



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

By Virginia Postrel

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Whether it's sleek leather pants, a shiny new Apple computer, or a designer toaster, we make important decisions as consumers every day based on our sensory experience. Sensory appeals are everywhere, and they are intensifying, radically changing how Americans live and work. The twenty-first century has become the age of aesthetics, and whether we realize it or not, this influence has taken over the marketplace, and much more.

In this penetrating, keenly observed book, Virginia Postrel makes the argument that appearance counts, that aesthetic value is real. Drawing from fields as diverse as fashion, real estate, politics, design, and economics, Postrel deftly chronicles our culture's aesthetic imperative and argues persuasively that it is a vital component of a healthy, forward-looking society.

Intelligent, incisive, and thought-provoking, *The Substance of Style* is a groundbreaking portrait of the democratization of taste and a brilliant examination of the way we live now.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

At the Great Indoors, a hugely successful department store chain, customers can choose from among 250 lavatory faucets. If that represents too little variety, there are more than 1,500 distinct models of drawer pulls. Like it or not, we live in an age where we can minutely dictate every aesthetic choice, to an extent our ancestors would certainly have found disturbingly wasteful and superficial. It is this censure that New York Times economics columnist Postrel is dead-set on dismantling. Aligning herself against "pleasure-hating" modernists like Walter Gropius and Adolf Loos, Postrel adopts the position that fashion has meaning. One of her argument's charms is that she allows Joe Q. Ray-Ban his own justification for his purchase ("I like it") against the interpretations of theorists who insist an interest in surfaces is linked with deception, status or falsehood. Postrel's apt example of the proliferation in toilet-brush design is an effective rebuttal against such theorists--after all, nobody buys a sleek toilet brush to impress neighbors who will never see it, so aesthetics must constitute much of the rationale. Increasingly, form is simply part of the function. Postrel begins by explaining that appearance has a meaning commensurate to loftier values, then examines the many manifestations of this truth. While her argument is intellectually sophisticated, Postrel's journalistic training ensures the examples she cites are well-chosen and the prose remains crisp and readable. Gracefully representing one endpoint of a certain debate, this ambitious book may someday become a classic of the genre.

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From [Booklist](#)

It's enough to make your head hurt, this very conscious, contemporary, intellectual interpretation of Keats' "Beauty is life, life, Beauty." On the other hand, social scientist and author (*The Future and Its Enemies*, 1998) Postrel brings together some very compelling arguments, insights, and examples about the value of aesthetics today. Nothing is quantified; instead, she points to qualitative examples like the GE Design Center in Selkirk, New York, devoted exclusively to the creation of new plastic forms. To Starbucks and the iMac, each a symbol of looks that sell--at a higher price. And to the 1,500-odd different drawer pulls available at the Great Indoors. Aesthetics is how we make the world around us special, a feature recognized as early as 1927, when adman Ernest Elmo Calkins opined about "Beauty the New Business Tool" in the *Atlantic*. It enhances communications (cf. PowerPoint) and identities (Hillary Clinton's hair). Ask any Afghan woman who risked prison to style her hair and paint her face; aesthetics is at one with life. *Barbara Jacobs*

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Review

"A brilliant analysis ... After reading The Substance of Style, the world will literally look different to you." (Steven Pinker, Professor, MIT, and author of *How the Mind Works* and *The Blank Slate*)

"A profoundly important book. The topic is absurdly under-studied; and Postrel has turned in a magnificent performance." (Tom Peters, author of *In Search of Excellence*)

"[Postrel] connects a million seemingly disparate dots into a fresh, clear-eyed, persuasive picture of our culture circa 2003." (Kurt Andersen, author of *Turn of the Century*)

"What a great read! It will heighten your awareness of our newly sculpted aesthetic world." (Karim Rashid, designer)

“A work vast in its range, profound in its depth, rich in its detail.” (Robert Venturi, architect)

“Marvelously informative...Brightly argued...Even when Postrel’s examples are familiar, the specifics can be eye-popping....It’s groundbreaking.” (Atlantic Monthly)

“Virginia Postrel . . . writes perceptively about everything on which her penetrating gaze alights.” (George F. Will, Washington Post)

“Provocative. . . demolishes the false dichotomy between substance and style.” (Washington Post Book World)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Margaret Williams:

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Raymond Jackson:

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