

# **Romantic Pragmatism**

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Embedded Value in Everyday Objects

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09/06/2015

**Abstract**

To communicate in non-verbal way is important for a designer and to create objects with values, which transcend our consumerist lifestyle is more important than ever before. I aimed to create such objects in my practical work. As a designer, who tends to be more of a practitioner than researcher, I explored concepts and theories through hands-on work in physical material. I worked with wooden cabinets, which were inspired by a tea-culture, in order to investigate how values could be communicated. Values I chose to represent were harmony, simplicity and tranquillity. Those values were communicated through carefully selected materials, forms and crafting techniques.

**Keywords**

*romantic, values, design, object*

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## Design Issue

Klaus Krippendorff and Seppo Vakeva, in their plea for product semantics, say:

*“Objects tell us a lot about their owners, their appropriate place and their use. While the image-based media industry calls for the production of ever more impressive shapes and colors to feed its fragmented version of reality, within product semantics, we believe that design must make sense of things rather than create a confusion of images, form and materials for the sole purpose of selling more products.”*

Objects which surrounds us are playing an active role in our social behavior and help to construct (or deconstruct) relationships and meanings within society. Bruno Latour states: “Actor network theorists argue that the material world pushes back on people because of its physical structure and design.” in an opposition to other social theorists, who believe that only human is an active factor in social behavior. Designer, an object and image maker, is not just shaping surfaces or forms, she/he is also playing an active part in creating its content, ergo. understandings. Of course, you can argue, that content is created every time, whether designer wants or not, and you’ll be right, but a challenge is to create a content people will understand and it’ll be in a range of meanings designer intended to create. It’s important to understand that it’s not possible to convey one message to everyone, since an interpretation of designed artifact varies with each viewer, due to their different cultural backgrounds and experiences, but it’s also differs with artifact’s surroundings. This is altogether a positive fact since different interpretations can leads to new meanings and therefore enrich the artifact. Which doesn’t mean new meanings arise with every new viewer. There are preconceptions in our collective memory. C. G. Jung talks about *an archetype*, which is described as “...a thought housed deep in the collective unconscious, not realizable un any object (..), but unconsciously entering the perception and evaluation of most things.” Thanks to these preconceptions, we understand that chair is for sitting, knife is for cutting, etc. and it partly explains how we are making meanings. To communicate value is more difficult than to communicate function, but the artistic expressions designers use are the same.

Within a shift from design as a problem-solving practice towards a meaning-making discipline( Schön, 1983; Jahnke, 2013), it’s time to re-evaluate what kind of role objects are playing in our lives. In the beginning I cited Klaus Krippendorff, an author of “Product Semantics; A Triangulation and Four Design Theories”, where he explains:

*“Product semantics should be concerned not with material objects as such, but with how they participate in human affairs, how they support understanding and practice.”*

Krippendorff further talks about C. G. Jung’s concept of *mythology*, which is “...probably the important and unconsciously embracing governing structure in an ecology with artifacts. C. G. Jung pointed out this long time ago but applied his insight to psychoanalysis only. A culture can hardly be conceived without myths either and the vitality of its continuous reproduction, the ecology of its meanings, derives directly from them.” He further explains “Mythologies give coherence to large cultural ecologies, complexes that no single individual can understand much less design in its detail, assign all participating things meaningful roles and direct them to interact in ways that have developed over centuries of human social existence.”

He sees relevance of design in context of social structures, and not just as a tool of industry. I agree with many Krippendorff’s statements, but I wouldn’t disregard materiality of objects, as their materials and forms can be used to mediate better understandings of their roles in human affairs. Many design theories (Design as hermeneutic practice, Product semantics) are finally questioning dialectic relationships such as good/evil, subject/object, humanity/nature so typical for how we, people in the west, understand the world. This dualistic way of thinking puts classical and romantic values (Pirsig, 1974) against each other, and ignoring other ways of seeing the world. Science vs. art, logic vs. intuition, metaphorical and cultural knowledge as something lesser than scientific knowledge. To challenge these preconceptions I engaged myself into study of different design theories, but also into ways of thinking and making in The East. Japanese culture, and traditional crafts especially, have been an inspiration many times before and this project is not an exception. Adrian Snodgrass, influential scholar

