Brand Aesthetics

Gérald Mazzalovo

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Foreword

Behind the uncertainties of our societies lie serious and relatively clear trends. Western countries have entered into a world of juxtaposition of opposites and fragmentation of personalities. The collapse of the religious (the Church) or secular (the welfare state) fundamental models returns to the individual an autonomy of essential decision which admittedly tends to scare him, but also opens new opportunities. Objects are increasingly signalling consumers' choices and affiliations to affirm individual personalities. New stories are carried by brands which fulfil a quasi-religious role in providing links between consumers and business but also among the consumers themselves. The look becomes more important than fashion. In other words, aesthetics gets involved in the sharing of experiences and therefore of emotions. The consumer today may be more thoughtful, but he still takes responsibility for his quest for pleasure. Design and forms have always been elements of differentiation for individuals. Today, they reveal a certain baroquization of society highlighted by mixtures of behaviours and styles.

In view of the importance that appearance has gained, it is surprising that no research has ever studied the preferences of consumers for lines or curves.

The combination of lines and curves has always been a source of mystery to the amateur. Ever since man learnt how to use a tool to draw or carve, he has expressed himself through these linear minimal units of meaning (morphemes). Aesthetics, a discipline long reserved for art historians, is fast becoming an object of study by marketing professionals, researchers in sociology, consumer psychology and organization management. In his first book *The System of Objects,* Jean Baudrillard (1967) pointed out how the new society was transforming objects, raising their status to the rank of sign, disconnected from their usage value. In doing so the aesthetic approach is important for the brand, even though designers and marketers seldom use a common language.

This contribution from Gérald Mazzalovo aims at understanding the fundamental meaning of lines and curves but also preferences for each of these morphemes.

It is exciting to see an engineer by education and former president of several luxury brands tackle such a fascinating subject. After *Prologo*

(2003) and *Luxury Brand Management* (2008), Gérald Mazzalovo presents an original book that analyses the presence of lines or curves in every-day objects and brand manifestations, both from a plastic point of view and according to psychological factors of individual consumers. He makes use of semiotic approaches in mobilizing the semiotic square to propose a prospective of the shape of objects according to alternating styles. This book has the merit of contributing to research and also to stimulate managers' thinking by proposing tools directly applicable to the effective management of brands.

Denis Darpy
Professor at Université Paris-Dauphine
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Acknowledgements

Introduction

The world of consumption is going 'aesthetic'

The aesthetization of daily life is one of the most noticeable characteristics of our postmodernizing world (Lyotard 1979; Baudrillard 1985; Featherstone 1987: 90–1; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Postrel 2003). This is what the semiotician Andrea Semprini (2005) defines as 'the generalization and trivialization of the aesthetic paradigm within the development of postmodern brands'.

Formal treatment of products and services – used here in the broadest sense of materials, textures, sounds, smells, colour, and so on – hitherto envisaged as a marginal consideration tends to become a fundamental competitive dimension. The success of the Absolut Vodka brand, based largely on the shape of a bottle and its constant application in communication, is a good example of how to succeed through aesthetics.

In the modern industrial period, aesthetic aspects were the subject of what one might call 'benign neglect'. Today we are seeing proactive management of all of the sensory dimensions of brand manifestations.

The word 'aesthetics' itself has undergone a semantic change. In the social, cultural and, particularly, semiotic literature the term is now used more to designate the formal treatment of creative and communicative activities, whether from artists or participants involved in commercial, political or confessional areas. While aesthetic treatment is especially applied to the visual aspects of existence, it actually covers all five of the human sensory dimensions.

This definition is much broader than the traditional term applied to the philosophical reflection on art and beauty. We went from a limited meaning related to the study of beauty, and intimately linked to a perception of pleasure on the spectator's part, to the study of

formal treatments producing meaning and emotions, in which pleasure is only one of multiple possible effects, adding a new dimension of communication.

Paradoxically, in spite of the growing importance of these elements governing what the semiotician Jean-Marie Floch (1990) called 'the approach of the sensory' ('*l'approche du sensible*'), brand managers and their academic observers have so far paid little attention to the aesthetic dimension of brand manifestations (Holbrook 1980; Bloch 1995; Ekman and Wagner 1995; Veryzer 1995; Charters 2006). A quick survey on Google Scholar in May 2010 showed 56 usages of the expression 'brand aesthetics' in the academic articles and books covered by this search engine, as opposed to 12,900 for 'brand identity' and 24,000 for 'brand equity'.

If aesthetics, as a formal treatment of the sensory world, is the expressive means, the source of information and emotion, essential to perception and knowledge of authors and artists by their public, it is also equally true of brands. Aesthetics deploys the semiotic and relational dimensions of brands. This is the ultimate path in communication.

The goal of this work is to show precisely that brand aesthetics is a new and fertile managerial concept. It allows a better understanding of the complexity of the nature of brands and of their perception by the markets and provides help in managing them better to become more competitive. This study seeks to position brand aesthetics within the streams of current knowledge and to revisit its genesis. It is, above all, an attempt to demonstrate the fertility of the concept through its capacity to structure some of the major management challenges that brands face and to create universal management tools.

This aim to rationalize a domain often abandoned to the creative genius of designers may seem an impossible challenge. However, can we reasonably leave entire parts of an organization separate from the rest of the company and beyond the reach of Cartesian logic? In fact, some brands are starting to understand the benefits of a rationalization of the creative departments. Audi's advertising campaign for the A5 Sportback in Spain in the summer of 2009 (see Figure I.1), for instance, is based on the theme '*La belleza sì puede ser objetiva*' ('Yes! Beauty can be objective') and on the golden mean.

The choice was made to deepen the nature, purposes and meanings of brand aesthetics as well as the perception processes that it triggers. Despite the complexities of the issue, a management approach structured around a knowledge of brand aesthetics is becoming, now more than ever, a fundamental source of competitiveness.

Figure I.1 Advertising Audi © All rights reserved. *El Mundo*, July 2009

This study is a theoretical reflection on the concept of brand aesthetics, illustrated with many practical applications at management level and legitimized by a quantitative survey on consumers' preferences for linear aesthetic treatments.

This reflection is born of personal experience where this notion and some management tools arising from it have been able to structure the action and the communication on specific projects for well-known brands (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2003, 2008).

As a consequence of the author's career-long involvement in managing brands and forming multidisciplinary teams around brand projects, this study also has a strong practical strand.

Two considerations have determined the content of the study:

- The importance of linking theoretical discourse to its practical applications in day-to-day brand management.
- The requirement for continuity between the 'microeconomics' of the planning and execution phases of brand aesthetics, and the 'macroeconomics' resulting from market perceptions of the manifestations of brand aesthetics. The study therefore covers both upstream factors preceding the brand's manifestations and downstream factors surrounding consumers' perceptions.

The book is structured in two parts. Part I, 'Brand aesthetics: Theory and immediate applications', presents the theoretical foundations of the concept and its relevance for better brand management. It recalls Jean-Marie Floch's essential contribution to the notion of brand aesthetics and his role as the pioneer of visual semiotics. It emphasizes the inseparable link between brand aesthetics and brand ethics in a resolutely semiotic approach that considers brands as systems for the production of meaning.

The aesthetics management issues addressed in Part I include:

- Brand identity and manifestations
- The degree of readability of brand ethics and aesthetics
- Four categories of brand aesthetics: of communication, of products, of spaces and of behaviours
- Plastic and figurative meanings
- Baroque/classical examples of plastic expressions
- The trend of 'baroquization' in day-to-day consumption

In all, seven instruments or analytical methodologies are offered which allow a greater visibility and consistency between the purposes of aesthetic treatment and realization in brand manifestations. These lead to the formalization of references, vocabularies and logics, promoting a better interdepartmental understanding. To declare, for example, that the aesthetics of Loewe is 'minimalist baroque' has an impact on the overall organization and drives all creative and communication activities.

Part I concludes with a chapter which introduces the 'Brand Aesthetics Chain', which is the logical sequence of the process from the definition of the finalities of the aesthetic treatment of the brand manifestations to the consumers' purchase decision. This scheme enables a comprehensive communication audit methodology to be constructed.

Part II, 'Brand aesthetics: Applications to linear aesthetic expressions', illustrates the application possibilities of the concepts introduced in Part I. The focus here is on the visual dimensions of products, as sight is the sense most activated by marketers. Among the many items affecting visual perception – shape, texture, colour, composition, and so on – this part concentrates on the lines chosen, not only because they are important in the generation of the form of objects and spaces, but also for their expressive capacity. Though they have been little studied, the choices of line types in specific brand manifestations have a direct impact on consumer preferences. Examples of specific brand

manifestations (Citroën, Gucci, Zippo and Caisse d'Epargne) are presented to demonstrate the relevance of the linear treatments.

Four basic linear elements, the simplest of lines still capable of producing meaning, have been selected for this purpose: *the straight*, *the angular*, *the single-curved* and *the sinuous*. The main methodological and analytical innovation introduced is the *semiotic square of linearity*. This allows for the structuring of the four lines and the emerging of their respective possible meanings and emotional implications at the semantic, symbolic, plastic and figurative levels. Finally, an analytical methodology for brand manifestations is presented, built around the notion of 'meaningful linear differentials' and tested on brands such as Mercedes, SAP, the CFA Institute, as well as on a bench designed by the American architect Frank Gehry.

The final chapter describes the logic, the means and the results of a quantitative study conducted to measure consumer preferences for the four lines of the square of linearity. In order to illustrate the relevance and usefulness of the concept of brand aesthetics, it was important to use an experimental aesthetics method to demonstrate that specific linear treatments of brand manifestations influence the consumer's judgements about them.

In all, Part II introduces four analytical tools.

The Conclusion describes several possible subsequent research programs. The complexity of the phenomena analysed and the relative novelty of its theme meant that the study leaned heavily on literature from a broad range of disciplines and authors (see Bibliography).

- First, there is *philosophy*, where the notions of aesthetics, ethics and preferences lead us directly to Plato and Kant's reflections on the good and the beautiful and to Aristotle's considerations on lines and shapes. The artists themselves, when they conceptualize their art, provide a wealth of relevant considerations and insights: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Lomazzo and their opinions on the sinuous line; van de Velde, Kandinsky, Klee, Hogarth, Anquetin, and so on, on the plastic meaning of lines.
- Following Fechner's initial studies in experimental aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century and the Gestalt theory, it is in the field of *psychology* that the first scientific knowledge on receptive (or perceptive) processes develops. Fechner's successors such as Birkhoff (1932) and Eysenck (1941) attempt to correlate quantitatively positive aesthetic effects with some visual aesthetic dimensions such as the degree of order and complexity of the objects considered. In

the 1970s, Berlyne, with his Wundt curve linking the 'hedonic feeling' and the complexity of objects, makes a major contribution to help explain consumers' preferences and aversions to certain types of lines (as confirmed by the current investigation presented in Chapter 11).

- *Art history* has given a solid theoretical foundation for this work. Many authors have been called upon, from du Fresnoy in the late seventeenth century to Lalo, Worringer, Focillon, Panofsky, Gombrich and Arnheim in the twentieth.

  Riegl and Wölfflin, in the second half of the nineteenth century, provide the bulk of reflections on plastic and figurative meanings. Wölfflin, introduced by Floch, was summoned here for his crucial contribution to the binary definition of the antithetical styles of baroque and classical. Among Riegl's many contributions mentioned are the concept of *Kunstwollen*, the notions of optical and tactile perceptions and of organic and crystalline expressions, and the three finalities of aesthetic treatment. Worringer's contribution is related to the specific worldviews that correspond to the respective organic and crystalline styles: empathy and abstraction, visions that will match Jung's psychological types of the extrovert and introvert.

  In line with authors such as Riegl (2002), Lalo (1926), Berlyne (1974), Holbrook (1980), Charters (2006), the reflections of art historians are applied to everyday objects and spaces. All products and services designed or manufactured by men have an aesthetic dimension: firstly, there is the aesthetic choice made by the designer on colours, forms, and visual, acoustic and olfactory aspects. These decisions then call upon the aesthetic sensibility of consumers. Postmodern theory also asserts that the analysis of beauty should not be confined to works of art alone, but extended to any social practice (Vattimo 1977).

- *Marketing* literature dealing with the influence of aesthetic products and services on consumers is relatively rare but growing. Holbrook with his work on cultural products (consumer aesthetics) in the 1980s was a pioneer. Among the many writers mentioned, Bloch (1995) holds a particular place for his work on a model on the influence of the shape of products on consumer reactions, compatible and complementary to the scheme introduced in 'The chain of brand aesthetics'.

- A great deal of research on the influence of the aesthetic treatment of objects on the preferences of consumers was conducted in the fields of *industrial design* and *computer-aided design*. The introduction

of digital instruments in the industrial-design process in the past 20 years has significantly shortened product-development times, reduced staff costs and increased reliability, while preserving the original intent of the designers (Loncaric 1998; Attneave and Arnoult 1966; Vergeest 2002). Studies of correlations between parameterized geometrical elements of the shape of objects and consumer preferences are frequent and similar to the type of empirical investigation presented in Chapter 11.

- The sociological literature on *postmodernism* in the late twentieth century (Lipovetski 1983; Baudrillard 1985; Featherstone 1990, 1991; Semprini 2005; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008; and so on) has also fed into the thinking behind this study. Postmodern theories claim that the logic of brand management invades all aspects of life and that aesthetics is a metaphor for how postmodern society functions. This reinforces our conviction that a new approach to brand management through its aesthetics can only enrich the existing methods.

- Finally, *semiotics* is the birthplace of the concept of brand aesthetics. It is positioned upstream of brand manifestations and focuses on the production of meaning but does not exclude the production of emotions (Greimas 1987; Landowski 2004). This study builds directly, though not exclusively, on Floch's work (1983, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1995), and that of his colleagues Ceriani (1995, 2001), Semprini (1992, 1993, 2005), Marrone (2007) and Denis Bertrand, who continued and expanded that work.

This work is not intended to replace the more traditional approaches to studying brands. Its objective is to add a new perspective, rich in analytical tools, to better understand the complexity of the management and perception of brands.

With regard to the planning and implementation of the aesthetic treatment of brand manifestations, the concept of 'brand aesthetics' allows a more refined and integrated brand management. In relation to market perceptions, the concept allows for a clearer aesthetic reading of how brands present themselves. It provides the means to decipher their discourses more clearly.

Part I
Brand Aesthetics: Theory and Direct Applications

1
Brand Aesthetics: An Oxymoron?

> *This is a strong assumption to say that the combination of*
> *shapes and colours is not innocent.*
>
> <div align="right">Jean-Marie Floch (1993)</div>

1.1   Introduction to the concept

The term 'brand aesthetics', introduced in 1990 by the semiotician Jean-Marie Floch, continues to surprise, even 20 years later. The juxtaposition of two words rarely combined and drawn from such seemingly incompatible fields – of aesthetics on the one hand and of trade and marketing on the other – would appear to be something of an oxymoron.

Aesthetics, a word traditionally used to designate the philosophical reflection on art (Jimenez 1997), is a discipline devoted to understanding the nature of beauty, art, aesthetic experience and the judgement of taste criteria. Such matters have always haunted men and since antiquity, philosophers, artists and art historians have studied these issues. The thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, then Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Hogarth and, closer to us, Riegl, Kandinsky, Panofsky and others will be summoned throughout this work. Plato established the foundations of the meaning and value of beauty. He is credited with the quest for the good, the beautiful and the true and it is fair to place beauty as part of his ethics, incorporating other concepts such as caution, wisdom, pleasure and 'performing arts'. However, the type of arts that found favour in his eyes needs to aim at being true in the 'idealistic' sense and is therefore rational in nature, the logical consequence of which is a denying of individuality and originality.

It was not until the eighteenth century that a separation between the sphere of aesthetics and those of theoretics and ethics (Panofsky 1989) was

established. Today, considerations on art and beauty are far from being exhausted, judging by the profusion of publications on the subject.

The noun 'aesthetics' appeared for the first time in *Aesthetica Acroamatica* by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, marking the emergence of the new disciplines of aesthetics and art history.

