DESIGN OBJECTS IN MUSEUMS: DIFFERENT LENSES, (RE)NEW OBJECTS*

SANDRA SENRA**

Abstract: *The redefinition of discourses on design objects and their representation in museums raised new questions in museological studies. This text presents considerations from Portuguese protagonists in all disciplines, exploring how design objects can be seen through different lenses in museums. It was part of the doctoral research in museology, intending to contribute to theorising musealization processes for material culture related to design. The investigation resulted in an instrument to build and rethink objects from a design perspective. Enabling the interaction of different pieces of knowledge allows for exploring new narratives and representations. This approach facilitates the production of retrospective and prospective discourses for design objects among collections from various organisations, enriching their understanding.*

Keywords: *design objects; representation systems; museums; academy; interdisciplinary confluence.*

Resumo: *A redefinição dos discursos sobre objetos de design e a sua representação em museus levantou novas questões no campo da museologia. Este texto apresenta algumas considerações de protagonistas portugueses de diferentes áreas disciplinares, explorando como os objetos de design podem ser percecionados através de lentes nos museus. Esta reflexão fez parte de uma investigação de doutoramento na área de museologia, com o objetivo de contribuir para a teorização dos processos de musealização da cultura material ligada ao design. A investigação resultou num instrumento com diferentes dimensões de análise para construir e repensar objetos na perspetiva da disciplina de design. Ao viabilizar-se a interação entre diferentes naturezas de conhecimento, poderão ser exploradas novas representações entre coleções. Esta abordagem facilita a produção de discursos retrospetivos e prospetivos para objetos de design em diferentes organizações, enriquecendo a sua compreensão.*

Palavras-chave: *objetos de design; sistemas de representação; museus; academia; confluência interdisciplinar.*

INTRODUCTION

This text is part of a doctoral study in Heritage Studies, in the specific field of specialisation of Museology, conducted by the author at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto. The thesis is entitled *Objetos de design em museus. «Portugal Industrial – Ligações entre o Design e a Indústria». Estudo de caso em*

profundidade (Design objects in museums. «Industrial Portugal – Links between Design and Industry». In-depth case study), was funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and was supervised by Professor Alice Semedo (FLUP/ CITCEM) and co-supervised by Professor José Bártolo (ESAD/esad—idea). This doctoral research deepens some of the generated and emerging concepts from the conclusions of the CIDES.PT – Portuguese Design Interpretation Centre project[1], coordinated by Professor Vasco Branco (University of Aveiro/DeCA/ID+), namely those related to the authority of the disciplines that operate in the organisation and production of knowledge in museums and the principles that underlie design objects musealization[2]. This study revealed that in museums and institutions with design objects and collections, there is uncertainty and ambiguity about the nature of the term and the concept of design and that the discursive construction of objects and collections is markedly linked to the art history and classic design history matrices, which gives evidence to the dimension of aesthetics, the function, and the known authorship of objects[3].

This paradox would end up placing the questions of the thesis on four levels: in the debate of critical museology that questions the authority of the disciplines that operate in the organisation and production of knowledge in museums; in the discussion about the construction of the history and culture of design, which admits the inclusion of objects outside the spectrum of industrial production, as it considers that design has different geographical, material and immaterial translations; in the debate on the musealization of design on the role that the institutions dedicated to it played in the narrative construction of the history and culture of design and on how to make traditional concepts compatible with contemporary ones; and, finally, in the debate on the role of other museological institutions linked to further disciplinary and thematic areas in the narrative construction of the design object, considering that design constitutes a discipline of a multidisciplinary nature. This article will focus on the last point, namely, will forward some considerations arising from the narratives enunciated by some Portuguese protagonists from different disciplinary areas regarding the idea of the design object and how it can be thought of through these lenses in museums.

Knowledge organisation about objects in a museological context is based on different disciplinary assumptions. Things are reflected and documented according to their different intellectual contexts, which is why museums' heterogeneous and

---

[1] See «CIDES.PT — Portuguese Design Interpretation Centre». [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <http://www.cides.pt>.
[2] BRANCO *et al.*, 2014: 327-332; PROJETO FCT, 2013-2015.
[3] SEMEDO, Alice; SENRA, Sandra; JORGE, Natália (2015). *Práticas e Recursos na Curadoria Digital de Objetos de Design*. In *Encontro MUX2015 — museus em experiência*. Aveiro: Departamento de Comunicação e Arte; SBDIM — Serviços de Biblioteca Informação Documental e Museologia da Universidade de Aveiro. Atas; SEMEDO; SENRA, 2015.

idiosyncratic nature naturally gives them different meanings and subjectivity. This variety of arguments about objects values them in almost all their dimensions. However, when we try to intercept this diversity of knowledge about the same thing in different museums, the variety of epistemologies, descriptive fields and vocabularies that are individually processed and used by each of these institutions makes it difficult and almost impossible to intersect different narratives. Recording knowledge about objects in a pragmatic and standardised way in museums, considering, simultaneously, each of their subjective specificities and natures — theoretical, historical, social, cultural, material, and immaterial — is not a very simple quest. This multidimensional, multi-contextual and multidisciplinary nature of the objects makes the construction and organisation of complex knowledge. And often ambiguous.