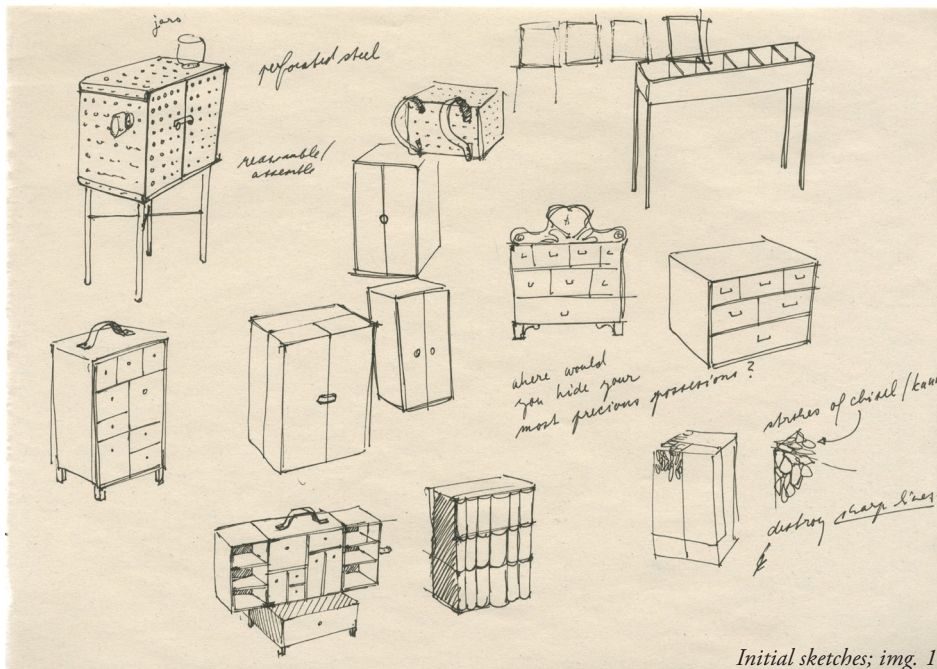
in field of Asian arts and also hermeneutics in relation to architectural design, said:

*“Asian Studies should aim not only to provide a knowledge of language, factual information and skills in critical analysis, but also to foster in a learning and research community the dialectics of interpretation, in which what is alien in the text of the other becomes the starting point for a process of questioning the horizons of our own prejudicial world in the hope of expanding and transforming them.”*

I was interested in how materiality of objects can be used in communication with user. How we, designers, can create meanings and values within artefacts by forming their physical structures and shapes. I worked with a single range of values, *harmony, simplicity and tranquillity*. Inspired by Asian culture and chosen values themselves, my material manifestation was a series of wooden tea-cabinets.

## Methods and Process

While I was researching and developing my concept I was simultaneously sketching ideas mixed with forms, which lead to new shapes and thoughts. Design issue weren't really formed yet and I only had an idea of cabinet as point of departure. In the end I created three cabinets, *Fågelholken, Tamatebako* and third one was *process material cabinet*.



Initial sketches; img. 1

## **Material**

Next step was to sketch in 3D. I did models in CAD and also cardboard. Cardboard prototypes helped me to realize a scale and dimensions of cabinets. Soon I started sketching material itself, which made it easier to find expressions I was looking for (simplicity, serenity). To choose right kind of wood was important step in my endeavour to express chosen values. My decisions were also based on construction qualities of the material, as it was a part I didn't disregard.



Beech sample; img. 2

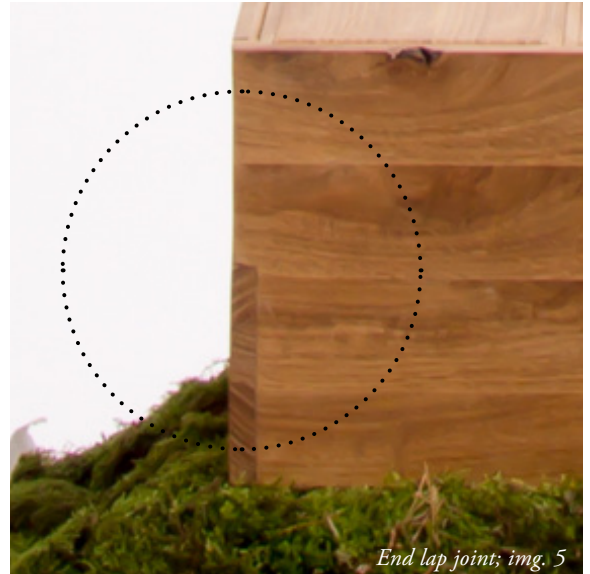


Oak sample; img. 3

I decided to work with beech for its warm color and soothing texture and with oak, which in my opinion represents *unasuming reliability*.

## Joinery

I used **miter joint** (*img. 4*) for a case and drawers in *Fågelholken*, which was more of a compromise of what I wanted and what I was able to do. Original intention was to use **finger joint** for its aesthetic qualities. In *Tamatebako* I used **end lap joint** (*img. 5*), which is more visible; also a detail of two sides, which meet and support each other was important.



## Hinges

Both cabinets have doors with different hinges. More about doors under headline **Doors**.

