

## Information and Inspiration

### Object Sources

Imagine finding an object that looks familiar in form or style of decoration, yet also seems to be like nothing you have seen before. Perhaps a design element disrupts your sense of what should be. Perhaps the item has an unusual shape or color. How do you assimilate this object as a novelty and as an item that may have uses? How do you adjust your understanding of what this object, or others like it, are or should be? When does the difference shift from noteworthy to commonplace? Imagine now that you are an artisan: How does an object offer clues to its construction, clues that might serve as inspiration or information in your work?

Il faut sans doute les imiter pour la solidité et pour quelques couleurs; mais on peut s'en éloigner à d'autres égards et trouver de nouveaux moyens de plaire au public, ainsi Mr Weggerwood a eu l'art de donner à de la simple poterie le prix de la belle porcelaine.

Claude-Louis Berthollet, Mémoire contre l'arrêt du 16 mars 1784, 23 November 1786, AN F/12/1494/V/(2).

A general answer to the first of these questions exists in the evolutionary models that describe the Western adaptation of foreign items.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of a wholly unfamiliar object will spur interest among potential consumers, including other producers. In response to that interest, the original maker(s) may adapt the item to meet expectations or needs of a new market, building demand and fostering further evolution. As the object becomes more familiar, production moves to sites closer to the market. Newer versions begin to appear, and these seem to address local needs or expectations more clearly. Occasionally, these new producers may not understand the original processes and make inadvertent changes based on this (flawed) understanding—these changes may be absorbed as further novelties or they may have no effect. Ultimately, the once-foreign object is fully integrated and familiar, produced locally with considerable sophistication. The sequence repeats, without necessarily waiting for a complete "cycle" to finish, so that, as these changes are taking place, other changes might appear. In time, the once attractive, novel characteristics of the original may be overtaken by newer ideas of good, or useful, or fashionable.

This model is a general articulation of changes and assimilation of innovation or novelties in both design and ideas. It is an especially common methodology for describing the integration of goods brought from the East to Europe or transported between any two geographically and culturally remote areas.<sup>2</sup> How does this cycle incorporate the role of objects as information and inspiration? To understand this we can look more closely at the effort of artisans to replicate colors, especially new colors, and consider the entwined paths of both chemical

understanding and workshop techniques. How are new forms or new colors, evidence of desirable changes created elsewhere, transformed into the mundane? Examples abound to prove that this happens with the creation of color for objects.

## Reading Objects

In the eighteenth century, novel objects inspired a broad range of novel changes, and the investigators who searched for and found the new objects came from an equally broad range of backgrounds. At a practical level, however, certain skills are required for one to "read" an object, take the measure of its differences, and imitate it well.

My being bred a potter excited my attempts for 50 years past to imitate, and if possible to equal the Dutch blew stone ware, for which such great [sums] have been and are annually sent out of this Kingdom. How far therefore the Specimens that accompany this shall, upon examination be found to answer the end in regard to its materials, for and & especially its colour, or any way deserve the notice & encouragement of this very honourable & judicious society is most humbly submitted . . . .

Paul Townsend to the Society of Arts, 3 December 1766, [R]SA Guard Book PR.GE/110/22/108,

We must start with the skills of the maker, or a maker. Comprehension of unfamiliar production techniques—the ability to read an unfamiliar design, for example—depends on visual and tactile examinations of the object that is technologically informed. Who better than an artisan to recognize and exploit new techniques and the possibility of a new fashion? A typical example of this attitude was expressed by the Bristol potter Paul Townsend who, on applying to the Society of Arts for an award, qualified himself by specifying his training as a potter and noting his fifty-year effort to imitate if not surpass Dutch blue and white ceramics.<sup>3</sup>

There was a time when no one thought grounding off the table could be performed as it now is; the writer well remembers when it was in agitation, to print two reds, and two olaves at the house where first executed. All the Printers exclaimed that the two after-colours could never be put in according to the designs; it was however attempted and it succeeded and nothing but that course of work was done there that season. The next season, indeed shortly after, it was attempted at other places; and now little difficulty (comparatively speaking) is experienced in it.

Charles O'Brien, "Of Pattern-Drawing," *The Callico Printers' Assistant* (London, 1789) 1:n.p.

To a trained observer, objects offer clues about production: the thickness of the glaze, the depth of color penetration into the substrate, the shininess of the varnish, the stiffness or malleability of the fabric, the response to standard tests. Finding an object that used an unusual color or color combination might also signal that materials or processes had been altered to a novel—and perhaps promising—end. The high cost of ultramarine meant that it was used where potential for color loss through abrasion or other damage was limited. When an eighteenth-century cabinetmaker saw a table, chest, or chair painted with a blue that looked like ultramarine, he could assume that the maker of that piece of furniture knew a source for a color as beautiful as ultramarine; this would be an

unlikely use of true ultramarine.<sup>4</sup> Recognition of changes was thus closely connected to understanding of production processes, their capabilities and drawbacks and the capabilities and drawbacks of their results. Such interaction occurred regularly in the eighteenth century. Saxon blue colors were introduced from Germany into France and Britain, first as cobalt-based ceramic colors and then—as a similar color on different kinds of objects—as a technique to prepare indigo. In both instances, colormakers were inspired to imitate a color specialty of another region. The information that objects provide was thus a critical feature of Hellot's investigation of Saxon blue, and it was an unspoken but underlying motivation for the development of Turkey red colors.

