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Teacher who will receive this document: Christophe Van Eecke

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Signed: 

Name of student: Boonraksa Wongprasit

Student number: s1049047

Radboud University Nijmegen



Bachelor's Thesis

Astier de Villatte, Idea, Object, Aura

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Author: Boonraksa Wongprasit, s1049047

Supervisor: Christophe Van Eecke

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Abstract

This paper was inspired by the popularity of craft practices and handmade products in recent years. As Colin Campbell remarked, the appeal of handmade objects in contemporary society is rooted in the widespread ideologies of the arts and crafts movement and Morris's worldview (Campbell 25). It raises questions not only about the ways in which handmade objects are seen in today's society but also about what motivates crafters and designers to create objects in the way they do. The purpose of this paper is to inquire into the attitudes held by designer-makers in relation to the creation of handmade objects, using the company Astier de Villatte as a case study. It aims to address the dominant ideas of the arts and crafts movement and William Morris that continue to influence the ideas/attitudes of creators towards the creation of handmade objects. It also discusses how Astier de Villatte used these ideas to construct the characteristics of handmade objects to reveal the commercial viability of their handmade objects.

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Introduction

In *Hopes and Fears for Arts* (1901), William Morris offered his views on consumption, where he remarked, “have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful” (Morris 34). From his point of view, not only does Morris suggest that the aesthetics of everyday objects begins at home, but he also urges us to think carefully about our consumption of goods in contemporary society, since mass-produced goods pervade and dominate every aspect of our lives. Bringing everyday objects that are normally hidden from plain sight into the spotlight for the critical examination should provide insight into people’s relationships between everyday objects and their consumption choices. How were the objects made and consumed? What are the working conditions of those who produce these objects? How long can the objects be used for and are the materials eco-friendly?

William Morris’s statement is reminiscent of the comeback of interest in handmade products and craftsmanship practices in recent years. Susan Luckman (2015) has labeled it as the “third-wave” of international interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement (18). Luckman observes that in a society saturated with mass-produced goods, the “handmade product offers a reprise, an alternative” (23). Subsequently, ideas from the past, such as craftsmanship and handmade products, are viewed as a “direct response” to industrial capitalism (Luckman 23). Historically, the words “craftsmanship” and “handmade” were often associated with William Morris, who advocated “the unity of art, joy in labor, and design reform” in the first wave of the arts and crafts movement (Crawford 20). Morris’s interest in the idea of craftsmanship initially started as a means of reforming a social revolution towards industrialization (Thompson 126). He started a company called William Morris & Co., and his company became well-known for handcrafted decorative items (Thompson 126). Morris himself remarks that “apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life

has been and is the hatred of modern civilization” (279). As a result of this, Campbell writes, the appeal of handmade objects and craft practices are rooted in the widespread ideologies of the arts and crafts movement and Morris’s worldview (25). These observations raise questions not only about the ways in which handmade objects are seen in today’s society but also about what motivates crafters and designers to create objects the way they do. As Alan Crawford argues, arts and crafts objects “serve to express idea. . . when you are trying to understand the object, you are looking at its construction, use, and formal qualities; and at its association” (22).

In light of the popularity of crafts practices and handmade products, the attitudes/ideas of crafters or designer-makers towards the creation of handmade objects may provide insights into the commercial viability of their handmade objects. In addition, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2020) reports on “The Market for Craft” for *Crafts Council UK*, that social media allows consumers in the twenty-first century to access stories of the makers and the ideas behind the handmade objects that they create (39). This immediacy then makes it easier for craft makers to build inclusive relationships with their consumers (McIntyre 39). Thus, this paper will inquire into the attitudes/ideas held by designer-makers in relation to the creation of handmade objects, using the company Astier de Villatte as a case study. This company was chosen because it fascinates one to see how a craft-driven company such as this thrives on small-scale artisanal production, whereas similar businesses such as Richard Ginori, Wedgwood, Spode, and Rosenthal, which have long resisted the upheavals of the industrial revolution and popular tastes, have nearly gone bankrupt in today’s economy (Povoledo). This raises the question of what Astier de Villatte did differently. What accounts for their success? Has the brand engaged with the widespread ideas of the arts and crafts movement and Morris’s worldview? If so, in which ways does Astier de Villatte use these ideas in the creation of their handmade objects?

Therefore, this paper asks: how has Astier de Villatte engaged with and reframed the attitudes and values of the arts and crafts movement? And how does this contribute to the commercial viability of Astier de Villatte's handmade objects?

With these questions, I aim to address the dominant ideas of the arts and crafts movement and William Morris that continue to influence the ideas/attitudes of creators towards the creation of handmade objects. Additionally, I will discuss how Astier de Villatte used these ideas to construct the characteristics of handmade objects to reveal their commercial viability of these objects.

Before answering these questions, it is crucial to mention that this paper will consider the commercial viability of Astier de Villatte's handmade objects by focusing on the way in which the company operates in an artisanal production context (rather than mechanical reproduction) that seeks to acquire authenticity. Thus, the analysis will focus on the production of handmade items in relation to the notions of authenticity, craftsmanship, and artistic autonomy. The historical context of William Morris and the arts and crafts movement will be discussed to discover the ideas and attitudes of the two companies. The paradoxes of running a craft-based business will be discussed to reveal the ways in which Astier de Villatte has engaged with and reframed the attitudes and values of the arts and crafts movement. After that, a discussion on how Astier de Villatte translated the attitudes and values of the arts and crafts movement into the creation of handmade objects and contemplation on the effects on the commercial viability of these handmade objects will take place.