In 1989 Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer introduced the concept of «boundary objects» in an article discussing the formation of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California-Berkeley. They sought to introduce the idea that the museum's story should be told by different social actors, from the museum director to professional researchers, collectors, academics, and amateurs. And that this coexistence of heterogeneous knowledge could be achieved through cooperation and the use of a cooperative model for management, which would allow the diversity of information to be processed and new knowledge to be generated. The border object represented, in this way, any object that belonged to multiple social worlds and assumed distinct identities circumscribed by the different approaches attributed to them[4]. This concept of boundary object would be used as a theoretical tool by several disciplines and investigations to mediate tensions between the various expressions of science that construct knowledge. At the same time, it promotes coherence between different social worlds it allows them to maintain their identities. The authors thus proposed the development of an analytical protocol, an ordered base structure, to interpret other materials in complex institutional contexts[5]. This production of new knowledge implies communication, diplomacy, cooperation, and coordination between different actors to harmonise meanings. The different conceptions and their ramifications should be identified, followed by their discussion, description, and triangulation. This analysis method does not presuppose epistemological importance, i.e., it does not seek to impose scientific or non-scientific points of view. The common denominator «boundary object», which intends to frame the different perceptions, proposes to mediate the overlapping areas of the multiple social worlds to bring out new representations[6].

---

[4] STAR, GRIESEMER, 1989: 409-413.
[5] STAR, GRIESEMER, 1989: 387.
[6] STAR, GRIESEMER, 1989: 388-389, 411.

The concept of boundary object became pertinent to this research, as it theoretically frames the questions and the purpose of this research that seeks to intersect different disciplinary contexts for the understanding, construction and communication of its multiple meanings and points of view that a single object can translate. To understand the experience of the design object from the perspective of other disciplinary fields in the Portuguese context, exploratory interviews[7] were carried out with researchers specialised in different fields of knowledge working in museums and academia. The aim was, essentially, to collect perceptions and interpretations about the design object in the national context and to add new concepts to those explored during the literature review, namely descriptive dimensions that guide and produce the representations of the design object, to configure a «boundary object» document. The semi-structured interview survey was considered the most appropriate technique for obtaining this qualitative data through the flexible conduct of the questions and the inclusion of emerging issues during the interview. These informants were asked to explore new ideas and formulate and reformulate questions. Nine interviews were conducted with significant Portuguese researchers working in the fields of museology and design, decorative arts, crafts, anthropology, ethnography, technical industrial heritage, and museum documentation[8]. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the design object at the contemporary moment and to get to know the place it occupies from the point of view of some of the disciplines at the frontier of design thinking. The interview script consisted of fifteen open questions (seven main questions and eight sub-questions), distributed by four themes, which asked informants from museums

---

[7] Each of the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted between April and June 2018 at the interviewees' workplaces — Aveiro, Caldas da Rainha, Guimarães, Lisbon, Porto and Sacavém. An interview protocol was administered, and the informed, free, and informed consent document was distributed for participation in the research study and for capturing and recording photography, video, and audio. All ten interviews were recorded in audio format and transcribed in full, respecting the characteristics of the oral register. The textual data from the interviews, expressions, or sentences were transcribed, identified, and systematically coded in a categorical format through an interpretative reading. This method allows the identification, analysis, and description of themes or meanings in texts with different epistemological and ontological positions. The qualitative content analysis programme NVIVO supported the description and organisation of the thematic categories. Once this process was completed, the different qualitative values were reflected, compiled, and systematised to illustrate the variability and tonality of the responses from the interviewees' narratives.

[8] Respondents from the museum field: Dr. Conceição Serôdio, Museu de Cerâmica de Sacavém (E1-CS); Dr. Filipa Quatorze, Vista Alegre Museum (E4-FQ); Dr. Maria João Vasconcelos, former Director of National Museum Soares dos Reis (E6-MJV); Dr. Carlos Coutinho, Director of the Ceramics Museum of Caldas da Rainha (E8-CC); Professor Bárbara Coutinho, Director of MUDE. Museu do Design e da Moda, Francisco Capelo Collection (E10-BC); Respondents from the academic field: Professor Filomena Silvano, Department of Anthropology, New University of Lisbon (NOVA FCSH), CRIA and URMIS (Université de Paris) (E2-FS); Professor Fernando Moreira da Silva, Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon (FA/ULisboa) and President of CIAUD – Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design (E3-FMS); Professor Alexandre Matos, Department of Heritage Sciences and Techniques, Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto (E5-AM); Professor Maria da Luz Sampaio, University of Évora and Interdisciplinary Centre for History, Cultures and Societies – CIDEHUS (E7-MLS).

and academia for narratives from their experiences and reflections about the design object in the museological context.

At first, the purpose was to discover to which museological identities the interviewees considered design objects to exist and to which types of cultural assets they referred. Secondly, the aim was to identify the criteria of values and meanings that the interviewees considered indispensable for constructing the design object and which enabled its incorporation into an institution. In a third moment, the point was to find out from the interviewees which discipline or disciplines best fit the design object in an institution. Also, how these objects can be collected, registered, organised, classified, and categorised, and what criteria of differentiation, approximation or superimposition exist about other things. To know the official documents which serve as a basis for this organisation. And in a fourth and final moment, the intention was to find out from the interviewees how design objects can be organised and represented in the exhibition space, what communication devices can enhance their understanding and what the intentions of the exhibitions concern the public. The results of this interpretative analysis and respective discussion are presented below[9].

