





By Virginia Postrel

Virginia Postrel is the author of *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness*, published by HarperCollins, from which this article is adapted. www.dynamist.com.

The Marginal Appeal of Aesthetics

WHY BUY WHAT YOU DON'T NEED?

As soon as the Taliban fell, Afghan men lined up at barber shops to have their beards shaved off. Women painted their nails with once-forbidden polish. Formerly clandestine beauty salons opened in prominent locations. Men traded postcards of beautiful Indian movie stars and thronged to buy imported TVs, VCRs and videotapes. Even burka merchants diversified their wares, adding colors like brown, peach and green to the blue and off-white dictated by the Taliban's whip-wielding virtue police. Freed to travel to city markets, village women demanded better fabric, finer embroidery and more variety in their traditional garments.

Left: Afghan woman begs for money with painted nails in an eastern Kabul street November, 2001.

Photo: REUTERS/Yannis Behrakis

When Debbie Rodriguez went to Kabul with a group of doctors, nurses, dentists and social workers, the Michigan hairdresser intended to serve as an all-purpose assistant to the relief mission's professionals. Instead, she found her own services every bit as popular as the serious business of health and welfare. "When word got out that there was a hairdresser in the country, it just got crazy," she told *The New York Times*. "I was doing haircuts every 15 minutes."

Liberation is supposed to be about grave matters: elections, education, a free press. But Afghans acted as though superficial things were just as important. A political commentator noted, "The right to shave may be found in no international treaty or covenant, but it has, in Afghanistan, become one of the first freedoms to which claim is being laid."

That reaction challenged many widely held assumptions about the nature of aesthetic value. While social critics cherish artworks like the giant Bamiyan Buddhas leveled by the Taliban, they generally take a different view of the frivolous, consumerist impulses expressed in more mundane aesthetic pleasures. "How depressing was it to see Afghan citizens celebrating the end of tyranny by buying consumer electronics?" wrote Anna Quindlen in a 2001 Christmas column berating Americans for "uncontrollable consumerism." Respectable opinion holds that our persistent interest in variety, adornment and new sensory pleasures is created by advertising, which generates what Quindlen calls a "desire for products consumers [don't] need at all."

Why buy a green burka if you're a poor peasant who already has two blue ones? Why paint your nails red if you're a destitute widow begging on the streets? These indulgences seem wasteful and irrational, just the sort of false needs encouraged by commercial manipulation. Yet, liberated Kabul had no ubiquitous advertising

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or elaborate marketing campaigns. Maybe our desires for impractical decoration and meaningless fashion don't come from Madison Avenue after all.

But do we really need all this adornment? Surely there are more important things in life.

"Aesthetics is a luxury," quipped a New York friend, hearing I was in town to pitch the book idea that became *The Substance of Style*. "Maslow said so."

Aesthetics and Maslow's Hierarchy

Psychologist Abraham Maslow's seminal writings on motivation argue that humans have a "hierarchy of needs." According to his theory, humans must address basic needs, such as food and shelter, before moving on to less critical items, including aesthetics. "We would never have the desire to compose music or create mathematical systems, or to adorn our homes, or to be well dressed if our stomachs were empty most of the time," he wrote.

Maslow was primarily interested in what makes people psychologically healthy in affluent societies, where true deprivation and danger are rare. He qualified his strongest statements about basic needs, contrasting starvation with mere appetite, for instance. Maslow did not suggest that higher needs represented unimportant luxuries; he saw them as essential expressions of human instincts.

But when Maslow's model is portrayed graphically as a simple pyramid, it can lead to a false conclusion: that aesthetics is a luxury that human beings care about only when they're wealthy. "Experiential and aesthetic needs are higher-order needs, which individuals seek only when basic needs have been satisfied," conclude management professors Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson in *Marketing Aesthetics*. Now that consumers have fulfilled their basic needs, these scholars argue, businesses

Photo: Karen Iman



A Hmong woman in Muang Sing, Laos: In subsistence societies, people spend a relatively large portion of their resources on adorning themselves and their environment.

Photo: Karen Iman



The headdress of this woman from the Akha tribe in Northern Laos is far more elaborate than necessary for protection from the elements. "Making special" is a basic human drive.

should concentrate on satisfying customers' aesthetic desires—sound advice based on a false premise.

