JOAN KRON

The Semiotics of Home Decor

Just when you thought it was safe to go back into your living room, here comes Joan Kron with a reminder that your home is a signaling system just as much as your clothing is. In Home-Psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration (1983), from which this selection is taken, Kron takes a broad look at the significance of interior decoration, showing how home design can reflect both an individual and a group identity. Ranging from a New York entrepreneur to Kwakiutl Indian chiefs, Kron further discusses how different cultures use possessions as a rich symbol system. The author of High Tech: The Industrial Style and Source Book for the Home (1978) and of some five hundred articles for American magazines, she is particularly interested in fashion, design, and the social psychology of consumption. Currently an editor-at-large at Allure magazine, Kron has also published Lift: Wanting, Fearing, and Having a Face-Lift (1998).

On June 7, 1979, Martin J. Davidson entered the materialism hall of fame. That morning the thirty-four-year-old New York graphic design entrepreneur went to his local newsstand and bought fifty copies of the New York Times expecting to read an article about himself in the Home section that would portray him as a man of taste and discrimination. Instead, his loft and his lifestyle, which he shared with singer Dawn Bennett, were given the tongue-in-cheek treatment under the headline: "When Nothing but the Best Will Do."1

Davidson, who spent no more money renovating his living quarters than many of the well-to-do folks whose homes are lionized in the Times’, Thursday and Sunday design pages — the running ethnographic record of contemporary upper-middle-class life-style — made the unpardonable error of telling reporter Jane Geniesse how much he had paid for his stereo system, among other things. Like many people who have not been on intimate terms with affluence for very long, Davidson is in the habit of price-tagging his possessions. His 69-cent-per-bottle bargain Perrier, his $700 Armani suits from Barney’s, his $27,000 cooperative loft and its $150,000 renovation, his sixteen $350-per-section sectionals, and his $11,000 best-of-class stereo. Martin J. Davidson wants the world to know how well he’s done. "I live the American dream," he told Mrs. Geniesse, which includes, "being known as one of Barney’s best customers."2

2Hbid.
Davidson even wants the U.S. Census Bureau's computer to know how well he has done. He is furious, in fact, that the 1980 census form did not have a box to check for people who live in cooperatives. "If someone looks at my census form they'll think I must be at the poverty level or lower." No one who read the Times article about Martin Davidson would surmise that.

It is hard to remember when a "design" story provoked more outrage. Letters to the editor poured in. Andy Warhol once said that in our fast-paced media world no one could count on being a celebrity for more than fifteen minutes. Martin Davidson was notorious for weeks. "All the Martin Davidsions in New York," wrote one irate reader, "will sit home listening to their $11,000 stereos, while downtown, people go to jail because they ate a meal they couldn't pay for." "How can one man embody so many of the ills afflicting our society today?" asked another offended reader. "Thank you for your clever spoof," wrote a third reader. "I was almost convinced that two people as crass as Martin Davidson and Dawn Bennett could exist." Davidson's consumption largesse was even memorialized by Russell Baker, the Times's Pulitzer Prize-winning humorist, who devoted a whole column to him: "While simultaneously consuming yesterday's newspaper," wrote Baker, "I consumed an article about one Martin Davidson, a veritable Ajax of consumption. A man who wants to consume nothing but the best and does, " Counting, as usual, Davidson would later tell people, "I was mentioned in the Times on three different days."

Davidson, a self-made man whose motto is "I'm not taking it with me and while I'm here I'm going to spend every stinking penny I make," couldn't understand why the Times had chosen to make fun of him rather than to glorify his 4,000-square-foot loft complete with bidet, Jacuzzi, professional exercise gear, pool table, pinball machine, sauna, two black-tile bathrooms, circular white Formica cooking island, status-stuffed collections of Steiff animals, pop art (including eleven Warhols), a sound system that could weaken the building's foundations if turned up full blast, and an air-conditioning system that can turn cigarette smoke, which both Davidson and Bennett abhor, into mountain dew —a loft that has everything Martin Davidson ever wanted in a home except a swimming pool and a squash court.