The phonetic and semantic ramifications of the Italian word «disegno» and their application to different geographies, specialised actions or concretised products gave to the actual word «design» multiple narratives and meanings and a material appearance that took on various forms over several centuries[10]. It is not uncommon, therefore, that in the extensive published bibliography of design history, design studies and practice or design criticism, among others, there is almost always an opening paragraph cautioning about the ambiguity of the design concept, the difficulty in determining its boundaries and the complexity of translating, in words, the versatility of its procedural, production, mediation and consumption attributes[11]. Added to this complexity is the difficulty of circumscribing a discipline claimed by a constellation of disciplines that run across humanities and sciences[12]. Historians historically accept that «design» gained expression with the British industrial revolution. It is also in this context that, for the first time, a distinction will be made between the two types of production: artisanal production, namely craft and industrial production. The first is associated with the artisan, who conceives and executes the objects manually in a workshop without following pre-production projection methods. At the same time, the latter, designed by one person and machine-produced by several, is divided into two production phases, namely the design project phase and the serial product

---

[9] For more information about the interview script and full interviews, see SENRA, 2022: vol. 2.
[10] ONIONS, *ed.*, 1966: 259; SIMPSON, WEINER 1998: 519.
[11] HESKETT, 2002: 3.
[12] MARGOLIN, 1989: 5-8; BORADKAR, 2006: 3-15.

manufacturing phase[13]. Herein lies the rupture established by the design discipline, which differentiated the artificer's role from the designer's emerging role[14], later acclaimed by an industrial designer[15]. The design statute sought to legitimise and emancipate itself intellectually from handmade crafts. It eventually distanced itself from the term craft, which has long been regarded as a second-tier concept, in disuse and naive, and has come to be regarded as the antipode of craft-based production techniques[16]. However, there has always been a dichotomy between production methods and techniques. The most critical perspective of design thinking advises that design must be assimilated as an uninterrupted process, which results conceptually and technically from different chronological, historical, political, economic, social, aesthetic, and cultural scales and environments[17]. Although many scholars remain hesitant about this constructivist view of design history, much progress has been made in recent decades with the production of studies on the discipline[18]. This new insight about the perception of what a design object is and the systems of representation in which they are placed raised further questions in the museum studies field, namely about the collections management field, where researchers have been working on solutions to embody these new dimensions to understand, complement and interpret design collections[19].

Regarding the idea of what may constitute a design object, in the Portuguese context, there was diversity in the understanding of its concept. For some of the interviewees from the academic world, it is a concrete product[20] that is linked to the intention and the act of thought found by its author or brand to solve a particular problem[21] and may result from the intellectualisation of the field of study that conceptually and methodologically circumscribes it, more specific design[22]. However, this is not an obligatory premise since contemporary reflection on the concept separates the notion of design from its classic conception, which opposes the industrially produced product based on the primacy of design and the assumption of the projectual process (knowledge-thinking)[23] to the handcrafted product, which results from the process of authorial intervention determined directly on the material (know-how)[24]. The design object, in its distinct classifications — equipment, product,

---

[13] HAUFFE, 1998: 10-11; HESKETT, 2002: 18; ERLHOFF, MARSHALL, 2008: 90-91.
[14] HESKETT, 2002: 18; PEVSNER, 1975: 45.
[15] HAUFFE, 1998: 10-11.
[16] LEES-MAFFEI, SANDINO, 2004: 207-209.
[17] DILNOT 1984a, 1984b; MARGOLIN, 2005: 237-239.
[18] MARGOLIN, 2005: 235.
[19] APPIANI *et al.*, 2007; ANTONELLI, 2009: 570-572; BRÄNDLE, FORMANEK, 2009; FARRELLY, WEDDELL, 2016.
[20] Interviewee E5-AM.
[21] Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.
[22] Interviewees E3-FMS; and E2-FS.
[23] Interviewees E3-FMS; and E5-AM.
[24] Interviewees E2-FS; and E3-FMS.

communication, fashion, digital data or research[25], is also associated with an ideal of form which must be related to a practicable functionality and a certain aesthetic ideal, which is not clarified[26], the idea of the designer author and the idea of a consumer product that can give it the status of an object of worship and desire, which makes it different from other objects and can contribute to its heritage and musealization process[27]. In the Portuguese museological universe, design is related to the verb as a process of action (of know-how) and the methodology of the projectual process (know-how-thinking)[28], which involves the practice of drawing[29]. This idea is also present in the conceptualisation of one of the interviewees from the academy[30]. The design object can configure everything conceived and produced by humanity to transform its surroundings in its material and immaterial dimensions[31]. However, it should be noted that the ontological, etymological and epistemological nature of the concept varies according to the contexts, realities and perspectives in which the object is found, meaning that the disciplinary boundaries that distinguish industrial production from handmade production, the authorial and the anonymous, can be blurred[32]. Any object may be framed as a design object as long as it is appropriately contextualised concerning its morphology which, as a standard parameter, should consider ergonomics and the relationship of its consumption context, which may be associated with the idea of intelligible utilitarianism[33] or the idea of ornamentation[34], also to its physical characteristics, which considers the production techniques and technologies — industrial in its most classical category[35] — and the production systems, as well as the contexts of material and personal consumption and the contexts of cultural value[36]. Transversal is the idea that the design object should result from a harmonious process established between the intellectualisation of a problem conveyed to a practical, functional and beautiful need[37]. The same happens in academic design object thinking[38]. In this variety of academic and museological thoughts, it seems clear that the notion of the design object is still very much linked to the traditional concept generated by the English industrial revolution, which separated

---

[25] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[26] Interviewees E5-AM; and E7-MLS.
[27] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[28] Interviewee E10-BC.
[29] Interviewee E1-CS.
[30] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[31] Interviewee E10-BC; E8-CC.
[32] Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; and E4-FQ.
[33] Interviewees E8-CC; E1-CS; and E6-MJV.
[34] Interviewees E8-CC; and E4-FQ.
[35] Interviewee E6-MJV.
[36] Interviewees E8-CC; and E1-CS.
[37] Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.
[38] Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; and E7-MLS.

the handmade from the industrial, but also the focus of the discipline of art history in its westernised perspective, concentrated on the author, aesthetic contemplation and ideals of the modernist movement associated with simplicity and depuration of form so that the object can fulfil a specific useful function. However, the discourses also reveal the ambiguity about what may or may not be a design object, transporting this responsibility to the hierarchies and disciplinary assumptions demarcated by classification boundaries that may separate, approximate, or overlap them. This compartmentalisation of disciplinary foundations, although necessary in the scientific analysis of objects, as Macdonald[39], Pearce[40], Alexander and Alexander[41] or Ambrose and Paine[42] have observed, when sublimated by institutions, inevitably conditions new ways of seeing and limits the construction of other narratives for objects.