Theoretical framework

Jules David Prown's material culture theory will be employed to approach these questions. As Prown writes, "objects are signs that convey meanings," so the framework of

material culture studies draws upon semiotics and structuralism (16). The basic premise of semiotics is that objects transmit signals which illuminate “the embodiment of mental structures” or “the patterns of belief” (Prown 6). In “Mine in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method”, Prown (1982) writes, “objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which they belong” (2). Similar to Prown’s approach, Ian Woodward states that the semiotic and structural approach to studying material culture is to think of an object as a symbolic code, a “signifier” that communicates something other than itself (Woodward 57). These approaches will be a useful framework to examine a system of belief in culture. In this case, it is the dominant ideas of the arts and crafts movement and William Morris that continue to shape the ideas/attitudes of creators towards the creation of handmade objects (Campbell 25). And Astier de Villatte will be used as a case study of this. Therefore, to understand the relationship between ideas/attitudes and objects, according to Prown, there must be an examination of the cause (some aspects of culture, the creator’s idea) and the effect (the object) (Prown 6). In doing so, external information such as the historical context of the cultural movement and the creator’s intention or purpose will be needed to aid the investigation (Prown 6).

After the ideas of Astier de Villatte’s designers are unpacked, the next step is to examine the objects. In the study of material culture, the significant quality of an object, especially in artworks or utilitarian objects, is authenticity (Prown 13). Walter Benjamin’s notion of authenticity and the aura of works of art will be used to support the discussion. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Benjamin uses the notion of the aura of artworks to critique the mechanical reproduction of artistic objects. However, what I find interesting in his essay is the aspect of the cult value of artworks and

how this cult value is perceived. So, I will also relate this aspect in the context of Astier de Villatte to discuss the commercial viability (authenticity/aura) of Astier de Villatte's handmade objects.

Methods

The first chapter aims to address the dominant ideas of the arts and crafts movement and William Morris that continue to influence the ideas/attitudes of creators towards the creation of handmade objects. A method of textual analysis will be applied to assist in these discussions. I will talk about the historical context of William Morris and the prominent ideologies of the arts and crafts movement to discover the ideas/attitudes of Astier de Villatte and William Morris & Co. I will introduce the scholarly debate surrounding the paradox of selling handmade objects of William Morris & Co, especially the struggle to maintain artistic autonomy and craftsmanship ideals due to the increasing demand for the products. And after that, I will discuss the ways in which Astier de Villatte has engaged with and reframed the attitudes and values of the arts and crafts movement as well as Morris's worldview.

In the second chapter, a method of textual and visual analysis will be used to discover what motivated Benoit Astier de Villatte and Ivan Pericoli to design and produce handmade objects in the way they do. In doing so, Benoit and Ivan's interviews in *Brand Balance* and the film presentation of Astier de Villatte will be used to explore their ideas/attitudes towards the creation of their handmade objects (throughout this paper, I will refer to both Astier de Villatte's designers by their first names to prevent confusion between Benoit's last name and the brand's name). This chapter will also apply Benjamin's concept of authenticity and the aura of artworks to discuss how artworks are perceived and valued. After that, I will argue that the past's cult value contributes to the commercial viability of Astier de Villatte's

handmade objects. Some of their handmade objects will be discussed to show how concepts such as authenticity, craftsmanship, and artistic autonomy were used to construct the characteristics of Astier de Villatte's handmade objects in general.

Literature Review

Edward Palmer Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* states that William Morris' interest in the decorative arts started as a means of reforming a social revolution towards industrialization (Thompson 122). Thompson touched upon the different aspects of the social, political, and cultural life of William Morris, as well as suggesting that "despite his decorative arts reforms, Morris was no closer to rectifying the situation of the producers of his objects" due to the conflict of his business success (Thompson 126). In addition to Thompson, Sandra Alfoldy gives an overview of the production aspects of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. and how it was made and consumed. In *The Commodification of William Morris: Emotive Links in a Mass-Produced World*, Sandra Alfoldy offers a well-researched account of William Morris & Co. during a period when the company's design was gaining growing popularity. Alfoldy has noted both commercial success and controversy within Morris's business, such as the contradiction between Morris's creative ideal of craftsmanship and his decision to employ machines in the manufacturing process (103).

Susan Luckman, in her research article *Craft entrepreneurialism and sustainable scale: resistance to and disavowal of the creative industries as champions of capitalist growth* (2018), talks about the revival of handmade products in recent years. As Luckman writes, "craft and design-led creative practices are presently enjoying a moment of popularity, driven by consumer demand for unique, innovative and/or handmade objects" (314). Luckman suggests that the current popularity of creative or craft practices and the revival of handmade products reflect broader human desires for "alternative" products and "good work," which rethinks the popular notion of the Arts and Crafts Movement in contemporary society (314).

