The Substance of Style
How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness

Virginia Postrel

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

When a Michigan hairdresser went to Kabul with a group of doctors, nurses, dentists, and social workers, she intended to serve as an all-purpose assistant to the relief mission’s professionals. Instead, she found her own services every bit as popular as the serious business of health and welfare. “When word got out there was a hairdresser in the country, it just got crazy,” she said. “I was doing haircuts every fifteen minutes.”

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

That reaction challenged many widely held assumptions about the nature of aesthetic value. While they cherish artworks like the giant Bamiyan Buddhas leveled by the Taliban, social critics generally take a different view of the frivolous, consumerist impulses expressed in more mundane aesthetic pleasures. “How depressing was it to see Afghan citizens celebrating the end of tyranny by buying consumer electronics?” wrote Anna Quindlen in a 2001 Christmas column berating Americans for “uncontrollable consumerism.”

Respectable opinion holds that our persistent interest in variety, adornment, and new sensory pleasures is created by advertising, which generates “the desire for products consumers [don’t] need at all,” as Quindlen put it, declaring that “I do not need an alpaca swing coat, a tourmaline brooch, a mixer with a dough hook, a CD player that works in the shower, another pair of boot-cut black pants, lavender bath salts, vanilla candles or a Kate Spade Gucci Prada Coach bag.”

What’s true for New Yorkers should be true for Afghans as well. Why buy a green burka when you’re a poor peasant and already have two blue ones? Why paint your nails red if you’re a destitute widow begging on the streets? These indulgences seem wasteful and irrational, just the sort of false needs encouraged by commercial manipulation. Yet liberated Kabul had no ubiquitous advertising or elaborate marketing campaigns. Maybe our desires for impractical decoration and meaningless fashion don’t come from Madison Avenue after all. Maybe our relation to aesthetic value is too fundamental to be explained by commercial mind control.

Human beings know the world, and each other, through our senses. From our earliest moments, the look and feel of our surroundings tell us who and where we are. But as we grow, we imbibe a different lesson: that appearances are not just potentially deceiving but frivolous and unimportant—that aesthetic value is not real except in those rare instances when it transcends the quotidian to become high art.
We learn to contrast surface to substance, to believe that our real selves and the real world exist beyond the superficiality of sensation.

We have good cause, of course, to doubt the simple evidence of our senses. The sun does not go around the earth. Lines of the same length can look longer or shorter depending on how you place arrows on their ends. Beautiful people are not necessarily good, nor are good people necessarily beautiful. We’re wise to maintain reasonable doubts.

But rejecting our sensory natures has problems of its own. When we declare that mere surface cannot possibly have legitimate value, we deny human experience and ignore human behavior. We set ourselves up to be fooled again and again, and we make ourselves a little crazy. We veer madly between overvaluing and undervaluing the importance of aesthetics. Instead of upholding rationality against mere sensuality, we tangle ourselves in contradictions.

This book seeks to untangle those confusions, by examining afresh the nature of aesthetic value and its relation to our personal, economic, and social lives. It’s important to do so now, because sensory appeals are becoming ever more prominent in our culture. To maintain a healthy balance between substance and surface, we can no longer simply pretend that surfaces don’t matter. Experience suggests that the comfortable old slogans, and the theories behind them, are wrong.

Afghanistan is not the only place where human behavior confounds conventional assumptions, raising questions about the sources of aesthetic value. Consider “authenticity,” which aesthetic authorities consider a prime measure of worth. Here, too, experience suggests a more complex standard, or perhaps a more subjective definition of what’s authentic, than intellectual discourse usually provides.

Built atop one of the hills that divide the San Fernando Valley from the core of Los Angeles, Universal CityWalk is deliberately fake. Its architect calls the open-air shopping mall “a great simulacrum of what L.A. should do. This isn’t the L.A. we did get, but it’s the L.A. we could have gotten—the quintessential, idealized L.A.”

Like the rest of Los Angeles, CityWalk’s buildings are mostly
Preface

stucco boxes. Their aesthetic energy comes from their façades, which are adorned with bright signs, colorful tiles, video screens, murals, and such playful accessories as a giant King Kong. Unlike the typical shopping center, CityWalk has encouraged its tenants to let their decorative imaginations run wild. The place has a tiny artificial beach and, of course, palm trees. A fountain shoots water up through the sidewalk. A fictional radio station sells hamburgers, and a real museum displays vintage neon signs. The three blocks of city “street” are off-limits to vehicles.

When CityWalk opened in 1993, it was roundly condemned as an inauthentic facsimile of real city life. Intellectuals saw only a fortress, a phony refuge from the diversity and conflict of a city recently torn by riots. A conservative journalist called it “Exhibit A in a hot new trend among the beleaguered middle classes: bunkering,” while a liberal social critic said CityWalk “has something of the relationship to the real city that a petting zoo has to nature.”

The public reacted differently. Almost immediately, CityWalk became not a bunker but a grand mixing zone. “Suddenly CityWalk was full of people. And they were all grinning,” wrote a delighted veteran of European cafés shortly after the new mall opened. He predicted that the artificial city street would soon become a beloved hangout, that locals would never want to leave. He was right. A decade later, CityWalk may be “the most vital public space in Los Angeles,” declares a magazine report. On a Saturday night,

*People from all across L.A. have gathered here in one great undifferentiated mass, as they rarely do in the city itself. Toddlers are tearing across CityWalk’s sidewalk fountain. Salvadoran, Armenian, Korean, black, and white, they squeal as the hidden water jets erupt, soaking their overalls. Hundreds of teenagers who have made CityWalk their hangout are picking each other up and sucking down frozen mochas. Families from Encino to East L.A. are laughing, stuffing their faces, gawking at the bright spires of light.*
So much for the assumption that artifice and interaction are contradictory, that the only experience a “simulacrum” can produce is inauthentic. By offering a place of shared aesthetic pleasures, CityWalk has created not an isolated enclave but a space where people from many different backgrounds can enjoy themselves together.

Half a world away is an even more artificial environment, where not only the street but the sky itself is fake. The social results are similar. “It’s a very special building, very different, very beautiful,” says a black South African of Johannesburg’s Montecasino, a casino that replicates a Tuscan village, right down to imported cobblestones and an old Fiat accumulating parking tickets by the side of the make-believe road. Unlike many places in Johannesburg, Montecasino attracts a racially mixed crowd, including unemployed black men who chat beneath its artificial trees and watch the gamblers at play. Like CityWalk, the casino offers its aesthetic pleasures to all comers. Its deracinated design is central to its appeal.

“Montecasino imposes nothing on anyone. It is completely, exuberantly fake,” writes a Togo-based critic. “And, as in Las Vegas, it is this fakeness that ensures its egalitarian popularity. Blacks and whites feel equally at home in this reassuringly bogus Tuscany. The price of democracy, it would seem, is inauthenticity.” Or maybe something is wrong with aesthetic standards that would deny people pleasures that don’t conform to their particular era or ethnicity. Maybe we’ve misunderstood the meaning and value of authenticity.

And perhaps our love of fine art has similarly blinded us to the nature of aesthetic appeals. While “art” can certainly be a meaningful category, it can also be deceptive, forcing sensory value into a transcendent ghetto separated from the rest of life. Again, recent experience offers a cautionary tale.

Like most museums, the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, in New York owns a much larger collection than it has space to display. While its exhibits mostly showcase finished artifacts, the offstage collection includes boxes and boxes of designers’ drawings—not art to be displayed but instructions to be followed. In April
2002, Timothy Clifford, director of the National Galleries of Scotland, went through about eight thousand of those drawings as research for a book about the relationship between the fine and applied arts. In Box D366, which was labeled “Lighting Fixtures II,” he made an extraordinary find:

It's a big drawing of a candlestick in black chalk, heightened by a brown wash applied by brush, with some under-drawing done with a stylus. . . . It not only shows the elevation of the drawing, but also the plan of the object. I believe it was going to be cut in marble. It is of a massive candelabrum, about 15ft-high—probably commissioned for the tomb of Pope Leo X di Medici, and never used.

Clifford identified the sketch as the work of Michelangelo. Other experts concurred.