From an academic perspective, the design object may be present in different museological institutions as long as its representation criteria are restricted. It may be related to the missions or curatorships assigned to it in exhibition contexts[43]. However, this idea is not consensual, once again, because the difference between know-how (handicraft) and know-how-thinking (drawing and the projectual process--design) is mentioned, mainly as it is unclear whether the latter includes the former in terms of the act of intellectual creation[44]. The idea that all museums have designed objects is also fractious, particularly when we evoke the classifications established by the disciplines which differentiate the craft object from the industrial object[45]. The industrial museums, generally thematic (ceramics, glass, etc.), science and technique museums and decorative arts museums are those whose collections are admittedly closer to the idea of the design object[46], as they allow analysis and interpretation of their dimensions of production technique and technology, materials or raw material or aesthetic value[47], but also their dimension of historical, social and cultural/patrimonial significance, especially when considering the valorisation of the know-how which expresses national identity[48]. The utilitarian objects of ethnographic museums may be evoked as design objects, provided that contemporary design thinking is articulated[49]. MUDE is the most frequently cited Portuguese design museum, although some consider it to be something other than a design museum compared to other

---

[39] MACDONALD, 2006.
[40] PEARCE, 1994b.
[41] ALEXANDER, ALEXANDER, 2008.
[42] AMBROSE, PAINE, 2006.
[43] Interviewees E5-AM; and E2-FS.
[44] Interviewees E5-AM; and E2-FS.
[45] Interviewees E3-FMS; and E2-FS.
[46] Interviewees E2-FS; and E7-MLS.
[47] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[48] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[49] Interviewee E2-FS.

international institutions[50]. From a museological perspective, MUDE is the Portuguese design museum most referred to by interviewees. MUDE frames different objects, authorships, periodisations, concepts, cultural contexts, and classifications, which tell a part of the history of Portuguese design and particular international objects and authors[51]. The museum is flexible in its concept of design objects. It admits that they represent different contexts and that these can be intersected, even with those of other non-design institutions, if they are correctly situated in their contexts of cultural, authorial, economic, procedural value, etc. Crossing these lenses allows different readings to be obtained and builds new knowledge[52]. As for the other institutions represented by the interviewees, they have not considered design museums. Still, it is admitted that some of the objects from their collections may be design objects, respectively, those from the Louça de Sacavém Factory and the Porcelain Factory Museum of Vista Alegre[53]. In the case of the Soares dos Reis National Museum, the object of design is present as long as the concept of design is applied retrospectively concerning the valuable mode of consumption and the value of aesthetic quality[54]. In contrast, the Ceramics Museum does not consider itself a design museum since the useful and symbolic-artistic objects produced in this material were not, at the time, understood as objects of design, even though they were based on design, using modern technology, and were based on a type of serial production. In this sense, the concept should be framed as objects in the light of the assumptions of the contemporary moment[55]. Another issue associated with the idea of a design object is related to the dimension of authorship, where it is admitted that the object of anonymous authorship can also be considered a design object[56]. It seems consensual among the interviewees from academia and museums that the design object can be thought of in different dimensions, which allows them to assume different identities and values of meaning[57]. However, it is advocated that these perspectives be framed correctly in the theoretical assumptions of their field of study — design. Thus, it becomes evident that the established disciplinary delimitations, although more flexible in their beliefs, still configure conflict zones for a broader construction of knowledge of objects[58].

Regarding the dimensions of information to be considered in the documentation of design objects, the academic interviewees think that this record of information should be consistent with the primary museological criteria that are transversal to

---

[50] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[51] Interviewee E10-BC.
[52] Interviewee E10-BC.
[53] Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.
[54] Interviewee E6-MJV.
[55] Interviewee E8-CC.
[56] Interviewee E4-FQ.
[57] PEARCE, 2012, 1994a; CONKEY, 2013.
[58] CANDLIN, GUINS, 2009; KOPYTOFF, 1986.

all museums when registering objects, namely those related to their intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics[59]. However, it is also considered that various dimensions are generically associated with the institution's vocation and its collection management practices and policies regarding object classification[60]. Therefore, particularly in museums with design objects and collections, the dimensions of information to be considered should be related to the different classes of objects without disregarding the interaction between the classifications assigned since a single object may belong to different categories[61], also the design thinking the dimensions of production technique/technology, raw material/material, state and edition/production system, type of consumption and the multiple contextual values[62]. The exhibition space should manifest the design approach related to project methodology, its dimension establishing the relationship between form and function, the aesthetic-artistic framework[63] and the objects' consumption contexts[64], making mention of their ethical-moral implications[65]. Also, the dimensions related to the techniques and technologies of production and their distinct chronological, geographical and cultural contexts[66], the technology of materials and their technical-scientific value[67]. The contextual dimensions of the object in an exhibition context are still being exhausted[68]. However, it is advocated that the representation of a design object should always be contextualised by the appropriate field of knowledge[69], although institutions can expand beyond their institutional assumptions and reflect on the premises of the design discipline[70]. For the museum interviewees, all dimensions of the inventory are relevant[71]. Still, the chronological recording of the production dates of the designs, prototypes and first editions produced of the object, the knowledge of their authorship, materials, manufacturing methods and the conceptual, historical, aesthetic-artistic, social, and economic values associated with them is fundamental[72]. Mention was also made of the importance of assigning an inventory number by the institutional numbering and nomenclature criteria, briefly describing the object and associating a photograph with it[73]. Attributing and describing the object's typology or function were also considered