George E. Newman, in his article *The Psychology of Authenticity* (2019), remarks that the notion of authenticity is crucial to how objects and experiences are valued, yet there are

different kinds of authenticity (8). His article suggests three types of authenticity. First, historical authenticity, that is, the object encompasses “the physical essence” of some valued source (Newman 16). Secondly, categorical authenticity, that is, the object fits the essential quality of a certain category or type (Newman 16). Lastly, value authenticity, that is, the object reflects an essential value (Newman 16). These types of authenticity will be useful when examining objects that are reminiscent of decorative objects in the past, and the ways in which objects may be perceived or valued as authentic. In addition, Walter Benjamin also defines authenticity in a historical context (Costello 167). In his 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin states that “the historical testimony rests on the authenticity” and the authority of the object is jeopardized by reproduction “when substantive duration ceases to matter (215). In other words, the authenticity of the object is linked with its history (Costello 167). In *Aura, Face, Photography: Re-reading Benjamin Today* Costello states that authenticity, like aura, is “the structure of perception,” a way of perceiving experiences and things in the world (167). In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arun Appadurai suggests that the meanings of objects and experiences stem from human transactions and motivation (5). He also agrees with Costello that the aura of an artwork concerns its history, its unique existence in time and space (45). He refers to Benjamin’s remarks on the picture of Madonna to explain why reproductions of artistic objects may have an aura and suggest that reproductions of artworks do not destroy the aura of the original work but “seek to partake of it” (Appadurai 47).

Chapter 1: The Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris, and Ideology

This chapter aims to present the dominant ideas of the arts and crafts movement and William Morris that continue to shape the ideas/attitudes of creators towards the creation of handmade objects. A historical context of William Morris, Morris & Co., and some of the prominent ideologies of the arts and crafts movement will be discussed. This historical context is necessary to discover the ideas/attitudes of Astier de Villatte and William Morris & Co. It will focus on the production system of Morris & Co. The paradoxes of running Morris & Co will also be discussed, especially the use of machines in handmade production. Then a discussion about the ways in which Astier de Villatte has engaged with and reframed the attitudes and values of the arts and crafts movement will take place.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

The British Arts and Crafts Movement began in the late nineteenth century (Betjemann 188). The movement is a critique of industrialization in which objects are mass-produced by machines and the working conditions of the labor force are horrendous (Crawford 17). Together, during the Victorian era, William Morris and his colleagues led the Arts and Crafts Movement. They realized that the Industrial Revolution had altered the manufacturing process of objects; machine-made, mass-produced goods dominated the market and traditional craftsmanship was becoming a skill of the past. William Morris, along with his socialist political views, believed that “craftsmanship” and “joy in labor” were the solutions to industrialization and oppressed workers (Crawford 17). Morris believed that the efficiency of the system of labor division, in which the production of an object is divided into small parts, resulted in individuals becoming disconnected from their work. For Morris, workers should be able to derive joy from their labor because they are masters of their work, rather

than just “tenders of machines” (Poulson 150). In *The Revival of Handicraft*, Morris posits the foregoing discussion on “the effect of machinery versus handicraft on the arts,” using the latter term broadly to encompass all labor-intensive products that have no claim “to be considered beautiful” (Poulson 146). These notions imply that Morris held strong opinions on how the mass-production of products eliminates their beauty and reduces the pleasure of the labor processes involved in their manufacture.

The concept of craftsmanship was also at the heart of the British Arts and Crafts Movement (Poulson 150). Handmade products and craft practices were regarded as a utopian idea by prominent critics such as William Morris, who advocated the “unity of art, design reform, and joy in labor” and which continues to influence the contemporary understanding of craft practices and handmade products (Crawford 17). Building on Karl Marx’s observations, Morris agreed that craftsmanship was necessary for establishing individualism and pleasurable work, both of which should be at the heart of modern society. Morris saw the craftsmanship of “lesser art” (decorative arts) as a means to a better life, which is what makes handmade objects matter. In the present day, the revival of handmade products and creative practices is rooted in the widespread adoption of Morris’s worldview (Campbell 25).

William Morris & Co.

According to Crawford, Morris established a decorative art firm, William Morris & Co. (formally Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co.) with his colleagues in 1860, based on the knowledge and experience he gained while designing and building his own home (Red House) (20). Morris was able to assemble a group of craftspeople and began to create objects for everyday use (e.g., curtains, wallpaper, chairs) (20). Although the products of William Morris & Co. were relatively successful, there are some contradictions between Morris’

artistic ideals and the reality of his company. Alföldy observes that at the height of his company's popularity, "mass-produced objects represented Morris" (Alföldy 102).

Essentially, as the business expanded, the ideas of "beautiful objects for all" and pleasure in labor were jeopardized by the growing demand for Morris & Co (Alföldy 102). products. The commercial success of Morris's company thus raised some controversies which triggered a discussion of "the conditions and contradictions surrounding the original production of Morris & Co. products" (Alföldy 102). According to Alföldy, in his new role as a designer, Morris was drawn away from his original craftsman role, requiring workers to carry out the physical production of his goods and subcontracting "outside suppliers and firms in the projects of Morris & Co. between 1886 and 1884" in order to "fill the demands of the middle-class market" (Alföldy 104). Eventually, Morris & Co. adopted "the use of machines in handicraft production" (Alföldy 105). As a result, Morris' products, which were heavily influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, became commercial items designed for market demand. Morris's concept of beautiful objects for all, driven by consumerism, exemplifies the loss of aura described by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of the reproduction of artworks (Benjamin 249). More importantly, the concern about how to satisfy the demand and supply of Morris & Co's products is incompatible with the concept of genuine craftsmanship. This is unmistakably a hegemonic dimension of Morris' "bourgeois motivation" (MacCarthy 15). To put it in perspective, Morris' artistic ideals were negatively affected by the conflict of his business, resulting in a retreat to a form of capitalist handicraft. Alföldy writes, "while successfully advertising his business by extolling the virtues of medieval times and the consumption of the Victorian era can be defined as modernizing the past while antiquating the present (Alföldy 102). Whereas E.P. Thompson's argument suggests that Morris' business activities and the SPAB (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) "lead to communism" and "capitalist society" rather than artistic reform (Thompson 231).