If a drawing is by Michelangelo, we presume it's art. But the candlestick sketch is still a blueprint—a design, not a display piece. It's not even clear that Michelangelo himself would have constructed the candelabrum. Like architecture, artifacts need not be crafted by their creators. Today’s commentators denounce art museums for “dumbing-down” their exhibits with motorcycles, guitars, and Armani clothes, but the line between art and artifacts was not always so rigid. “Renaissance artists of the highest caliber were commissioned to design decorative objects such as lamps, salt cellars and tapestries,” notes a Cooper-Hewitt decorative-arts expert. Modern manufacturing does not reduce the importance of initial design.

You no longer have to be a Medici to enjoy aesthetic abundance, including ever more customized combinations. Not only monuments but the humblest of objects increasingly embody fine design. This book is not about art per se but about the profusion of style in everyday life. It is about life and work, pleasure and meaning, in a new age of aesthetics.

Several themes run throughout the book: that aesthetic value is subjective and can be discovered only through experience, not deduced in advance; that sensory pleasure and meaning are funda-
mental, biologically based human wants but that their particular expressions vary; that people make different trade-offs among goods depending on the alternatives they face; and that aesthetics is not a value set off from the rest of life. Decoration and adornment are neither higher nor lower than “real” life. They are part of it.
One

THE AESTHETIC IMPERATIVE


There are a million people in a fifteen-mile radius, my host tells me, but you wouldn’t know it as we drive past snow-covered fields. The place looks empty. We’re a few miles outside Albany, in what might as well be rural New England. Western Massachusetts is less than half an hour away, Vermont not much farther.

The area is much more influential than the picturesque countryside suggests. Selkirk is smack in the middle of General Electric territory, snuggled between the research labs and power systems operations in Schenectady and the GE Plastics headquarters in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. That means Selkirk is more than just another out-of-the-way place, because GE is more than just another
big corporation. GE has been, year after year, the most admired company in the business world, an enterprise known for its technological prowess, consistent growth, and hardheaded management.

We turn up a narrow drive and park in front of a small building, the sort of corrugated prefab structure that might house a small construction company or insurance office. This modest site is the American center of a multimillion-dollar bet on the future. GE Plastics believes we’re entering an era in which the look and feel of products will determine their success. Sensory, even subliminal, effects will be essential competitive tools. GE wants to make those tools, and to help customers use them more effectively.

“Aesthetics, or styling, has become an accepted unique selling point—on a global basis,” explains the head of the division’s global aesthetics program. Functionality still matters, of course. But competition has pushed quality so high and prices so low that many manufacturers can no longer distinguish themselves with price and performance, as traditionally defined. In a crowded marketplace, aesthetics is often the only way to make a product stand out. Quality and price may be absolutes, but tastes still vary, and not every manufacturer has already learned how to make products that appeal to the senses.

The modest building in Selkirk houses a design center that customers can visit to brainstorm and develop new products, inspired by the materials available to make them. Instead of just telling engineers and purchasing managers how cheaply GE can sell them raw materials, plastics managers now listen to industrial designers and marketing people “talk about their dreams.”

We enter through humdrum gray offices, walk through the plant floor where plastic samples are mixed with pigments and extruded, and open a bright blue door. On the other side lies an entirely different environment, designed for creativity and comfort rather than low-cost function. This end of the building proclaims the importance of aesthetics for places as well as plastics. Gone are the utilitarian grays of cubicles and indoor-outdoor carpet, replaced by contrasting blue and white walls, light wood floors, shelves of design books, and comfortable couches for conversation. Customers’ hit products are
displayed in museum-lit alcoves: Iomega’s Zip drive in translucent dark blue plastic, the Handspring Visor in a paler shade.

The center’s most striking room isn’t “decorated” at all. It’s lined with row upon row of GE Plastics’ own products—about four thousand sample chips, each a little smaller than a computer diskette, in a rainbow of colors and an impressive range of apparent textures. Since 1995, the company has introduced twenty new visual effects. Its heavy-duty engineering thermoplastics can now emulate metal, stone, marble, or mother-of-pearl; they can diffuse light or change colors depending on which way you look; they can be embedded with tiny, sparkling glass fragments. The special-effects plastics command prices from 15 percent to more than 100 percent higher than ordinary Lexan or Cycolac. With that incentive, company researchers are busy coming up with new effects, having accelerated introductions in 2001 and 2002. “The sky’s the limit,” says a spokesman.

The Selkirk plant will mix up a batch of any color you can imagine, and the company prides itself on turning barely articulated desires into hard plastic: “You know how the sky looks just after a storm? When it’s late afternoon? But right at the horizon, not above it? When the sun has just come out? That color.” That’s from a GE Plastics ad. In the real world, designers come to Selkirk to play around with color, paying the company thousands of dollars for the privilege. That’s how the trim on Kyocera’s mobile phone went from bright silver to gunmetal gray. The project’s lead engineer told technicians he wanted something more masculine. “I figured that they would look at me as if I were nuts. But they didn’t,” he says. “They came back a few minutes later with exactly what we wanted.” Once you’ve got the perfect color, the Selkirk center will (for a fee) preserve a pristine sample in its two-thousand-square-foot freezer. More than a million color-sample chips are filed in the freezer’s movable stacks, protected from the distorting effects of heat and light.

At the end of my visit, GE managers talk a bit about their own aesthetic dreams. Already, researchers have figured out how to make plastics feel heavy, for times when heft conveys a tacit sense of quality. Coming soon are joint ventures that will let customers put GE
effects into materials the company doesn’t make. Squishy “soft-touch” plastics won’t have to look like rubber. Cushy grips will be translucent and sparkle, to coordinate with diamond-effect GE plastics. And somewhere in the aesthetic future are plastics that smell. “I love the smell of suntan lotion,” says a manager, laughing at his own enthusiasm, “but that’s just me.” He imagines sitting in his office in snowy New England with a computer that exudes the faint scent of summer at the beach.

GE is betting real money on such imaginative leaps—on a future that will sparkle like diamonds and smell like summer, that will offer every color that delights the eye and every texture that pleases the touch, on a future of sensory riches. GE believes in an aesthetic age.

This is not a hip San Francisco style shop. These executives don’t get their photos in fashion magazines or go to celebrity-filled parties. They don’t dress in black, pierce their eyebrows, or wear Euro-style narrow eyeglasses. This is General Electric. Jack Welch’s company. Thomas Edison’s company. An enterprise dedicated to science, engineering, and ruthless financial expectations. A tough company, macho even. GE doesn’t invest in ideas just because they sound cool. When a trend comes to Selkirk, it’s no passing fancy.

The twenty-first century isn’t what the old movies imagined. We citizens of the future don’t wear conformist jumpsuits, live in utilitarian high-rises, or get our food in pills. To the contrary, we are demanding and creating an enticing, stimulating, diverse, and beautiful world. We want our vacuum cleaners and mobile phones to sparkle, our bathroom faucets and desk accessories to express our personalities. We expect every strip mall and city block to offer designer coffee, several different cuisines, a copy shop with do-it-yourself graphics workstations, and a nail salon for manicures on demand. We demand trees in our parking lots, peaked roofs and decorative façades on our supermarkets, auto dealerships as swoopy and stylish as the cars they sell.

Aesthetics has become too important to be left to the aesthetes. To succeed, hard-nosed engineers, real estate developers, and MBAs
must take aesthetic communication, and aesthetic pleasure, seriously. We, their customers, demand it.

“We are by nature—by deep, biological nature—visual, tactile creatures,” says David Brown, the former president of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and a longtime observer of the design world. That is a quintessential turn-of-our-century statement, a simultaneous affirmation of biological humanity and aesthetic power. Our sensory side is as valid a part of our nature as the capacity to speak or reason, and it is essential to both. Artifacts do not need some other justification for pleasing our visual, tactile, emotional natures. Design, says Brown, is moving from the abstract and ideological—“this is good design”—to the personal and emotional—“I like that.” In this new age of aesthetics, we are acknowledging, accepting, and even celebrating what a design-museum curator calls our “quirky underside.”

This trend doesn’t mean that a particular style has triumphed or that we’re necessarily living in a period of unprecedented creativity. It doesn’t mean everyone or everything is now beautiful, or that people agree on some absolute standard of taste. The issue is not what style is used but rather that style is used, consciously and conscientiously, even in areas where function used to stand alone. Aesthetics is more pervasive than it used to be—not restricted to a social, economic, or artistic elite, limited to only a few settings or industries, or designed to communicate only power, influence, or wealth. Sensory appeals are everywhere, they are increasingly personalized, and they are intensifying.

