

Question 1: What is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st Century and how might this role change in the next 10 years? Discuss your ideas with reference to two of the practitioners or thinkers discussed in your lecture strand.

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Research in Context

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Introduction

In this essay, I want to discover what is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st Century and how might this role change in the next 10 years with an increasing “generation which ignores history [and] has no past and future” (Heinlein, 1959). We are currently standing on the edge of another potential workplace revolution with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). History often repeats itself so to predict what will happen with the introduction of AI into the luxury furniture-making industry, I am going to examine past revolutions (industrial revolution) and the impact they have had on our current world/furniture market in terms of new technologies.

Looking to the past

According to *Design the Definitive Visual Guide* (2023, p. 12) “Until the 18th century, objects were usually made by craftsmen in a workshop. In the late 1700s, however, the production of goods became increasingly mechanized, and the designer became removed from the hands-on process of creation”. This coincides with the introduction of the steam engine and mass production but also created the perfect starting point for the arts and crafts movement and the introduction/creation of a luxury market that celebrates the craftsmen/designers.

William Morris was one of the pioneers in the arts and crafts movement “Morris championed a principle of handmade production that didn't chime with the Victorian era's focus on industrial 'progress'” (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2023). The interesting fact was that the Arts and Crafts Movement came about as a retaliation against mechanization and mass production. Morris was not alone in his views that designers were being replaced. The Arts and Crafts Movement spanned about 75 years, three generations of man, from 1850 to 1925 (*Design the Definitive Visual Guide*, 2023, p. 14). 75 years shows how long it took for people to start becoming amicable towards technology/mechanization. The friendliness of using new technology had started to be integrated and used by the designers and craftsmen adopting a new tool.

This slow adoption of technology and mechanization led to the rise of different design movements that pioneered the use of mechanization, even designing products/furniture for mass production. These design movements were modernism, Bauhaus, Streamlining, and Minimalism.

The rise of luxury brands

The Art and Craft Movement (1850 to 1925) was when some of the biggest names in modern luxury goods started, such as Louis Vuitton starting in 1857 (Louis Vuitton) and Gucci started in 1921

(Zargani, 2021). These two brands and other big luxury company's managed to keep their production small and celebrate the craftsmen and championing quality. Even to this day, these brands are associated with quality, heritage, and good design. Louis Vuitton still makes leather goods out of the original workshop; "170 craftsmen work in the Asnières workshop, designing and creating leather goods and special orders for clients around the world" (Louis Vuitton, 2023). Louis Vuitton still has managed to tread the fine line where their marketing, brand heritage, and product quality encourage people to pay more for their products because they kept to tradition but embraced and engaged in new technology.

The luxury furniture industry has developed over time and has started to celebrate the designer or design house, for example, Charles and Ray Eames. Charles and Ray Eames had an enormous impact on the luxury furniture industry without knowing it. They created the lounge chair 670 which originally sold in 1956 for \$310 but their infamous name has pushed it to the luxury market with an average recreation of a "670 selling for £8,570" (Heals, 2023); this demonstrates the power of time and the recognition of skill in design. The Eames's rise to the luxury market took many years. Whilst they never intended to be part of the market, technology moves fast in manufacturing and the skills of the past can be forgotten, increasing the price of products. NASA is discovering this problem with sending people to the moon

When the Apollo program ended, the factories that assembled those vehicles were re-tasked or shut down. The jigs were disassembled. The molds were destroyed. The technicians, engineers, scientists, and flight controllers moved on to other jobs. Over time, some of the materials used became obsolete (Forbs, 2023).

This is the same in the furniture and luxury goods industry. As skills and crafts are lost they come at a price, increasing the overall price and making the luxury industry bigger.

The luxury furniture industry today. A case study of Boca do Lobo a luxury furniture designer and manufacturer.

Boca Do Lobo is a stand-alone company creating modern contemporary designs which when compared to other major players in the industry, make their designs appear old fashioned and outdated. The classic modern look of Boca de Lobo originates from their core principles "Boca Do Lobo was founded in 2005 and, early on, it committed to reinterpreting ancient techniques of fine craftsmanship to create unexpected pieces of contemporary design" Boca Do Lobo (2023). This commitment to the past to create new modern pieces of furniture resonates with people who want something traditional but that looks modern and contemporary.

Song, He and Jiang (2023) have looked at the psychology of handmade products.

Four studies reveal that while a positive handmade effect exists among consumers whose sense of personal control is not threatened, a negative handmade effect appears for those consumers under control deprivation. That is, consumers show less favorable attitudes toward handcrafted products when their sense of personal control is threatened (Song, He & Jiang, 2023).

Customers prefer handmade products so they feel some form of control and personal involvement. If the customer does not have that involvement, they feel threatened because they're spending money on something to not get what they want.

This is where Boca Do Lobo covers both markets as they offer a catalogue of products but also offer a bespoke service. This is not too dissimilar to how the powerhouses of fashion, Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Prada work. This catalogue of back products is extremely important and shows the customer/client what level of quality and potential style their product will be. Boca Do Lobo in 18 years has climbed to the top of the luxury furniture industry. It has displayed itself as committed to tradition and quality in its work but has embraced change in design. By aiming at the future market in 2005 and creating a back catalogue, having a strong brand identity of classic modern furniture, and utilising modern marketing, Boca Do Lobo has risen to the top of the luxury furniture market, comparatively very quickly.

The luxury furniture industry today. A case study of silverlining furniture a luxury furniture designer and manufacturer and comparison with Boca Do Lobo.