---

[59] Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; E2-FS; and E7-MLS.
[60] Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.
[61] Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; and E7-MLS.
[62] Interviewees E5-AM; E3-FMS; E2-FS; and E7-MLS.
[63] Interviewees E5-AM; and E7-MLS.
[64] Interviewees E5-AM; E7-MLS; E2-FS; and E7-MLS.
[65] Interviewee E2-FS.
[66] Interviewees E3-FMS; and E7-MLS.
[67] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[68] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[69] Interviewee E2-FS.
[70] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[71] Interviewees E10-BC; and E6-MJV.
[72] Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.
[73] Interviewees E8-CC; and E4-FQ.

relevant[74]. The exhibition space is the place par excellence that allows crossing the multiple contexts of information. However, the traditional exhibition model is still predominant, where objects are portrayed as pieces of art and desire[75]. Discourses may vary according to different disciplinary approaches and curatorial programmes, and the different dimensions, once at odds with each other by different epistemologies and disciplinary constraints, may interrelate[76]. Even so, the idea of representing objects in their conceptual dimension, technical/technological process of industrial production, in their authorial dimension, known — individual or collective — or anonymous, and in their dimensions related to the aesthetic-artistic, historical, social, cultural and identity contextual value, always located in their geography of origin, is reinforced[77], provided that the contexts that differentiate the industrial object from the handmade thing are well situated[78]. Scientific research on objects should be continuous to build different dialogues[79]. The speeches of the interviewees from academia and museums show that the theoretical particularities of the disciplines that work in classification practices condition the ways of documenting[80]. Constructed and established narratives about objects are not dissolved when associated with new descriptions from other disciplinary fields[81]. Objects only seem able to interact in their antagonistic positions and participate in the construction of knowledge when present in exhibition contexts.

Regarding what differentiates objects in the subjectivity of their disciplinary criteria — art, decorative arts, science and technique, fashion, industrial or ethnographic — from an academic point of view, the requirements will always depart from the gaze of the institution and its mediation processes[82]. Once again, it should be remembered that a design object is not the same as an art object[83] since the former is associated with a particular mode of intelligible utilitarian functionality, aesthetic-artistic value, chronological period, market, and consumer value[84]. In contrast, the latter is not associated with a specific function[85] since it configures the individual expression of its author for the consumer's enjoyment[86]. On the other hand, it should also be remembered that the design object is not the same as the handcrafted object due

---

[74] Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.
[75] Interviewee E10-BC.
[76] Interviewees E10-BC; and E8-CC.
[77] Interviewees E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.
[78] Interviewee E8-CC.
[79] Interviewee E10-BC.
[80] BAL, 1994.
[81] KNELL, 2007.
[82] Interviewees E5-AM; E2-FS; and E3-FMS.
[83] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[84] Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.
[85] Interviewee E5-AM.
[86] Interviewee E3-FMS.

to disciplinary classification or institutional interpretation[87], which distinguishes manual production technology and small-scale production from industrial production technology and the mass production system[88]. However, these divisions should be removed since we are talking about objects and multidisciplinary approaches only favour their understanding[89]. In the museological view, the differentiation of objects is once again reinforced, even if intermittent in its borders, by the reminder of its ontological contexts. For example, the art object invites contemplation, while a design object seeks to solve a problem where function and aesthetics are linked. However, their intersections are not discarded, especially the science and technology and industrial objects[90]; also by the different institutional contexts, although contemporary looks may be admitted[91] since objects are polysemic[92]; and, finally, by the multiple criteria that may be involved in their heritage and musealization process[93]. In the inventory, if the institution is dedicated to the design object, they can be organised according to classes — product, graphic, fashion, digital[94], in other institutions, they should be concordant with the criteria of value and meaning of their collections since it is these research contexts that position the classifications[95]. Although respondents from academia and museums admit that objects contain numerous biographies, in their material properties and immaterial values, information that is almost always drawn from culturally situated investigations[96], the conceptualisation of an eclectic model of understanding design objects that would make it possible to establish links between different material dimensions and social contexts with objects that do not belong to the universe of design[97] has not been equated. This void seems to originate, in general, in the slight flexibility of the disciplines to intersect objects from different social and cultural contexts[98], although they constitute theoretical instruments of analysis[99], and, above all, in the very clarification of the term object that undoubtedly must be translated in its different narrative constructions, but which should not fail to be thought of as such, namely because it is the material result of the adaptive convergence between nature and human intellect and the evolution of their capacities in the particular circumstances of their life cycles and rhythms, a

---

[87] Interviewee E2-FS.

[88] Interviewee E7-MLS.

[89] Interviewee E7-MLS.

[90] Interviewee E10-BC.

[91] Interviewee E8-CC.

[92] Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

[93] Interviewees E8-CC; E4-FQ; E1-CS; and E6-MJV.

[94] Interviewee E10-BC.

[95] Interviewees E8-CC; E1-CS; and E4-FQ.

[96] DUDLEY, *ed.*, 2012; TILLEY, 2013a.

[97] TILLEY *et al.*, *eds.*, 2013b.

[98] MILLER, 2007.

[99] AMBROSE, PAINE, 2006.

process called autopoiesis[100]. In this sense, the idea of the design object, when seen inserted in the criterion of industrialisation, the same should not be dissociated from the contexts of the evolution of human thought and intellectualisation, the contexts of the development of production technology processes and materials technology or the cultural and social contexts of self-adaptation, since they are the mirror of that culture[101].