Of course, saying that aesthetics is pervasive does not imply that look and feel trump everything else. Other values have not gone away. We may want mobile phones to sparkle, but first we expect them to work. We expect shops to look good, but we also want service and selection. We still care about cost, comfort, and convenience. But on the margin, aesthetics matters more and more. When we decide how next to spend our time, money, or creative effort, aesthetics is increasingly likely to top our priorities.

In this context, “aesthetics” obviously does not refer to the philos-
Aesthetics is the way we communicate through the senses. It is the art of creating reactions without words, through the look and feel of people, places, and things. Hence, aesthetics differs from entertainment that requires cognitive engagement with narrative, word play, or complex, intellectual allusion. While the sound of poetry is arguably aesthetic, the meaning is not. Spectacular special effects and beautiful movie stars enhance box-office success in foreign markets because they offer universal aesthetic pleasure; clever dialogue, which is cognitive and culture-bound, doesn’t travel as well. Aesthetics may complement storytelling, but it is not itself narrative.

Aesthetics shows rather than tells, delights rather than instructs. The effects are immediate, perceptual, and emotional. They are not cognitive, although we may analyze them after the fact. As a midcentury industrial designer said of his field, aesthetics is “fundamentally the art of using line, form, tone, color, and texture to arouse an emotional reaction in the beholder.”

Whatever information aesthetics conveys is prearticulate—the connotation of the color and shapes of letters, not the meanings of the words they form. Aesthetics conjures meaning in a subliminal, associational way, as our direct sensory experience reminds us of something that is absent, a memory or an idea. Those associations may be universal, the way Disney’s big-eyed animals play on the innate human attraction to babies. Or they may change from person to person, place to place, moment to moment.

Although we often equate aesthetics with beauty, that definition is too limited. Depending on what reaction the creator wants, effective presentation may be strikingly ugly, disturbing, even horrifying. The title sequence to Seven—whose rough, backlit type, seemingly stuttering film, and unsettling sepia images established a new style for horror films—comes to mind. Or aesthetics may employ novelty, allusion, or humor, rather than beauty, to arouse a positive response. Philippe Starck’s fly swatter with a face on it doesn’t represent timeless beauty. It’s just whimsical fun.

Aesthetic effects begin with universal reactions, but these effects
always operate in a personal and cultural context. We may like weather-beaten paint because it seems rustic, black leather because it makes us feel sexy, or fluffy pop music because it reminds us of our youth. Something novel may be interesting, or something familiar comforting, without regard to ideal beauty. The explosion of tropical colors that hit women’s fashion in 2000 was a relief from the black, gray, and beige of the late 1990s, while those neutrals looked calm and sophisticated after the riot of jewel tones that preceded them. Psychologists tell us that human beings perceive changes in sensory inputs—movement, new visual elements, louder or softer sounds, novel smells—more than sustained levels.

Because aesthetics operates at a prerational level, it can be disquieting. We have a love-hate relationship with the whole idea. As consumers, we enjoy sensory appeals but fear manipulation. As producers, we’d rather not work so hard to keep up with the aesthetic competition. As heirs to Plato and the Puritans, we suspect sensory impressions as deceptive, inherently false. Aesthetics is “the power of provocative surfaces,” says a critic. It “speaks to the eye’s mind, overshadowing matters of quality or substance.”

But the eye’s mind is identifying something genuinely valuable. Aesthetic pleasure itself has quality and substance. The look and feel of things tap deep human instincts. We are, as Brown says, “visual, tactile creatures.” We enjoy enhancing our sensory surroundings. That enjoyment is real. The trick is to appreciate aesthetic pleasure without confusing it with other values.

Theorist Ellen Dissanayake defines art as “making special,” a behavior designed to be “sensorily and emotionally gratifying and more than strictly necessary.” She argues that the instinct for “making special” is universal and innate, a part of human beings’ evolved biological nature. Hers may or may not be an adequate definition of art, but it does offer a useful insight into our aesthetic age. Having spent a century or more focused primarily on other goals—solving manufacturing problems, lowering costs, making goods and services widely available, increasing convenience, saving energy—we are increasingly
engaged in making our world special. More people in more aspects of life are drawing pleasure and meaning from the way their persons, places, and things look and feel. Whenever we have the chance, we’re adding sensory, emotional appeal to ordinary function.

“Aesthetics, whether people admit it or not, is why you buy something,” says a shopper purchasing a high-style iMac, its flat screen pivoting like a desk lamp on a half-spherical base. He likes the computer’s features, but he particularly likes its looks. A computer doesn’t have to be a nondescript box. It can express its owner’s taste and personality.

“Deciding to buy an IBM instead of a Compaq simply because you prefer black to gray is absolutely fine as long as both machines meet your other significant criteria,” a writer advises computer shoppers on the female-oriented iVillage Web site. “Not that color can’t or shouldn’t be a significant criterion; in truth, the market is filled with enough solid, affordable machines that you finally have the kind of freedom of choice previously reserved only for the likes of footwear.” Computers all used to look pretty much the same. Now they, too, can be special.

A Salt Lake City grocery shopper praises her supermarket’s makeover. Gone are the gray stucco exterior, harsh fluorescent lighting, and tall, narrow aisles. In their place are warm red brick, spot and track lighting, and low-rise departments of related items. The “crowning glory” is the Starbucks in the front, which provides both a welcoming aroma and a distinctive look and feel. “The experience is a lot more calm, a lot more pleasant,” she says, “an extraordinary change, and a welcome one.” Grocery shopping is still a chore, but at least now the environment offers something special.

A political writer in Washington, D.C., a city noted for its studied ignorance of style, says he pays much more attention to his clothes than he did ten or fifteen years ago, and enjoys it a lot more. “One thing I try to do is not to wear the same combination of suit, shirt, and tie in a season,” he says. “It’s another way of saying every day is special.” Once seen as an unnecessary luxury, even a suspect indul-
gence, “making special” has become a personal, social, and business imperative.

How we make the world around us special varies widely, and one mark of this new age of aesthetics, as opposed to earlier eras notable for their design creativity, is the coexistence of many different styles. “Good Design is not about the perfect thing anymore, but about helping a lot of different people build their own personal identities,” says an influential industrial designer. Modern design was once a value-laden signal—a sign of ideology. Now it’s just a style, one of many possible forms of personal aesthetic expression. “Form follows emotion” has supplanted “form follows function.” Emotion tells you which form you find functional. A chair’s purpose is not to express a modernist ideal of “chairness” but to please its owner. “The role of design,” a venture capitalist tells a conference of graphic designers, “is to make life enjoyable.” The designers generally agree.

If modernist design ideology promised efficiency, rationality, and truth, today’s diverse aesthetics offers a different trifecta: freedom, beauty, and pleasure (the brand promise, incidentally, of the rapidly expanding Sephora cosmetics stores). We have replaced “one best way” with “my way, for today,” a more personal and far more fluid ideal. Individuals differ, and the same person doesn’t always want the same look and feel. Contrary to some assertions, we have not gone from a world in which everything must be smooth to one in which everything must be rough, from an age of only straight edges to an age of only curves, or from industrialism to primitivism. All these styles coexist, sharing equal social status.

Nor are we seeing the triumph of “beauty,” defined as a universal standard, although some observers identify the trend that way. They argue that the public is now rejecting both the canons of modernist design and the idea that tastes are personal and subjective. “Beauty is now proclaimed as being at the heart of a universal human nature—even at the core of the order of the universe, and
the essence of life itself,” reports *The Washington Post*, declaring, “Beauty is back.”

It’s true that artists and critics are more willing to talk about beauty than they were a half century ago, and that psychologists have begun to document some aesthetic universals, such as a preference for symmetry in faces. But it’s absolutely not true that we’ve reached some sort of consensus on the one best way to aesthetic pleasure. Quite the contrary. Our aesthetic age is characterized by more variety, not less. Beauty begins with universals, but its manifestations are heterogeneous, subjective, and constantly changing.

Aesthetics offers pleasure, and it signals meaning. It allows personal expression and social communication. It does not provide consensus, coherence, or truth. Indeed, in many cases the rising importance of aesthetics sparks conflicts, since one man’s dream house is another’s eyesore; one neighbor’s naturally beautiful prairie garden is another’s patch of weeds. An employer’s idea of the dress and hairstyles needed to create the right atmosphere for customers may violate employees’ sense of personal identity or practical function. Today’s aesthetic imperative represents not the return of a single standard of beauty, but the increased claims of pleasure and self-expression. Beauty in its many forms no longer needs justification beyond the pleasure and meaning it provides. Delighting the senses is enough: “I like that” rather than “This is good design.”