Human beings do not wait until they have full stomachs and a roof that doesn't leak before they satisfy their aesthetic needs. Given a modicum of stability and sustenance, people have always enriched the look and feel of their lives through personal adornment and decorated objects. Poor people created the body decoration illustrated in *National Geographic*. Poor people built cathedrals in Europe and sand paintings in Tibet. Poor people turned baskets and pottery into decorative art. Poor people invented paints and dyes, jewelry and cosmetics. Five thousand years ago, unimaginably poor Stone Age weavers living in Swiss swamps used fruit pits as beads to work intricate, multicolored patterns into their textiles, work that archeologists have found preserved in the alkaline mud.

These artifacts do not reflect societies focused only on "lower-order" needs. Aesthetics is not a luxury, but a universal human desire. The anti-capitalists who criticize markets for luring consumers into wanting more than meets their basic needs and the capitalists who scoff at aesthetics for detracting from serious work are missing a fundamental fact of human nature.

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Quick self-test based on the Hierarchy of Needs

Read the following eight statements and check those that apply to you. There are no right or wrong answers. Then proceed to the interpretation guide below.

- n **G** Aside from dieting and personal choice, I never starve through lack of food, nor lack of money to buy food. Aside from the usual trauma of moving house, I have no worry at all about having somewhere to live; I have 'a roof over my head.'
- n **E** I generally feel safe and secure (job, home, etc.) and protected from harm. My life generally has routine and structure - long periods of uncontrollable chaos are rare or non-existent.
- n **B** I am part of, and loved by, my family. I have good relationships with my friends and colleagues; they accept me for who I am.
- n **A** I am successful in life and/or work, and I'm recognized by my peers for being so. I'm satisfied with the responsibility and role that I have in life and/or work, my status and reputation and my level of self-esteem.
- n **F** The most important thing to me is helping others to reach their ultimate potential, whatever that may be, even at my own expense.
- n **H** Improving my self-awareness is one of my top priorities. The pursuit of knowledge and meaning of things, other than is necessary for my work, is extremely important to me.
- n **C** Above mostly everything else, I actively seek beauty, form and balance in things around me. My interest in beautiful culture and the arts is central to me.
- n **D** My aim is self-knowledge and enlightenment. The most important thing to me is realizing my ultimate personal potential. I seek and welcome "peak" experiences.

Interpretation:

1	Biological Needs	G
2	Safety Needs	E
3	Belongingness & Love Needs	B
4	Esteem Needs	A

5	Cognitive Needs	H
6	Aesthetic Needs	C
7	Self-Actualisation Needs	D
8	Transcendence Needs	F

Maslow says that needs 1-4 are deficiency motivators and are generally satisfied in order when the previous need is fully or partially satisfied. If checked they are probably satisfied. If a need ceases to be satisfied there is less or no motivation to strive to maintain or satisfy higher level needs.

Needs 5-8 are growth motivators. If checked they are likely to be a focus of personal growth motivation. This test is based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, but Maslow's original theory did not include cognitive, aesthetic and transcendence needs. These were added later by others who developed his model.

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The Incremental Value of Aesthetics

With its emphasis on shifting relative prices, micro-economics is a clearer guide than Maslow's hierarchy of needs for understanding the increasing value of aesthetics. There is no pyramid of needs, where each layer depends on completely satisfying the need under it. Rather, the value of the next increment of what we consume changes depending on what we already have. The marginal value of some characteristics, such as nutrition or shelter, is high initially—we don't want to starve or to freeze to death—but that value drops off faster than the marginal value of other characteristics, including aesthetics.

The relative costs and benefits of different goods rise and fall as circumstances change.

Consider what has happened with cars, among the first industrial goods for which aesthetics became important. In the 1950s and 1960s, automotive design and manufacturing seemed mature. As cost and quality fell into predictable niches, car buyers began to focus on looks, giving rise to the famous tailfins of the Populuxe era. In the 1970s, however, the trade-offs changed. Although incomes continued to rise, gasoline shortages made fuel efficiency more important, and Japanese and German competitors entered the US market in a big way, offering significantly higher reliability. Suddenly, the relative costs of aesthetics, fuel efficiency and reliability shifted, making aesthetics only marginally important to consumers.