Informed examination might provide sufficient information to reproduce a novelty. Or, it might suggest a general path, and so serve as inspiration only until some success was achieved or the project abandoned. Recognition of these differences alters the meaning of novelty for any object. It adds to the variety of exchanges based in direct contact that we normally consider—a transaction between objects and their beholder, between merchant and consumer and between arbiter of taste and acolyte. In this way, objects add the possibilities of inspiration to the catalog of their desirability.

The Etruscan Vases are arriv'd -I see how the mechanical part of the Glaze and painting is perform'd -all wch may be faithfully imitated at any time. . . .

Josiah Wedgwood to Thomas Bentley (9 October 1769) Wedgwood MS E18266-25.

Successful efforts to produce new colors or color combinations inspired their own imitations, as their production methods were adopted or adapted, based on artisan or other investigator's combinations of sources, understanding, and experiment. Throughout the eighteenth century there was considerable interest in sources for white lead as good as that made by the Dutch, interest (in Britain) to develop a native source of verdigris as good as that made in Montpellier, interest (in France) in locating a source for kaolin to make Chinese- and Meissen-style porcelain.<sup>5</sup> Deliberate attempts to imitate, to establish a local production site, were a significant part of the diffusion pattern for most color technologies. Contact could be direct or indirect; rumors about new techniques, or mention on broadsheets or in periodicals, might also inspire. Josiah Wedgwood studied William Hamilton's collection of antiquities to understand Greek, Roman, and Etruscan pottery techniques. Through examination of the works of Van Eyck, Armand Vincent de Montpetit developed both his theory of deterioration of paintings and his remedy for that problem.<sup>6</sup>

Objects spoke to non-specialists as well. When a "student of manufactures" sent the to the Council of Commerce in Paris his outline of a treatise on dyeing, he offered his reflections on plant life from observation and combined them with his understanding of coloring sources.<sup>7</sup> He was inspired by the information that

cochineal and kermes are animal colors, derived from insects that feed on certain plants; his objects were the insects he found in the garden. This inventor's manuscript treatise shows a source of inspiration that was object-based but not directly related to investigation or to familiarity with practices. The author's concern with understanding objects was based on a goal (improvement of colors) in which the problem was joined to the study of nature and its uses. If some insects are useful color sources, how, without experiment, can one know this isn't true for others?

How objects were used as information and as inspiration was dependent on understanding of that object, on access to it and to supplemental information. In all cases, skill and skill-driven imagination, combined with imagination, suggested possibilities. The nature of eighteenth-century trade meant that objects were available—legally or illegally—in sufficient quantity, which rendered them separate and important sources of information and inspiration. They were a fertile starting place for inspiration; in the eighteenth century, "in imitation of" was a near-synonym to "as good as," and mentioned almost as frequently. An object could inspire by confirming that it *is* possible to make a certain color, or to make it better or more cheaply. This suggests how objects inspired study and how study led to experimentation. It was easy to find examples that could inspire. There were colored objects—practical examples—everywhere.

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### Notes:

**Note 1:** Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Britain, 1500–1900* (London, 2001); George Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology* (Cambridge, 1988).

**Note 2:** John Styles, "Manufacturing, Consumption and Design in Eighteenth-Century England," *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London, 1994), 527–54.

**Note 3:** Paul Townsend, potter in Bristol, to the Society of Arts, 3 December 1766, [R]SA PR.GE/110/22/108.

**Note 4:** On eighteenth-century colored woods, see Flavia Perugini Philp, "Coloured Woods on Eighteenth-Century Furniture," in *Postprints of the Wood Artifacts Group*, American Institute for Conservation Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Mo. (1999), 24–33.

**Note 5:** Reed Benhamou, "The Verdigris Industry in Eighteenth-Century Languedoc: Woman's Work, Woman's Art," *French Historical Studies* 16, no.3 (1990): 560–75; R. D. Harley, *Artists' Pigments c. 1600–1835: A Study in Documentary Sources* 2d ed. (London, 1982), 80, 123, 166–72; Antoine d'Albis, "La Découverte du Kaolin de Saint-Yrieix," *Dossier de l'art*, no. 54 (January–February 1999): 26–32.

**Note 6:** Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and his Collection* (London, 1996); Arnaud Vincent de Montpetit, *Essais sur les moyens de conserver les portraits peints à l'huile, plusieurs siècles dans toute leur fraîcheur*, 29 April 1775, AdS pochette.

**Note 7:** Anonymous to Pierre-Joseph Macquer, *Plan d'un traité de teinture*, n.d., AN

F/12/2259.

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