The pressure on William Morris & Co. to compete with demand and the reproducibility of handmade products, unfortunately, stripped away the aura of artistic authenticity and the pleasure of creating an original product. As Bourdieu argues, artistic objects or artists whose work is motivated by market demand would alter artistic authenticity (Bourdieu 143). For this reason, the art market considers reproductions of artworks to be less valuable than original works of art due to the lack of authenticity (Bourdieu 143). This shifted the status of Morris' products from "symbolic values" to just a commodification of handicrafts (Grenfell and Hardy 44). Morris's company was far too reliant on the past, but in an attempt to keep up with consumer demand, he incorporated the use of machines into the production process despite the fact that he "frequently advocated the removal of machinery from the process of work in his writings," thus contradicting the reality of his company (Alfoldy 105). With the case of William Morris & Co. in mind, the idea of "beautiful objects for all" can be observed at companies such as IKEA (Alfoldy 102). IKEA is a Swedish furniture company founded in 1943 that sells "functional furniture" with an eccentric design that is both artistically pleasing and affordable (Lamare). From local to global, IKEA is currently attempting to fulfill the absence of beauty (furniture) from the ordinary lives of civilized people through the company's international distribution and marketability.

In the case of Astier de Villatte, the company may rely on the artistic values of its creators to intrigue consumer interest, but demand is uncertain because their handicraft products are what Richard Caves called "nobody knows property" (Caves 3). As Caves argues, "demand is uncertain" due to the fact that "the product or service contains a substantial element of artistic or creative endeavor" (3). And while it may succeed commercially, it may only appeal to a small niche of customers (Caves 2). Thus, whether Astier de Villatte's products will meet demands cannot be known in advance because a creative or artistic product is an "experience good" and, as such, "the buyer's satisfaction will be a subjective reaction," meaning no one

can know their response beforehand (Caves 3). Nonetheless, the question of why some handmade products may succeed commercially in the contemporary craft marketplace while others do not is a true dilemma. As Lampel et al. has argued, when it comes to cultural or artistic objects, some see creative and cultural products as “an expression of the consumer’s need” and those who suggest that what consumers want is mostly the product of ingenuity, “shaped by the imagination and creativity” of the creators (266). A further complication is that craftspeople, designers, and creative entrepreneurs often battle to maintain their authenticity while under commercial pressure (Lampel et al. 226). If economic satisfaction is not achieved, it could mean the related work of art must be discontinued (Lampel et al. 229). For Astier de Villatte, the company acknowledges contemporary capitalist structures while resisting being defined by them (Park et al. 21). For Ivan and Benoit, this is the main reason why the brand decided to remain with artisanal production methods rather than satisfy market demands.

That said, Astier de Villatte can be seen as a company that has engaged with and reframed the ideologies of the Arts and Crafts Movement. On the one hand, the idea of beautiful objects for all is incompatible with the small-scale production of Astier de Villatte. Astier de Villatte’s designers (Ivan and Benoit) reframed this idea. They insisted on making their products via artisanal production. As they have repeatedly stated in their interviews, they are not at all interested in increasing the “efficiency or productivity” of their artisans, nor do they strive for “a perfect and flawless product” (Park et al. 47). The products of Astier de Villatte are all handmade, which inevitably leads to a situation where demand is higher than supply (Park et al. 51). Kelsang Gonnot, who has been the commercial director of Astier de Villatte since 2011, noticed that there was increasing marketability overseas due to the long collaboration with many creators in California (Park et al. 51). However, the commercial director says “it seems the production will remain on a human scale, which is neither too big

nor too small” because the cofounders have a clear vision of Astier de Villatte’s production and customers express great satisfaction with our high-quality handmade products (Park et al. 51).

On the other hand, Astier de Villatte seems to engage with the notion of “joy in labor,” which is the dominant idea of William Morris and the arts and crafts movement (Crawford 17). In the context of joy in labor, Ivan and Benoit prefer that their artisans are fully involved in the production process, as this allows them to express their individuality and joy through the objects they create (Park et al. 47). Ivan and Benoit both value the imperfection of handmade objects because they represent the artisan’s “individual being” (Park et al. 47). In a sense, the notion of an individual underlining the connection of ideas between these two companies. As mentioned earlier, Morris felt that when the production of an object is divided into small parts, it results in individuals becoming disconnected from their work.