What then do consumption, trade, communication and distribution have to do with aesthetics? What allows the reconciliation of these two seemingly opposed fields which are in fact much closer than it seems at first?. 'This is the science of knowledge and of sensitive representation that takes the name of aesthetics', wrote Marc Jimenez (1997), commenting on the work of Baumgarten. The brands themselves are involved in multiple representational activities. They promote lifestyles, imaginary possible worlds, their own values, as we shall see. They offer us the pleasant, the beautiful, the good and, sometimes, the sublime, to use Kant's vocabulary (1995) in the first part of the *Critique of the Faculty of Judgement* (or, more accurately, *Criticism of the Faculty of Aesthetic Judgment*).

The first part of this book intends to demonstrate the validity of the paradoxical concept of 'brand aesthetics', and its fertile and innovative relevance for brand management.

1.2   The contribution of Jean-Marie Floch

It was Floch who first introduced the term 'brand aesthetics' in his book *Semiotics, Marketing and Communication: Beneath the Signs, the Strategies* (1990), in which he presented his work on the brand identity of the Crédit du Nord bank. He introduced this concept with caution, speaking of the 'possibility of a brand aesthetic' and of the 'legitimacy of an aesthetic – or, more precisely, a semio-aesthetic approach to brands'. He defined it as an intrinsic component of a brand identity and placed all related creative activities – such as the design of a logo. For example – in a predefined aesthetic framework. The brand aesthetics notion then appeared in a more structured and explicit way in a schema Floch used in his consulting activities with the communication agency Creative Business. This is the *hinge* of the brand identity (Figure 1.1) that Floch would use with Ferragamo in 1992 (Figure 1.2).

Floch took up and developed a model developed in the Saussurean tradition by the linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1971). This model illustrates how a semiotic manifestation (a production of meaning) is produced by the necessary presence of both the plans of content and expression. The content is the *signified*, the material part of the sign.
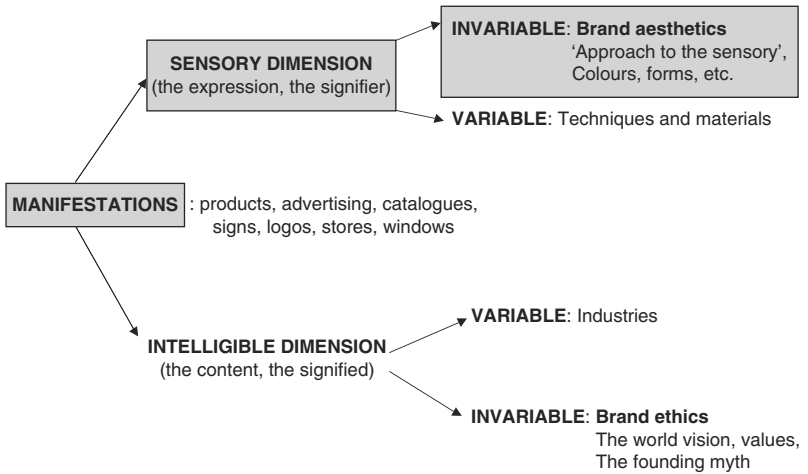
Figure 1.1 The hinge of brand identity by Jean-Marie Floch. Levels of analysis of a brand universe
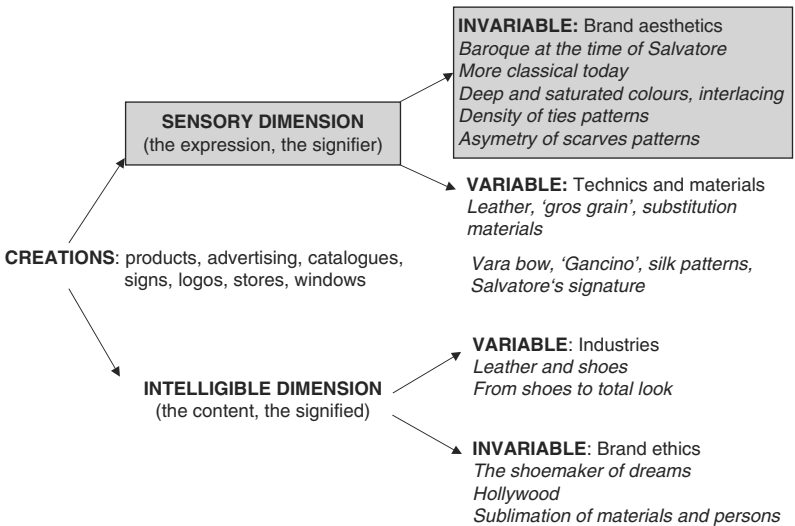
Figure 1.2 The hinge of brand identity by Jean-Marie Floch. Application to Ferragamo in 1992

The expression corresponds to the *signifier*, the representation that is associated with the sign. Floch enriched this approach by introducing the dimension of variability/invariability for each of the two plans. The invariable components of the sensory dimension can be perceived by the five senses – touch, taste, smell, sound, colour, shape, and so on – and constitute the means by which the brand is perceived and recognized. This will be the 'brand aesthetics'. The invariable components of the intelligible dimension are abstract and intangible elements. They represent the vision of the world of the brand (myths, values, attitudes with respect to norms, life, death, passions, success, and so on) – 'What it is propelled by', as Floch used to say, and that he named 'the brand ethics'.

Through this hinge, we realize how the notion of brand aesthetics is placed in a context of identity and systematically coupled with the concept of brand ethics. It represents one of the two components of the mechanism that allows brands to produce meaning. It is the major premise of the semiotic approach to brands that they are systems of production of meaning. Brand aesthetics is instrumental in expressing the brand values. However, despite their obvious symmetry, the two components retain their specific individual characteristics, which are by no means equivalent. The aesthetics is an indispensable passage for producing meaning: there can be no intelligibility without perception.

The schema is not only of theoretical value. It has been applied systematically by a number of specialists in communication or brand management and has been proven to be a powerful analytical tool.

Floch is the undisputed forerunner of brand aesthetics. The subtitle of his 1985 book *Small Mythologies of Eye and Mind* – 'For a Plastic Semiotics' – clearly indicates its orientation towards the analysis of the sensory aspects and particularly the image. In *Semiotics, Marketing and Communication*, he broadens the concept of 'discourse' (in a semiotic sense) to the itineraries people follow in the subway. In *Visual Identities* (1995), in which he analyses brands such as Chanel, Waterman, Habitat, Opinel, IBM and Apple, he declares that: 'these essays participate in a project of establishing an Aesthetic Semiotics … a life project', and later: 'The reader will hardly be surprised to see that issues related to visual identities … lead to problems of general aesthetics such as the notion of style … synaesthesia, i.e. consistencies between visual and other sensory manifestations.' Floch's intuitions precede by a decade the acceptance by a growing number of academics and practitioners that aesthetics is a crucial aspect of the management of postmodern brands (Semprini 2005).

I propose the following definition:

> The aesthetics of a brand is composed of stable and specific elements that characterize its 'approach to the sensory world'; that is, to everything which can be perceived by the senses: not only aspects relating to vision (shapes, colours, textures, light treatments and so on) but also to sound (music, the noise of engine, a door slamming, and so on), odour, taste, and touch. *These are therefore the specific (or proprietary) sensory treatments applied to all brand manifestations.*

It should be noted that 'aesthetics' in the term 'brand aesthetics' is not used in the usual philosophical sense in which everything is seen in relation to the field of beauty. It is, rather, a return to the etymology of the word aesthetics, *aisthetikos*, meaning 'belonging to the realm of sensory perception'.

The brand manifestations, in turn, are all the possible physical interfaces between the brand and the consumers (products, advertisements, website, shops, among others).

Before analysing how the respective disciplines of aesthetics and brands have converged to finally find a meeting point, we should first establish the possible usefulness of the concept of brand aesthetics – which is the intention of the next chapter.

2
The Relevance of the Concept

> Anything that produces meaning can be analysed: the saturation of a specific red hue, the parallelism or the crossing of two lines or even the memory of a same arrangement of forms and volumes in a given space.
>
> Jean-Marie Floch (1985)

To what extent may this concept, relatively new in its application to brands, help us manage them better? The relevance of the concept of brand aesthetics is based on three main elements:

- The sensory dimensions of objects, particularly their visual appearance, influence consumers' judgements about them.
- The world of consumption has become dramatically 'aesthetized' since the 1980s and 90s and brands are now paying much more attention to the aesthetic treatments of their products and their communication in general.
- The concept helps to solve some managerial problems.

2.1   The impact of the sensory world on consumer attitudes

To assert that certain forms, colours, contrasts, harmonies, subjects are more noticeable than others or generate emotions in those who are exposed to them is to state the obvious.

   This is even more obvious when the brand communication plays on the register of rejection. The sight of a young girl with a nail embedded in her forehead (Nell & Me advertising), mutants with three legs and two torsos (Brema advertising) or a mouth positioned at the back of

the neck (advertising of the French Ministry of Labour to fight against musculo-skeletal disorders) are intended to generate rejection and discomfort. The effect is always amplified when the human body is manipulated in an unnatural way.

There are more positive examples of responses to aesthetic treatments such as the statistically favourable reactions to rectangles with the golden mean proportions (Fechner 1876; Ghyka 1977; Piehl 1976) or the physiological and psychological, effects, medically proven, that light or the colour red have on human beings (Birren 1978; Mahnke 1996).

This is especially true in the field of consumption where the aesthetic dimension of objects becomes a competitive factor of the first order (Thackara 1997; Hoshino 1987; Walsh, Roy and Potter 1993).

The psychological process leading the consumer to the act of purchase has been the subject of a plethora of analyses which allow a better understanding of the mechanisms of the influence that the aesthetic aspects of brands has on individuals. The psychological process of consumer choice is subject to both external and internal factors.

External factors are classified by McGuire (1976) as consisting of information received from others (media and face-to-face contacts), from the individual's own past experiences with the products and at the points of sale. This is an almost exhaustive list of what are called the 'brand manifestations' (see Figure 4.4) whose specific aesthetic treatments are what are referred to as the aesthetics of a brand.

The internal factors are divided into the two categories of directive and dynamic factors. Since the 1960s, the 'cognitive revolution' (McGuire 1976) has introduced from the field of psychology the notion of man as an 'information processor' and applied it to marketing. The directive factors are the personal structural characteristics that govern the ways information is processed and lead eventually to the act of purchase. It is a sequence consisting of eight successive stages: exposure, perception, understanding, agreement, retention, retrieval, decision and action.

Brand aesthetics will influence more specifically the first three phases of *exposure*, *perception* and *understanding.*

- The first phase of *exposure* leads directly to issues of the social structuring of information. In marketing, it is the field of segmentation. One can imagine a brand of baroque expression sponsoring an exhibition of Rembrandt rather than of Poussin or David.

- The second phase of *perception* of information leads to considerations of attention, perception and sensation.
  - ○ How to capture the consumers' attention? Here all the techniques of innovation, surprise, provocation, intensity and maximum contrasts come into play.
  - ○ How to keep account of perceptual selectivity? This is based on a number of parameters such as intensity of stimuli, dimensional dominance, expectations, needs, novelty, and persistent values of consumers. We highlight here the importance of the values that constitute the ethics of an individual, in this perception phase, thus justifying the need for a clearly perceivable brand ethics.
  - ○ How to make the maximum appeal to the five senses? If the aesthetic of a brand is essentially its specific approach to the sensory, all the questions just raised are naturally within its jurisdiction.
- The third phase of *understanding* highlights the crucial role that semiotics, which focuses on the mechanisms of production of meaning, can play in these processes of consumers' decision-making.

We will not cover these complex areas of consumer psychology in more detail. It should be sufficient for creators and communicators to remain aware of the complexity of the processes that trigger consumer choices, when defining the objectives of aesthetic treatments (see Chapter 5) they are responsible for.

As for the internal dynamic factors that influence the psychological mechanisms of purchasing decisions, they deal with the motivational aspects, the reasons for which the treatment of information followed the steps described previously. These motivations fall into two categories: the cognitive and the emotional. The former corresponds to aspects of personality which lead the individual to adapt to his environment and give meaning to his actions. The latter leads to the experience of satisfaction and to the achievement of emotional goals.

The semiotic and identity-based concept of brand aesthetics that we have adopted clearly addresses the two categories of dynamic internal factors of the psychological process of the consumer purchase decision. The notion of aesthetic experience, as presented next in part 2.1c, is an attempt to integrate the sensory and cognitive aspects.

2.1a   Aesthetic dimensions of objects and services

Holbrook (1980) gives a restrictive definition of what he calls 'consumer aesthetics' by applying it exclusively to cultural products (media, entertainment and arts). While recognizing that any product must

obey aesthetic considerations in the choices that are made to define its design, packaging or promotion, he reserves this designation to products or services that should be appreciated solely for themselves, without any sense of their having utilitarian value.

Charters (2006) expands the use of the term and introduces a rudimentary scale of intensity of the aesthetic dimension of different product categories (Figure 2.1).

In accordance with the definition established in the first chapter, all objects designed and made by man have an aesthetic dimension: not only 'cultural' products such as those related to entertainment in general (music, shows, and so on) but also those related, for example, to mobility, food, and furnishings such as cars, furniture, kitchenware and appliances, where stylistic treatment offers an undeniable aesthetic dimension.

In 1974, Berlyne had already affirmed that the aesthetic is concerned not only with artistic productions, but also with all other objects and that, as a consequence, all consumption products and services offered to markets can be appreciated aesthetically. Insofar as the product designer makes decisions on such things as chromatic, graphic, visual, acoustic and olfactory aspects and so on, engaging the senses and having an impact on how these products will be perceived, there is an aesthetic dimension – both upstream in the aesthetic choices made at the time of the design and realization of the object or service, and downstream because those decisions will challenge the aesthetic sensibility of consumers.

The controversy surrounding art object and artefact is first found among art historians. Alois Riegl, to whom this study will often refer, does not exclude even the most insignificant object from the realm of aesthetic expression, while Croce and Schlosser defend a traditional meaning of the work of art (Riegl 2002: XXIV) (French translation).
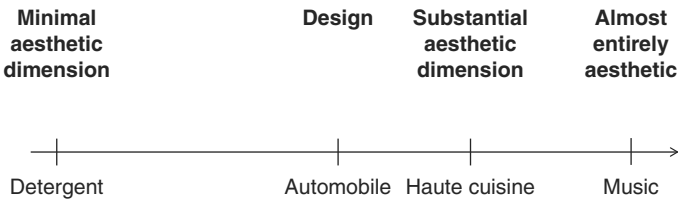
Figure 2.1 Intensity of aesthetic dimension for consumers' goods. Adapted from Steve Charters (2006)

This broad meaning is also an extrapolation to all brand creative activities of Lalo's definition of art:

> Art in the broadest sense is the transformation of natural materials by men … In this sense it includes mechanical, industrial and applied arts, the art of the engineer and the doctor, which by the transition from craft imperceptibly join the fine arts themselves: literature, music, sculpture, painting and combinations thereof.
>
> (1926: 10)

Postmodern theories also affirm that the analysis of beauty must no longer be confined to works of art, but extended to include any social practice (Vattimo 1977). We will return to the convergences between art and brand activities, a characteristic trend of postmodernism, later. An art historian interested in the aesthetic expression of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries could not ignore brands, which now generate the highest density of creativity of all human activities.

2.1b Influence of the visual appearance of products and spaces on consumers

Quality of design influences commercial success (Gemser and Leenders 2001; Roy 1994; Cooper and Kleinschmidt 1987) as it adds value to the product by increasing the quality of user's experiences associated with it. Bloch (1995) suggests four ways in which form contributes to the success of a product:

- Differentiation: the form attracts attention if it is particularly innovative (Apple, Swatch)
- Communication: the form provides information on the product and the brand (the radiator grille of the Dodge Ram, the body of the Hummer)
- Pleasure: the perception and usage of products that have been designed with care/attention to detail are generally associated with pleasure
- Longevity: products that are aesthetically pleasing typically have a longer life than those that do not have this characteristic. Bloch cites the song 'Satisfaction' by the Rolling Stones as an example of this, to which we could add the Alfa Romeo Spider convertible ('il Duetto'), designed by Pininfarina and also produced by them from 1966 to 1993.

Beyond the products themselves, the architectural context and the decorative elements of spaces also influence the behaviour of consumers

and employees. Bitner (1992) develops a theoretical model that links the effects of the environmental dimensions of a space as ambient conditions (temperature, odour, noise, air quality), functional aspects (equipment, furniture, configuration) and signs and symbols (decoration, logos), with the cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses of consumer and employees. She stresses, among other things, the managerial implications arising from the representative and functional roles of spaces and architecture in general. She envisions 'the aesthetic treatment of space as a visual metaphor for the offerings of an entire organization'.