Silverlining Furniture is recognized as an industry leader in luxury furniture making. "[W]e create museum-quality furniture that finds its way to palaces, galleries, corporate headquarters, homes, yachts, and private jets around the world" (Silverlining Furniture, 2023). Silverlining aims to make furniture that are works of art. They achieve this by drawing "on the best of old and new techniques to conjure them into extraordinary pieces of furniture" (Silverlining Furniture, 2023). This statement is interesting because they are willing to combine very traditional techniques with modern manufacturing and they are actively looking to the future to enhance the past.

Silverlining and Boca Do Lobo are very similar in many ways however they are two different types of company. Silverlining brand and identity has been built up over 35 years of private bespoke work,

but Boca Do Lobo took only 15 years to get to the top of the market, because of its catalogue model which sees a constant quick stream of customers, building the brand up quickly. Boca Do Lobo is aiming for two different types of client. Boca Do Lobo is aimed at people who make a couple of million a year. They are aiming for this market the same way Louis Vuitton is for the middle class. If the customer is fortunate to become wealthier the brand loyalty that Boca Do Lobo has built with them, increases their chances of getting a bespoke product made for them because they know what they're getting. On a company front, this means they are less likely to take the risk.

Silverlining customers are at the top 1% of multimillionaires, who want special treatment and to be involved in creating something new. This willingness and strive for creativity and innovation mean that their portfolio is incredibly diverse as they try new things. Silverlining is willing to embrace change to enhance the traditional nature of its work. Boca Do Lobo and Silverlining are willing to embrace change however Silverlining customers will push that change forward and can do it quicker than Boca Do Lobo. Boca Do Lobo doesn't necessarily have that drive from the customer which could lead to a downturn in business.

The rise of AI in the current furniture industry

With the rise of AI, it is only natural that bigger companies look into developing it and testing how they can use it. Ikea is using a design agency called "Space10" to test designing with AI (Roettgers, 2023). They have been inputting images of past Ikea catalogues into an AI database, in decade format and what is being produced is Ikea-looking furniture from that decade. However, you can teach AI what furniture looks like and "about basic design concepts, but not necessarily the laws of nature" (Roettgers, 2023). The AI has no current understanding of human nature; it has been designing chairs with one or two legs and does not understand the position of the centre of mass positioning which is necessary when designing a comfortable chair. Where the level of AI currently is a designer can use it as a tool to help with idea generation; the AI is the creative and the human is the logic.

AI already exists in manufacturing, "with AI powered robotics" (Gupta, 2023). These AI-powered robots can perform tasks with efficacy and accuracy negating the use of human workers. Where once a highly skilled craftsman would spend years honing his skill to create a piece of furniture. with the production line, this was moved to one unskilled person doing one simple part of the product. This has now shifted again with the rise of AI robotics. Companies can have a skilled craftsman

making one component over and over again. A robot does not have to take breaks or need a wage to work so this overall increases the profit of the company in the long term.

The main driver for the use of AI in the furniture industry is the customer. AI is already used in everyday shopping and monitoring of analytical data. "AI-powered predictive analytics analyse customer data, market trends, and historical sales patterns to forecast future demand and optimize pricing strategies" (World Construction Today, 2023). By using this data, the AI can inform a designer what style and what materials are likely to sell well in the current market. This will fundamentally increase the profitability and viability of the product. An increase in profit is why companies are heavily investing in AI and loyalty schemes. For example, "When you sign up for a Tesco Clubcard you give them the right to track all your data, purchases, behaviour and combine this with information from outside 'to enrich their records'" (Poulter, 2011). They will use this data to target you by changing the layout of their shops, their recipes, and overall stock. All big companies do this to increase their profit margins. This is the same with Ikea and other mass market and luxury market furniture brands.

Like most things in technology the longer it is around the cheaper it gets and more accessible it becomes to the public. Big industry has had access to a form of AI for years. "The first AI program was written in 1951" (Copeland, 2023). In 72 years it has finally become accessible to the public in the form of ChatGBT and SEO Marketing. Big companies currently use AI to increase their profit margins. Without the motivation of money and efficiency, how the modern person uses AI could open the possibility for more people to become designers. "AI-generated designs could foreshadow a democratization of the design process." (Roettgers, 2023).

Conclusion

"A generation which ignores history has no past and future" (Heinlein, 1959) not only is this true for society and generations but also industries and companies. In this essay I have looked back throughout time to understand what the introduction of new technologies did and how they changed the world, but most importantly what people thought and did about it. In the rise of the Industrial Revolution, design movements regressed until they had become integrated with technology because of the economic advantage and a new generation's views. This generation craved the past, the skill, and the prestige of luxury products.

There is a noticeable trend of new technology eventually becoming the normality. This makes it very easy to predict what will happen in the design and craft industries. AI is already embedded in big companies, they use it every day. It is only now it has become accessible and open to the public; the question is how will they use it. I know people who have used it to write essays, make presentations, draw designs, and come up with ideas for them. They say it's just a tool; I think it is a tool that devalues human nature to try and work hard, to design, to think, and to be creative.

The big fear that I have with AI is my inevitable job replacement and the potential dullness of the world around me. It could be used to make beautiful things man could not think of just like humans do every day, but will AI ignore the history of the past. We must remember that to live, survive, and thrive in design we must celebrate humanity and remember the lessons of the past

I conclude that the luxury market will split into two factions, those who use AI and those who will not use AI. However the longevity of the ones who don't use AI will be uncertain, and they will stand alone in a world full of things designed by artificial intelligence.

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