In *Fågelholken*, it is the most basic type of hinge, a **butt hinge** (*img. 6*), in bronze finish. Butt hinge was more of a compromise between what I could fit to my concept and construction. Simplicity and functionality were key elements and bronze finish matched with another metal details, **magnets**.

I used **wooden hinges** (*img. 7*) in *Tamatebako*, hence I didn't want to add metal parts.



## Proportions

Proportions of the cabinets reflect their function, but also a plan to make more than one cabinet. It is also a size of carry on luggage as I had an idea of *cabinet you can take on desert island*. From construction point of view, small size of bottom part of *Fågelholken* wasn't so suitable for long legs I designed, yet result was steady enough.

## Legs

Legs became an important element of *Fågelholken*, even though they were designed later in the project and their form and purpose was questioned many times. To create straight legs was a risk from construction point of view, but it really changed overall expression of the cabinet. By lifting the cabinet up, it creates space around it and it is also in suitable height for viewers/users to feel invited to explore its insides. Long, subtle legs leave a lot of air below the case, which visually lightens upper part. The case and legs, or *a stand*, are not permanently joined. By sliding the case up, you release it from the stand.

## Doors

The doors are important part of both designs. The act of opening works as a trigger; *something begins...* Everyday routine is transformed into more ceremony like feeling, which sets your mind to the task ahead of you, when it's preparation of tea or something else. A ruffled surface (*img. 8*) of *Fågelholken*'s doors visually calms rectangular form of the cabinet, and also enhancing tactile experience when it's touched.



## Sessions

The way of presenting the cabinets was also very important, since their surroundings will also influence how they'll be perceived by a viewer. I asked myself if the cabinets should be presented with or without objects inside, hence they were designed for specific utensils and accessories. But the objects inside the cabinet could take-over those language-like qualities of my work, and then it wouldn't be clear which is actually communicating intended values. To get some feedback I hosted *sessions* with people who didn't know this project; and through questionnaire and discussions I was able to evaluate my work. Two *sessions* were hosted out of planned three. In the first *session* the cabinets were presented in a not suitable room without any hint or clue what they are or supposed to represent.



In the second session the cabinets were presenting with tea utensils in the same room, but with a more suitable arrangement. In both cases I gave a viewer a questionnaire and left him/her alone for some time. The questions were following:

*What impressions you have from object in front of you?*

*Can you describe its purpose?*

*Can you name this object?*

When the questionnaire was completed, the session continued with a further discussion, still without revealing the reasons behind this project. I invited five persons in total, from and outside of HDK and all sessions were recorded and evaluated afterwards. The feedback I received was most helpful and overall positive. Except the values I intended to communicate, there were also other values. Sense of curiosity and mystery were repeating in every discussion.

## Discussion

To communicate in non-verbal way is very important for a designer and to create objects with values, is designer's responsibility to our material culture. Values I chose to represent are harmony, simplicity, tranquillity...What could be a material representation of those values and what they're actually mean to me and others? From a research, and my own personal experience, I found out those values are revolving around tea culture. Therefore I decided to design cabinets for acts related to tea; keeping tea and tea utensils, tea preparation and such...Why cabinet? The idea about cabinet was there from the beginning, since my original intention was to make a cabinet out of salvaged wood; and I also find a cabinet as an intriguing archetype to work with. I shortly left the idea of using salvaged wood, which I was too fixated with, and instead of that I focused on communicating values, which was a main purpose of my project. At some point of my process I also played with an idea of creating cabinets which will hold objects precious to selected persons or personas, and different values will be represented through the collected objects, displayed in the cabinets. But then the objects inside would play an active role in communicating intended values and the cabinet would be just an empty vessel, therefore I left this idea behind...After some discussions I thought it could be a good idea to create different cabinets, each representing different range of values, and show them in contrast to each other. *The Tea Cabinet* was one of them, but then there was also *the punk cabinet* and some other design. Some ideas were just based on construction, others on values and others were combination of both. Eventually I left an idea of several different cabinets behind, because I thought the contrast between them would be actually the element which reveals what they represent, and not the cabinets by themselves. That's why I decided to focus only on one range of values and see how many expressions I can find in working with the same theme.

Through design and construction of the cabinets, I aimed to convey not just functional aspects of the objects, but also values which they should represent. When expressing values like *harmony* and *tranquillity*, the hands-on approach occurred to be more than rewarding. I understand *harmony* as a confluence of two contradictory forces, *an excess* and *a frugality*. Like when you're filled with impressions, but not overwhelmed by them. It is more of an intuitive and tactile experience than visual, meditated one. Therefore it was important to have this tactile experience also in the cabinets, whether it is a structured front side in *Fågelholken* or branch marks in *Tamatebako*. While you're opening the doors or the drawers, it is a texture of the wood, the movement of a hand and a fragrance of the wood and tea inside, which speaks the value. A visual experience is rather secondary in this case, and that's why the design is so subtle. In fact, you might not even see the structure of the doors, until you feel them. The values are encoded within artifact's material, structure, weight and form, yet they're triggered by interaction with the artifact.