2.1c   Aesthetic experience

This notion has always been at the heart of major intellectual considerations and debates and we are no closer – even today – to finding a consensus on the nature of this experience. Aesthetic appreciation has been closely associated with a sensation of pleasure on the part of the viewer (Kant 1995; Santayana 1955; Jimenez 1997). Kant uses the term 'satisfaction', rather than 'pleasure', to distinguish between three kinds of experience, triggered respectively by the pleasant, the beautiful and the good. The pleasant generates pleasure; the beautiful is what pleases and the good is what is approved, what is attributed an objective value. For Kant, the taste for beauty is the only disinterested form of satisfaction.

Voltaire describes the aesthetic experience as a 'felt response'. Edmund Burke sees it as a 'faculty of the mind' (Schaper 1983), while the Gestalt school clearly positions it as a 'mental response' (Arnheim 1974). For Berlyne (1971) and Funch (1968), hedonic pleasure, sensation and stimulation (or arousal) are fundamental components of the aesthetic experience, while Charters (2006) says that it convenes simultaneously – and to varying degrees – sensory, emotional and cognitive effects.

Biaggio and Supplee (1983) define, and validate by factor analysis, the qualifying dimensions of aesthetic experience into three broad categories:

- The hedonic value named by Berlyne (1971) is related to interest, satisfaction, pleasure and beauty. The descriptive binomial expressions are: simple/complex; weak/powerful; interesting/uninteresting; very pleasant/unpleasant; beautiful/ugly.
- The value of stimulation is associated with tension, vivacity and discomfort. The descriptive couples are: tense/relaxed; strong/weak; comfortable/uncomfortable; sleepy/animated.
- The value of uncertainty is related to clarity, order and balance, the descriptive couples being: clear/ill-defined; ordered/disordered; balanced/unbalanced.

This partly illustrates some of the complexity that underlies aesthetic judgements when we try to describe the nature of the effects experienced by everyone. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) were the first to talk about experiential consumption as a conscious and subjective state caused by a combination of aesthetic criteria, hedonic feelings and symbolic meanings.

Holbrook and Zirlin (1985) simplified this and suggested that the aesthetic assessment process is actually a simple continuum of a hedonic pleasure that goes from the simplest to the most profound. Yet there is some research that shows a decoupling between the positive aesthetic judgement and the pleasure produced by the object (Fischer 1968).

The approach to aesthetics adopted in this study leads to a focus on the cognitive and sensory aspects of aesthetic experience. This is consistent with the research trends in motivational theory (McGuire 1976) that distinguish cognitive and emotional aspects of an individual's motivation. Brand aesthetics corresponds to the sensory treatment (the physical expression) which, reflecting the choices made on the plan of content (ethics), triggers the process of production of meaning. It is the 'signifier which makes possible the emergence of meaning at the level of perception.' And, as Greimas (1986: 9–10) reminds us, 'the meanings of the human world are at the level of perception'. It seems legitimate to ask what happens at the perception level of the 'deconstruction' model (Figure 1.1) we made on the mechanism of the production of meaning.

The debate between the supporters of the cognitive, the rational and the formalized and those of the emotional, the affective and the sensory has generated an abundant literature. The mechanisms which lead to satisfaction are complex and undoubtedly exciting. They are, however, outside the scope of this book, which limits itself to the measure of preference used for the quantitative study presented in Chapter 11, deliberately neglecting the links between preference and satisfaction.

However, the overcoming of the sensory/cognitive duality, proposed by the Harvard Professor of Art Psychology Rudolf Arnheim (1969), developer of the notion of visual thinking, seems a more appropriate way to approach the nature of the phenomenon of aesthetic experience. He argued (1969: 13) that 'cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception, but the essential ingredients of perception itself'.

Merleau-Ponty (1945: 355) asserted that 'the subject is thinking his perception and the truth of his perception rather than perceiving'. More

recently, Eric Landowski (2004: 2) has argued that 'the experience is to be understood as the moment of the emergence of meaning' and that

> the act of understanding, viewed as the seizure of meanings discursively articulated, does not exclude, but incorporates the sensory experience of a world recognized as immediately making sense, and that conversely, feeling is already in itself a first mode of grasping the meaning, so that some form of understanding is already outlined in the very way we experience, including physically, our presence in the world.

This approach seems to correspond best to the perception of brand aesthetics, within the semiotic and identity-based context adopted in this study.

2.2   The aesthetization of the everyday

One characteristic of postmodern consumption is the 'aesthetization' of products and services and of their communication (Featherstone 1991). According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), 'It is the signifier that is given greater attention under postmodernism.' It is indeed the realm of the senses which prevails over the world of ideas. They point out that market awareness that the value of an object is not independent of its symbolic or imaginary dimension leads consumers to attribute more value to the aesthetic aspects of consumption experiences and forces marketers to 'spectacularize' their offering and communication.

Brands play a central role in consumption and their communication logic extends to other areas such as culture (Klein 2001), politics, and so on. In this, they clearly contribute to the phenomenon of aesthetization of our daily environment.

2.2a   Plastic differentiation

Product design, one of the main elements of brand aesthetics, is a recognized source of differentiation (Kotler and Rath 1984; Veryzer 1995). It is the need for brands to differentiate themselves in an easily discernible manner in order to compete successfully for consumers saturated by multiple and never-ending new brand offerings that contributes strongly to the aesthetization of consumer products and services. As early as the 1970s, brands began to develop this relatively unexplored dimension to be more competitive (Schmitt and Simonson 2007; Semprini 2005).

Since the mass dissemination of 'design' in the 1950s, the examples are numerous. It was first applied to limited series or machines, then expanded massively and became common with the arrival of brands like Ikea, Conran, Alessi and Habitat.

It is in the use of colours (appliances, phones, laptops, personal computers, tapes, and adhesives) that this trend is most visible. Divard and Urien (2001) go so far as to characterize the trend as a 'real chromatic revolution'. Thus products commonly referred to as 'whitegoods' (domestic appliances such as refrigerators (see Figure 2.2), washing machines and dishwashers) have in recent years unfurled the wildest colours and motifs. A comment from the Smeg Communication Director (2011) about her company's approach to design is worth noting here:

For Smeg, the objects that surround us must not only fulfil a functional purpose, but also create an atmosphere. That's why technology and functionality are inseparable elements of Smeg style and of its aesthetic research. This sensitivity, which inspired the collaboration with great architects and designers of our time, expresses the

Figure 2.2   Advertising SMEG 2005 © All rights reserved

excellence of the 'Made in Italy', which knows how to infuse art and industrial design in everyday objects.

The evolution in the automobile industry illustrates the trend perfectly. Legend has it that Henry Ford's famous formula was that you could buy a Model-T Ford of any colour, so long as it was black. However, during the period of its production from 1907 to 1928, it was in fact possible to get it in other colours – green, gray, red and blue (McCalley 1994). In 2009, from the Ford website in France, Ford Fiesta customers could choose from 15 possible colours for the bodywork, eight for the upholstery and in six finishes, which represented a total of 720 combinations.

What we are witnessing in the developing market for mass-produced electric cars reinforces the correlation between the increase in competitive intensity and the aesthetization of the products. In 2008, the team responsible for developing the electric car for the Pininfarina Bolloré joint venture declared of the electric cars already on the market: 'They are not designed.' This was a clear expression of the team's view that the aesthetic dimension was not the primary objective in creating the first cars, while the model developed by Pininfarina (in association with the Bolloré group) was to be particularly competitive in terms of aesthetics for reasons of differentiation, attractiveness and brand identity.

The most spectacular example of differentiation by aesthetics is certainly that of Absolut Vodka, whose success was essentially based on the aesthetic treatment of its advertising, its name and its bottle, and the consistency in the implementation of the creation and communication programmes. The recent success of the Spanish ready-to-wear brand Desigual was built, in addition to exemplary logistics, on a strong aesthetic differentiation based on a particular use of colours.

Services are also involved in this quest for differentiation by aesthetics. Banks revise their logos and the architecture of their branch networks; head-hunters customize their advertisements and the designers themselves (Newson, Arad, Pininfarina, for example), cultivate and formalize their own brand aesthetics, while their trade is based on their ability to interpret their clients' aesthetics.

Colour is not the only dimension in which this tendency to aestheticism finds expression. It affects all aspects of graphics, volume, composition, textures, themes and contexts; it plays on quality, originality and artistic associations; it applies to all brand manifestations, especially in the visual treatment of advertising. A quick comparative study of two Samsonite advertisements, respectively from 1955 and 2008, is

particularly illustrative of the growing attention to the aesthetic treatment of brand manifestations (see Figure 2.3).

Both ads communicate around the physical attributes of the suitcases. In 1955 we have a presentation of their strength, their capacity, their adaptability to car boots and the range of colours. The scene depicts the preparations for departure on holiday suggested by a weathervane, a card and a rear car. It uses a practical, factual approach that highlights the size, strength and colours of the product conceived for travelling by car. Fifty-three years later, we see the same emphasis on strength and durability but now there is the added feature of lightness. In 2008, we are presented with a floor, a wall and two pedestals in a setting which, though not clearly defined, is suggestive of a museum. Humour and surrealism are summoned to illustrate strength and lightness. The photo is in black and white. Textures are contrasting: the symmetrical relief of the products against the glossy smoothness of the floor; the uniformity of the opaque white wall against the organic veins of the stone blocks. The X 'swallows' the preceding 'e' giving a touch of modernity and technology. It is a sophisticated, cultural approach, suggesting an unreal and yet familiar world. The handwritten text 'Life's a Journey' is like the signature of a painter or of the photographer. It is a successful exercise in which the aesthetic treatment of advertising transforms a suitcase into a work of art. As part of a strategy of diversification (shoes, accessories, and so on), the entire Samsonite communication is oriented towards highlighting design and creativity.

The vital need for brands to differentiate themselves is not the sole driver of the aesthetization of brands. Another cause of this phenomenon (Semprini 2005) is the realization by the brands of the power of the formal work to express the brands' values and the worldview that they want to project. As illustrated by the Samsonite example, a brand that is able to display its aesthetic sensitivity comes to be associated with values of good taste, sophistication, refinement, elegance, culture, art, design and the avant-garde – a convergence of arts and brands that is explored further in the next section.

2.2b   Convergence of art and brands

The disappearance of the line separating artistic works from the activities of daily life is one of the main components of the definition of postmodernism (Featherstone 1991). For Baudrillard (1983), it is the rapid and intense flow of images and signs generated by contemporary society which leads to the confusion between the real and the virtual and to the aesthetization of everyday life. For him, the incursion of art into

Figure 2.3 Advertising Samsonite © All rights reserved. On the left 1955, on the right 2008

the fields of production and reproduction (as illustrated by the works of Duchamp and Warhol, for example) brings even the banal and the quotidian into the realm of art. Reality and fantasy merge and fascination with aesthetic pleasure permeates everything. *The end of the real and the end of art lead us to a hyper-reality that the surrealists had anticipated.*

Marcel Duchamp was a pioneer in this field in 1913 when he presented a bicycle wheel on a stool as a full artistic creation. He systematically introduced industrial objects such as doorknobs, plastic bottles and other everyday utensils into his works. In his quest to demystify the classical notions of artistic creation based on the academic ideal of a transcendent beauty, harmony, and so on, he developed the logic of the work of art as 'ready-made' with the famous urinal of 1917. The status of the artist then evolves into a purely 'editing' role consisting of selecting objects from everyday life and simply choosing the time and place of their exhibition.

This is not very different from how some of the current brand designers work, selecting from among a myriad prototypes created by their assistants the pieces that will appear in the fashion show. Let's see how brands participate in this convergence of daily life and art.

From art to brands

Warhol excelled at reducing artistic activity to the discovery of an original concept and at relying primarily on techniques of provocation (all words well known in the world of communication). He stacked bottles of Coke, reproduced colourized photographs of celebrities, and painted the famous Campbell Soup tin. The work of art reproduced the branded object without adding anything. The difference between the Campbell Soup poster signed by Warhol and the product itself lies only in the discourse built around it. *It is the artistic theory alone which makes the work of art.*

This is the 'vanguard', the elite who knows the theory, which is able to identify what is art; hence, the crucial role of communication in contemporary art. Similarly, one needs to be 'connected' to know which brands are becoming fashionable.

Brand logic prevails also in activities related to the world of art. The frenzy to cash in on celebrity or notoriety that has been the hallmark of public life for much of the past two decades has even swept up such great institutions as the Louvre, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA) and the Prado. Today, in airport and downtown boutiques everywhere one can find an eclectic array of items: Impressionist neckties, Van Gogh mouse pads, Mona Lisa T-shirts, Picasso refrigerator magnets and Velázquez aprons.

The artists themselves have been the instigators of this phenomenon: Salvador Dali – whose commercial sensitivity was such that his surrealist colleagues nicknamed him 'Avida dollars', an anagram of his name – produced volumes of prints and lithographs. His heirs too have developed a considerable range of commercial activities bearing the Picasso name – from perfumes, cosmetics and accessories to a Citroën car.

However, the true heir to Warhol is Takashi Murakami. The Japanese artist has collaborated with Louis Vuitton since 2002 and is the author of the 'Cherry' collection, which combines drawings of cherries with the famous brand monogram. According to the journalist Florinda Salinas, Murakami sells more handbags than paintings or sculptures (*El Mundo* 13 February 2009).

From brands to art

For their part, brands have quickly realized the benefits to be gained by being associated with the art world. Having a strong cultural dimension cannot harm a brand's reputation. The use of art and artists by luxury brands is, in general, perceived quite favourably: indeed, it is difficult to see how it could damage them in any way. It helps to attract the attention of the press and the public and testifies to the brand's aesthetic sensibility. It energizes the brand's creativity, bringing a new relevance from its association with celebrities from the world of art.

Associations between brands and art take several forms that can be classified according to the degree of artistic involvement within the brand identity. This can begin with a simple association of convenience with a renowned artist or work of art, such as Yves Saint Laurent's tributes to Mondrian (1965), Picasso (1979), Matisse (1981), Van Gogh (1988) and Warhol (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008). Other brands are choosing to develop an artistic dimension firmly rooted in their identity, with the creation of foundations for arts (Cartier, Loewe) or a special relationship with a particular artistic activity. For a large number of new brands, the cinema has been the main source of cultural legitimacy. It conveys an image of modernity and dynamism, and the public can easily identify with famous actors. Tod's famous advertising campaign, in which Cary Grant, Steve McQueen and Audrey Hepburn were shown wearing its moccasins, contributed to the transformation of a banal product into an iconic one.

We have reached the stage where some brands creations have themselves acquired the status of works of art. The Guggenheim Museum in New York was the first to organize an Armani exhibition in 2000. The 2003 exhibition of Guy Bourdin's photographs used for advertising

Charles Jourdan shoes in the 1970s is a very good example of this change in status. We have to keep in mind that, 20 years ago, the fashion world was still associated with great vulgarity in artistic circles. The elevation of photography to the ranks of artistic disciplines contributed significantly to this change in perception as well as the proliferation of fashion or design museums and exhibitions.

Is there a big difference between contemporary art fairs and fashion shows, or between a painter who exhibits and sells his work in galleries every two years, and a ready-to-wear designer who organizes a fashion show twice a year and sells his products in brand shops or department stores?

Contemporary art presents branded products as masterpieces; masterpieces mingle with the more prosaic consumer goods. Brands borrow creative legitimacy from the world of art; art borrows the commercial and communicational logic of brands. Brands compete with movies, television, the entertainment industry and literature by offering new ways to dream. *The boundary between art and brands has become blurred.*

We have talked about the interpenetration of the worlds of art and brands, about the increased competition between the multitude of brands amplified by ever increasing technological advances, about the saturation of the flow of images and signs: the overall framework of the aesthetization of our existence would be not complete if it did not also consider the role of 'Dandyism'.

2.2c   Dandyism

The dandy, who is also the central figure of Baudelaire's conception of modernity (Baudelaire 1976), is one who makes his body, behaviour, feelings, passions and existence a work of art in itself. Featherstone (1987) pointed out how his project to transform his own life into a work of art fuelled the construction of distinct lifestyles and the quest for new sensations that characterize the consumption culture. This constant attempt to reinvent one's life as an aesthetic project has always fascinated and continues to influence artists, designers and intellectuals, thus contributing to the aesthetization of everyday life.