At the practical level of profit-seeking businesses, the increase in aesthetic pluralism spurs competition to offer increasing variety. “The consumer is a chameleon: one day she’s polished, one day she’s tribal,” says a hair-care-products executive determined to serve both identities. “It is exciting to see not just one look, but people celebrating their individuality.” The holy grail of product designers is mass customization. Industrial design guru Hartmut Esslinger (the source of “form follows emotion”) imagines modularly designed products that could be recombined “to offer 100,000 individual versions,” expressing as many personal styles. “Mass production offered millions of one thing to everybody,” writes another design observer, upping the estimate. “Mass customization offers millions of different models to one guy.”
This vision is not just a business strategy. It represents a major ideological shift. Designers and other cultural opinion leaders used to believe that a single aesthetic standard was right—that style was a manifestation of truth, virtue, even sanity. What if someone didn’t like the fixed way in which Walter Gropius had arranged the furniture in a new Harvard dorm? a student reporter once asked the Bauhaus architect. “Then they are a neurotic,” Gropius replied. The idea that aesthetics represented truth and virtue was hardly limited to design elites, as those of us old enough to recall the culture wars over men’s hair lengths can attest.

Today, buzz cuts and ponytails coexist, without a social consensus and mostly without conflict. Typographers win awards for creating fonts based on such widely varied styles and sources as Renaissance Florentine manuscripts and hand-lettered Latino shop signs. Homeowners mix minimalist contemporary furnishings with antique Persian rugs. Even the gatekeepers of taste acknowledge and embrace aesthetic plenitude. They find the old rigidity strange and a bit embarrassing. “When we started American Elle, fashion dictated that a skirt had to be either one inch above the knee or one inch below it,” said the magazine’s publication director in its fifteenth anniversary issue, published in September 2000. “And if it wasn’t, then the woman wearing it was out of it, end of story. The beauty of what’s happening now is that you can be bohemian, minimal, sexy, or retro. There are so many options—anything goes.”

Maybe not “anything.” Elle’s list of acceptable diversity is still fairly limited, and it doesn’t suggest much mixing and matching across styles. Other style mavens are more eclectic. The smash-hit magazine Lucky, launched in December 2000, seeks to offer “fashion options, as opposed to mandates,” encouraging readers to combine styles to fit their personal tastes and body types. “I thought there was room for a magazine that took the position that many trends could exist simultaneously,” says Lucky’s creator, who was inspired by the mix-and-match styles in the 1995 movie Clueless.

The once-rigid aesthetic hierarchy has broken down. Individuals do not simply imitate their social betters or seek to differentiate them-
selves from those below them. Personal taste, not an elite imprimatur, is what matters. A furniture executive talks about an environment shaped by customers’ “self-assurance.” Consumers are willing to mix not only styles but sources. “They have a great sofa or chair,” he says, “then build around it with everything from high-end accessories to flea-market finds.” Personal expression, personal imagination, personal initiative—form follows instinct.

The French interiors magazine *Maison Française* touts customization as the “reaction to the homogenization of styles and tastes: the desire to personalize our universe. We embroider our jeans, paint our walls, dye our curtains . . . or have others do it for us.” The authoritative Larousse dictionary, notes *Maison Française*, traces the word *custom* to Americans personalizing their cars. But, fear not, French designers have given the idea a more ancient and patriotic pedigree. They’ve reappropriated the dictate of Antoine Lavoisier, the great eighteenth-century chemist: “Nothing is lost, nothing is created, all is transformed.”

A sort of chemical transformation through recombination is, in fact, where much of today’s aesthetic plenitude comes from. Like atoms bouncing about in a boiling solution, aesthetic elements are bumping into each other, creating new style compounds. We are constantly exposed to new aesthetic material, ripe for recombination, borrowed from other people’s traditional cultures or contemporary subcultures. Thanks to media, migration, and cultural pluralism, what once was exotic is now familiar.

Some of these subcultural styles begin with an ethnic base—Indian *mehndi* (temporary henna tattoos), African-American hip-hop styles, New England WASP preppy clothing, Chinese feng shui, the vivid colors of Mexico and the Caribbean, the pervasively influential lines of Japanese art and interiors. Others indicate value-related, voluntary associations, “differences with depth,” in the words of cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken. For such subcultures as goths, punks, and skaters, he writes, “Differences of fashion, clothing—the differences of the surface—turned out to indicate differences below, differences of value and perspective.”
While subcultures may remain stylistically distinct, elements of their aesthetics get adopted by people who simply like certain looks and may combine them in seemingly contradictory ways. Some of these aesthetic adapters are influential designers or trendsetting celebrities. Others are unknown individuals looking for ways to express their own sense of what is beautiful, interesting, or new. As a result, ethnic styles do not stay in their literal or metaphorical ghettos, nor do they remain pristine and traditional. Value-laden aesthetics, such as punk or goth, spill over into mainstream culture as people outside their subcultures adopt purely aesthetic elements, usually in a less-extreme form. That's how Chanel's reddish-black Vamp nail polish wound up on the hands of stylish women in the mid-nineties, and how pierced ears ceased to indicate anything definite about men's sexual orientation. Those narrow European-style glasses say a lot less about someone today than they did ten years ago.

Ours is a pluralist age, in which styles coexist to please the individuals who choose them. The “return to beauty” classicists confuse today's aesthetic pluralism, which overthrows modernist ideology, with the banishment of modernist aesthetics. But modernism is not dead. It is thriving, enjoying a huge upsurge in interest. Modernist furnishings, from Art Deco to midcentury styles, have become sought-after antiques, and modernist buildings are the latest cause for preservationists. Contemporary designers continue to use modernist motifs, along with many other influences, to create new objects and environments. Some modernist experiments were certainly aesthetic failures, but the modernists created many beautiful things. Their formal breakthroughs continue to inspire delight.

Although clever allusions still have their place, the breakdown of modernist ideology means that it's no longer necessary to hide aesthetic pleasure behind postmodern irony and camp. Even modernism's advocates have abandoned its confining strictures. “Instead of finding a style and adhering to its tenets, modern design allows you to grapple with your own ideas about how you want to live,” writes the publisher of *Dwell*, an architecture and interiors magazine first published in 2000.
Dwell’s editor in chief preaches a pluralism that would sound strange to her forebears: “We think of ourselves as Modernists, but we are the nice Modernists. One of the things we like best about Modernism—the nice Modernism—is its flexibility.” She tweaks the puritanical doctrines of Adolf Loos—“one crabby Modernist”—whose influential 1908 essay “Ornament and Crime” proclaimed decoration degenerate, the amoral indulgence of children and barbarians. To a contemporary reader, Loos sounds like a racist, pleasure-hating totalitarian. In the twenty-first century, ornament is not crime. It is an essential form of human self-expression.

And what an expressive age ours is. The signs are all around us. A few have become cultural clichés: Apple’s iMac turns the personal computer from a utilitarian, putty-colored box into curvy, translucent eye candy—blueberry, strawberry, tangerine, grape. Translucent jewel tones spread to staplers and surge protectors, microwaves and mice. Apple reinvents its designs in touchable pearly whites.

Target introduces a line of housewares developed by architect-designer Michael Graves. Few Target customers have heard of Graves, but his playful toaster quickly becomes the chain’s most popular, and most expensive, model. A year later, Target doubles the number of Graves offerings, to more than five hundred products. Over time, it adds even more.

Volkswagen reinvents the Beetle. Karim Rashid reinvents the trash can. Oxo reinvents the potato peeler. People will pay an extra five bucks for a little kitchen tool that looks and feels good. Show them something cool or pretty, and they’ll replace wastebaskets they’ve never thought twice about.

For every well-publicized touchstone there are dozens of surprises—credit cards, for instance. Nordstrom issues shiny holographic credit cards to spice up its brand. “The look of the card made it more special,” explains a spokeswoman. PayPal, the online payments service, entices customers with see-through Visa cards in five different colors. I present my American Express Blue card at a hotel
and get a common reaction: “Wow. Where did you get it?” The company, proud of its cool card, dubs that response the “clerk double-take.”

Reflecting the demand for products that stand out, the number of industrial designers employed in the United States jumps 32 percent in five years. Design schools are so full of students they can hardly find faculty to staff the courses. “We’re seeing design creep into everything, everything,” says the former president of the Industrial Designers Society of America. The post-nineties recession is just a “speed bump” in a long-run trend.