## **Romantic Pragmatism**

During my project I came up with an idea of Romantic Pragmatism, a concept which would gathered some of my thoughts and findings.

**Romantic Pragmatism** strives for an acknowledgment of *romantic* (do not mistake for romanticized) *values*, such as poetry or Quality, in everyday objects and an acknowledgment by their creators.

**Romantic Pragmatism** is not interested in replacing *classical values*, such as functionality, rather to see both sets of values equally important, as they truly are.



It's reasonable to think about emotional impact of objects we make, as we're not governed only by reason.

### Original/Copy

The objects I created are hand-crafted, unique pieces and many details came from this fact. Yet it doesn't mean that they can't be reproduced nor only *the original* can communicate intended values. If being reproduced, *a copy* will have same expressions as *the original*.

### Genre

The values I chose to represent and also techniques I used are very much part of *live authentic* genre or a trend. Even though it wasn't my goal to work within a specific genre I am fully aware of the fact my project is part of it. This genre is manifested by lifestyle magazines like *Kinfolk*, *Martha Stewart* and *weekend retreats* on one hand, but also represented by *Art & Crafts Movement*, contemporary craftsmen like *Tokuhiko Kise (TRUCK)*, *Martino Gamper*, *Studio Swine* and many others, or even brands like *Patagonia*. *The craftsmanship* is an axis which this genre revolves around, whether it's just a marketing strategy or a true interest. Richard Sennet describes it as "an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake," in his internationally acclaimed book *The Craftsman (2008)*. Even though this is a mere generalization of a concept, which is further discussed in another 336 pages, it gives us a clear notion what *the craftsmanship* is about. It was re-discovered by *hipsters* and popularized by marketers who saw increasing demand for well-made goods and alternative lifestyles, so they created romanticized image of what *craft* is and how *well-made product* looks like. Precious natural resources like *leather* and *wood* are as often used in mass-produced cheap goods same as *good old times* imagery in their promotional materials. It shows how demand for well-made goods is twisted into poorly made, cheap products with features of the crafted object. It brings a question of how can designer communicate values through objects, when general public is so easily deceived by *a counterfeit*? Where well-made chair speaks the values of its creator (whether it's a maker or a skilled manufacturer); a counterfeit only appropriates for short period of time before it breaks-down. As an example I use two similarly styled backpacks by *Herschell* and *PLAYBAG*.



As an example I use two similarly styled backpacks by *Herschell* and *PLAYBAG*.



Herschell; img. 12



Playbag; img. 13

### Luxury

*Craft* is often considered to be *a luxury*, and it's true, yet that doesn't mean high price tag. *Herschell* backpack made in China from cotton canvas, with one-year guarantee which "does not apply to damage caused by accidents and/or wear and tear" costs 150 EUR, where *PLAYBAG* backpack is made in

Czech Republic by skilled workers from tarpaulin (material from Germany), and costs 120 EUR. Another example of *the craftsmanship* in large scale production is *Patagonia* with their strong environmental initiatives and *DON'T BUY THIS JACKET* campaign. Even their products became part of a trend, and even though it might sounds negative, their popularity was gained by the values their products represent and that is an important fact. As much *crafts* cherishing the past, they're also evolving and reflecting our contemporary society; *Playbag's* or *Patagonia's* use of materials for example or *Studio Swine's plastic craft*, which question a real value of materials around us (as we are running out of oil, plastics might be eventually luxurious material). My work represents different kind of luxury, luxury to be *slow, offline* and *unproductive*. To prepare and drink, while doing nothing else. Regarding *materials, values* and *luxury*, I would like to state clear that luxurious material doesn't always represents "good" values, neither cheap material "the bad ones" (*Playbag's* example again). Materials themselves have story to tell, but they can express wide range of values depending on design, construction and surroundings.

## Results

This series of images is documenting results of my practical investigation. As I mentioned before, the values are embedded in a materiality and a form of the objects and are communicated through interaction between the object and the user. It is an indirect and intuitive way of communication and therefore it may tackle needs and desires housed deep within ourselves.

## Tamatebako



## Fågelholken



## Summary

The materiality of objects is playing an important role in mediating meanings and values and thus influencing us on daily basis. Therefore designers are indirectly shaping our social structures and we should be aware of that. In this project I mainly addressing object oriented designers, as it might seem obsolete, since design is becoming more and more interdisciplinary, to think about products in wider perspective of our culture.

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