The purpose of this study is not to prepare an exhaustive list of all the causes of this trend; however, it seems legitimate to wonder whether the trend may be both a cause and a consequence of a greater aesthetic sensitivity among consumers, a phenomenon that would be interesting to analyse more deeply. Other social trends – the increasing popularity of cosmetic surgery, the development of the cosmetics industry and, in particular, the recent development of cosmetics for men (metrosexual),

for example – are contributing to this growing aestheticism. The Lifelab advertising in Figure 2.4 represents, through a pre-Columbian mask and an explicit message ('The art of being beautiful'), a specific intent to activate and engage the male aesthetic sensibility.

A few points to conclude on the aesthetization of everyday life and its implications for the world of brands.

If we recognize the relevance of the aesthetic dimension, is it not appropriate to give it a proper place in the field of brand management? If it is true that the aesthetic dimensions of life and objects play a major role in our choices, it is then important to understand the nature of brand

Figure 2.4 Advertising Lifelab © All rights reserved 'The art of being beautiful'

aesthetics, its evolution, how it is perceived, and its ability to influence, in order to gain a certain degree of control over it. For the brand manager, it is a matter of being able to define and communicate the objectives of the aesthetic treatment of all brand manifestations. For consumers, it is a matter of learning how to read and decipher the multitude of signs, images and aesthetic experiences to which they are subjected. For both, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the mechanisms of production of meaning that brands propose through their aesthetics.

2.3   Managerial implications of the concept

In this preliminary part dedicated to demonstrating the relevance of the concept of brand aesthetics, we mention only how the very notion can be instrumental in untying old management knots, especially in the field of creativity. The introduction of the concept of brand aesthetics and the audacity to think that it can be managed are based on the conviction that *it is not healthy to have functional areas of the business that do not obey the laws of rational management*. Rational management requires justification of how individual choices and actions contribute to the company's competitiveness and results. An attempt to rationalize aesthetics, notwithstanding the complexity of phenomena, is part of this quest to introduce justification and rational argumentation into projects often abandoned to the talent and creative instincts (Marion 1989: 126–31; Chiapello 1998).

Solomon (1988) highlights the role that semiotics can have in the communication and the creation of products. The concept of brand aesthetics that derives directly from the semiotic approach to identity allows us to confront issues relating to communication, creation, organization and culture with new eyes (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008).

2.3a   Communication issues

A willingness to manage brand aesthetics in a systematic and rational manner leads directly to the following core questions:

- Do the brand's aesthetics (or a specific manifestation thereof) contribute to the effective communication of the brand's ethics and, therefore, to consolidating its identity?
- Does the aesthetic treatment of a specific manifestation serve the operational objectives of brand communication (visibility, easy memorization, special message delivery, emotional arousal) while remaining consistent with the brand aesthetics?

• Are the various brand manifestations mutually consistent from an aesthetic point of view? Too often the brand identity has not been the subject of a sufficiently thorough study to define and formalize the basic values and the permanent aesthetic elements it seeks to promote.

2.3b Creation issues

The types of issues encountered in the communication area also apply in the creative activities related to the products. There is no doubt that an explicit framework formalizing the characteristics of the brand aesthetics will complement the collection plans and various briefs and will guide the creative work of the development of new products or collections. If this framework can serve as a guide to the creation and development of collections, it can also serve as a tool for assessing the completed work.

2.3c Organizational issues

The management of a brand's aesthetics is often confined within the creative departments (products and communication) and is generally poorly thought through. Only rarely are design decisions evaluated in terms of market performance, according to their direct effects on consumers and their financial impact.

The difficulty inherent in the rationalization of aesthetic aspects leads to two opposite organizational models which avoid the problem without solving it. One is the model adopted by LVMH or Chanel, where the keys to the brand aesthetics world are assigned to a renowned designer and where the managing director has absolutely no say in the designer's work. The second model is that of mass brands (Gap, Zara, H & M, Celio). In this context, designers, generally unknown to the public, work for a product manager (or collection director) who determines both style and price logics. Creative activities are thus reduced to a rapid dress up of business plans and a replication of the bestsellers. This model does not exclude the use of celebrities (H & M's recent promotional activities, for example, have included Madonna and Roberto Cavalli) who give their name to special collections. Both systems have recorded stories of success and dissatisfaction.

Between one system that entrusts designers with full and undisputed decision-making power and another in which designers are subjected to strict market constraints, only a rationalization of brand aesthetics can provide the tools to introduce new organizational solutions based on expertise and on smooth, balanced and open rapport among all personnel participating, directly or indirectly, in the creative process.

2.3d Cultural issues

The staff of the creative departments of brands have always had certain contempt for merchants. On the other hand, the commercial personnel are quick to blame 'bad design' when sales perform below expectations. The employees of the production or prototyping departments show no particular tenderness for their creative colleagues. Figure 2.5 illustrates the types of constraints to which a creative department is subject. The tensions caused by differences in the logic applied within the different functions within any normally constituted company, converge at the highest hierarchical level and are crystallized in the relationship between the head of design (or the art director, depending on the organizational structure) and his direct supervisor, usually the Chief Executive Officer. In the confrontation between a manager concerned about figures, budget, performance, market shares and consumer-behaviour theories, and a product designer conscious of the prestige of his profession, sensitive to the world of fashion and its players, nurturing dreams to impose his taste and his talent on the largest possible audience, the rapport is rarely smooth enough to allow for a rational and constructive dialogue.

The success stories of great designers are often the result of a bicephalous leadership: two individuals with complementary talents brought
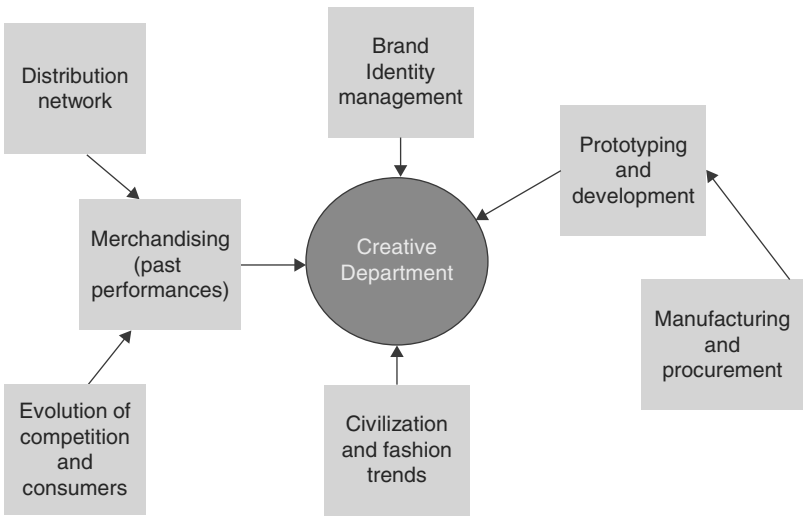
Figure 2.5 Multiple constraints applied to the creative department

together in an outstanding symbiosis. These include, obviously, the mythical pairings of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, and Tom Ford and Domenico de Sole at Gucci in their respective eras. It is also found in brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Victorio y Lucchino, Marc Jacobs, Michael Kors, and so on.

Legitimate questions from the CEO to the designer about the reasons for some of his aesthetic choices may well be taken as an affront, an unwarranted intrusion into a field that belongs exclusively to the designer. 'Because I feel it like that!' is a common response. The fact that, very often, neither protagonist has been prepared to discuss brand aesthetics rationally and that they completely lack a common background of concepts and vocabulary to discuss the choices made in the creative department, reinforce the mutual incomprehension.

In addition to the brand-identity hinge introduced earlier, a number of analytical tools will be introduced in Chapters 4 and 5 to help actively manage brand aesthetics. They allow us to intervene not only at the conceptual level of the complex process by which a brand builds meaning, but also in the management of the plastic dimensions (light, colour, composition, lines, shapes, and so on) of the brand manifestations.

2.4   Conclusions on the relevance of brand aesthetics

We have seen how the aesthetics of products affects consumer behaviour and how postmodern consumption has been strongly aesthetized.

2.4a   Postmodern consumption

Fabris (2003), cited and translated by Semprini (2005), summarizes the changes involved in the passage from modern to postmodern consumption, which has occurred over the last 20 years and which is still in progress.

He shows clearly how the emphasis is on appearance, signs of style and aesthetics rather than essence, signs of status and functional aspects, respectively.

'Postmodernism is very much concerned with the aesthetization of contemporary culture' write Firat and Venkatesh (1995), who also cite Baudrillard (1985):

Aesthetics and economics interact dialectically to produce the aesthetic of commodity form and the commodification of the aesthetic subject. There is a simultaneous reification of aesthetics and

economics into a single cultural form that becomes the essence of the consumer society.

2.4b   Emergence of the postmodern brand

Today's brands can be characterized as postmodern as they are the protagonists of consumption activities. They reflect and contribute to the aesthetization of everyday life, both as partial cause and consequence of the phenomenon.

The modern brand was born in the early twentieth century with industrialization and the need to distinguish products in the nascent mass-distribution system. In the 1970s, the brand emerged as a sub-element of communication and quickly became a new alternative to the traditional strategies that focused on the product. In the 1990s, there was a very clear shift towards intangible values associated with the products and expressed through communication. Semiotic and symbolic values became crucial. This was the beginning of the emergence of the postmodern brand that offers meaning and 'possible worlds' (Semprini 2005), establishing a complicity with the customer beyond the product and often rooted in services. To propose convincingly imaginary worlds, dreams, values which give special meaning to the product or service consumed, the postmodern brand must be in full control of its interface with its consumers: its aesthetics.

This aesthetic dimension of the brand has always existed, but the emergence of the postmodern brand makes it a strategic management factor.

Let's consider now how two worlds that are apparently as alien to each other as the sensory and subjective realm of aesthetics and the economic and social context of brands were able to converge to give birth to the postmodern brand.

3
Historical Foundations: From Experimental Aesthetics to Postmodernism

Having defined the concept of brand aesthetics and attempted to establish its managerial relevance, it is now legitimate to ask how the respective disciplines of aesthetics and brand management have come to converge. The starting point of this process of convergence was the advent of experimental aesthetics, when a scientific interest developed in the reaction of groups of people to the form, colour, or graphic aspects of objects or works of art.

3.1   Experimental aesthetics

The study of beauty (and, more generally, of visual phenomena that generate pleasure) as a discipline was first called 'Aesthetics' by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in his work *Aestetica Acroamatica* in 1750. Until the dawn of the twentieth century, all treatises written by philosophers, theologians, and by the artists themselves, were based on their author's personal experience and observation of their illustrious predecessors and contemporaries. Philosophical, metaphysical, existential and technical issues were addressed. It was towards the end of the nineteenth century that experimental aesthetics was born whose aim was to investigate empirically the reactions of a group of people, representing a certain population, to shapes, colours and the strictly aesthetic qualities of works of art and objects in general. These reactions were then, for the first time, used inductively to derive laws or theories. The quantitative research on consumer preferences for the four linear elements presented in Chapter 11 is part of this experimental approach.

3.1a   Fechner

The work of the German philosopher and psychologer Gustav Theodor Fechner and the publication of his major work *Vorschule der Ästhetik* in 1876 truly marked the beginning of experimental aesthetics (Lalo 1926). The traditional humanistic perspective was abandoned for a scientific experimental approach.

Fechner sought to highlight the relationship between the intensity of the aesthetic preference (subjective experience of pleasure) of a group of people and formal and measurable features of perceived objects. The major innovation was primarily methodological, but also epistemological. It lay not only in the statistical analysis of collective data, but also in the belief that the responses to aesthetic features were measurable.

Fechner defined his approach as 'aesthetics from below' to distinguish it from the existing approach (which he called 'aesthetics from above') which dealt with abstract concepts in a speculative manner, and which was essentially metaphysical and deductive.

He measured, among other things, the aesthetic appreciation of simple objects such as business cards and books in order to assess the most common taste for particular formats. He is best known for his controversial experiments on rectangular shapes, where he revealed a lukewarm endorsement for the square, an aversion to elongated rectangles and a clear preference for the rectangle of size 34×21cm, whose proportions match the golden mean ($\Phi = 1.618$) (Ghyka 1977).

3.1b   The heirs of Fechner

The controversy over the magical effects of the golden mean has still not subsided. The results of research on preferences for specific rectangular proportions are still inconclusive (Green 1995).

From analysis of artistic works with abstract geometric shapes, the researchers quickly came to the study of objects for everyday consumption. Given the multitude of products with rectangular or parallelipipedic shapes that the market offers, it is natural that they have been subject to many studies. McManus (1980) demonstrated that there was 'moderately good evidence' to support the preference for the golden mean, although Fechner's experimental methodology was inadequate. A more recent study (Raghubir and Greenleaf 2006) reached mixed conclusions:

- The ratio of the sides of the rectangle of the packaging has an influence on consumer purchase intentions

- The ratio of the golden mean was preferred in a case studying three possible dimensions of CD packaging, but was not confirmed for the format of invitation cards, where the preferred ratio was around 1.38

Fechner's inductive method led to many theoretical and methodological contributions to experimental aesthetics. One that is of particular relevance to our field of research is his principle of 'unity in diversity', which argues that an aesthetically pleasing object must contain a maximum of unity, compatible with a maximum of diversity. From Plato and Aristotle to Gestalt psychology, the concepts of unity, complexity, harmony, grandeur, order, proportion, rhythm and symmetry are present in most reflections on art and aesthetics.

The two dimensions of 'complexity' (including multiplicity and diversity) and 'structural order' (harmony, unity, order) were a constant topic of reflection of the aesthetes. The study of the balance between these two dimensions, as the basis for measurement of aesthetic objects, has marked the research in the psychological field, with often controversial results. The mathematician George Birkhoff (1932) transformed this intuition into a mathematical formula to allow rational and quantified comparison of different aesthetic objects, as follows:

$$M = O/C$$

where M is a measure of the aesthetic value, O a measure of order and C a measure of complexity.

He argued that the simplest and most ordered objects are more pleasing, his hypothesis being that the effort required to understand a certain configuration increased proportionally with the visual complexity and decreased with the order. M is actually an inverse measure of the effort of attention needed to perceive and understand the object.

Birkhoff's work on the measurement of complexity is of particular interest to us and is used in the investigation into the preferences of consumers for four linear plastic elements (Chapter 11).

Complexity factors vary according to the objects. Polygonal figures, for example, include vertical and radial symmetries, the number of straight lines, and angles. Many authors have tested Birkhoff's assumptions, with mixed results. Staudek (1999) tested the formula on Chinese vases by using the following complexity factors:

- Points of inflection
- Terminal points

- Points of vertical tangent
- Points of abrupt change in direction of tangent, and so on

These aspects are deepened in Chapters 8 and 11 with the analysis of the degree of complexity of the four types of lines introduced there and their relationship to the preferences of consumers. Eysenck (1941) showed that, in fact, complexity and order are correlated to positive aesthetic effects and he studied, as does this current survey, the relationships between the preferences measured and the profile of respondents': sex (Eysenck and Iwawaki 1975), culture (Eysenck and Iwawaki 1971) and psychological types (Eysenck 1941).

3.1c Berlyne

In the 1970s, Berlyne (Konecni 1978) finally summarized all the research of his predecessors. He laid the groundwork for an objective psychology of aesthetic appreciation and he is recognized as the founder of contemporary experimental aesthetics. His research was guided by the desire to show that a large number of human behaviours could be explained by reference to a limited number of motivational principles. Berlyne's approach rested on the belief that it is possible to measure both the physical characteristics of a stimulus and the resulting physiological aspects of a subjective feeling called aesthetic pleasure.

This current study of consumer preferences for certain lines shares the same objectives: to discover common features that can explain aesthetic preferences. Berlyne's theory on the impact of the degree of complexity of stimuli on consumer preferences provides a partial explanation of the results presented here in Chapter 11.

In *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (1971), Berlyne highlighted the preferences for moderately complex stimuli rather than for simple or highly complex stimuli.