"People were objecting to my life-style," said Davidson. "It's almost as if there were a correlation between the fact that we spend so much on ourselves and other people are starving. No one yells when someone spends $250,000 for a chest of drawers at an auction," he complained. "I just read in the paper

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3Author's interview with Martin Davidson.
6Letter to the Editor, ibid.
that someone paid $650,000 for a stupid stamp. Now it’ll be put away in a vault and no one will ever see it."\(^8\)

But Dawn Bennett understood what made Davidson's consumption different. "It's not very fashionable to be an overt consumer and admit it,"\(^9\) she said.

### What Are Things For?

As anyone knows who has seen a house turned inside out at a yard sale, furnishing a home entails the acquisition of more objects than there are in a spring housewares catalog. With all the time, money, and space we devote to the acquisition, arrangement, and maintenance of these household possessions, it is curious that we know so little about our relationships to our possessions.

"It is extraordinary to discover that no one knows why people want goods," wrote British anthropologist Mary Douglas in *The World of Goods.*\(^10\) Although no proven or agreed-upon theory of possessiveness in human beings has been arrived at, social scientists are coming up with new insights on our complicated relationships to things. Whether or not it is human nature to be acquisitive, it appears that our household goods have a more meaningful place in our lives than they have been given credit for. What comes across in a wide variety of research is that things matter enormously.

Our possessions give us a sense of security and stability. They make us feel in control. And the more we control an object, the more it is a part of us. If it's not *mine*, it's *not me.*\(^11\) It would probably make sense for everyone on the block to share a lawn mower, but then no one would have control of it. If people are reluctant to share lawn mowers, it should not surprise us that family members are not willing to share TV sets. They want their own sets so they can watch what they please. Apparently, that was why a Chicago woman, furious with her boyfriend for switching from *The Thorn Birds* to basketball, stabbed him to death with a paring knife.\(^12\)

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\(^8\)Author's interview with Martin Davidson.

\(^9\)Author's interview with Dawn Bennett.


\(^12\)"Touch That Dial and You're Dead," *New York Post,* March 30, 1 983, p. 5.
Besides control, we use things to compete. In the late nineteenth the Kwakiutl Indian chiefs of the Pacific Northwest made war with sions.\(^\text{13}\) Their culture was built on an extravagant festival called the "\(\text{\&}\) a word that means, roughly, to flatten with gifts, It was not the posse of riches that brought prestige, it was the distribution and destruction of 0 At winter ceremonials that took years to prepare, rival chiefs would try to outdo one another with displays of conspicuous waste, heaping guests thousands of spoons and blankets, hundreds of gold and silver dance masks and coppers (large shields that vi/oro were their most valuable medium of exchange), and almost impoverishing themselves.

Today our means of competition is the accumulation and display of symbols of status. Perhaps in Utopia there will be no status, but in the id reader. Every member of society, said French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, "must learn to distinguish his fellow men according to the social status."\(^\text{14}\) This discrimination satisfies human needs and has survival value. "Status symbols provide the cue that is used in open ways to cover the status of others, and, from this, the way in which others are treated," wrote Erving Goffman in his classic paper, "Symbols of Class Status."\(^\text{15}\) Status affects who is invited to share "bed, board, and culture" and affects how others are treated. Whom we invite to dinner affects who marries whom, which affects whose children get start. Today what counts is what you eat (gourmet is better than greasy), what you fly (private jet is better than common carrier), what sports (sailing is better than bowling), where you matriculate, shop, and whom you associate with, how you eat (manners count), and where you live. Blue Blood Estates or Hard Scrabble zip codes wizard of demographics calls them. He has figured out that "peonlpr the same roost as birds of a feather."\(^\text{17}\) People also symbols to play net worth hide-and-seek. When Forbes profiled the 400, its own in-house millionaire Malcolm Forbes referred to people as "the numbers you shall know them."