For Astier de Villatte’s workshop, a small number of artisans work with Ivan and Benoit’s aesthetic guidelines for objet d’art, which state that each ceramic object should be made from start to finish by the same artisan, so even though it is the same design, it is never the same twice (Park et al. 15). At the base of each finished piece, the brand name, and the artisan’s initials (see Fig. 1) are engraved alongside one another (Ivan 69). Considering this idea in a marketing context, the distance between artisans and consumers is reduced (Appadurai 44). And it enables the brand to build an inclusive relationship with their consumers (McIntyre 39). However, in terms of creative freedom, it seems too easy to conclude that the artisans who made the objects work autonomously because Ivan and Benoit seem to have a set of guidelines for how to make handmade objects their way. According to Crawford, individualism, joy in labor, and creative freedom, “were equated with handwork by the arts and crafts movement”, and they also reinforced “myths of personal endeavor” (18). Crawford refers to John Ruskin’s prose, in which he writes, “men lose their souls day

after day of minding machines,” so handwork became the expression of man’s pleasure in work (19). Nonetheless, this idea again underlines William Morris’s romantic ideas about individual labor, which were used to mark the contrast between handmade objects and machine-produced objects (Krugh 281). Krugh observes that handmade objects have been linked “socially and politically with unalienated personal labor” (293). Since then, the appeal of handmade objects stems from the focus on the individual labor involved in the process of making things (Krugh 293). Another idea that Astier de Villatte stresses, is that “the same design is never the same twice” (Park et al. 15). Crawford says that slight imperfections of handmade objects “declare that they are handmade,” a very common detail on craft objects (Crawford 18). This idea was popularized by John Ruskin, who suggested that handmade objects hold an attraction and small imperfections make them unique (Betjemann 188). In the following chapter, I will discuss more the imperfections of handmade objects in the context of authenticity.



Fig.1, Photograph of the stamp of the brand and an artisan’s initials.

<https://www.summerillandbishop.com/blogs/meanderings/exploring-artisans-inside-the-astier-de-villatte-atelier>.

Chapter 2: The Aura of Handmade Objects

This chapter aims to address Benoit and Ivan's attitudes towards the creation of their handmade objects. Some of their handmade objects will be discussed to show how concepts such as authenticity, craftsmanship, and artistic autonomy are used in the creation of handmade objects by Astier de Villatte in general. After that, a discussion about the effect these ideas had on the commercial viability of Astier de Villatte's handmade objects will take place.

Astier de Villatte

Astier de Villatte is a decorative art company founded in 1996 by Ivan Pericoli and Benoit Astier de Villatte (Maeckler). Initially, the company focused on making wooden furniture, while the ceramics were made as decorative objects alongside the furniture (Maeckler). During an exhibition of their products at the Maison et Objet design fair in Paris, their ceramics quickly became popular among consumers (Park et al. 17). Later on, Astier de Villatte's handmade ceramics became well known for their unique style, as, in the workshop, the ceramic items are handmade by skilled artisans using the press mold technique (Park et al. 17). This is because the aesthetic of handmade products that Astier de Villatte seeks emerges from "the imperfection of human-made objects" (Maeckler). Ivan Pericoli notes that in the nineteenth century, craftspeople had to compete with industrial manufacturing by attempting to "perfect their handmade objects" (Maeckler). As a result, their handmade objects could not be distinguished from machine-made objects. For this reason, "Ivan and Benoit are not at all interested in perfection" (Maeckler). Both designers chose to celebrate the imperfection of man-made objects because, in their opinion, when objects are handmade, not only do you

never create the same object twice, but you also interact with the human being who made it and the life of the object itself (Maeckler).

Craftsmanship As a Traditional Method of Production

Like Morris, Ivan and Benoit revived traditional artisanal production methods in their workshop. However, the difference is that the artistic commitments of Ivan and Benoit stem from a desire to avoid “falling into the trap of replicating relics” (Benoit 79). The brand finds a middle ground between embracing the aesthetic sentiments of the past and “remaining determinedly in the here and now” (Samuel 183). This does, however, appear reminiscent of the retrofitting observed by Raphael Samuel as a “reproduction of the classic” that seeks to conceal “the visible signs of modernity” (Samuel 172). The term retrofitting is a critique of the commodification of the past in contemporary practices and is the process of making new things look old and marketing them under the umbrella of times gone by. This makes a statement about the revival of trends that were previously considered old-fashioned. Conversely, even though Ivan and Benoit’s desire for the revival of historical decorative objects originates from the fact that they wanted to “conjure up a certain period in the past” in the contemporary era (Ivan 71), this is not the case for Astier de Villatte. To some extent, the work of Astier de Villatte resembles that of William Morris & Co. in the sense that the production of their handmade products is entirely dependent on the traditional methods of medieval crafts, which contrasts with Samuel’s notion of “instance oldness” (Samuel 754). In addition to this, Ivan and Benoit envision Astier de Villatte as a space to reintroduce a discussion halted by “the brutality of modernism” in which decorative objects of the past were deemed out of fashion (Ivan 71). They state that the brand will continue to be a place where “the unnoticed beauties” of decorative objects in the past are reintroduced into the

presence (Ivan 71). It is precisely the phrase “the brutality of modernism” that highlights the belief of William Morris and the general sentiment of the arts and crafts movement (Crawford 24). Crawford refers to Morris’s statement in *The Collected Works of William Morris* (1910-1915) that states, “apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization” (24). With this statement, he suggests that antimodernism is the principle that lies behind the arts and crafts movement because its values “challenged the modernization of society in the nineteenth century” (Crawford 24).