On the basis of his neurobiological discoveries, Berlyne asserted that the motivational state of an organism is the product of three nervous systems:

- A primary reward system
- An aversion system
- A secondary reward system, which can inhibit the aversion system

The respective activities of the three systems depend on the degree of stimulation (arousal) caused by the environment. The arousal potential is the intensity of the effect that may have a stimulus on the three systems.

The primary reward system is the most sensitive and it triggers pleasure at relatively minor levels of stimulation. If the level of stimulation continues to increase, the threshold of activation of the system of aversion is reached and it begins to offset the effects of pleasure until it eventually exceeds them if the stimulation level continues to increase At each level of stimulation, we can calculate the 'hedonic value' – which is simply a measure of pleasure generated by the stimulus – by the algebraic sum of the value defined by two curves. Figure 11.5 in the last chapter shows an example of a curve using this algebraic sum in order to illustrate the hedonic value (or pleasure intensity) according to the arousal (or stimulus) intensity.

This curve takes its name from the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), who developed it for the measurement of performance in relation to stimulation. Berlyne used it to illustrate his own theories.

Berlyne (1971) argued that it is the level of complexity of a work which acts as the primary stimulus in the fields of arts and aesthetics in general. The complexity of a work is determined by several factors such as the number of elements presented, their heterogeneity, irregular shapes, and so on. We will come back to the notion of complexity in Chapter 11 in the discussion of the results of the survey. The important point demonstrated by the curve is that if the increase in the complexity of an image initially creates fun, it begins to decline after a certain threshold of complexity, and ends up generating aversion. As Gombrich (1979) expressed it: 'The aesthetic pleasure comes from a balance between boredom and confusion'.

3.2   Business and aesthetics

We have seen that the psychologists paved the way in the field of experimental and theoretical responses to shapes, colours, and aesthetic qualities of objects. However, it wasn't until the 1980s that marketing and, in particular, consumer research developed theories on the aesthetic aspects of consumption. Holbrook (1980) was the first to realize this lack and he urged researchers into the marketing of consumer goods to focus more on the aesthetic aspects of products than on the utilitarian aspects.

Progress was slow, however. In 1995, Ekman and Wagner were still arguing that the aesthetic aspects of consumption were being neglected by marketing research. Veryzer (1995) also commented that research on product design and aesthetics was still only in in its 'infancy'.

That same year, Bloch lamented that subjects on product design were rarely treated in marketing journals. More than a decade later, Charters (2006) was pointing out that comparatively little analytical work had been done on the aesthetic dimension as an essential component of a product. He did admit, however, that aesthetic processes had begun to receive more attention from marketing academics mainly because of the recent focus on experiential and symbolic aspects of consumption.

Holbrook and his collaborators have had a strong influence on aesthetic studies since the 1980s. Holbrook has relied primarily on the psychological approach that indeed allows for an easier implementation of quantitative research. Although his work has been primarily devoted to 'cultural' products (media, entertainment, music), he acknowledges, in the tradition of Fechner (a tradition maintained in this current study), that processes of aesthetic appreciation can be extended to other products of lesser apparent aesthetic content.

3.2a   Product design

From the 1980s a new focus emerged on the sensory aspects of products as components of the marketing mix (Veryzer 1995). The continuous and intense flow of new products and increased competition led companies to differentiate their products by playing on the aesthetic side of design.

Bloch (1995) provides a useful model for studying the influence of the shape or form of goods on the reactions of consumers and on their processing of visual information. See Figure 5.3 where we show how our Brand Aesthetic Chain scheme comes to complete Bloch's model. Under the heading 'Form' he includes all visual and tactile aspects of a product, as well as the quality of execution (Pye 1978), on which designers have to make choices.

The constraints that apply to the determination of the form are more than those presented previously in Figure 2.5, which focused on the interdepartmental cultural tensions that exist around a creative department. Bloch mentions constraints of an ergonomic, productive, legal, marketing and performance nature including those related to the designer himself and his desire for self-expression (Lawson 1983). It is remarkable that, in a model so complete, there is no reference to the characteristic features of brand identity, whether related to ethics or aesthetics. The only thing approaching this is the mention of the constraint on the designer to share some characteristics with previous projects.

The psychological responses of the consumer are separated according to whether they are of a cognitive (beliefs and categorization) or emotional nature, which can lead to welcoming (approach) or rejection (avoidance) attitudes of approximation. Bloch introduced moderating factors, such as personal taste, the prevailing culture, and so on, that influence consumer responses and warned marketers and designers to recognize the potential impact of age, social class, culture and subculture on preferences. It is this same type of reasoning which led us to the quantitative analysis implemented in this study (see Chapter 11).

3.2b   Artificial intelligence and computer-aided design

The literature on industrial design is rich in studies on the influence of the aesthetic treatment of objects on consumer preferences. This area of research is dedicated in particular to the introduction of instruments to automate a maximum number of tasks. The introduction of digital instruments in the industrial-design process over the past 20 years has helped to significantly shorten the development time of products, reduce the costs of staff (Giannini, Monti and Podehl 2006) and increase reliability in the transition from concept to production. The prototyping phase has long been a bottleneck in the automotive and jewellery industries, for example (Wannarumon and Bohez 2006); hence, the introduction of digital tools to model the different phases of design and development.

Although one of the main goals of modelling the processes is to ensure that the designer's intentions are preserved during any phase of product development, there is in this discipline a great deal of sensitivity to the influence of the visual appearance of the products on their commercial success (Vergeest 2002). Parameters related to the shape of goods are subject to extensive studies because they enable numerous and rapid geometric changes to be effected during the design phase. Studies of correlations between parameterized (i.e. mathematically translatable) geometrical elements of object shapes and consumer preferences are common and are similar to that presented in the next few chapters where the four basic lines used as the analytical framework are actually easily parameterized.

A particular branch of the vast field of artificial intelligence consists of the analysis of form, in which various methodologies have attempted to artificially reproduce the human vision system (Loncaric 1998; Attneave and Arnoult 1966). This particular discipline is evolving towards the use of artificial-intelligence tools applied to artistic judgement and creativity (Machado and Cardoso 1998).

3.2c   Brand aesthetics

Apart from Floch's work on brand identity (1990) and subsequent research undertaken by Ceriani (2001), Semprini (2005) and Marrone (2007), there has been little academic study of the concept of brand aesthetics.

Although the notion of 'marketing aesthetics' appears with Schmitt and Simonson (2007), their approach was incomplete in that it referred solely to the strategic management of brands, identity and image. Their definition of corporate and brand ae*sthetics* – 'the attractive visual and other sensory markers and symbols that represent the organization and its brands appropriately and dazzle customers through sensory experiences' – does not encompass the full range of meanings carried by the term 'brand aesthetics'.

Schmitt and Simonson's definition is narrower than what is encompassed by 'brand aesthetics' and, in their acception, "brand aesthetics" must necessarily have an attractive and exciting effect. However, before describing the desired commercial effects, we need to establish the fundamental nature of this 'marketing aesthetics'. Moreover, the phrase 'sensory markers and symbols' does not cover all aesthetic treatments of brand manifestations. To their credit, though, Schmitt and Simonson introduce the important notion of 'aesthetics planning'. We are touching here on the identity dimension of aesthetics, one of the purposes of an aesthetic strategy being to create an identity for the organization and its brands.

What is most lacking in their definition is the fundamental link of aesthetics with brand ethics – a connection that is inherent in the semiotic approach as the basis of the mechanism of production of meaning.

The authors further claim, and somewhat peremptorily, that the numerous studies on colour and shape that exist in the literature on arts and psychology up to that time had had no influence on marketing – and this despite the influential contributions that had been made by Holbrook and his followers since the 1980s. It should be noted, too, that they make no reference to Floch or semiotics.

3.3   Postmodernism and the aesthetics of consumption

At the end of the twentieth century a major change in the way in which aesthetics was viewed began to unfold. The end of the meta-narratives and of universal ideologies (Lyotard 1979) brought about widespread suspicion of any theory explaining human behaviour. All the works of previous centuries were rendered uninteresting and

aesthetics became a metaphor for the way postmodern society works. The logic of brand management now pervades all aspects of life; economic, cultural, political, social and artistic activities converge (Baudrillard 1985; Featherstone 1990, 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008).

Postrel (2003) is the main advocate of a 'new aesthetics', which has been reduced to a mode of communication through the sensory and which denies any cognitive aspect of aesthetic experience. Lipovetski and his 'hypermarket of lifestyles' (1983) reinforces this new approach to the aesthetic, emphasizing the role of personal aesthetic choices as a means of the expression of individual identity and freedom.

3.4 Art history

For marketing purposes, the history of art represents an untapped wealth of knowledge, considerations, approaches and rules that can often be adapted and applied to phenomena relating to brands. Floch was an enthusiastic user of art history as source material before the emergence of semiotics. He made particular reference (1990: 107) to Heinrich Wölfflin and his definitions of 'classical' and 'baroque', and mentions himself as an example of the contribution of art history to semiotics. This current study also will often borrow from the rich German literature in the field of reflections on art. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1995), which placed the experience of beauty at the same level as theoretical activity and moral action (Panofsky 1989: Introduction), began a tradition in the German language of reflections on art as a manifestation of a sensory and intelligible duality of human nature. This current study draws on that tradition, making frequent reference to the following writers:

- Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), German, for his considerations on the sinuous line
- Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1905), Swiss, for his essential contribution in providing a binary and antithetical definition of baroque and classical styles, independent of the subject of the studied works
- Aloïs Riegl (1858–1905), Austrian, for the introduction of several concepts such as that of *Kunstwollen*, the oppositions between tactile and optical perceptions, organic and crystalline expressions and the three finalities of aesthetic treatments
- Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965), German, strongly inspired by Riegl, for the link made between organic and crystalline styles and the specific world views that correspond to them

- Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), of German origin, for his comments on his predecessors, on the sinuous line and one of his main guiding principles: 'no form without content' (See Molino's Introduction to Panofsky 1924)
- Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007), of German origin, Harvard professor of the psychology of art, for his experiments on the plastic meanings of linear expressions
- Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), of Austrian origin, for his comments on lines

The writings of the following artists are also used as references, particularly in Part II in relation to linear expression:

- GianPaolo Lomazzo (1538–92), Italian painter, who reported Michelangelo's statements on the serpentine line
- Du Fresnoy (1611–65), French painter, art critic and poet, who also made comments on the serpentine line
- Hogarth (1697–1764), English painter, who argued that the serpentine line, or 'line of grace', is the main source of beauty in painting and sculpture
- Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), painter of Russian origin, and Paul Klee (1879–1940), Swiss painter, for their general consideration of all types of line
- Henry Van de Velde (1863–1957), Belgian architect, for his writings on lines in general

Having undertaken a rapid synthesis of the literature on aesthetics and its applications in the field of brand management, and to the extent that the definition of brand aesthetics adopted for this research is of a semiotic-identity nature, we now need to examine how the concept of the aesthetics of a brand is linked to its identity.

4
Brand Identity

We have seen in Chapter 1 how the notion of brand aesthetics was introduced in the dual context of the expression of an identity and the production of meaning as the brand is, in the words of the semiotician Gianfranco Marrone (2007), 'a complex entity of eminently semiotic nature'.

4.1 The semiotic nature of brands

This semiotic nature is simply due to the capacity of brands to build and disseminate meanings through their manifestations which, in the semiotic sense, are 'acts of discourse' (Semprini 2005). Beyond its visible manifestations, the signifier, the hinge formed with the signified (see Chapter 1), produces meaning effects on people that transcend the purely economic transactions. The brand is a protagonist of postmodern consumption. It actively participates in:

• The production, circulation and perception of social discourse
• The cultural conditions for the dissemination of texts and images
• The changes in collective representations
• The genesis of beliefs
• The management of trust in people and institutions
• The dynamics of intersubjective communication
• The construction and recognition of identities, and so on. (Marrone 2007)

Brands are not entities with a dual soul, material and immaterial, but rather signs, texts, images, discourses that link content and expression, form and substance, idea and matter.

Simmel ([1903] 2005) was the first to say that consumption to some extent determines consumers by enabling them to associate with, or invest their own values into, the products offered. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) recognized that objects are means of passing messages between individuals and that consumption has a highly symbolic dimension.

Baudrillard (1977) spoke of 'a society of meaning' where the product, by virtue of its triple nature – symbolic, functional and commercial – becomes a sign obeying the rules of differentiation imposed by fashion. The Saussurian structural semantic sustains that meaning arises from the relationship of two contrary terms. This emphasizes indirectly how differentiation from the competition is fundamental in the production of brand meaning.

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argued that consumers look for meanings and experiences while marketers propose entertainment shows. This ability of brands to produce and propose meaning is an essential part of the postmodern context characterized by a permanent search for meaning and intangible value on the part of consumers, orphans of the great universal ideologies.

The semiotic approach to brand identity is based on the simple and seemingly reasonable assumption that brands are systems that produce meaning (even if it seems sometimes that what some of them produce is simply nonsense). It is merely according the minimum respect due to each participant – managers, distributors, advertisers, consumers, observers – to assume that the brand 'makes sense'.

It is also a much easier way to be competitive! In the media bombardment that characterizes society today, *having something interesting and original to say is a prerequisite for effective communication*. In fact, semiotics and advertising have always had a privileged relationship: after all, what is the task of the advertiser if not to intentionally produce meaning from signs?

4.2   The notion of invariance

All the talent of semioticians working on brands lies in their ability to bring to light ethical and aesthetic invariants, which implies the mastering of at least three different disciplines:

- To discover ways of thinking about the world presents the same issues as faced by the ethnologist. This is the dilemma as to the certainty of a proper reading of the thoughts of others (which Weeks 2001 refers to as 'beliefs ascription').
- To retrieve invariant elements from within the corpus of the history of brand manifestations requires the ability to extract a number of

recurrent graphical or plastic elements from the iconography, photos, text and products. This is an activity more usually associated with the work of the art historian.

- To extract gestures, attitudes, patterns from interviews or observations of pre- and post-purchase behaviours is more akin to the work of a field sociologist.

Where invariants are tenuous or non-existent, linking the ethical and aesthetic constants identified can be a complex and arid exercise.

To uncover the deep values of a brand buried under a profusion of layers of creativity requires experience and insight, as exemplified by Jean-Marie Floch in Florence in 1993. Stopping in front of a photograph of Salvatore Ferragamo at the feet of Anna Magnani, delicately touching her shoe, Floch declared: 'It is Vulcan and Venus!' (Mazzalovo 2008).

Vulcan was the god of fire and metal-working. In addition to forging the thunderbolts of Jupiter, he created jewels such as the crown of Arianne or the necklace of Hermione. This was one of the elements which led the Ferragamo brand to adopt the concept of the sublimation of materials and people as being the main quest of the brand: a fundamental component of its ethics. There are other photos of Salvatore at the feet of his famous clientele including Gloria Swanson, Maria Grazia di Savoia, Gene Tierney, Katherine Dunham, Alicia Markova, among others. This ethical invariant was further reinforced in Ferragamo's autobiography where he stated: 'There is no limit to beauty, no saturation point in design, no end to the materials that a shoemaker may use to decorate his creations so that every woman may be shod like a princess and a princess may be shod like a fairy queen'.

4.2a   Dynamic coherence of identity

However, we need to go deeper into the notion of invariance and beyond a rigid conception of the notion of identity. In his study of the advertising of Waterman, Floch (1995; 14–41) took up the concept of 'narrative identity' introduced by Ricoeur (1990), in which two modes of 'permanence over time' are opposed: the character, and the keeping (or preservation) of oneself ('*maintien de soi*') and/or of one's word. An identity that forms in the constant dialectic between the *idem*, the sameness, the perpetuation, the durable distinctive signs by which a person is recognizable, and the *ipse*, the preservation of one's own values and of the given word, which relates to ethics.

By opposing as two extremes the 'character' to the 'keeping of oneself' we wanted to identify the proper ethical dimension of selfhood

(ipseity) without regard for the perpetuation of the character. It thus marked the difference between the two modes of permanence in time that clearly states the term of 'keeping of oneself', opposed to the perpetuation of the same.

<div align="right">Ricoeur (1990: 195)</div>

Figure 4.1 sums up the duality of the concept of narrative identity.

The identity is then defined by its mode of production (generative approach). It is linked to the idea of a journey, path, progressive connections to places, to the world, and to acts, and justifies the extension of the notion of identity to projects, organizations, brands, and so on. It is a notion of identity shaped by processes, tensions, concatenated sequences and orientations (syntagmatic approach) typical of organizational life in general.