“Kmart goes under,” he says, “and all anybody cares about is Martha Stewart. Target doesn’t have enough with Michael Graves. They have to hire Philippe Starck, the most famous designer in the world.” Business Week was wrong to declare the 1990s the age of design. “The nineties were clearly the age of distribution, and Walmart coming to the fore,” he says. High-style products like the iMac and Beetle didn’t appear until the very end of the decade. “I see 2000 to 2010 as the decade of design.”

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art opens an exhibit of sneakers. Guitars are art in Boston; motorcycles are art in New York. Museums in Miami and La Jolla display household objects, from chairs to salad bowls. To the consternation of critics, an exhibit of Armani couture draws swarms of visitors to the Guggenheim in New York. The definition of “art” has changed. But so has the definition of sneakers and salad bowls. We expect the most mundane products to provide not only function but aesthetic pleasure and meaning. “Design has become the public art of our time,” says a curator and designer.

A Time cover story hails “The Rebirth of Design,” declaring that “America is bowled over by style.” Not just America. The new age of aesthetics is a worldwide phenomenon, found throughout the developed nations, most strikingly in the once-plain and pragmatic English-speaking world. “The Style Wars,” reads a cover line on the Sydney Sun-Herald’s Sunday magazine. “Once upon a time, sofas were for sitting on and kettles were for making tea. But all that’s
changed now.” Five new Australian home and lifestyle magazines started publishing in 2000 alone, bringing the total there to more than twenty.

Aesthetic creativity is as vital, and as indicative of economic and social progress, as technological innovation. In Turkey, interior design is flourishing; the number of magazines on the subject has jumped from one to forty in a decade. Young people are recovering Ottoman artifacts and aesthetics, fusing them with Asian and Western influences. Istanbul, says a Turkish architect who returned there from New York, is “very dynamic, and hungry for progress. Hungry to catch up with London and New York as a capital of design.”

Japan, whose traditional styles have long been a source of aesthetic inspiration worldwide, is fast becoming “the real international capital of fashion,” writes Amy Spindler, the influential style editor of The New York Times Magazine. It’s the place where aesthetic change for its own sake dominates popular culture. “Unlike with the London punks and mods, or the New York rappers who so inspire dress in the streets of Japan’s capital, there are no politics behind the Tokyo fashion movements. The punk movement, when it came, was only about fashion. The hip-hop movement has nothing to do with rebellion. . . . As central as fashion is to life here, all it really says is that the person wearing it loves fashion.” Along with the clothing styles that attract New York editors, Japan exports new aesthetic concepts through animation and industrial design.

As recently as 1970, Japan had no design schools. Neither did South Korea or Singapore, which have also become centers of design. Today, Japan has at least nine design schools, South Korea at least ten, and Singapore at least four. To boost the country’s industrial design capacity, the South Korean government is establishing more specialized schools and design departments within existing universities. Even Italy, by many measures a design superpower, offered no degrees in design, as opposed to architecture, before Domus Academy opened in 1983. Today, at least twenty-three schools grant design degrees. Since 1995, more than forty design and architecture
magazines (excluding graphic design publications) have begun publishing worldwide.

Graphic design has grown along with product and environmental design. In the early seventies, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the professional association for graphic designers, had 1,700 members. "And 1,350 lived or worked between Fourteenth Street and Eighty-fifth Street in Manhattan," says a longtime member. Now there are 15,000 members—double the number in 1995—and dozens of chapters all over the country. That growth in part reflects organizational vitality, but the profession as a whole is indeed flourishing. There are about 150,000 graphic designers in the country, estimates the AIGA's executive director. A generation ago, he says, his counterparts would have optimistically told a reporter there were 30,000 and "believed there were only 15,000." Worldwide, at least fifty graphic design magazines publish regularly; in 1970, there were three.

Demand for professional graphic design has increased along with do-it-yourself capability. Word processors and PowerPoint are teaching everyone about typefaces and bullet points. Digital cameras, low-cost scanners, and ink-jet printers make four-color illustrated documents cheap and easy. In 1999, Kinko's launched a $40 million campaign to convince customers that everyday communication requires polished graphics: "Sometimes it's not just what you say, but how you say it." Maids looking for housecleaning jobs hand out flyers that feature attractive layouts, clip art, and typefaces once reserved for design professionals. Staid law firms hire graphic designers to create a unique and consistent look and feel for everything from stationery to Web sites, including such once-unthinkable elements as corporate logos. The plain typed résumé or company newsletter is as obsolete as carbon paper. "There's no such thing as an undesigned graphic object anymore," says graphic designer Michael Bierut, former president of the AIGA board, "and there used to be."

Contrary to Time, it's misleading to call the trend "design." Designers worry as much about function as about form, and they stubbornly resist being treated as mere "stylists." Yet when a GE Plastics executive says that "aesthetics, or styling, has become an
accepted unique selling point,” he is not talking about recent breakthroughs in the cleaning power of toothbrush-bristle arrangements or the ergonomics of desk chairs. Nor is he addressing the ideological meanings that designers invoke in the manifestos that bring prestige within their profession. He’s saying that surfaces matter, in and of themselves.

Talking about “design” also inevitably focuses attention on products, with occasional nods to hotel interiors. Even graphic design usually gets left out. The Time cover story is illustrated with pictures of housewares and electronic gizmos. Every single person it quotes, except boutique hotelier Ian Schrager, is in the business of designing, displaying, or selling objects. That’s what “design” means to most people—cars, computers, toothbrushes, housewares, clothes, furniture.

The boom in product design is just one sign of the increasing importance of sensory content in every aspect of life. Real estate agents hire “stagers” to redecorate homes for sale. New home owners can then use “move-in coordinators” to unpack and arrange their things in a visually appealing way. Aesthetically ambitious suburbanites engage professionals to adorn their houses for Christmas. Busy professional couples hire chefs to come in and make dinner, providing not only good food but the textures and smells of home cooking. Business executives enlist Hollywood stylists to dress them. Making people, places, and things look good is a growth business.

Or consider the change observed by Pierluigi Zappacosta, a founder of Logitech, the computer peripherals company best known for its mice. Zappacosta has his own place in design history; by hiring Hartmut Esslinger’s design firm, frog, to create Logitech’s product and packaging designs, he injected a playful, distinctive style into the dull world of computer peripherals. But the most vivid stories Zappacosta tells about aesthetics have nothing to do with computers. They’re about food.

When he came to Palo Alto from Italy in 1976, Zappacosta was baffled by American meals—no good bread, no good cheese, no good coffee. “It seemed like something was fundamentally wrong,” he
says. If the food was bad, the atmosphere of restaurants was even weirder. "You could not eat, except in the dark," he says, recalling going from the blinding sun into pitch-dark business lunches. "I don't know how much it has to do with food and how much it has to do with the concept of décor. But if it was a nice restaurant, you couldn't see what you were eating."

All that has changed. Just as competition from Microsoft spurred Logitech to beautify its mouse, so grocery and restaurant entrepreneurs have pushed up standards for food and restaurant design. Some were immigrants re-creating the good taste of their homelands. Others were American-born innovators, creating such oddities as "California roll" sushi and barbecue-chicken pizza. Today, marvels Zappacosta, you not only can get good bread in Silicon Valley, but a local grocery has a thirty-foot-long aisle filled with cheeses from all over the world—far more variety than you'd find in an Italian market. Dark restaurants aren't classy but old-fashioned.

Our generic standards have ratcheted up from Pizza Hut to California Pizza Kitchen, from TGI Friday's as trendy urban innovator in the 1970s to TGI Friday's as everyday suburban fare. "Black-Eyed Pea used to be a high-design restaurant," says an architect who specializes in restaurant design. The chain, which serves home-style Southern food, was one of the first to hire professionals to create its atmosphere. "It used to be unique and kind of fashion-forward. People would talk about, 'Have you seen the Black-Eyed Pea?' That's not the case anymore." Design that was once cutting edge is now a minimum standard, taken for granted by customers.

Contrary to all the stories about product design, a better indicator of our aesthetic age than the splashily designed objects on store shelves is the evolution of the environments that surround them, and us. Industrial design is unquestionably enjoying a new golden age, but the look and feel of at least some leading products has been important since the late 1920s. As a widespread phenomenon, meticulous attention to environments is much newer. "Design is everywhere, and
everywhere is now designed,” says David Brown, the former Art Center president, with only a little exaggeration.

