matter, most offices are finally designed by the people who work in them and make them their own."²¹

This view recognized the man-made environment as a product of design, which was itself understood as a universal and often anonymous activity. Within this perspective, the opacity of the design process thus became an important condition to unpack. By extension, the function of the Museum

"is not merely to show the myriad end products of international design activity, but to show the process by which those products come to assume the forms they do. We are concerned not just with what gets designed, or with who designs it professionally, but with the way in which design affects and is affected by the life styles, aspirations, and needs of people. The Museum is to be, in other words, a museum of design process - a process rooted in the vital interactions of people with nature, technology and historical events."²²

It is here, with this emphasis on design process rather than product, that the Museum comes full circle back to issues of use and instrumentality. However, Taylor and the staff of the Cooper-Hewitt viewed the service or the agency of the museum in radically different terms than did the Cooper Union Museum. While the Cooper Union Museum primarily addressed decorators, artisans, manufacturers, and other professionals, the main audience of the Cooper-Hewitt was the layperson. The goal was no longer to improve contemporary products through exposure to quality historical examples, but rather to help the layperson understand how to understand the world of design all around them. The Museum thus had a primarily exegetical role: "Design is everywhere and people already see it -- on the streets, in stores, in their own homes and in existing museums. The role of the National Museum is to help them see it differently, to show why things look the way they do, to

20 *Smithsonian Institution*, 6.

21 Draft of *Smithsonian Institution: A National Museum of Design*, box 6, Accession 09-068, Taylor, Lisa, 1933-91, Lisa Taylor Papers, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

22 Draft of *Smithsonian Institution*.

show how things get designed and how they are used.”²³ Further, the Cooper-Hewitt brought this mission to its historical collections as well, re-reading and re-interpreting the historical record through the new lens of design:

“Design exhibitions are usually made up of objects or pictures of objects, and some of our exhibitions will surely take that form. But our exhibit policy is interpretive rather than merely presentational. Our aim, as described previously, is not to show objects, but to show what the objects mean in human terms—how they were made, how they are used, and how they affect the people who use them.”²⁴

The Museum’s first opportunity to put these ideas into action arose with their inaugural exhibition in the Carnegie Mansion, entitled “MANtransFORMS”, which opened in July of 1976. Designed by Austrian Postmodern architect Hans Hollein in collaboration with a cadre of designers and architects of international renown, the exhibition further emphasized the Museum’s conceptions of design as populist, anonymous, and pervasive in daily life.²⁵ For example, one installation exhibited one hundred and forty-four types of daily bread from cultures around the world. These were displayed as specimens on a long table evocative of the Last Supper and placed in a tall glass vitrine. The intent behind this exhibit was to posit the humble loaf of bread as a designed object. Rather than the product of a single designer, though, the form and characteristics of each loaf type evolved over time and with the input of unnamed thousands. Further, the exhibit demonstrated how something as universal as bread could take such radically different forms as a result of cultural, environmental, and historical differences, emphasizing the rich variation produced by human ingenuity. Another section of the exhibition focused on textiles and clothing. Highlighting forms that could be created by a single piece of cloth, the exhibition displayed a series of photos to illustrate this phenomenon, including: a woman donning a sari; a man wrapping a turban; and a couple demonstrating the various uses of a handkerchief. While some textiles from the Museum’s collection were utilized, the historical origins of those examples were suppressed in favour of foregrounding clothing as a timeless and paradigmatic condition of daily life, as well as a fundamental design problem. A third display was organized around the motif of the star, understood to be a man-made shape that transcended cultural specificity. Installed in a domed room, a wide variety of star-shaped objects were installed on the dome, forming constellations. These objects included sheriff’s badges and war medals, star-shaped crystal plates and vessels, and even architectural plans of fortifications and ideal cities. This mix of designed and every-day objects emphasized the pervasive nature of the star that, as both a geometric shape and a symbol, transcends utility. Hollein elaborates: “This sequence conveys some understanding of design processes which are not primarily based on functional or utilitarian considerations. It also shows how design transforms given things into things in their own

23 Draft of *Smithsonian Institution*.

24 Draft of *Smithsonian Institution*.

25 Hollein’s collaborators included Arata Isozaki, Ettore Sottsass, Richard Meier, Peter M. Bode, architecture critic at *Der Spiegel*, Oswald Mathias Ungers, filmmaker Murray Grigor, Buckminster Fuller, Nader Ardalan, and Karl Schlamming.

right, and how it creates basic models of perception.”²⁶ Other installations focused on paradigmatic architectural conditions, such as: the door; the room; and the minimum conditions of shelter. What drew these disparate displays together was the overarching desire to embody the Museum’s new conception of design as pervasive and democratic—not as a special realm of production for the wealthy few, but rather one that everyone participated in all of the time, whether they recognized it or not.

By way of conclusion, the history of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and its inaugural exhibition “MANtransFORMS” allows us to gain insight into the power of category in the understanding, interpretation, and significance of objects. Unlike fine art objects, whose aesthetic experience is still held under the Kantian sway of ‘purposive purposelessness’, both the ‘decorative arts’ and ‘design’ engender the mandate of instrumentality, that is, the necessary usefulness of the collections toward some end. However, their respective notions of use differ dramatically, and this has to do with a related attitude towards history. The Cooper Union Museum was arranged primarily for fellow makers: artisans, manufacturers and also decorators - the same sorts of people who had produced and promoted the historical objects within the collection. The primary mode of use of the decorative arts collections was that of imitation, revealing a belief in the authority of history and the superiority of its products. The Cooper-Hewitt Museum, in contrast, addressed itself not to practitioners but to the layperson. Historical objects were no longer authoritative, but rather examples from a distant time and a distinct culture. They were to be examined not for their particularities, which could be copied, but rather for their underlying abstract set of relationships, which could then be applied to nearly any facet of contemporary life. In this light, historical objects were viewed through the lens of the present, and interpreted according to contemporary concerns and desires. As such, design as a category has agency not only to address issues in the present but also to rewrite the history of the past.

26 Hans Hollein, *Hans Hollein, Design: Man Transforms: Concepts of an Exhibition* (Vienna, Löcker, 1989), 46.