We reach thus a definition of identity characterized by a dynamic consistency built into the unfolding story of the brand life, where the apparent changes are used to highlight the invariant aspects of its identity.

We will see in Chapter 5 (when dealing with the purposes of aesthetic treatments) how it is feasible to classify brands according to whether they are more oriented towards the perpetuation of style codes and therefore centred on sameness, or are more focused on the perseverance in their own creation and therefore on the selfhood.

Floch offers a semiotic square of the two main brand conceptions (see Figure 5.1) which ranks the brands into two broad categories: 'Guarantee'

Narrative identity

IDEM SAMENESS	IPSE SELFHOOD
Character	Keeping one's word, '*maintien de soi*'
Perpetuation of the same	Perseverance, self-coherence
Continuity	Constancy
Relational invariant	
sedimentation	Innovation
What you are recognized by?	**What makes you tick?**
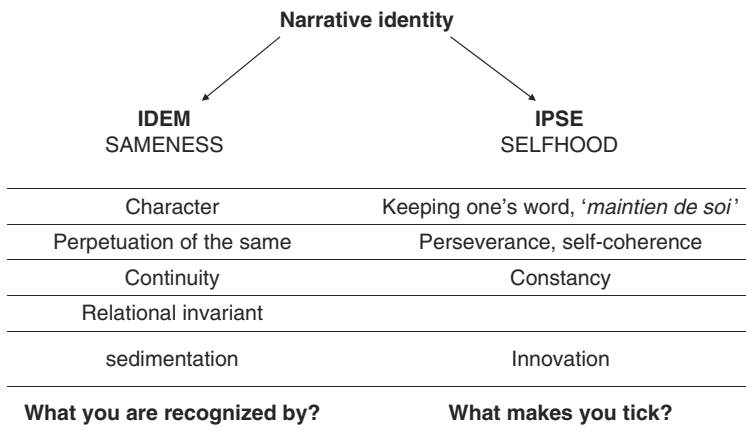
Figure 4.1   Narrative brand identity (according to Floch et Ricoeur)

brands, which systematically exploit signs, as opposed to 'Universe' brands, which generate their personal meaning. Floch did not publish this semiotic square directly but it can be found in other publications (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008).

Pushing these rationales to their limits, what happens when one of the two elements of identity (ethics or aesthetics) is missing? In both cases, the perception of identity is much more difficult because the meaning does not surface.

A brand in which it is virtually impossible to find aesthetic invariants struggles to transmit coherently its vision of the world.

If the brand's ethics is missing, if there is nothing to say (unfortunately a frequent phenomenon in the fashion world), it is unlikely to find aesthetic invariants which go beyond repetitive style codes. With regard to the lack of ethical invariants in the world of fashion, we may cite an article titled 'On the endless runway, a fading aura' by Guy Trebay (originally published in the *New York Times* and republished in the supplement of *Le Monde* on 20 September 2008). In it, he quotes the Spanish designer Miguel Adrover who declares after his New York fashion show: 'You don't feel like digging for meaning right now in fashion, because you dig and dig, and you find nothing … everything is next, next, next, everything is VIP; it's an empty idea'.

In fact, the presence of specific aesthetic invariants always augurs well about the likelihood of discovering ethical invariants. And if one finds only very tenuous aesthetic and/or ethical invariants, then the field is open to allow for a new and precise definition of an identity, as was done for Loewe in 1996.

4.2b   The need for brand evolution

Consistency in a brand's identity must not come about from a diktat. The identity of a brand must have certain 'fluidity': how many brands have disappeared or weakened because of an inability to evolve? There are countless examples: Panhard, Talbot, Paco Rabane, Fiorucci, Benetton, and, more recently, Hummer and Mercury.

Decline is inevitable if nothing is done to stop it and the reasons for it, both internal and external, are numerous (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008). They include mismanagement and stronger competition, but are mostly what might be called the natural brand '*entropy*'. Any brand, through the use of its products, the repeated exposure to its advertising and its omnipresence will experience a certain demystification among its consumers. It loses its mystery and with it part of its attractiveness. In the context of today's novelty race, its success erodes more rapidly.

Finally, there is the evolution of the fundamental trends of our civilization – its needs, fashions, lifestyles, technology, tastes, and so on. The history of the evolution of perceptions of the colour blue (Pastoureau 2000) is a known and relevant example of this. In the Greco-Roman era, blue played no role in social, religious or artistic life and was only little used by the barbarians. It was not until the thirteenth century, with the evolution of Church dogma on the divine nature of light and the subsequent creation of the stained-glass windows of Chartres Cathedral, that blue began to take a more prominent place in liturgical life. It then became an aristocratic colour, taking its place in clothing, artistic creations, and the religious life. Today, blue has become the favourite colour in the western world (Divard and Urien 2001). Opinion polls show that over 50 per cent of Western Europeans prefer blue, with green following far behind with 20 per cent. The only exceptions are Spain, where red is favourite, followed by yellow. In the Far East, white comes first, followed by either bright blue or black, depending on the country. Tastes change as a function of time and place and brands must adjust their ways in order to remain competitive.

For all these reasons, a brand identity that is too rigid, too corseted by constraints or defined in too much detail, does not allow for 'sticking' closely to markets. But this does not necessarily mean that the brand's ethical and aesthetic invariants must be renewed. Indeed, the need for evolutionary change is felt differently in each of these areas.

The need for evolution is greater at the aesthetic level. Rather than changing the invariants, it is a matter of remaining in tune with the current aesthetic taste. For example, if the aesthetic of Loewe was defined as 'baroque minimalist' in 1996, today it is a little less Spartan, as minimalism virtually disappeared in the early 2000s and the trend is baroquization in general. We shall return to this theme later. As for ethics, it is perhaps less a question of changing the brand's core values than of placing under a stronger light those values that seem most in tune with market sentiment and hence capable of generating the best economic results.

Evolution is not about transforming the invariants in a hasty manner; rather, it is about making marginal and timely adaptations to focus on what markets favour without altering the substance of the brand.

The evolutionary needs are more important for brands whose ethics are based on values related to fashion. Brands such as Hermès and Bentley, whose ethics promote elitist and aristocratic values, are less subject to change as there will always be new rich and old fortunes. The management of the brand over time may be more complex for brands such as Prada, Gucci or Roberto Cavalli.

The example of the Hummer brand is instructive in this regard. The brand, which used to belong to the General Motors group, is intrinsically associated with the Iraqi wars led by the United States. Without the possibility of the brand's identity evolving, there remains little hope for its development or even survival. Not only has the growing ecological sensitivity in developed countries led to a negative attitude towards the 4x4 in general, but the Hummer in particular is associated with the policies of both the presidents Bush, to which some market segments took great exception. Is the Hummer's decline inevitable and terminal? Is it not possible to project a more positive light on the brand's values – a greater emphasis on the aspects of strength, durability, protection, for example? An extrapolation from the driver's protection to the protection of the environment, with hybrid or electric engines? A new focus on a niche such as armoured security vehicles for banks? The sale of the model to a Chinese automobile company in 2009 proved to be unsuccessful, as a result of which the Hummer is going to be 'phased out over time', according to an announcement on the website www.hummer.com in mid 2011.

4.3   Brand ethics and aesthetics: The EST-ET© diagram

From these two components that determine identity, we can form a two-dimensional diagram that allows the physical positioning of any brand manifestation on the surface thus created. Named the 'EST-ET'© diagram, it is derived directly from the hinge and is a diagnostic tool applicable to each individual brand manifestation to measure its adequacy for the desired or perceived brand identity. Figure 4.2 shows an example of the application of the EST-ET© diagram to a certain number of cars designed by Pininfarina, within the context of a study where the author, together with Jean-Christophe Vilain, developed and formalized the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of a brand project for the famous automobile design company.

The degree of consistency with the brand values is indicated on the abscissas. The degree of adequacy in relation to the brand aesthetics is indicated on the ordinates, to finally give an indication of the degree of compliance of the manifestation assessed with the brand identity. At the upper right, the Maserati Birdcage, with an innovative design made of fluid and tense lines, is an original interpretation of the Maserati aesthetics; a utopian concept car, full of technological innovations guiding the design; in short, a car conceived, designed and built by Pininfarina in strict compliance with its way of working, its values and its *coup de crayon*.
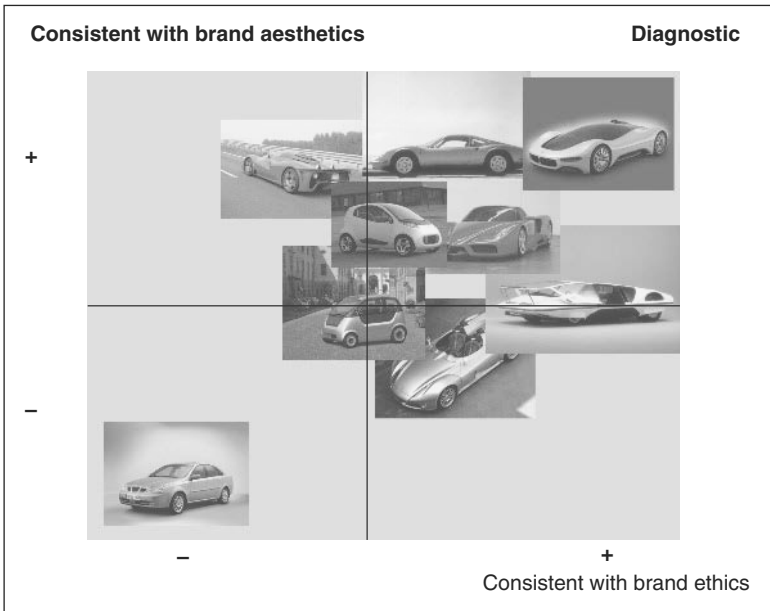
Figure 4.2   Diagram EST-ET© applied to some cars designed by Pininfarina
Source: G. Mazzalovo and J. C. Vilain, Study for Pininfarina 2007.

At the lower left is a car designed by Pininfarina for a Chinese automotive brand where only very few of Pininfarina's values or aesthetic elements are perceptible. This diagram was also applied as a diagnostic tool to test the conformity of all Pininfarina brand manifestations, including logos, non-automotive products and advertisements, to the brand identity.

A precise definition of the axes is necessary because several questions may arise about the position of a specific manifestation in relation to brand aesthetics and ethics and thus lead to completely different positioning on different diagrams. For example, the abscissas can measure the readability of the brand ethics from a specific manifestation. The axis of the ordinates can measure the degree of differentiation with respect to a particular competitor, and so on. This is actually a whole series of EST-ET© diagrams that can be created according to the precise nature of the selected axes.

Obviously, each single manifestation can hardly express exhaustively the complexity of a brand identity but it should ideally contain as many of its elements as possible. Taken together, elements such as the logo,

name or slogan, and certain iconic products can tend towards producing the perfect synthesis.

4.4 Communication chain and brand manifestations

So as not to lose sight of one of the basic reasons for the existence of brands – to generate sales – it is therefore necessary to link the brand identity to this purpose.

4.4a Communication chain

Figure 4.3 illustrates the sequence leading from a brand project to the act of purchase of a product (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2003). It starts with a willingness to propose a brand to the market; a brand defined by its identity made up of its ethics and aesthetics. All perceivable elements of brand identity, the 'brand manifestations', follow the intent of the brand project. This is the sensory world of the brand in which its aesthetics transmit, more or less transparently, the values that make up its ethics.

The third stage consists of the multiple perceptions generated among consumers by these manifestations that eventually lead in turn to the last link in the chain: the purchase.
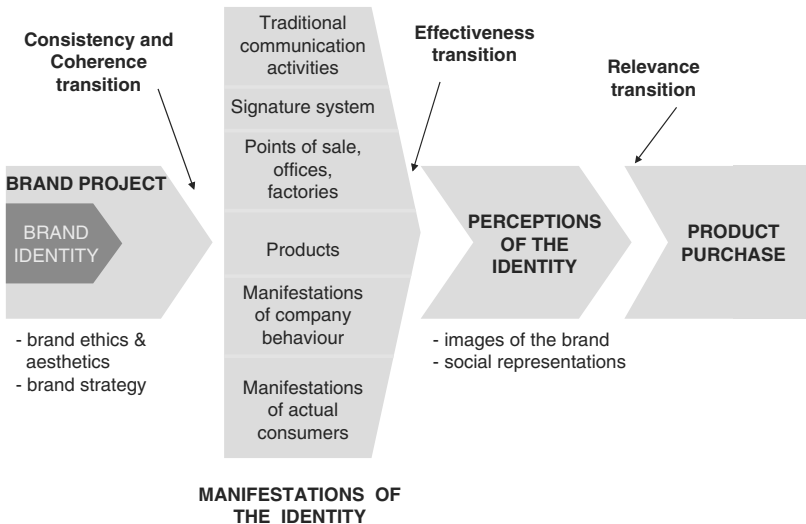
Figure 4.3 Communication chain

The passage of the first to the second link of the chain is the transition of fidelity and consistency. Any activity that affects the perception of the brand identity – any manifestation – should contribute to strengthening this identity, and must therefore be true to it. Moreover, once this first condition is met, all these manifestations should be coherent among themselves.

The path from the core values which constitute the brand ethics to the brand manifestations, that is, the 'staging' of the values (*mise en scène*), passes through an intermediate stage of 'script development' (*mise en intrigue*). This is the semio-narrative model of meaning of Semprini (1992): a generative process which will evolve from the most simple stage (the values, the axiological level) to the most complex surface (and interface) level (discourses and acts of discourse) passing through the narrative intermediate level (stories and narratives). The passage between the second and the third link is the transition of effectiveness. Are all of the brand manifestations actually reaching the targeted consumers? And do consumers have a perception that corresponds broadly to the desired brand identity? These are the two types of effectiveness expected of any communication: to take a ballistic metaphor, on the one hand, there is the accuracy of the shot (whether it reaches its target), and, on the other, its effects (the impact on the target). The answers to these two questions help measure the effectiveness of the communication work done in previous phases.

However, it is possible to achieve perfect communication – to be fully perceived and understood by the consumer – and still not trigger the desired acts of purchase. This is the transition of relevance between steps three and four of the model. This is the area of studies and theories relating to consumer behaviour and the competitiveness of the brand offering.

4.4b   Brand manifestations

The perception of brands is by no means limited to their products and advertising. Brand manifestations incorporate all possible interfaces between brand and consumer.

Table 4.1 gives a detailed breakdown of six categories of manifestations through which brand aesthetics can be apprehended.

The proposed classification tries to follow the logic of the competences necessary to carry them out and is not always strictly homogeneous:

- The traditional activities of communication, including internet activities (websites, blogs, social networks).

Table 4.1 Brand manifestations

Aesthetics of communication		Aesthetics of space	Aesthetics of products	Aesthetics of behaviour	
Traditional commu- nication activities	**Signature system**	**Points of sale Offices Factories**	**Products**	**Manifestations of company behaviour**	**Manifestations of actual consumers**
Advertising PR Events Internet	Logo Stores signs Labelling Packaging Letterhead	Locations Internet Architectures Light Decoration Windows Sales style Receptionist Layouts Dressing code Uniforms Organigrams	Number Categories Colours, forms Materials Style Performance Durability Price Availability	Social and ecological activities Company and employees conduct Behaviour of related entities (foundation, suppliers, Agents, etc.) Ethical chart	Who they are What they do

- The signature system, which includes all graphic activities outside of advertising.
- The product as a separate category. It communicates in a special way. It 'spends more time' with the client; it is in physical contact with him; it is owned by him (sometimes it is the product that owns the consumer). Of all the manifestations, it is probably the relationship between the product and the consumer that is the most personal.
- The fourth category covers everything to do with buildings and premises, where the issues are of an architectural and decorative nature.

Finally, come two behaviour-related categories that are not fully controllable by the brand:

- The fifth category consists of behaviours of the company and its related entities (providers, foundations, associations, and so on) and the people who work there. Lou Gerstner's choice to wear a sky-blue shirt when he was IBM president was a message of substance sent to employees and markets, announcing upcoming changes (the previous, strict dress code had imposed formal attire, where the white shirt was compulsory). This category also includes all charitable activities and commitments of solidarity; as well as organization charts that reflect the approach of the distribution of power and responsibility and, in part, the culture of the company.