With its carefully conceived mix of colors and textures, aromas and music, Starbucks is more indicative of our era than the iMac. It is to the age of aesthetics what McDonald’s was to the age of convenience or Ford was to the age of mass production—the touchstone success story, the exemplar of all that is good and bad about the aesthetic imperative. Hotels, shopping malls, libraries, even churches seek to emulate Starbucks. Curmudgeons may grouse about the price of its coffee, but Starbucks isn’t just selling beverages. It’s delivering a multisensory aesthetic experience, for which customers are willing to pay several times what coffee costs at a purely functional Formica-and-linoleum coffee shop (much less a 7-Eleven or Dunkin’ Donuts). The company employs scores of designers to keep its stores’ “design language”—color palettes, upholstery textures, light fixtures, brochure paper, graphic motifs—fresh and distinctive.

“Every Starbucks store is carefully designed to enhance the quality of everything the customers see, touch, hear, smell, or taste,” writes CEO Howard Schultz. “All the sensory signals have to appeal to the same high standards. The artwork, the music, the aromas, the surfaces all have to send the same subliminal message as the flavor of the coffee: Everything here is best-of-class.” (Emphasis in the original.)

Starbucks has a specific look and feel. But it’s not alone in either the message it wants to send or the sensory techniques it uses to send it. Within a generation, the floors of shopping malls have gone from concrete to tile to marble. Truck stops and turnpike rest areas are hiring architects to create airy, light oases. Designer bathrooms have become de rigueur in upscale restaurants. Once windowless boxes, new self-storage centers look like antebellum plantation homes or luxury hotels. Factories incorporate more open space and natural light, and businesses make relocation decisions based in part on aesthetic amenities. Muzak has dumped its infamous elevator music in favor of recordings by original artists, with programs crafted to produce just the right atmosphere for a customer’s environment.

Trade show booths today emulate theme parks and World’s Fairs,
striving to be “immersive environments” rather than mere product displays. Lighting, sound, and textures convey not only information but the right mood. The goal, writes an exhibit designer, is to create “a complete environment—one that gets inside the minds of the attendees and triggers the right feelings.” Form follows, and leads, emotion.

People have always decorated their homes. But the aesthetic quality and variety of home interiors have increased dramatically. Furnishings once reserved for rich aficionados are now the stuff of middle-class life. In the early 1990s, when Pottery Barn launched its interiors-oriented catalog, American home owners could not buy a wrought-iron curtain rod without hiring an interior designer. “We had to go to a little iron shop in Wisconsin and teach them how to make a curtain rod,” recalls Hilary Billings, who turned the Pottery Barn catalog into a home-furnishings source for the aesthetically aspiring middle class, a niche that rival Crate and Barrel also filled. Now such once-exotic offerings can be found in discount stores. “Crate and Barrel changed the world,” says Brown, “and then Target changed it again.”

In a 1976 *Vogue* article, a designer praised a Manhattan high-rise for millionaire jet-setters by saying, “Luxury of the bathroom is terrific—marble floor and walls and nicely designed chrome fixtures.” Twenty-five years later, new tract-home bathrooms come with marble floors, and do-it-yourselfers replace ho-hum designer chrome with brushed-nickel faucets once restricted “to the trade.” Large home builders open design centers where buyers can choose from hundreds of porcelain, stone, and marble tiles, dozens of different sinks, and well over a thousand carpets, customizing their mass-produced homes.

Home-improvement shows are booming on television, offering not just do-it-yourself handyman advice but designers’ aesthetic expertise. Seventy million U.S. households get Home & Garden Television, “the CNN of its niche,” which also runs in Canada, Japan, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The Learning Channel’s *Trading Spaces* room-makeover show, a knockoff of the British hit *Changing Rooms*, draws 3 million to 5 million viewers a week, sets
audience records for the networks, usually placing among cable’s top ten shows. Producers get between three hundred and five hundred unsolicited applications a day from home owners who’d like to participate. The shows keep proliferating. BBC designers now redo gardens on *Ground Force* and, using only what residents already have on hand, make over entire homes on *House Invaders*. On TLC’s *While Your Were Out* and its sister Discovery Channel’s *Surprise by Design*, spouses and friends surprise a home owner with a redecorated room. MTV makes over teens’ rooms in rock-star style on *Crib Crashers*.

“Home-improvement television has gone from being an oddity very much on the fringe to being very mainstream,” says a veteran host. “Our society’s willingness to spend our time and money on homes is much greater, whether it’s a condominium or a house on the water.” Membership in the American Society of Interior Designers has more than doubled since 1992, rising to about twenty thousand from nine thousand.

A new art market has developed: upscale wall décor. Artists and art collectors have long mocked the idea that someone might purchase a work to go with a couch—an insult to serious art. Perhaps as a result, the wall décor industry has been the home of generic, clichéd prints. But not all visually sophisticated consumers want art to impress their friends, hobnob with the gallery crowd, or make money as an investment. Some just want a more attractive living room. In response, an unsnobbish middle market is offering prints and photographs to go with stylish furniture.

Many of the featured artists are well-known modern or contemporary names. Eyestorm, which started as a specialized Web site and branched out into stores, offers limited-edition prints by Damien Hirst at $3,000 each, and a photo of Andy Warhol by Dennis Hopper for $500. Serving the same need, Crate and Barrel sells framed reproductions of Mark Rothko paintings for $499. Sales are growing at double-digit rates. Customers are “buying for aesthetics, not collecting,” says an Eyestorm executive. They’re treating art not as an investment or status symbol but simply as a way to create a beautiful home environment.
As aesthetic standards rise in private homes, public places feel pressure to upgrade their own look and feel. Elaborating on the techniques of one-of-a-kind boutique hotels, Starwood Hotels & Resorts has adopted a strategy of “winning by design.” Its upscale W chain gets the most attention, but the big news is in the midmarket. Starwood is ridding Sheraton and Westin rooms of cheesy floral bedspreads, plastic veneer furniture, and tacky ice buckets. It, too, is buying better art. “If you wouldn’t have it in your house, why should we give it to a guest?” is the motto, and the hotelier’s design choices reflect rising standards at home. Bathroom mirrors get frames, and countertops go granite. Sheraton rooms feature sleigh beds and accent walls. Three customers a day ask, unsolicited, how they can buy Westin’s all-white, ultracomfortable “heavenly bed.”

Airport terminals are remodeling with skylights, panoramic views, art galleys, custom carpeting or terrazzo floors, and high-end shops. Wolfgang Puck Cafes and Starbucks have replaced hot dogs and stale coffee. New airport spas offer manicures and massages to travelers with time to kill. At La Guardia, the Figs restaurant serves such gourmet dishes as Italian panini sandwiches and fig-and-prosciutto flatbread pizza. At Chicago’s O’Hare, travelers changing concourses walk beneath a 744-foot neon-light sculpture, its colors rippling in sync with music. At art-filled Albany airport, which opened its remodeled terminal in 1998, the security checkpoints match the café chairs—blond and cherry woods with a decorative grid of brushed stainless steel and copper-colored backing. Only the actual conveyor belt would look out of place in a Starbucks. “If Americans are going to spend more time in airports, it’s incumbent upon us to make them attractive places,” says the former mayor of Philadelphia, who made upgrading the city’s airport a major project. And that was before added security precautions extended airport waits.

Shopping malls, once designed to be functional and convenient, with little attention to atmosphere, are turning to aesthetics to try to hold customers who might otherwise prefer drive-up “lifestyle centers.” New malls have “grand portals” and attractive landscaping on
the outside, soft seating and decorative lighting fixtures on the inside. Older malls are remodeling. “The original shopping centers were extremely durable but not necessarily the kind of places you’d like to linger in,” says the chief designer at a large mall developer. As recently as the 1980s, he explains, malls “were rational and functional designs that were to be convenient and efficient. They were more or less ‘machines for shopping.’”

Not so today. At the Beverly Center, a twenty-year-old mall in Los Angeles, the new central court features a backlit, three-story “shoji screen” with panels in subtle blues and yellows representing the colors of the California landscape and sky. A new patio off the food court gives visitors a view of the Hollywood Hills, while sofas and chairs throughout the corridors invite people to linger. The goal, says the mall’s general manager, was to create a place “where people would spend the day, not come in on their mission and turn around and go somewhere else for their social environment.”