Today, by contrast, quality is high throughout the auto market, gasoline is plentiful and relatively cheap, and aesthetics has again risen in stature. Baby boomers are fueling a market for "road candy," from convertibles to the retro PT Cruiser, there is an abundance of striking cars designed for fun. **Marketing consultant Carol Morgan estimates that about 20 percent of middle-aged car buyers are less interested in performance or reliability than in "stylish fun."** The cars they buy—often the third or fourth in the family fleet—have aesthetic personalities that express the drivers' identities. And younger car buyers are perhaps even more aesthetically oriented, forcing companies like Honda to rethink their designs. "If you put out an automotive appliance, no one under 35 will buy it," Morgan told *USA Today*. On the margin, look and feel are more likely to determine value.

Rather than progressing up a simple Maslovian hierarchy, then, we move back and forth among the available options, making the best tradeoffs we can. Which trade-

offs we choose depends on what resources we have. Our choice also depends on what options are available, at what cost. **Technology and economic development affect the relative costs of equally valuable goods, and the relative importance of aesthetics waxes and wanes over time.** To a peasant in a subsistence economy, significantly better housing or faster transportation might require more than a lifetime's income, while a bit of decorative carving or an elaborately braided hairstyle can be acquired at minimal expense. In this instance, we choose aesthetics over more "basic" goods.

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Function or Form?

The industrial revolution changed these relative prices. When mass production and distribution first made functional products cheap, consumers often chose function over form. This effect was particularly pronounced in the United States, because its populous continental market offered great

economies of scale. The preference for function over form gave rise to the common critique that industrial capitalism made the world ugly, not just because factories were unpleasant but because, given the costs and benefits they faced, the masses were mostly interested in making their lives healthier, easier, more comfortable and more exciting rather than beautiful. "The public, tickled to get so many things so cheaply, accepted them without question," lamented Earnest Elmo Calkins in a 1927 *Atlantic Monthly* article, "and thus we had a depressing period when, in New York City, brownstone houses were built literally by the mile." And he hadn't seen Levittown.

In the age of Wonder Bread and Holiday Inn, the big story was not the rise of aesthetics but the spread of predictable standards of minimum quality. After crowded city apartments and isolated farmhouses with little plumbing or no electricity, affordable houses made of ticky tacky looked awfully good. Packaged foods were not only convenient but were also reliable in taste and quality and slow to spoil. A hotel chain might lack the charm of a country inn, but at least visitors could rest assured that they wouldn't be staying in a roach-infested dump.

The slogan Holiday Inn adopted in 1975—"The best surprise is no surprise"—summed up several decades of economic progress. Americans were more concerned with avoiding below-par experiences than achieving unique or extraordinary ones. Delivering basic comfort and convenience to a vast middle class was, in itself, a huge achievement. But the economics of mass produc-

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

1990's Eight-stage Model Based on Maslow*



tion, mass marketing and mass distribution exacted an aesthetic cost. The lowest common denominator determined what was made. Thanks to such advances as cut glass, synthetic dyes and colorful Formica, in some areas of life, people did enjoy more aesthetics than their ancestors. On the margin, however, they were more likely to choose the newly affordable benefits of convenience, hygiene, mobility and living space. Once these became pervasive, people began to take these benefits for granted and turn attention once again to aesthetics.

“Making Special”

Today, having spent a century or more focused primarily on other goals—solving manufacturing problems, lowering costs, making goods and services widely available, increasing convenience, saving energy—more people in more aspects of life are drawing pleasure and meaning from the way their persons, places and things look and feel.

Theorist Ellen Dissanayake argues that the instinct for “making special” is universal and innate, a part of human beings’ evolved biological nature, a behavior designed to be “sensorily and emotionally gratifying and

more than strictly necessary.” Once seen as an unnecessary luxury, even a suspect indulgence, “making special” has become a personal, social and business imperative.

“Aesthetics, whether people admit it or not, is why you buy something,” says a Dallas shopper purchasing an iMac. He likes the computer’s features, but he particularly likes its looks. “Deciding to buy an IBM instead of a Compaq simply because you prefer black to gray is absolutely fine as long as both machines meet your other significant criteria,” a writer advises computer shoppers on the female-oriented iVillage Web site. “Not that color can’t or shouldn’t be a significant criterion; in truth, the market is filled with enough solid, affordable machines that you finally have the kind of freedom of choice previously reserved only for the likes of footwear.”

Whenever we have the chance, we’re adding sensory, emotional appeal to ordinary function. Which computer? Which cell phone? Which trash can or toilet brush or pair of sneakers? Aesthetics has become the deciding factor in almost every product that we once considered primarily functional. With each of these proliferating choices, we find new ways to express our individual tastes and personalities—to make our world special. ●

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