Strati (1992) spoke rightfully of 'organizational aesthetics'. His point of view was strictly at the figurative level and of the pleasure that beauty engenders. While it is true that the aesthetic dimension is not often considered in the analysis of organizations, the approach proposed by Strati is nonetheless very far from the notion of aesthetics under consideration here. The category that we call the 'aesthetics of behaviour' includes all acts of discourse, controlled or not, which are brand manifestations (organizations included) and which may be analysed not only for the hedonic aspects that they trigger, but mostly for the meanings they emit.

- The last category consists of all manifestations of consumers associated with the brand. This is a category which used to be often neglected by the communicators, insofar as it is not controlled directly. However, by 1976, McGuire was already including face-to-face contacts among the external phenomena that influence purchasing decisions. This can be extended to all contacts transmitted by the media. The Lacoste brand is very familiar with the problem of lack of control over some communication aspects related to consumers' brand manifestations. Some residents of the French suburbs which have experienced considerable social unrest in recent years have become enthusiastic brand supporters, although they do not belong to the target consumer segment. This has generated a lot of images of young people dressed in the brand's typical sports attire and its characteristic crocodile logo engaging in unlawful acts (riots, car burning, gang fights).

The effects of Internet social networks belong to this brand manifestation category.

Table 4.1 is an attempt to establish an exhaustive list of all manifestations. It shows that communication management in a broad sense, that is, anything that influences brand perception (what is commonly and incorrectly referred to as 'brand image management'), involves many skills that are generally dispersed within the organization.

As Webster (1992) argued, before the skills necessary to manage brand communication in a consistent way are dispersed throughout all departments of the organization, as shown in Table 4.1, a new paradigm for the marketing function within the organization is probably necessary. Webster advocated a larger role for marketing in order to keep pace with the new organizational models oriented towards networks, partnerships and alliances. If marketing is to get rid of its microeconomic myopia and embrace the relational themes of individuals, organizations

and social processes, it will need to incorporate all aspects of brand communications.

In most cases today, it is at the CEO level that all the various competences involved in communicating converge. The person ultimately responsible for the brand (CEO, Marketing Director, Creative Director or Brand Manager, depending on the organization) is like a musician sitting at a keyboard: he can control (or at least influence) all brand manifestations which make up the sensory aspects of the brand; he can compose and play the brand 'music' – that is, the coordinated use of all brand manifestations. Several strategies are possible here:

- The repetitive strategy, where, for reasons of impact, similar messages must be transmitted by each manifestation. Although fragmentary in essence, each of them should contain most of the brand's identity values.
- The complementary strategy, in which different messages acquire meaning when they are combined, as when, for example, the classical architecture of a point of sale emphasizes the baroque aesthetics of the products.
- The strategy of cacophony or, rather, the absence of strategy, unfortunately still too frequent, in which each manifestation tells its own story in isolation from the others.
- The symphonic strategy is one in which each manifestation is used for its own communicative characteristics in order to contribute to the easiest possible perception of the brand identity. For example, we know that the Internet makes possible a more comprehensive communication on conceptual issues than on the product itself, and that advertising is more effective than architecture in conveying brand ethics.

Maintaining the coherence of discursive communicative elements of a verbal, visual, plastic, audiovisual, spatial, or behavioural nature across various media is a task of great complexity. Marrone (2007: 222–24) proposes three methods:

- The use of inter-semiotic translations to make consistent the meaning of various brand manifestations (Marrone refers to Dusi and Neergard 2000, Dusi 2003 and Fabbri 2007).
- Maintaining at the surface of the plan of expression the deep brand values and therefore a 'communication contract' between brand and consumer. Marrone cites Floch's use of the 'clarity' value (1990 [Italian

translation 1992: 89–123) in his renowned study for the French bank Crédit du Nord. The method works when, as in this example, the concept is applicable and meaningful in both content and expression (signified and signifier plans). Another example can be extracted from the work done on the identity of a possible Pininfarina brand. One of the values of the Pininfarina ethics is 'harmony', which enjoys the same qualities of application and meaning on the expression plan.

- The third method is to ensure consistency through the coordinated use of semantic categories (themes and figures) and syntactic categories (actors, spaces and time). The example proposed by Marrone is the advertising of the New Clio RS 200hp, where the advertising material used in newspapers or magazines acquired a more precise meaning when used in conjunction with the TV commercial. In this case, the theme of escape was chosen, which corresponds to the value of freedom at a deeper axiological level.

4.4c   Four areas of brand aesthetics

Schmitt and Simonson (2007) identified three areas of aesthetics: graphic and product regrouped in one design category, communication design, and space design. Our 'aesthetics of behaviour' category is notably absent and the aesthetics of product, despite its need for specific competences, is not a separate category.

The six initial categories of manifestation introduced in Table 4.1 can eventually be reduced to four for reasons of homogeneity, according to the typology of aesthetic work to which they are submitted:

- *The aesthetics of communication* brings together traditional communication activities and the signature system. Apart from relations with the press, the majority of these activities relate to work which materializes on two-dimensional screens or paper.
- *The aesthetics of space* deals with offices, places of sale, of production or of memory or historical significance for a company. For example, the manufacturing plant of Ducati motorcycles at Borgo Panigale in Italy was built in way such that visits could be organized. This is the only category which deals with the environment where purchases are made or services deployed.
- *The aesthetics of products*. This is, with the treatment of space, the category which allows the greatest multisensory experience to promote the brand experience. Obviously, for a service company this category does not exist and the other three categories consequently acquire greater importance.

- *The aesthetics of behaviour*, where many manifestations are not fully controlled. For example, on 3 March 2006, the Spanish daily *El Mundo* ran the headline '*el Movistar hace agua*' (The Movistar is taking on water). It is only from reading the article that it becomes clear that a boat (rather than the Spanish telecommunication brand of that name that sponsored it) was having difficulties at Cape Horn.

Worse for the brands are articles on the fraudulent behaviour of corrupt leaders (as in the case of Siemens, Enron and Arthur Andersen) or on major pollution (as with Exxon, Total, BP, and so on). Whatever the discourse on the brand and regardless of the manifestation that transmits it, it all contributes to the construction of the brand identity. The negative consequences for the brand sponsors of Tiger Woods following the revelations in late 2009 of his marital infidelities reveal the nature of the risk to be managed in the field of the aesthetics of behaviour. In May 2011 the court case against the IMF's Dominique Strauss-Kahn (regardless of the result of the case) will have a lasting impact on the IMF brand.

This category of aesthetics can be extended to consumer behaviour. The relatively recent emergence of social networks on the internet is a typical example of this category of aesthetics. What do people do with my brand? How do they talk about it? This is a new and rapidly growing field for marketing research. These are manifestations that managers can only seek to influence, in the knowledge that they cannot exert full, direct control over them.

4.5   More-or-less explicit meaning

By analysing brand identity according to its two components, intelligible and sensory, we discover that some brands privilege one over the other. The curtain between aesthetics and ethics can have varying degrees of transparency.

Brands with explicit ethics clearly assert the values underlying their identity. The Mecca Cola website, for example, used to announce*: '*No more drinking stupidly, drink committed' and '10% of net profits to Palestinian children'. The text provided immediate information on the values being promoted, without recourse to symbolism, codes or connotations: there was no guesswork required.

A similar approach was taken by Camper in its 'Walk Don't Run' campaign (see Figure 4.4) when the brand was born.

Here, it's an easily understood way of life that unfolds, purporting to be that of the Majorcan peasant. This was amplified by advertising
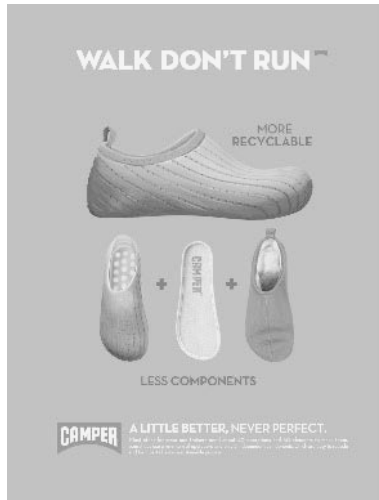
Figure 4.4   Camper © Advertising 2006

campaigns revolving around farmers around the world and an effi-
cient website that ran all the values that the brand sought to promote.
Since then, this powerful and relevant message, the antithesis of the
modern 'rat race', has been somewhat diluted. The slogan changed to
'Imagination walks' and the images of people walking with a box in
place of a head were more abstruse. In a new ad campaign in 2009,
'Reinvent your reality', any relationship to the strong and easily read-
able initial theme was lost. In 2011 the advertising concept is focused
on 'Extraordinary crafts', which marks a return to very clear values,
though different from the original campaign.

In another register, Body Shop and Dove clearly present, through
their ads and their websites, their commitment to the canons of natu-
ral beauty and of the female body free from the dictates of the fashion
world and its artificial models. When a brand's ethics are based on a
theme strongly linked to the physical or the sensory (preferably visual),
its expression is all the easier.

An easy and immediate readability of a brand's ethics from only a few
of its manifestations is, in fact, a rather rare phenomenon.

Missoni is known for its multi-coloured knits. The designs are
original. Its brand aesthetics have taken shape over time and through
perseverance and have succeeded eventually in crystallizing humanist

values of joy, dynamism and comfort, which are characteristic of its business and lifestyle.

As we saw in Chapter 1, in 1992 Ferragamo undertook a comprehensive semiotic study covering the entire historical corpus of the brand manifestations to establish clearly the concept of 'sublimation of materials and people' behind the brand identity (see Figure 1.2). Many of its products utilize the '*gancino*' (small hook), a decorative metal element present on bags and shoes, which has become, through its intensive use over time, a plastic element of brand recognition. The company's recent advertising themes revolve around movie stars – young, beautiful and wealthy – and their ways of life. The regular Ferragamo client today does not necessarily perceive the concept of sublimation. It may even be that it has lost its relevance in developing sales today.

The *gancino* does not promote any of the fundamental values of the Ferragamo brand. The colours and shapes of Missoni products, on the other hand, are able to transmit all the energy, vitality and vision of the world of the brand (see Figure 4.5).

Some brand ethics are more easily representable at the level of expression.

This raises the question of the ideal degree of transparency that brand ethics must have in order to produce the best financial results and reputation. Intuitively one might think that, since brand communication is about presenting all of its competitive differences, it is preferable to strive for maximum transparency. But what about the benefits that can be drawn at the aesthetic level, of the effects of suggestion, veil, translucency, rather than raw lighting? These are aspects of brand communication that are deserving of further consideration in future studies.
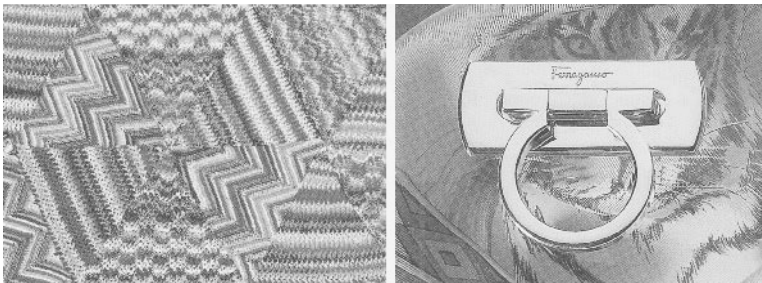
Figure 4.5 Two examples of aesthetic expression: Missoni patchwork © on the left and Ferragamo 'gancino' © on the right

4.6   Style

'A style is defined not only by what it expresses but also by how it expresses it', wrote Panofsky (1975: 184). All of the components of brand aesthetics are to be found in this definition. *Style is to the creator what aesthetics is to the brand*. Everything that was said about aesthetics applies fully to the notion of style.

Lalo asserted that 'Nature without style is anaesthetic' (1926: 9). It is same for brands.

The online dictionary *Le Trésor de la langue française en ligne* provides the following definitions of 'style':

> Category of aesthetics that allows for the characterization of the organization of verbal, plastic and musical forms that the history of art has identified and described as having marked a particular time and as being characteristic of an artist.
>
> In the field of language: all the means of expression (vocabulary, images, turns of phrase, rhythm) that reflect in an original way the thoughts, feelings and personality of an author …
>
> In the field of painting and sculpture: a personal way of using some artistic techniques (choice of the subject, shapes, lines, colour scheme) that allows us to recognise an artist through his works.[1]
>
> <div align="right">Author's translation</div>

All of these definitions should challenge designers who work for brands. Style is thus associated with a characteristic, and therefore recognizable, way of dealing with the sensory, whether in a Monet painting, an Armani suit or a Rolex watch.

Yet, style is not composed solely of easily recognizable sensory elements. When Floch (1995: 140) described the style of Chanel as being characterized by the complementarity of freedom and control ('*maintien*' in French), he did not mention elements of instant identification such as those selected by Karl Lagerfeld in 1993 for the first issue of the brand catalogue (the black-tipped pump, the cross-shaped brooch, the quilted leather bag, the collarless jacket, the camellia, the tie for the ponytail, the little dress, the button with the logo). On the contrary, the terms used by Floch are inherent to the brand ethics that come to characterize the style.

4.6a   The creative process

A brand's style is defined by the whole process of moving from a particular vision of the world to its sensory expression. If, as Floch declared,

'Identity is defined by its mode of production' (1995: 36) – a definition of identity to be understood as a journey, a series of connections between initially isolated elements that ultimately create meaning – one can dare to extend this definition to the production process of the aesthetic treatment of an object; that is, the creative process.

The style of a designer, brand aesthetics, any approach to the sensory, are not only determined by the two constituent elements of identity (aesthetic and ethical invariants), but also by the creative process itself.

It is often the way of doing (or not doing) that leads to the characteristic results of a creator. This also should directly reflect the brand's values, as consistent brands and individuals will act in accordance with their beliefs. A selected lifestyle, as in the case of some brands, can only be the product of an ethic.

In a study on the aesthetics of a possible brand for Pininfarina in 2007, the following 'creative sequence' was established (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Pininfarina creative sequence

Invisible to the public			visible to the public	
brand ethics	**project**	**process**	**plastic features**	**effects**
progress	concept (object, purpose, contexts)	nothing gratuitious (technological, functional & aesth.)	volumetric coherence	elegance beauty simple/sober
humanism			perfect surfaces	refinement
luxury	project briefs (market, techno, usage, eco, style, etc.)	start with vol. forms, then surfaces, textures and modelés, then details.	simple/ essential	harmonious proportions
harrmony			the whole before the parts	strong personality
Italian	client B. Identity	(lines as consequence of vol. decisions)	dynamic and pure lines	emotional and meaningful objects
1st bodymaker	innovation opportunities	search for harmony	balanced proportions	user-friendly objects
	ethics applicability	innovation as an aesthetic opportunity	few colours	long-lasting

Source: G. Mazzalovo and J. C. Vilain: Study on a possible Pininfarina brand in 2007.

The ethical level is twofold. Firstly, there is the ethics of the brand for which the designer works and, secondly, the designer's own values and a sub-level here called 'concepts' which covers the specific project briefs.

Considerations such as the conditions for the applicability of the ethics of the brand and that of the designer to the specific project are also to be taken into account.

The next level, which is the last one still invisible to the public eye, consists of the methods used to design the product – in this example, the self-imposed constraints, the secrets of the trade, the specific ways of implementation, and so on.

The perceptible levels comprise visible and tactile aspects and then the emotions and feelings generated by them.

The designer-interpreter, who creates for brands as in this example of Pininfarina, is to transpose the aesthetics of the brand he works for. But can he really rein in his own style? Can he forget or disown his own values?

This is when the notion of transparency (or opacity), controlled or not, of the style of the designer in relation to the brand aesthetics and ethics becomes relevant, and is deserving of further study.

4.6b   Non-identification of aesthetic invariants

The study of the historical corpus of the aesthetic treatment of brand manifestations sometimes reveals the absence of identifiable aesthetic invariants. This was the case with Loewe in 1996 where, despite (or perhaps because of) 150 years of history, no consistent approach to the sensory was identified. The management had to make legitimate and differentiating choices for the brand identity and its aesthetics in particular. It finally settled for a minimalist baroque aesthetic capable of expressing all the energy and sensuality of a modern Spanish brand.