The most dramatic indicators of the new aesthetic age relate not to product design or environments, but to personal appearance—the crossroads of individual expression, social expectations, and universal aesthetic standards. In a 2001 report titled *Looking Good, Sounding Right: Style Counselling in the New Economy*, a British consulting and research group writes that employees’ looks are no longer simply an advantage to their personal careers but “a highly marketable asset for employers.” The importance of “aesthetic skills” has grown along with lifestyle-oriented service businesses, in which aesthetic environments attract customers and good-looking employees function as “human hardware,” enhancing the company image.

A British boutique hotel chain, for instance, hires only attractive employees (with good personalities). It then gives each new staff member ten days of grooming and deportment training, including individual makeovers and shaving lessons. In today’s economy, argues the report, training programs for the unemployed need to emphasize aesthetics as much as other skills: “Why should the middle class, profes-
sionals, and politicians be the only ones to make use of the image-makers?” Following that logic, StyleWorks, a New York–based nonprofit group, uses volunteer hairstylists, makeup artists, and image consultants to provide “a fresh new look for a fresh new start” to women moving from welfare to work. Founded in 1999, StyleWorks gave makeovers and style counseling to about one thousand clients in its first two years.

As recent elections demonstrate, the politicians also need their image makers. From Al Gore’s earth-tone suits to Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris’s heavy makeup, coverage of the 2000 U.S. presidential race seemed obsessed with appearances. For the first time ever, the Gallup Organization polled people on which presidential candidate was better looking (Gore won, 44 percent to 24 percent). The question was worth asking because the answer wasn’t obvious. Both candidates were way above average. Contemplating the politics of cuteness, a Washington Post writer declared, “Presidentially, the United States is now in a place called Hunksville.”

In her Senate-race victory speech, Hillary Clinton gave credit to her “six black pants suits.” When she showed up on Capitol Hill looking plump and frumpy, critics opined that she’d hit a “glamour spiral.” When Gore reemerged on the political scene in August 2001, all pundits could talk about was his salt-and-pepper beard. Speculation about 2004 Democratic contenders inevitably mentions the good looks of Senators John Kerry and John Edwards. People magazine even dubbed Edwards the nation’s “sexiest politician.”

The 2001 British election concentrated even more blatantly on the candidates’ looks. “The underlying topic of the General Election,” wrote a Tory commentator, “was not tax and spend, boom or bust, saving the pound and snatching Britain from the gaping, salivating maw of Europe, but hair, and [Tory candidate William] Hague’s distressing lack of it.” Hague’s looks were universally declared a major political problem, before and after he was trounced by Tony Blair. “The general view is that he looks a lot like a fetus in a suit,” said an old friend and ally. Shortly after becoming Hague’s successor as Tory leader, the equally bald Iain Duncan Smith proceeded to attack Blair
on the hair issue. “He’s losing it pretty rapidly and brushes it like a teased Weetabix,” he said. “If having a head of hair is the qualification for being Premier, we’ll have to rule out the current PM in a year’s time.”

Good hair, by contrast, is a political asset. Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi’s permed “Lion King” mane boosted his popularity and helped reinforce his image as an iconoclastic reformer. German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, whose thick brown hair gives him a youthful appearance, actually went to court over a published allegation that he dyes his hair to keep out the gray. He won an injunction against future hair-coloring claims. With dramatic costuming sense and the right headgear, however, even a bald politician can win style plaudits. “The chic-est man on earth,” according to fashion designer Tom Ford, is Afghan leader Hamid Karzai.

Handsome political leaders reflect a more general phenomenon. Spared not only the disfiguring diseases and malnutrition of earlier centuries but the crooked teeth, acne scars, and gray hair of our parents and grandparents, the people of the industrialized countries are arguably the best-looking people in history. We live less physically demanding lives, which can lead to obesity but also keeps us young. It’s no longer the case, as a nineteenth-century visitor wrote, that “the bloom of an American lady is gone” at twenty-one and by thirty “the whole fabric is in decay.” Baby boomers expect to look young and attractive well into their fifties, and many do.

While only the genetically blessed can be extraordinary beauties, more and more of us qualify as what historian Arthur Marwick calls “personable”—generally good-looking if we care to be. At the same time, we have the chance to see many more truly beautiful people than our ancestors, thanks to a combination of media, travel, and population density. An hour watching television, flipping through magazines, or driving down billboard-lined streets exposes us to more beautiful people, of more different types, than most of our forebears would have seen in a lifetime. That means we make more exacting judgments, about ourselves as well as others. “Only when people have the opportunity to make choices and comparisons can
they make a genuine evaluation of personal appearance,” writes Marwick.

Those judgments extend to areas where personal appearance was once considered irrelevant, even unseemly, to call attention to. Authors on both sides of the Atlantic are starting to notice, and sometimes complain, that their looks are almost as important as their writing. “Looks sell books,” reports The Washington Post. “It’s a closed-door secret in contemporary American publishing, but the word is leaking out. Not that you have to resemble Denzel Washington or Cameron Diaz, but if you can write well and you possess the haute cheekbones of Susan Minot, the delicate mien of Amy Tan or the brooding ruggedness of Sebastian Junger, your chances are much greater.”

In Britain, publishers aren’t as shy about admitting the importance of the “gorge factor”—How gorgeous is the writer?—especially for new authors. Acclaimed young novelist Zadie Smith, author of White Teeth, even underwent a publisher-pleasing makeover, changing her hairstyle and getting rid of her glasses. “I didn’t see too many White Teeth reviews without a photograph,” says the company’s publishing director. “Looks do make a difference, we all know that.”

If all this emphasis on appearance represents bad news for those of us who’d just as soon be judged on other criteria, the good news is that the same influences have led to a broader definition of attractiveness. Exposure to the way many different people look raises beauty standards, but it also teaches us that beauty, while a recognizable universal, comes in different types—variations of build, skin color, hair color, and so on. On top of the natural variations, we add artificial ones, matters of style that imitate or expand on nature. The result of higher beauty standards and more stylistic variety is an explosion of activity designed to produce better-looking, or more aesthetically interesting, people. Here, too, ornament is no longer a crime.

The number of nail salons in the United States has nearly doubled in a decade, while the number of manicurists has tripled. The market for skin-care “beauty therapists” and aestheticians, long strong on the European continent, is booming in the United States and Britain.
Tattoos have ceased to be taboo. Hair coloring is virtually mandatory. Nearly three-quarters of middle-aged women (ages forty-five to fifty-four) polled by the American Association of Retired Persons say they dye their hair to cover gray. So do 13 percent of middle-aged men. U.S. hair coloring sales topped $1.1 billion in 2001, up 34 percent since 1997.

The trend is international. Sixty percent of the women in Japan and South Korea color their hair, between 30 percent and 40 percent in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In 2002, Japan Airlines changed its policies to allow flight attendants to have subtly colored hair; previously only naturally black hair was allowed. “Nowadays if you don’t color your hair, you’re the one who’s different,” says a Singapore fashion-magazine editor.

“Hair-dyeing used to be driven by negative motivations like hiding gray hair,” says a hair-coloring executive in Japan, where sales doubled from 1991 to 2001. “But today, people have come to view hair coloring as a form of self-expression.” A Tokyo business analyst compares the rapid adoption of hair coloring to a more widely recognized Japanese trend: “The two biggest changes in the Japanese market in the last decade have been mobile phones and the color of Japanese hair.”

Coloring adds depth and highlights to dull hair and makes artificial blondness so common it has become, in the words of one fashion critic, “just one of the many attractive ways to adorn dark hair.” Clairol aims its Herbal Essences True Intense Color at men and women ages eighteen to thirty-four. Young people, says an executive, tend to be “very experimental” and “want to express themselves and their own individuality.”

When L’Oreal launched its Féria line of hair colors in the summer of 1998, it showcased a blond shade on a youthful model with a short Afro and milk-chocolate complexion. Even more audaciously, a Clairol ad shows two black-clad redheads, one with pale skin, the other deep brown: “Believe it or not—we’re the same color,” reads the headline, ostensibly referring to the Clairol product. What once would have been a problematic statement about race is now purely
aesthetic. And artificiality is no longer suspect. Does she or doesn’t she? Of course she does. In the next ad, she’ll have yet another hair color. “The brand is about breaking the rules of hair color and using it like a cosmetic,” a L’Oreal executive says of Féria.