The question of Authenticity

As mentioned previously, Astier de Villatte’s artistic approach to design stems from the need to avoid “falling into the trap of replicating relics” (Benoit 79). Ivan and Benoit both have firm views on the idea of leaving a trace of “human touch” on objects so that there is a “life of an object itself” (Ivan). In this sense, Astier de Villatte’s artistic value closely matches what Walter Benjamin referred to as the “aura” of artworks—that is, the aspect of originality and authenticity (249). In his 1963 essay, Benjamin observes that mechanical reproduction has taken away “the aura of the work of art” (249). The aura of a work of art, according to Benjamin, derives from its authenticity, uniqueness, and its presence in a specific time and space (248). He points out that by manufacturing countless replicas, the artwork’s aura is diminished because mechanical reproduction reduces the aesthetic value of the original work of art due to the consistency of reproduction (Benjamin 249). According to Benjamin, by allowing the replication to engage with the spectator or customer in his or her own personal state, and by permitting ownership of the work of art, this pattern inevitably regenerates the “object replicated” and mass culture (249).

Looking back at Astier de Villatte, the idea of leaving a trace of human touch on an object underlines an important aspect in the design and production to acquire the authenticity (and uniqueness) of their handmade objects. Arguably, Astier de Villatte was/is trying to move away from the trap of reproduction by emphasizing the act of making objects. They insist that the only way to make authentic objects is through artisanal-based production (Park et al. 15). At the workshop of Astier de Villatte, each ceramic item was handmade by the same artisan from start to finish, so each object had slightly different characteristics (Ivan 69). In addition to this, Ivan and Benoit state that the natural look of materials is important even though they do not look perfect to others, but for them, the “crude surfaces” (these details can be observed in Fig.3-Fig.5) and imperfections of man-made objects are considered “authentic” (Ivan 69). Crawford refers to these details (trace of human touch, imperfection, crude surfaces) as “thinginess” or “visual language” of arts and crafts objects (20). He argues that imperfections in handwork are thought to distinguish handmade objects from machine-made objects, which are precise and identical (Crawford 18). Peter Betjemann also observes that the imperfections of handmade objects are in fact “a paradoxical relationship to skill” (183). He argues that during the era of William Morris and the arts and crafts movement, the capabilities of mechanical reproduction such as precision and perfection posed a threat to the ideal of craftsmanship (Betjemann 183). The development of this particular idea stemmed from John Ruskin, who pointed out “irregularity as the basis of handicraft authenticity” (Betjemann 188). So, after the arrival of mechanical reproduction, imperfection was celebrated and valued (Betjemann 188).



Fig. 2, “Ivan Pericoli and Benoit Astier de Villatte.”, *artilleriet-journal.se*, 25 september 2018, <https://artilleriet-journal.se/Astier-de-Villatte>.



Fig. 3, Woodward, Jooney. “press mold.”, *Vogue.com*, 28 November 2018, www.vogue.com/projects/13547240/inside-astier-de-villatte-paris-workshop.



Fig. 4, Photograph of how a cup is created by using press mold technique at Astier de Villatte's workshop. *artilleriet-journal.se*, 25 September 2018, <https://artilleriet-journal.se/Astier-de-Villatte>.



Fig. 5, "Marguerite tea cup", *Astier de Villatte*, 12 July 2021, <https://www.astierdevillatte.com/product/429/marguerite-tea-cup?v=429>



Fig. 6, Astier de Villatte's handmade objects. *artilleriet-journal.se*, 25 September 2018, <https://artilleriet-journal.se/Astier-de-Villatte>.

Benjamin writes, “the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its imbedded in the fabric of tradition... it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function” (215). This statement allows one thing to be argued: the aura of artworks is attached to tradition. Thus, craft as a traditional method of production may affect the way in which objects are perceived and valued.

Benjamin notes that works of art can be perceived and valued on two levels: “cult value” and “exhibition value” (253). He argues that “artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult” (Benjamin 254). Cult value refers to how artworks are viewed with a ritualizing gaze (the objects of warships). Whereas exhibition value refers to a new function of art, mainly because mechanical reproduction has transformed how artworks are perceived and experienced. Benjamin states that mechanical reproduction liberates “the work

of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual,” so the artwork loses its aura and its authenticity (Benjamin 255). From this statement, Costello argues that the aura of an artwork is the presence of its cult values (189). This brings one to think about the presence of cult value in art’s new functions, especially in applied arts (decorative objects, furniture, everyday objects). However, what I would like to pinpoint here is the cult value of craft or craftsmanship as a mode of production, which has a long history in the Guilds of the Middle Ages (Alfoldy 107). As Benjamin writes, “aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function and tradition” (215). Therefore, one might say that craftsmanship as a traditional mode of production has cult value because of its existence in history. This comes with a question. Is it possible that when objects are produced using a traditional method of production, parts of their historical significance (cult value) are associated with them? In addition to this, Benjamin asserts

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space... its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years, as well as the various changes in its ownership (247).