From the academic's perspective, documentation is the device that allows organising and mediating the information of the material culture. This organisation may follow more generalist information categories or be guided by disciplinary premises[102]. In any case, it is recommended to use the norms and procedures of official collection management documents designed for museums, which offer suggestions for information standardisation[103]. Other devices for mediating object information were the storytelling technique[104], research based on the ethnographic method[105] and the exhibition[106]. From a museological perspective, the documentation of information in a collection management system is essential for information to be related[107], as are the international platforms that organise museum objects in a shared database[108]. The organisation and mediation of information should also be guided by the manuals dedicated to national inventories[109] or by the official museum collection management documents produced internationally[110]. Also valued are the exhibitions, the devices in video format to express the curatorial themes and the models of social representation (live performances and educational services)[111] and the documents associated with the objects, among others, photographs that document their manufacture, technical drawings, prototypes, and documents that make it possible to know the associated social contexts[112]. The inventory sheet is considered a mediation device, as well as the regular scientific research of objects[113]. Other devices to be considered are the technical reserves and the archives and spaces[114]. For both the academic and museum interviewees, good information management on things is essential, which ideally should involve policies, practices and procedures based on international and

---

[100] INGOLD, 2012.
[101] INGOLD, 2012; SHANKS, TILLEY, 2007.
[102] Interviewees E5-AM; and E2-FS.
[103] Interviewee E5-AM.
[104] Interviewee E5-AM.
[105] Interviewee E2-FS.
[106] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[107] Interviewee E10-BC.
[108] Interviewee E10-BC.
[109] Interviewees E1-CS; and E4-FQ.
[110] Interviewee E1-CS.
[111] Interviewees E4-FQ; and E10-BC.
[112] Interviewee E10-BC.
[113] Interviewee E6-MJV.
[114] Interviewee E10-BC.

national models for the documentation and management of museum collections. These instruments promote interaction between objects and enable the lenses that construct them to be represented in their multiple formats[115].

Opinions in academia are divided on whether museum information management systems should admit the category design or design object. Museums should document objects equally, i.e., information units are transversal, and the design dimension is framed in their physical characteristics — of the function, utility, and aesthetic-artistic value dimension — so documenting by disciplinary assumptions is likely to result in poor information management[116]. On the other hand, some admit that the term should be contemplated if collection management systems are organised according to disciplinary criteria since a design object is not an art object[117]. The concern of the word being disentangled from its temporal and historical origin is also present. In this sense, the mention of the term makes sense only in design museums[118]. The same doubts and division of opinions occur from the museological perspective. The classification term design object makes sense when associated with design institutions and the contexts of their missions, nature of the collections and selection criteria[119], but the criteria that circumscribe it to the discipline, when too rigid, may condition its understanding and limit interactions with other objects[120]. Beyond design museums, the term design object should be included in the vocabulary of collection management systems of industrial museums[121]. The resistance to answering this question was also related to the doubt about the term design object. In both academia and museums, the idea prevails that the design object should be contextualised within its theoretical and methodological field of action. Part of this premise stems from the still very solid idea of the classic concept of the design object, which links it to the importance of drawing, the serial industrial process, and the representation of capitalism. Even so, because it deals with material objects that integrate culture and society, the term's polyvalence is admitted in the collection management system. However, in objective terms, the modes of the organisation have yet to be specified[122].

Regarding how interdisciplinarity between the different theoretical and methodological fields can be achieved, in a scholarly opinion, it should be mediated with the help of documentation and museological assumptions — mission, nature of the collections, objectives — and not by disciplinary assumptions or restrictions[123].

---

[115] ROMANO, 2007; BASSI, 2007.
[116] Interviewee E5-AM.
[117] Interviewees E3-FMS; and E2-FS.
[118] Interviewees E2-FS; and E7-MLS.
[119] Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; and E6-MJV.
[120] Interviewee E10-BC.
[121] Interviewees E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E8-CC.
[122] PEARCE, 1990, 1994a.
[123] Interviewees E5-AM; and E3-FMS.

Also, through the establishment of partnerships or inter-institutional protocols to develop models of object mediation, which include the participation of different communities and fields of knowledge[124]. Relationships between departments within the same institution are just as crucial as inter-institutional relationships[125]. Some have called this multidisciplinary interpretation analysis model a cross-pollination process, where different areas of knowledge converge to tell something new[126]. However, it was also found that each institutional lens should drive the objects' thinking and that the object's narrative should convey the intended intention. From a critical perspective, design objects should be considered in their design, production, and consumption dimensions. They should denounce, among others, the dimensions related to labour precariousness, human rights, or gender issues[127]. This production of multiple discourses for the objects will imply a repeated updating of the inventory, but institutional contingencies only sometimes allow it[128]. In a museological opinion, interdisciplinarity should be mediated by crossing different databases with converging classification criteria[129]. However, some understand that this interdisciplinary approach should always frame the design object in the context of history[130], the history of design and the history of technique[131]. And any of these dimensions will always be contingent. It will always be among the multiple possible framings resulting from different investigation mappings[132]. When mediating objects, there are always dimensions that are not considered[133], and nowadays, design objects are more easily identified and negotiated because they are less rigorous in the way they are thought of[134]. The institutions represented by the interviewees have established research partnerships with other institutions. Their objects are accessed in their collections and archives and thought of from a design perspective[135], many of which are translated into temporary exhibitions[136].