Young men constitute a rapidly growing market for hair coloring, with U.S. sales up 25 percent in five years. Teen boys in the United States spend about 5 percent of their income on hair color. “If you have the fashion, you have the girls,” says a teenager whose mother helps him keep his hair tipped blond. Too young to worry about gray, young men are looking for excitement and self-expression. “I have this mousy brown hair, and I never felt it represented who I was,” says a twenty-six-year-old Canadian man, whose hair color has ranged from jet black to champagne blond. “I see myself as more colorful and more interesting.” A Brisbane, Australia, salon owner reports that twenty to thirty men a week come in for hair color, many inspired by pop star Ricky Martin’s tinted locks. “In the old days, you didn’t color your hair,” he says. “Now it’s just being fashion-conscious.”

Since the 1980s, we’ve also experienced what cultural critic Jonathan Rauch dubs the “Buff Revolution.” For the first time in centuries, it has become respectable for people in Anglo-American countries to pay attention to men’s bodies. “Suddenly,” writes Rauch, “there were half a dozen physique magazines on every 7-Eleven newsstand. Suddenly buses prowled through the cities bearing ads in which, for no discernible reason, a barechested young man with a chiseled and tanned and shaved-down torso displayed a microwave oven (a microwave oven?).”

Rauch finds this revolution generally a good thing, despite some excesses. Others worry that men’s growing concern with their looks is, to quote a magazine headline, “Turning Boys into Girls.” Feminist Susan Faludi assails “ornamental culture” for its baleful effects on men’s self-esteem. Books with titles like The Adonis Complex and Looking Good fret that men are hurting their physical and psychological health in pursuit of their aesthetic ideals.

For both men and women, the boundary between health and
beauty, medicine and cosmetics, is melting away. Pharmaceuticals promise to grow hair on men’s heads and slow its growth on women’s upper lips. “Enjoy beautiful eye color change even if your vision is perfect,” suggests an ad for contact lenses. From 1992 to 2001, the number of patients having cosmetic medical procedures in the United States nearly quintupled, from 413,000 to 1.9 million. Sixty percent of American women and 35 percent of men say they’d have cosmetic surgery if it were safe, free, and undetectable; younger people are more likely to say yes, suggesting a generational shift in attitudes.

Having prevented or cured most tooth diseases, dentists now bombard prospective patients with mailers selling cosmetic services—bonding and whitening for younger-looking smiles. U.S. and Canadian orthodontists claimed 5 million patients in 2000, up from 3.5 million in 1989. “The dental profession’s traditional domain, centered around the eradication of disease, now finds itself on the threshold of uncharted territory: the enhancement of appearance,” declares a cover article in *The Journal of the American Dental Association*. A journalist evaluating tooth-whiteners notes that the products “are primed to be the next deodorant: a once-optional form of personal hygiene that’s now simply an obligation. It’s only a matter of time because the more of us who get whitened, the grungier your unwhitened teeth will appear in contrast.”

Dermatologists zap age spots with lasers and prevent acne with drugs. Doctors declare teenage acne scars a thing of the past, as unnecessary as measles or crooked teeth. In 2001, more than 111,000 Americans under eighteen availed themselves of chemical peels, while another 55,000 submitted to microdermabrasion. Such skin treatments also raise beauty standards. With new preventive drugs and remedies available, says a teenager, “Now, if you have some bad acne, it really stands out.”

While all this activity has been going on in the economic and social world, two big waves of scholarship have directed intellectual attention toward aesthetics. Scholars in the relatively new field of “mate-
rial culture” study the interactions among style, commerce, and personal identity. This research reflects what Grant McCracken calls “the long-standing anthropological conviction that material culture makes culture material, i.e., that the expressions of a lifestyle are more than mere reflections of it; that, in some cases, they are its substance, and that, in all cases, they give it substance.” The material—and hence the aesthetic—matters to people’s sense of self. It isn’t just surface and illusion. And it is worthy of serious study.

Feminist historians are uncovering and analyzing women’s beauty culture and domestic taste, challenging the twentieth-century dogmas that declared ornamentation inherently decadent, corrupt, or manipulative, and markets inherently exploitive. “Why were there no serious books on refrigerators and cars?” Penny Sparke, a design historian, recalls wondering. “Why was there so much work available about architecture and so little about interiors? . . . Feminine culture, linked with the everyday, the commercial and the aesthetically ‘impure,’ had been relegated to the margins.” That’s no longer true, as Sparke’s own work demonstrates.

Journals with names like *Fashion Theory* (first published in 1997) and *Journal of Design History* engage these topics, among others. Academic presses publish works on the history and meaning of dress and of dishes. Art museums are beefing up their design and clothes collections, and scholars are analyzing the culture and history of fashion. Books on the evolution of shopping and store environments, pro and con, are increasingly common. *Enterprise & Society*, a business-history journal founded in 2000, devoted one of its first issues to “beauty and business,” focusing on commerce and personal appearance.

One result of this new inquiry, quips a reviewer, is that “the new term for an overflowing wardrobe is ‘archive’; rummaging through your cast-offs has become a form of research, and, if you have shopped wisely, your archive may deserve an exhibition of its own.” In 2000, a New York professor did in fact donate her collection of Perry Ellis clothing to the Fashion Institute of Technology’s museum. Many natural and social scientists, meanwhile, are increasingly
interested in the nature of aesthetic universals. While the material-culture scholars ponder the value and social creation of aesthetic meaning, these researchers want to understand the biological origins of aesthetic pleasure. Their scholarship challenges the received academic wisdom that tastes are as different as languages, that the art of one culture is incomprehensible to the previously unexposed people of another. In fact, languages themselves begin with universals. So, apparently, do aesthetic responses. As a result, aesthetic elements can spread relatively easily from culture to culture. Although context and meaning can vary widely, and specific tastes may differ from individual to individual, human beings don’t have that much trouble appreciating the pleasures of otherwise foreign aesthetics.

Psychologists have found patterns of symmetry and proportion, consistency and surprise, that cross cultures and ages. Even infants, they’ve discovered, distinguish between attractive and unattractive faces. Across fields and in different countries, good-looking people earn more, report economists, and good looks are at least as important economically for men as for women. “Musics cross-culturally are very different from one another,” says Denis Dutton, a professor of aesthetics with a particular interest in the relation between biology and art. “But musics depend on sounds, on pitch, on harmonies, on iterations—getting tired of something, being surprised. Novelty, surprise, echoing effects, repeating of themes, variations of themes—in all developed musics you find these things happening.” Languages differ in how finely they distinguish colors, but some categories are found just about everywhere: the “focal colors” of white, black, red, green, yellow, and blue. No culture names only orange and puce. The combinations vary, but the component building blocks are universal.

Evolutionary theorists postulate explanations for these patterns, based on survival and sexual selection. “Our response to beauty is hard-wired—governed by circuits in the brain shaped by natural selection,” writes psychologist Nancy Etcoff. “We love smooth skin, symmetrical bodies, thick shiny hair, a woman’s curved waist and a man’s sculpted pectorals, because in the course of evolution the people who noticed these signals had more reproductive success. We are
their descendants.” Of course, biology also differs somewhat from individual to individual, which may explain why I prefer brunets while you like blonds—a preference for exogamy has positive genetic effects—or why I respond strongly to bright colors while you prefer pastels. Within the universal patterns are individual variations. In addition, the universal patterns of novelty and surprise lead to different results depending on what a particular person is already accustomed to.

The analysts of ephemeral material culture and the seekers of biologically based universals often seem at odds. But they in fact complement each other. Both are necessary to fully understand the role of aesthetics in human life, to explain both pleasure and meaning. Together, they tell us that aesthetics is neither a natural absolute nor a complete social construct. It interweaves nature and culture. The evolution of taste operates on timescales that range from gene-shaping eons to fad-and-fashion seasons. Aesthetics begins with the body, but it does not end there. Human beings are indeed visual, tactile creatures; we are also social, pattern-making, tool-using creatures. We remember, innovate, experiment, teach, and improve. “Making special” is a complex discovery process—a search through trial and error, experimentation and response, for sensory elements that move or delight.

The prophets who forecast a sterile, uniform future were wrong, because they imagined a society shaped by impersonal laws of history and technology, divorced from individuality, pleasure, and imagination. But economics, technology, and culture are not purely impersonal forces ruled by deterministic laws. They are dynamic, emergent processes that begin in the personal—in individual action, individual creativity, and individual desire. And, in our era, they are accelerating aesthetic discovery.