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disclose his net worth but was delighted to drop clues telling about his status entertainments —his ballooning, his Faberge egg hunts, his chateaux, and his high life-style. It is up to others to translate those obviously costly perks into dollars.

A high price tag isn't the only attribute that endows an object with status. Status can accrue to something because it's scarce —a one-of-a-kind artwork or a limited edition object. The latest hard-to-get item is Steuben's $27,500 bowl etched with tulips that will be produced in an edition of five —one per year for five years. "Only one bowl will bloom this year," is the headline on the ad for it. Status is also found in objects made from naturally scarce materials: Hawaii's rare koa wood, lapis lazuli, or moon rock. And even if an object is neither expensive nor rare, status can rub off on something if it is favored by the right people, which explains why celebrities are used to promote coffee, cars, casinos, and credit cards.

If you've been associated with an object long enough you don't even have is to retain ownership. Its glory will shine on you retroactively. Perhaps that is why a member of Swiss nobility is having two copies made of each of the Old Master paintings in his collection. This way, when he turns his castle into a museum, both his children can still have, so to speak, the complete collection, mnemonics of the pictures that have been in the family for centuries. And the most potent status symbol of all is not the object per se, but the expertise that is cultivated over time, such as the appreciation of food, wine, design, or art.

If an object reflects a person accurately, it's an index of status. But symbols of status are not always good indices of status. They are not official proof of rank in the same way a general's stars are. So clusters of symbols are better than isolated ones. Anyone with $525 to spare can buy one yard of the tiger-patterned silk velvet that Lee Radziwill used to cover her dining chair seats. But one status yard does not a princess make. A taxi driver in Los Angeles gets a superior feeling from owning the same status-initialed luggage that many of her Beverly Hills fares own. "I have the same luggage you have," she tells them. "It blows their minds," she brags. But two status valises do not a glitterati make. Misrepresenting your social status isn't a crime, just "a presumption," said Goffman. Like wearing a $69 copy of a $1,000 watch that the mail-order catalog promises will make you "look like a count or countess on a commoner's salary."

"Signs of status are important ingredients of self. But they do not exhaust all the meanings of objects for people," wrote sociologists Ivihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols*.

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21 "Synchronies" catalogue, Hanover, Pennsylvania, Fall 1982.
CONSUMING PASSIONS

of the Self The study on which the book was based found that people cherished household objects not for their status-giving properties but especially because they were symbols of the self and one’s connections to others.

The idea that possessions are symbols of self is not new. Many people have noticed that having is intricately tied up with being. “It is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine, the line is difficult to draw,” wrote William James in 1890. “Every possession is an extension of the self,” said Georg Simmel in 1900. “Humans tend to integrate their selves with objects,” observed psychologist Ernest Beaglehole some thirty years later. Eskimos used to lick new acquisitions to cement the person/object relationship. We stamp our visual taste on our things making the totality resemble us. Indeed, theatrical scenic designers would be out of work if Blanche DuBois’s boudoir could be furnished with the same props as Hedda Gabler’s.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton discovered that “things are cherished not because of the material comfort they provide but for the information they convey about the owner and his or her ties to others.” People didn’t value things for their monetary worth, either. A battered toy, a musical instrument, a homemade quilt, they said, provide more meaning than expensive appliances which the respondents had plenty of. “What’s amazing is how few of these things really make a difference when you get to the level of what is important in life,” said Csikszentmihalyi. All those expensive furnishings “are required just to keep up with the neighbors or to keep up with what you expect your standard of living should be.”

“How else should one relate to the Joneses if not by keeping up with them,” asked Mary Douglas provocatively. The principle of reciprocity requires people to consume at the same level as one’s friends. If we accept hospitality, we have to offer it in return. And that takes the right equipment and the right setting. But we need things for more than “keeping level” with our friends.