The circumscription of objects in specific systems of representation has led to the uniformisation of knowledge and a restriction of new perspectives to think about them[137]. Specifically, about design, the institutional plurality to which the design

---

[124] Interviewee E5-AM.
[125] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[126] Interviewee E3-FMS.
[127] Interviewee E2-FS.
[128] Interviewee E7-MLS.
[129] Interviewee E10-BC.
[130] Interviewees E10-BC; and E6-MJV.
[131] Interviewee E1-CS.
[132] Interviewee E10-BC.
[133] Interviewee E4-FQ.
[134] Interviewee E8-CC.
[135] Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; E4-FQ; and E6-MJV.
[136] Interviewees E10-BC; E8-CC; E1-CS; and E6-MJV.
[137] WHITEHEAD, 2009: 8; BENNETT, 2018: 6-8; 39.

object is associated necessarily could have produced heterogeneous and polysemic identities. Design, as a concept, discipline, and operational methodology, leans towards a collaborative and transdisciplinary thinking model. This phenomenon takes on a complex set of questions and sets up a field of opportunity to think about new discourses about objects. This new approach to design objects makes it possible to furnish institutions with different approaches, making it enjoyable to presume that some already represent the various facets of design history and culture. However, this coexistence between different disciplinary contexts is not peaceful because material culture is framed by incompatible ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions. The natures of collections have other reasons and purposes, but they all seek to evoke, represent, and transmit knowledge. Their training contexts fluctuate and are intellectualised by different disciplines that incorporate social and cultural ideologies, through which concepts are formulated, experiences are anticipated, and reflections are produced[138]. The constructions of the design object will then be included in some of the actions recommended by the leading institutions whose exhibition models were disseminated and established as a standard for other museums.

This text sought to illustrate some considerations arising from the narratives of Portuguese protagonists from different disciplinary areas concerning the idea of the design object and how it can be thought of from these lenses, both by the academy and museums. Object mediation, both in academia and in museums, still encounters obstacles in the interaction of discourses[139] due to disciplinary models and their rigid boundaries. There is, however, a desire to explore different realities for objects. From time to time, inter-institutional collaborations are established whose research results in temporary exhibitions. However, these models that facilitate the intersection of the information dimensions of objects in their diversity have yet to be clarified[140]. These exploratory interviews in the Portuguese context with committed agents in the areas of museums and design, whose selection criteria were limited to the relevance and notoriety of their contributions to the themes under discussion, were part of a broader research methodology, which included an international conference in Porto dedicated to the musealization of design (presenting the current book some of the considerations presented therein) and a literature review, essentially of museology and design, where we sought to contextualise the object of design in its main paradigms of theoretical understanding, its prominent issues of reflection, and the contextual and narrative dimensions that participate in its perception, with the primary purpose of developing a study model instrument that would guide the questioning, organisation, and knowledge management of its different translations.

---

[138] MACDONALD, FYFE, *eds*., 2005: 6-7.
[139] TABORSKY, 1990.
[140] HOOPER-GREENHILL, 2000.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALEXANDER, Edward P.; ALEXANDER, Mary (2008). *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*. 2nd ed. Lanham: Altamira Press.

AMBROSE, Timothy; PAINE, Crispin (2006). *Museum Basics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

ANTONELLI, Paola (2009). *Evolution: the Future of Museum Collections of Design*. In BRÄNDLE, Christian; FORMANEK, Verena, *eds*. *Every Thing Design*. Zürich: Museum für Gestaltung; Hatje Cantz, pp. 566-575.

APPIANI, Francesca *et al.* (2007). *Memoria e Racconto. Per una Museologia del Design*. Venice: Università Iuav, Facoltà di Design e Arti, Dipartimento delle Arti e del Disegno Industriale. Convegno. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <http://www.museologiadesign.it/2016/memoriaeracconto/ita/home.html>.

BAL, Mieke (1994). *Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting*. In ELSNER, John; CARDINAL, Roger, *eds*. *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, pp. 123-145.

BASSI, Alberto (2007). *Attorno ai Modi del Collezionare il Design*. In *Atti del convegno/Proceedings of the Conference Memoria e Racconto. Per una Museologia del Design*. Venice: Facoltà di Design e Arti, Dipartimento delle Arti e del Disegno industriale Convento delle Terese, pp. 1-3. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <http://www.museologiadesign.it/download-2>.

BENNETT, Tony (2018). *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays*. New York: Routledge.

BORADKAR, Prasad (2006). *Theorizing Things: Status, Problems and Benefits of the Critical Interpretation of Objects*. «The Design Journal». 9:2, 3-15. DOI: doi.org/10.2752/146069206789377140.

BRANCO, Vasco *et al.* (2014). *Developing an Interpretation Centre for Portuguese Design – CIDES.PT*. In BARBOSA, Helena; CALVERA SAGUÉ, Anna, *org.* 9th *Conference of the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies – ICDHS Tradition, Transition, Trajectories: Major or Minor Influences?* Aveiro: Universidade de Aveiro, pp. 327-332. Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280580356_Developing_an_Interpretation_Centre_for_Portuguese_Design_-_CIDESPT>.

BRÄNDLE, Christian; FORMANEK, Verena, *eds*. (2009). *Every Thing Design*. Zürich: Museum für Gestaltung; Hatje Cantz.

CANDLIN, Fiona; GUINS, Raiford (2009). *Introducing objects*. In CANDLIN, Fiona; GUINS, Raiford, *eds*. *The Object Reader (In Sight: Visual Culture)*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1-18.

CONKEY, Margaret W. (2013). *Style, Design, and Function*. In TILLEY, Christopher *et al.*, *eds*. *Handbook of Material Culture*. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 355-372.

«DESIGN OBJECTS CONFERENCE. MUSEALIZATION, DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION» (2017). Available at <http://www.designobjectsconference.com>.

DILNOT, Clive (1984a). *The State of Design History, Part I: Mapping the Field*. «Design Issues». 1:1, 4-23. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1511539.pdf?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>.

