

FORM & FUNCTION

self-guided tour



**MUSEUM
OF FINE ARTS
ST. PETERSBURG**

FORM & FUNCTION

This tour explores the importance of design and aesthetics on objects for practical use. Often, when looking at objects, particularly those in museums, it is easy to overlook their practical functions and instead to become overwhelmed by their aesthetic qualities. This is especially true for the decorative arts, which often combine beauty with utility. This tour looks at a number of objects in the collection that blend form and function.



SCAN THIS CODE FOR A MAP IDENTIFYING
THE LOCATIONS OF THE ARTWORKS

PERSONAL DEITY

Zushi (Portable Buddhist Shrine), 1868–1912

FIND THIS IN THE ASIAN ART GALLERIES

Buddhist statues in Japan frequently reside in *zushi*, which are wooden shrines or cabinets with doors that can reveal or conceal the deity—as well as protect it. The size of this piece makes it easily portable, allowing the owner to travel under the protection of their personal deity. The statue enshrined here depicts the *Amida Buddha*, the central figure of Pure Land Buddhist tradition. As a hand-held religious item, this shrine provides a more intimate connection between the deity and the worshipper. In addition to personal use, the scale of the figure suggests that the work may have been intended for display on a high shelf. This multitude of uses reflects a complex mingling of function, tradition, and design.



PORTABLE DEVOTION

Diptych with Scenes from the Life of the Virgin and Christ, c. 1375–1400

FIND THIS IN THE EUROPEAN ART, 13TH-18TH CENTURIES GALLERIES

During the medieval period, personal devotion—that is Christian worship outside of church services—was extremely popular. As a result, an industry grew up around supplying the faithful with religious objects: rosaries, prayerbooks, crucifixes, statues, and of course, diptychs. Most of these objects were quite small, allowing them to be tucked into the equivalents of pockets or purses. Why did they need to be portable? Well, if you were traveling even a short distance, maybe for business or family, it could take a while even on horseback or cart, especially over poorly maintained or muddy roads. Thus, such small objects allowed you to pray wherever you ended the day. This diptych, despite its tiny size, was filled with scenes to help its owner focus upon the lives of Christ and the Virgin, and messages of faith, suffering, humility, and salvation.



COMFY SEATING

Jean-Baptiste Boulard, *Pair of Armchairs*, c. 1775

FIND THESE IN THE EUROPEAN ART, 13TH-18TH CENTURIES GALLERIES

In the grand scheme of comfy seating, these pair of chairs probably do not look that inviting. However, for the time—when most people sat on simple wooden chairs or benches—they represented great extravagance and comfort. First of all, rather than having straight, angular backs, they have a gentle backwards tilt allowing the sitter to relax a little. This detail also adds to the chairs' graceful appearance. In addition, they have arms. That probably doesn't seem like much of a luxury, but arms added greatly to the cost of a chair. Not only that, but these arms—as well as the back and seat—are upholstered. Constructed of linen webbing and stuffed with springy horsehair, this cushioning would have been very comfortable, and the luxurious, hand-woven wool tapestry would have made it even more so.



ILLUMINATION

Pair of Pier Mirrors, 18th century

FIND THESE IN THE GREAT HALL

This pair of massive mirrors were intended for a very specific location within a room: on the space between two windows—known as a pier. It may seem that their primary purpose was to show off that their owner could afford such costly expanses of glass, surrounded by elaborate carvings enriched with gilding. However, they actually served a very important function, that is to reflect light. That must seem rather obvious. However, lighting during this period was, if you could afford it, very expensive wax candles. Thus, in order to maximize this illumination, you would use the largest mirrors you could afford to reflect the light throughout the room.



ELECTRICAL LIGHTING

Agathon Léonard, *Le jeu de l'écharpe* (*The Scarf Dance*), c. 1900

FIND THIS IN THE EUROPEAN & AMERICAN ART, 19TH-20TH CENTURIES GALLERIES

This sculpture has a practical purpose: it functions as a light; a bulb is concealed in the fold in the scarf! In 1882 Thomas Edison (1847–1931) formed the Edison Electric Illuminating Co. of New York, which brought electric light to parts of that city. It took a long time for this innovation to take hold across the States. Most Americans would light their homes with gas, kerosene, and candles for the next half century. By 1925, only about half of all U.S. homes had electric power. Thus, this lamp is a luxury not only as a sculpture made of precious bronze and covered in gilding, but as an early light fixture—sold to someone wealthy enough to have a house wired for electricity.



STAINED GLASS

John LaFarge, *Peonies in the Wind*, 1835–1910

FIND THIS IN THE AMERICAN ART, 19TH-21ST CENTURIES GALLERIES

In the late nineteenth century there was an increased focus on beautifully crafted, functional furniture and fine household design. This shift was in response to what interior decorators saw as the poor taste of standardized, at times shoddy, products that dominated the market due to enhanced mechanization. LaFarge, who created this window, was integral to the movement toward aesthetic appreciation and fine craftsmanship. Americans, fascinated by the Japanese culture they saw in prints and decorative objects, were drawn to LaFarge's Japanese-inspired compositions. The artist said that he based this window upon a Japanese scroll in his personal collection.



CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Attributed to Pottier and Stymus Manufacturing Company, *Parlor Cabinet*, c. 1872

FIND THIS IN THE AMERICAN ART, 19TH-21ST CENTURIES GALLERIES

This elaborate piece of furniture seems to have no real purpose. It lacks glass doors to show off what's inside; it's too tall for serving food or liquor; and its stepped top doesn't provide much surface area. Nonetheless, it did have an important function: showing off its owner's wealth and good taste. Made of expensive materials—bronze, gilding, and rare woods, its first function is clear: displaying material wealth. The idea of conspicuous consumption would have been especially true when its stepped top was covered with porcelains, clocks, sculptures, or other decorative objects—which is what it really was designed to do. During that time period, it represented not only wealth, but also sophisticated taste.



TIN LIZZIE

John Sloan, *Cliff Dwellers' Country*, 1925

FIND THIS IN THE AMERICAN ART, 19TH-21ST CENTURIES GALLERIES

Here again, you are looking for an object in a painting, this time, a Ford Model T automobile. It's easy to overlook the importance of design, both practical and aesthetic, that goes into the making of cars. The Ford Model T—lovingly known during its heyday as a “tin Lizzie”—was produced from 1908-1927. Thanks to its reliability and relatively low price over sixteen million of these cars were produced. Thus, cross-country automobile travel became possible for middle-class Americans. Regarding the aesthetics of design, the Model T, when new at least, looked expensive in its elegant black paint and restrained chrome details. And for the time, its lines were sleek and spoke of speed and modernity. However, the dark tone was not a style choice, but owed to the fact that black paint dried faster.



Cover/Inside: Agathon Léonard, *Le jeu de l'écharpe (The Scarf Dance)* (detail), c. 1900, Gift of Mary Alice McClendon

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