26Ibid., p. 134.
27Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, p. 239.
28Author’s interview with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.
We human beings are not only toolmakers but symbol makers as well, and we use our possessions in the same way we use language—the quintessential symbol—to communicate with one another. According to Douglas, goods make the universe "more intelligible." They are more than messages to ourselves and others, they are "the hardware and the software . . . of an information system." Possessions speak a language we all understand, and we pay close attention to the inflections, vernacular, and exclamations.

The young husband in the film Diner takes his things very seriously. How could his wife be so stupid as to file the Charlie Parker records with his rock 'n' roll records, he wants to know. What's the difference, she wants to know. What's the difference? How will he find them otherwise? Every record is sacred. Different ones remind him of different times in his life. His things take him back. Things can also hold you back. Perhaps that's why Bing Crosby's widow auctioned off 14,000 of her husband's possessions—including his bed. "I think my father's belongings have somehow affected her progress in life," said one of Bing's sons. And things can tell you where you stand. Different goods are used to rank occasions and our guests. Costly sets of goods, especially china and porcelain, are "pure rank markers. . . . There will always be luxuries because rank must be marked," said Douglas.

One of the pleasures of goods is "sharing names." We size up people by their expertise in names—sports buffs can converse endlessly about hitters' batting averages, and design buffs want to know whether you speak sponge-ware, Pialadio, Dansk, or Poggenpohl. All names are not equal. We use our special knowledge of them to show solidarity and exclude people.

In fact, the social function of possessions is like the social function of food. Variations in the quality of goods define situations as well as different times of day and seasons. We could survive on a minimum daily allotment of powdered protein mix or grains and berries. But we much prefer going marketing, making choices, learning new recipes. "Next to actually eating food, what devout gastronomes seem to enjoy most is talking about it, planning menus, and remembering meals past," observed food critic Mimi Sheraton. But it's not only experts who thrive on variety. Menu monotony recently drove a Carlsbad, New Mexico, man to shoot the woman he was living with. She served him green beans once too often. "Wouldn't you be mad if you had to eat green beans all the time?" he said. If every meal were the same, and if everyone dressed alike and furnished alike, all meanings in the culture would be wiped out.
The furnishings of a home, the style of a house, and its landscape are all part of a system—a system of symbols. And every item in the system has meaning. Some objects have personal meanings, some have social meanings which change over time. People understand this instinctively and they desire things, not from some mindless greed, but because things are necessary to communicate with. They are the vocabulary of a sign language. To be without things is to be left out of the conversation. When we are "listening" to others we may not necessarily agree with what this person or that "says" with his or her decor, or we may misunderstand what is being said; and when we are doing the "talking" we may not be able to express ourselves as eloquently as we would like. But where there are possessions, there is always a discourse.

And what is truly remarkable is that we are able to comprehend and manipulate all the elements in this rich symbol system as well as we do—for surely the language of the home and its decor is one of the most complex languages in the world. But because of that it is also one of the richest and most expressive means of communication.

Decor as Symbol of Self

One aspect of personalization is the big I—Identity. Making distinctions between ourselves and others. "The self can only be known by the signs it gives off in communication," said Eugene Rochberg-Halton. And the language of ornament and decoration communicates particularly well. Perhaps in the future we will be known by our computer communiques or exotic brainwaves, but until then our rock gardens, tabletop compositions, refrigerator door collages, and other design language will have to do. The Nubian family in Africa with a steamship painted over the front door to indicate that someone in the house works in shipbuilding, and the Shotte family on Long Island who make a visual pun on their name with a rifle for a nameplate, are both decorating their homes to communicate "this is where our territory begins and this is who we are."

Even the most selfless people need a minimum package of identity equipment. One of Pope John Paul I's first acts as pontiff was to send for his own bed. "He didn't like sleeping in strange beds," explained a friend. It hadn't arrived from Venice when he died suddenly.