DILNOT, Clive (1984b). *The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities*. «Design Issues». 1:2, 3-20. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1511495?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>.

DUDLEY, Sandra H. *ed*. (2012). *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London; New York: Routledge.

ERLHOFF, Michael; MARSHALL, Timothy, *eds*. (2008). *Design Dictionary: Perspectives on Design Terminology*. Basel; Boston; Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag.

FARRELLY, Liz; WEDDELL, Joanna (2016). *Design Objects and the Museum*. London: Bloomsbury.

HAUFFE, Thomas (1998). *Design: A Concise History*. London: Laurence King Publishing.

HESKETT, John (2002). *Design: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

HICKS, Dan; BEAUDRY, Mary C., *eds*. (2010). *Chapter 1. Introduction. Material Culture Studies: A Reactionary View*. In HICKS, Dan; BEAUDRY, Mary C., *eds. The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture*. New York: Oxford, University Press, pp. 1-21.

HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean (2000). *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*. London; New York: Routledge.

INGOLD, Tim (2012). *Making culture and weaving the world*. In DUDLEY, Sandra H., *ed. Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 368-384.

KNELL, Simon J. (2012). *The intangibility of things*. In DUDLEY, Sandra H., *ed. Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 324-335.

KOPYTOFF, Igor (1986). *The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process*. In APPADURAI, Arjun, *ed. The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64-92.

KNELL, Simon J. (2007). *Museums, reality and the material world*. In KNELL, Simon J. *Museums in the Material World*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 1-28.

LEES-MAFFEI, Grace; SANDINO, Linda (2004). *Dangerous Liaisons: Relationships Between Design, Craft and Art*. «Journal of Design History». 17:3, 207-220. DOI: doi.org/10.1093/jdh/17.3.207.

MACDONALD, Sharon, *ed*. (2006). *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Malden, USA; Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

MACDONALD, Sharon; FYFE, Gordon, *eds*. (2005). *Theorizing Museums: Representing Change and Diversity in a Changing World*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review.

MARGOLIN, Victor (1989). *Design Discourse. History. Theory. Criticism*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

MARGOLIN, Victor (2005). *A World History of Design and the History of the World*. «Journal of Design History». 18:3, 235-243. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epi043.

MILLER, Daniel (2007). *Artefacts and the meaning of things*. In KNELL, Simon J. *Museums in the Material World*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 166-186.

ONIONS, Charles Talbut, *ed*. (1966). *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

PEARCE, Susan M. (1990). *Editorial introduction*. In PEARCE, Susan M., *ed. Objects of Knowledge*. London; Atlantic Highlands: The Athlone Press, vol. 1, pp. 1-5. (New Research in Museum Studies: An International Series).

PEARCE, Susan M. (1992). *Museums, objects, and collections: a cultural study*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

PEARCE, Susan M. (1994a). *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London; New York: Routledge.

PEARCE, Susan M. (1994b). *Studying Museum Material and Collections*. «International Journal of Heritage Studies». 1:1, 30-39.

PEARCE, Susan M. (2012). *Museum Objects*. In DUDLEY, Sandra H., *ed. Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 23-25.

PEVSNER, Nikolaus (1975). *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*. Norfolk: Pelican Books.

PROJETO FCT (2013-2015). [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <https://sigarra.up.pt/flup/pt/projectos_geral.mostra_projecto?p_id=65741>.

ROMANO, Simona (2007). *Archiviare al Kartellmuseo. In Atti del Convegno/Proceedings of the Conference Memoria e Racconto Per una Museologia del Design*. Venezia: Facoltà di Design e Arti Dipartimento delle Arti e del Disegno Industriale Convento delle Terese, pp. 1-5. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <http://www.museologiadesign.it/download-2>.

SEMEDO, Alice; SENRA, Sandra (2015). *Práticas e Recursos na Organização de Conhecimento de Objetos de Design*. In BRANCO, Vasco *et al.*, *coord. Consequências: História, Museologia e Museografia do Design Português – Projeto e Pensamento*. Porto: Universidade do Porto, Universidade de Aveiro, pp. 13-39.

SENRA, Sandra (2022). *Objetos de Design em Museus. «Portugal Industrial – Ligações entre o Design e a Indústria», estudo de caso em profundidade*. Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. Doctoral thesis. Available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10216/141578>.

SHANKS, Michael; TILLEY, Christopher (2007). *Material culture*. In KNELL, Simon J. *Museums in the Material World*. London; New York: Routledge, pp. 79-94.

SHELTON, Anthony (2013). *Critical Museology: A Manifesto*. «Museum Worlds: Advances in Research». 1:1, 7-23. Available at <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/museum-worlds/1/1/air-mw010102.xml>.

SIMPSON, John A.; WEINER, Edmund S. (1998). *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. IV.

STAR, Susan Leigh; GRIESEMER, James R. (1989). *Institutional Ecology, «Translations» and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39*. «Social Studies of Science». 19:3, 387-420. Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/030631289019003001>.

TABORSKY, Edwina (1990). *The discursive object*. In PEARCE, Susan M. (1990). *Objects of Knowledge*. London; Atlantic Highlands: The Athlone Press, pp. 50-77. (New Research in Museum Studies: An International Series).

TILLEY, Christopher (2013a). *Objectification*. In TILLEY, Christopher *et al.*, *eds. Handbook of Material Culture*. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE Publications, pp. 60-73.

TILLEY, Christopher *et al.*, *eds.* (2013b). *Handbook of Material Culture*. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage Publications.

WHITEHEAD, Christopher (2009). *Museums and the Construction of Disciplines: Art and Archaeology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd. (Debates in Archaeology).