This statement is significant because it underlines that the aura of artworks has to do with history, time, and space. In this sense, it can be argued that for Astier de Villatte, the past’s cult value seems to function as a signifier for the aura of handmade objects. Astier de Villatte fits with this argument because their handmade objects were inspired by things in the past. In an interview with *Brand Balance*, Ivan and Benoit state that Astier de Villatte draws inspiration from long-forgotten decorative objects and reintroduces them to the modern world (Park et al. 44). The main reason for this is that they wanted to make handmade objects that

“evoke some kind of emotion” in a way that mechanical production rarely does (Benoit 79). One might wonder, how can objects evoke emotions? Benjamin’s concept of aura offers some insight. But first, we need to understand that emotions, like the aura of artworks, come into being at “the moment of seeing, hearing, or reading” (Davis 386). An aura is not a property of an object (Davis 386). This agrees with Costello, who defines Benjamin’s concept of aura as a mode of artistic experience between subject and object (20). He observes that in the reproduction of early portrait photography and photographs of artworks, there is a unique phenomenal between subject and object, its ability to “return our gaze” (Costello 20). Costello uses Benjamin’s notion of “cult of remembrance” to explain the ability of an object to “look back” at the observer (20). As Benjamin asserts:

In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty (258).

Therefore, if a handmade object has the ability to evoke some kind of emotion in us, it is important to understand that emotion is not a property of the handmade, rather, emotion arises when an observer encounters objects (Davis 386). Similarly, Costello talks about the cult of remembrance that there is something about objects (for example, appearance, style, or design) that reminds the observers of what they have encountered in the world. This brings one to consider the term “the cult of remembrance” and Benjamin’s notions of cult value in the context of Astier de Villatte’s handmade objects. So, in order to get a clearer sense of the cult value, the spirit of things in the past that Astier de Villatte’s handmade objects were inspired by. The following section will look at the objects (appearance, style, design) as well as discuss the context in which they were created, in order to show that the past seems to be a source of inspiration and association for Astier de Villatte.

The item is the book *Ma Vie a Paris*. In 2000, in collaboration with Editions Ivrea and François Huin, the master of the typographic printing house (SAIG), Astier de Villatte's notebooks and diary were published, followed by books such as *Ma Vie a Paris*, *Mitsou*, and Lou Doillon's drawings. All were published using the typesetting process, which involved using a linotype machine and type blocks to press letters onto paper (Park et al. 36). The expansion of Astier de Villatte's product line to include book publishing comes from the desire to preserve "the last linotype printing house in Paris (Park et al. 82). With regard to the publication of the first book, *Ma Vie a Paris*, Ivan, and Benoit initiated a plan to create a product surrounded by the aesthetics of the linotype printing technique. Ivan remarks that, "in many fields today, there is certain knowledge that could potentially be lost forever" (Ivan 83). This statement pinpoints the narrative through which the book *Ma Vie a Paris* and many other books in the product line are presented to consumers.



Fig. 7, "Ma Vie à Paris, French Version." *Astier de Villatte.com*,

<https://www.astierdevillatte.com/product/525/ma-vie-paris-french-version?v=525>



Fig. 8, Ansiau, Julie. “The linotype machine in action for the book *Ma Vie a Paris*”. *WSJ magazine.com*, 22 March 2016. <https://www-wsj-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/articles/astier-de-villatte-releases-a-new-guide-to-paris-1458659944>

According to *Brand Balance*, Astier de Villatte’s decision to acquire Societe Des Ateliers Et Imprimeries Graphiques (SAIG) took place when they were “on the brink of bankruptcy for the second time” (Park et al. 83). After completion of the new arrangement, Francois Huin still “remained in charge of the press” (Park et al. 83). Francois Huin, the master of the typesetting machine of SAIG, took over the business from his father in 1951 and kept it running for over sixty years. He explains that “traditionally, typography means letterpress printing. Therefore, the typographer is a person who makes books to read, see, and touch, rather than a person who makes letters with computers” (Huin 83). Huin recalled the days when Astier de Villatte was his client:

It took a while for me to adjust to the freewheeling spirit that Ivan and Benoit have, as I have been accustomed to meticulously punctual publishing people. Without the two cofounders, I wouldn’t have thought of making a paper and stationery item, which had never been tried before in the printing house.... The task that I’m supposed to

repeat every year requires a vast amount of time and energy, but the exquisite result is a more than mental reward. I often argue with the duo, who are the most improvisatory and disorganized of all my clients, but I have found trust when working with them. (84)

From Francois Huin's testimony, it emphasizes that work satisfaction evolves from complete involvement in the means of production (the process of linotype printing) and from the product of one's labor: all of which underline William Morris's worldview and the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In a short film presentation of the brand "Astier de Villatte", Huin was also introduced as the master of SAIG printing. Shortly after his introduction, Benoit remarked, "if Mr. Huin stops the printer, we're in trouble because we don't want to print it using another technique and no one else is able to do it" (Astier 4:17–4:25). This film then demonstrates that all printing of product packaging, labels, and stationery items occurs at the SAIG linotype-printing house (see an example in Fig. 10). At this point in the discussion, it can be seen that, with the publication of *Ma Vie a Paris* and many other books in the product line, Astier de Villatte continues to reintroduce the aesthetics of Linotype printing. However, it is the linotype printing machine that I am interested in. While the use of machines within handmade production raised some controversies for William Morris and Co. (Alfoldy 105). However, for Astier de Villatte, it seems that the linotype printing machine held some values. Even though, in the past, linotype machines were deemed as the industry standard in the nineteenth century (Park et al. 41). Arguably, the book *Ma Vie a Paris* exemplifies the artwork reproduced and the loss of aura (and authenticity), and that is what Benjamin's essay is about. Benjamin states that "the unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (Benjamin 247). In other words, the unique existence of the artwork is tied up with its history, and that is its aura (Appadurai 45). Benjamin writes, "at the time of