Without familiar things we feel disoriented. Our identities flicker and fade like ailing light bulbs. "Returning each night to my silent, pictureless apartment, I would look in the bathroom mirror and wonder who I was," wrote D. M. Thomas, author of The White Hotel, recalling the sense of detachment he felt while living in a furnished apartment during a stint as author-in-residence at a

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Washington, D.C., university. "I missed familiar things, familiar ground that would have confirmed my identity."  

Wallpaper dealers wouldn't need fifty or sixty sample books filled with assorted geometries, supergraphics, and peach clamshells on foil backgrounds if everyone were content to have the same roses climbing their walls. Chintz wouldn't come in forty flavors from strawberry to licorice, and Robert Kennedy Jr.'s bride Emily wouldn't have trotted him around from store to store "for ten hours" looking for a china pattern if the home wasn't an elaborate symbol system — as important for the messages it sends to residents and outsiders as for the functions it serves. 

In the five-year-long University of Chicago study into how modern Americans relate to their things, investigators Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton found that we all use possessions to stand for ourselves. "I learned that things can embody self," said Rochberg-Halton. "We create environments that are extensions of ourselves, that serve to tell us who we are, and act as role models for what we can become." But what we cherish and what we use to stand for ourselves, the researchers admitted, seemed to be "scripted by the culture." Even though the roles of men and women are no longer so tightly circumscribed, "it is remarkable how influential sex-stereotyped goals still remain." Men and women "pay attention to different things in the same environment and value the same things for different reasons," said the authors. Men and children cared for action things and tools; women and grandparents cared for objects of contemplation and things that reminded them of family. It was also found that meaning systems are passed down in families from mothers to daughters —not to sons. Only children and old people cared for a piece of furniture because it was useful. For adults, a specific piece of furniture embodied experiences and memories, or was a symbol of self or family. Photographs which had the power to arouse emotions and preserve memories meant the most to grandparents and the least to children. Stereos were most important to the younger generation, because they provide for the most human and emotional of our needs — release, escape, and venting of emotion. And since music "seems to act as a modulator of emotions," it is particularly important in adolescence "when daily..."
swings of mood are significantly greater than in the middle years and... later life. Television sets were cherished more by men than women, more by children than grandparents, more by grandparents than parents. Plants had greater meaning for the lower middle class, and for women, standing for values, especially nurturance and "ecological consciousness." "Plateware," the term used in the study to cover all eating and drinking utensils, was mentioned mostly by women. Of course, "plates" are the tools of the housewife's trade. In many cultures they are the legal possession of the women of the house.

The home is such an important vehicle for the expression of identity that one anthropologist believes "built environments" — houses and settlements — were originally developed to "identify a group — rather than to provide shelter." But in contemporary Western society, the house more often identifies a person or a family instead of a group. To put no personal stamp on a home is almost pathological in our culture. Fear of attracting attention to themselves constrains people in crime-ridden areas from personalizing, lack of commitment restrains others, and insecurity about decorating skill inhibits still others. But for most people, painting some sort of self-portrait, decoratively, is doing what comes naturally.

All communications, of course, are transactions. The identity we express is subject to interpretation by others. Will it be positive or negative? David Berkowitz, the "Son of Sam" murderer, didn't win any points when it was discovered he had drawn a circle around a hole in the wall in his apartment and written "This is where I live." A person who fails to keep up appearances is stigmatized.

READING THE TEXT
1. Summarize how, according to Kron, our possessions act as signs of our identity.
2. How do our living places work to create group identity?
3. Why did New York Times readers object to the consumption habits of Martin J. Davidson?
4. In your own words, explain how possessions give one a sense of "stability" (para. 10).

READING THE SIGNS
1. In a small group, discuss the brand names of possessions that each of you owns. Then interpret the significance of each brand. What do the brands say about each of you? About the group?

\[\text{\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 72.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., p. 79.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{50}Leonard Buder, 'Berkowitz Is Described as 'Quiet' and as a Loner,' New York Times, August 12, 1977, p. 10.}\]