its origin, a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be authentic. It became authentic only during the succeeding centuries, and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one” (Benjamin 243). With that in mind, Appadurai further argues that reproductions of art objects which have a singular existence in time and space and have a long history, do not wither the aura of the original but “seek to partake of it” (45). Thus, in the context of the linotype printing machine, it has its own unique existence in time and space, and that is its past’s cult value (its aura). The book *Ma Vie a Paris* is an object reproduced by the linotype printing machine. In this sense, it seems, the book *Ma Vie a Paris* may partake of the past’s cult value of the linotype printing machine.



Fig. 9, Bloch, Richard. “Francois Huin, at the press where he has worked for 52 years, is still hard at work”, *interiormonologue.com*, 9 July 2021, [https://interiormonologue.com/astier-de-](https://interiormonologue.com/astier-de-villattes-ma-vie-en-paris/)

[villattes-ma-vie-en-paris/](https://interiormonologue.com/astier-de-villattes-ma-vie-en-paris/)



Fig.10, “Stockholm candle.” *johnderian.com*, 9 July 2021,

https://www.johnderian.com/products/bggestc10-jpg?_pos=11&_sid=ae0a62112&_ss=r

To summarize the discussions in this chapter, it can be argued that Astier de Villatte was trying to encompass the past’s cult value in their handmade objects. In the sense that the aesthetics and the production of their handmade products depend on things in the past, things that have already existed in time and space. Astier de Villatte, like Morris & Co., both “extol the virtues of medieval times... modernizing the past while antiquating the present” (Alfoldy 102). Here, I must bring what Benjamin remarks about the aura of a work of art as “the unique appearance of a distance, however, close it may be” (247). Benjamin proposes the concept of aura to define authenticity in a historical context (Costello 167). He uses it in a way that is similar to the way Newman (2016) uses the concept of “historical authenticity” to evaluate an object that encompasses “the physical essence” of some valued sources (16). Starting with this awareness, the consumer may infer from Astier de Villatte’s handmade objects, their craftsmanship (see Fig 12), their style at a particular time (see Fig 11), some romantic ideals of handmade objects from the arts and crafts movement, and so on. In this sense, Astier de Villatte’s handmade objects may have an aura. However, it is only because their handmade objects are reminiscent of the past’s cult values, tradition, and history.



Fig. 11, “Victorian Jewellery Box.” *Astier de Villatte.com*,

<https://www.astierdevillatte.com/product/891/jewellery-box?v=891>



Fig. 12, The making of Astier de Villatte’s handmade Objects. *Summerillandbishop.com*,

<https://www.summerillandbishop.com/blogs/meaderings/exploring-artisans-inside-the-astier-de-villatte-atelier>.

Conclusion

This finding reveals that the appeal of Astier de Villatte's handmade objects may derive from two parts: artisanal production and the artistic values of its cofounders and designers—Ivan and Benoit. Astier de Villatte shares many artistic ideals with the Arts and Crafts Movement, and with William Morris and William Morris & Co., but, at the same time, the brand also reframes these ideals in its own way. Both companies recognized the value of craftsmanship and wanted to produce objects that were well made and beautiful. The difference between the two companies is that, instead of making a perfect and flawless handmade product, Astier de Villatte prefers an element of imperfection—a crude surface, the natural look of materials, or the trace of human touch—in order to avoid the trap of replication. Ivan and Benoit recognize that trying to compete with the perfection of the machine-made object “represents a missed opportunity” (Maeckler). For Benoit, the imperfections of a handmade object “communicate something about life and the life of the object itself” (Benoit 71).

In essence, Astier de Villatte, as a craft-based business, focuses on a few critical aspects: authenticity, craftsmanship, and artistic autonomy, whereas economic reality is not a primary concern. The commercial viability of the brand also came from the fact that the co-founders and designers (Ivan and Benoit) were committed to the idea of making decorative objects that carry sentimental meaning in contemporary culture. They do this by creating a production system that enables their autonomous artisans to create an object from start to finish. This freedom allows the artisans to express their individuality in each object, making meaningful items that the artisans can be proud of. In the case of Astier de Villatte, the handmade objects may encompass an aura that “evokes some kind of emotion” in a way that mechanical production rarely does (Benoit 79). The aura of genuine handmade objects is an interesting aspect that somehow cannot be described in words but must be felt subjectively or with

bodily senses. Therefore, for consumers, the aura of an object is perhaps the reason why in everyday life it can mean something to its owner, which contrasts with an item one could throw away easily and carelessly.

Astier de Villatte is a relatively thriving craft-based company. Yet, this study has disclosed the paradoxes of the commodification of handmade products. Firstly, commercial success is needed to sustain the business and artistic practice. Second, there should be a balance between authenticity and artistic autonomy within the production system.

Historically, all of these paradoxes were an uneasy task for craft-based businesses such as William Morris & Co., yet similar paradoxes are being experienced by the creators and craft makers of today.

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