What of the style of Jean Nouvel, the French winner of the 2008 Pritzker Prize for architecture? He is renowned for an eclectic range of projects, in which it is very difficult to identify aesthetic invariants. What, for example, do the Agbar Tower in Barcelona, the Dentsu Tower in Tokyo, the extension of Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum and the Copenhagen Konzert Hall have in common? It is only through careful and expert study that some invariants of an ethical nature can be unearthed which reflects his particular way of creating and achieving. According to the architect Jean-Christophe Vilain (in a personal interview in 1991), numerous considerations have to be taken into account – the history and the environment (for integration or contrast),

the created object as the protagonist, a pragmatic (non-utopian) meaning, a classical vision of urbanism, unconventional accomplishments, rigorous compliance with the initial brief, and so on. One might even say that Nouvel is unencumbered by a rigid aesthetic vocabulary. Architects such as Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid, or designers such as Marc Newson and Ron Arad, have chosen a more 'formal' expression. Their styles are more easily recognizable, as recurrent plastic elements can be identified in their designs.

This approach to creativity, where aesthetic invariants are difficult to identify, is fairly characteristic of ready-to-wear designers. For example, in an article entitled 'Marc Jacobs' Creative Confusion' in the *Financial Times* (September 19–20, 2009) on the designer Marc Jacobs' 2010 spring/summer collection, Vanessa Friedman expressed the view that the designer cannot be put in 'a stylistic box, because you never know what his style will be from one season to the next'.

More recently, at the fashion show for Ungaro's spring/summer 2010 ready-to-wear collection, the movie actress Lindsay Lohan, recruited a few months earlier as creative director, was reported in *El Mundo* (5 October 2009) as saying: 'Estrella [the designer] and I love fashion, its various elements, its different generations, different styles from around the world; we are delighted to mix everything.' This was the only Ungaro collection in which they were associated together.

What about the Yves Saint Laurent style? While there are a few iconic products (the tuxedo, the desert jacket, for instance), these are not sufficient to define a set of invariants for the creator's approach to the sensory. Yves Saint Laurent is so remote from having a systematic reproduction of plastic elements that he can afford to pay tribute to artists such as Mondrian (1965), Picasso (1979), Matisse (1981) and Van Gogh (1989) by incorporating elements of their paintings into his own creations. Here again, there is a lack of identifiable aesthetic invariants. When Floch studied Saint Laurent, he drafted a semiotic square on the semantic axis 'here/elsewhere' (unpublished work. Source: Creative Business). As for Chanel, Floch defined the style in terms of content rather than of expression.

These few examples illustrate some of the difficulties that can sometimes arise in the process of evolving from the status of designer to that of a brand. In his preface to Panofsky's book *Idea* (1989: XX), Jean Molino says that the business of 'stylistic analysis is to find the generating principle which reduces the diversity of phenomena to the unity of concept' – a formula that sums up nicely the nature of research into aesthetic invariants.

4.6c   Facts of style and facts of fashion

Floch (1995: 137) introduced these two concepts and positioned the fact of fashion on the '*idem*' side of the narrative identity scheme introduced in Figure 4.1. The fact of style he placed on the '*ipse*' side; that is, resolutely on the side of self-consistency ('*maintien de soi*'), ethics, life or brand project. This does not, however, exclude possible partial overlapping of some aspects of the '*idem*' polarity with the facts of style.

In addition to the issue of the degree of transparency of ethics in the success of brands, a new question comes up on the influence of a more-or-less immediate recognition of brand aesthetics on its commercial success. It is a vital issue which should be the subject of further research.

4.6d   *Kunstwollen*

The notion of style also applies to civilizations, historical periods, nations and cultures. Riegl (1899) introduced the concept of *Kunstwollen* – often translated as 'artistic will or intent' – which reflects the spirit of an era or of a nation at a given time, and that is best expressed by the great artists of the period. For him, the history of art was strictly linked to the history of the visions of the world, each producing its own stylistic laws. This will be illustrated next in section 4.9 when we introduce the 'baroquization' trend.

4.7   Figurative and plastic meanings

Semiotics provides some partial responses to the problems of visibility and understanding of brand meanings.

Marrone (2007: 260–85) developed the concepts of plastic and figurative meanings, originally introduced by Greimas (1978) and Floch (1985), with many concrete examples of great relevance for the understanding of the meanings of brand manifestations.

Images have a double significant nature, the most immediate of which is the figurative significant nature.

The image signifies the object, character, scene, landscape, and figure of the world it represents. The property of being figurative has been the subject of much debate among semioticians and can be broken down into three sublevels of increasing figurative intensity:

- The figural, where very few elements begin to concretize the theme
- The figurative, where the figures of the world appear
- The iconic, where figures are expressed with such a wealth of detail that their representation becomes an iconic interpretation

A picture can carry meanings that are not related to something recognizable from the world but simply because of its visual or plastic features. This is the second significant nature of an image: its plastic significant nature. Put simply, this is all that can be perceived when there is no subject represented, as in non-figurative or abstract art. Floch (1993) declared that 'iconisation and abstraction are only varying degrees and levels of figurability'. Where the figurative is absent, we are left with only the plastic dimension.

Plastic categories to be considered are:

- Forms (or shapes), which belong to the eidetic category, to which lines also belong
- Colours, which belong to the chromatic category
- Texture, which incorporates the tactile dimension (soft and hard) and the visual dimension, consisting of the effects of surface treatments such as the brilliant, *moiré*, shimmering, matte, *modelé*, granular, and so on.
- Light, which combines the three previous categories
- Composition (topological category), which includes top and bottom, left and right, and so on

The Absolut Vodka advertisements, in which creativity is expressed through the treatment of the now legendary silhouette of the bottle, are good examples of figurative meaning.

Some of the photographic work of Oliviero Toscani for Benetton illustrates how figurative meaning can also work by analogy. The famous picture of the terminal AIDS patient, surrounded by his family, recalls all of the painted or carved '*pietà*' of Christian art simply by the figurative aspects that they share (the positioning of faces, hands, and attitudes of the characters). This analogy shows how figurative meaning is closely linked to culture.

Marrone urges us to go beyond the 'blackmail of symbolism' that has meaning only in a given cultural context, which is, by definition, limited (in particular on the symbolic valences of colours, which vary from one country to another), and beyond the 'vague connotations' that are subjectively dependent on those who have noticed them and to seek to construct what the semioticians call 'semi-symbolisms'.

An advertisement for Black & White whiskey (1988), studied by Denis Bertrand (Semprini 1993: 113–39), is used by Marrone to illustrate the emergence of plastic meaning. On a figurative level, we are presented with the interior of a black tunnel whose exit can be seen in white at

the top right-angle of the picture. At the top and middle of the page, in white characters, are the words 'If the whole page was black, there would be no hope', a clear indication that the theme is one of hope (the light at the end of the tunnel). It also indicates that the reader must go beyond the figurative aspect to focus on how it is built. It is not only the tunnel that represents despair, but also the black colour. In the same way, the tunnel exit and the white colour represent hope. This is an example of semi-symbolism (black/white = despair/hope). In this case it is the chromatics of the advertising image (graphic and text) that provide us with the key to understanding the plastic meaning.

It remains to be proven if this ironic way of communicating is legitimate for the brand and if the value of hope is related somehow to the brand's vision of the world. It is not enough to develop all the possible meanings of the black/white pair to create a brand identity.

Marrone gives us another (more complex) example of the double significant nature of images with an advertisement from Kerastase. On the left of the picture, there is a black-and-white photograph of a woman's face occupying 2/3 of the width. Her eyes closed in an attitude of satisfaction. Her long hair, carefully combed, describes a curve that wraps around her head and shoulder. On the remaining right side of the picture, the hair continues (drawn as if enlarged by microscope), dotted with nutrient bubbles and with two bottles of 'satin bath' for dry hair placed in a vertical orange-coloured box with the commercial texts of presentation of the product and the brand.

Figurative message: If you use this Kerastase product your hair will be as beautiful as that presented here and you will experience the same satisfaction felt by the model.
Plastic reading: The black-and-white part represents the world of normal hair; the orange represents the treated hair and the brand universe.

On the side of the female body, it is all curved lines; on the other side, the parascientific world of the brand, there are curves, too, but there are also straight lines and angles. Thus we have two well-separated worlds that are connected by the continuity of a curve forms by the movement of the hair which happens be a spiral.

The presence of the spiral is essential, not only for the connection between the photographed and the drawn hair, but also for the vortex that it creates if we imagine the continuity of its design. Its movement mixes the two worlds, hair and products, as would a shampoo. The eye

of the cyclone is located precisely at the model's eye. The spiral movement also reinforces the notion of activity found in the text ('nutritive gluco-active').

The following semi-symbolic system is thus created:

We can therefore add a symbolic reading supported by the many valences of the spiral. This figure is found in all cultures and 'represents the permanence of being under the transience of movement … The sign of balance within imbalance … The order of being within changes' (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982). This is consistent with the contrast between the serenity of the model's face and the movement of her hair.

The Golden Mean (φ), which is the basis of the construction of the logarithmic spiral, is the symbol of the relationship between mathematics and nature. The spiral is found in many phenomena of natural growth, such as ammonites, sulphur crystals, the horns of the Alaska Bighorn and of the Kudu, pineapples and sunflowers, and so on (Cook 1974).

The use of the Golden Mean is evidence of a classical conception of beauty based on harmony. The Kerastase advertisement expresses classical aesthetics as defined in the next paragraph. The parts are well separated and easily identifiable; there is no effect of depth.

'Nourish your hair from root to tip' invites the text: tips that extend to infinity, carried by the spiral.

The information regarding the brand identity is very rich: Kerastase not only deals with hair in a professional manner, it enables one to remain oneself in the midst of a changing world (controlled).

This example shows that undertaking separate analysis for the figurative and the plastic meanings allows for a wider scope and the possible discovery of new and meaningful content.

All the reasoning introduced previously applies not only to images (logos, photos, posters, drawings, and so on) but can be extrapolated to

Table 4.3   Semi-symbolic system of Kerastase advertising

Plastic dimension	Consumer world	Kerastase world
Chromatic	Black and white	Orange
Eidetic (medium)	Photo	Drawings
Eidetic (lines)	Curved lines	Straight Angles Curves
	Spiral	Spiral

the third dimension and to all manifestations that address space (architecture, decoration, and so on).

4.8   Baroque and classical styles

The concept of invariance may be somewhat elusive. At what depth do we find invariants? Floch's comments (1995: 34) about identity in general, apply both to ethics and aesthetics: 'the features constituting this otherness will be considered as being positioned at a level of meaning relatively superficial, simply because at the same time a deeper, more invariant, level has been established, where lies the dynamic coherence of the whole identity'.

The binary notion of 'baroque/classical' introduced by Wölfflin (1915) and used by Floch in several of his studies (1986, 1990, 1995) is a good example of how to define more precisely the level and nature of abstraction that can take the description of an approach to the sensory world and give substance to the notion of brand aesthetics. It is an approach that is plastic and non-figurative in nature.

In his comparative study of the Italian art of Rome respectively in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Wölfflin ([1915] 1984) introduced five pairs of concepts that characterize the visual aspects of the respective styles of these two periods: linear/pictorial; surface/depth; closed/open and free forms; autonomy/interdependence of components; clear/dark. Table 4.4, building on Floch (1990: 109, Italian version), summarizes these five pairs and gives additional descriptions extracted from Wölfflin (1985).

Table 4.5 summarizes the meanings that underlie the two types of expression.

Panofsky 1989: 96 synthesized the baroque expression and content this way:

> [T]ypically Mannerist art (baroque) breaks and bends the balanced and universally received forms of classicism in favour of a more intense system of expression.

The five pairs introduced by Wölfflin are not homogeneous, but overlap and complement each other. Many of the properties described in one category could also be placed in others. For example, it is difficult to have a precise contour clearly identified without light, or twilight (*chiaroscuro*) without shading (*sfumato*). Illustrations of classical and baroque expressions are not only found in art (e.g. Bernini baroque sculpture of St Therese of Avila versus Canova's sculpture of Pauline Bonaparte

Table 4.4 Classical and baroque expressions

Classical	Baroque
Linear	**Pictorial**
Precise and meaningful contours	Lines as element of drawings (hatching). Shading
Right angles, sharp edges	Dulled angles, 'soft' volumes
Straight lines	Incidents (fold of a fabric)
Plan	**Depth**
Space divided in zones	Movement carrying everything
Parallel separated plans	in depth
Closed forms	**Open forms**
The format drives the plastic organization	Non-tense forms
	Forms seem fortuitous
The frame functions as a limit	The frame seems insufficient to
Balanced forms	contain the elements
Multiplicity	**Unity**
Autonomy of the components	Each part contributes to the whole and loses autonomy
Numerous and isolated elements	Homogeneity, simplification
Smallness	Larges volumes
Each element is identifiable	Effect of group
Clarity	**Darkness**
Forms entirely revealed	Light does not coincide with the form of objects.
Chromatic dimension	*Clair-obscur.* little chromatism
	Dark and heavy colours
Other characteristics	
'la maniera gentile'	*'la maniera grande' (Vasari)*
Alignment, symmetries	Rhythmic composition
	Live appearance, flows
Sharpness, precision, distinction	Interpenetration, interlacing, veils
	Approximation, non-formalism
Circle	Ellipse
Marble	Travertin

as Venus Victrix) but also in the brand expressions (e.g. the classical approach of Jil Sander versus the baroque of Versace).

From these five categories (Panofsky 1975 called them 'optical foundations of representation'), Floch (1990) revealed two features of the baroque/classical aesthetic categories:

- They express meanings that go beyond the historical periods in which each style was born.

Table 4.5   Classical and baroque contents

Classical	Baroque
Need to please	Ned to surprise, to subjugate
Permanence/immobility To stay	Movement
Rest/peace/quiet	To climb
Beauty/well-being	Tension/agitation/passions Emotion/ecstasy
Satisfaction	Insatisfaction
A controllable world	A world not always controllable
Isolation	Relations
Time/duration	Instant
Distance	Presence
Chanel *maintien* (bearing)	Loewe passion

- Each of the two styles is a full semiotic, in that each of them associates a specific vision of the world to its aesthetic expression.

4.8a   Independence from the historical period

The concepts of baroque and classical constitute a semantic axis. That is to say, one of the terms makes sense only in relation to the other. They are contrary terms. The two concepts do not depend on the respective historic period or place in which they were first observed. The classical style in the sixteenth century and the baroque in the seventeenth were both born in Rome. They are coherent visions, specific approaches to the sensory world. It seems therefore legitimate to introduce the concepts of 'contemporary baroque' logos or products and classical or baroque brand aesthetics. The goal pursued is to use the baroque/classical concept as an analytical tool and for the management of creative activities.

4.8b   Full semiotics

Floch's contribution in recovering Wölfflin's work and transforming it into a managerial instrument lies, above all, in demonstrating that *the baroque and classical visions are full semiotics; that is, that the visual aspects that characterize them correspond to specific visions of the world.* Therefore, they have a plan of expression and a plan of content.

Panofsky's main criticism of Wölfflin's work relates to its absence of a world vision to support its reflections. No particular values are attached to the styles. As Panofsky (1975: 195) put it:

The sentence that the vision of the seventeenth century was a pictorial one, involving depth, etc. gives the impression that something

drives this representation of objects pictorially and in depth. In truth, it says only that the seventeenth century represented objects pictorially and in depth, nothing else. The sentence expresses the facts that are objects of investigation.

The criticism is that there are no explanations for the baroque and classical styles that define the spirit of an era and the fundamental psychological and metaphysical conditions of its artistic creations. We find in the quoted sentence a good definition of what would be brand aesthetics within a brand identity study: the facts (the sensory world) that provide the material of the investigation.

The merit of Floch was to link the stylistic terms 'baroque' and 'classical' to specific contents and values. In a chapter entitled 'La liberté et le maintien: esthétique et éthique du total look de Chanel' (1995: 107–44), he presented the application of the baroque/classical notions to the brand analysis. In fact, he had already introduced the baroque and classical visions as genuine semiotics in *Les formes de l'empreinte* (1986) in an analysis of two photos, – Paul Strand's 'The barrier' (1916) and Alfred Stieglitz's *L'entrepont* (1907). There, Floch proposed the following scheme:

	Classical vision	**Baroque vision**
Plan of expression	Non-continuity	Non-discontinuity
Plan of content	Non-discontinuity	Non-continuity

The non-continuity of classical expression is justified by the treatment of the sensory characterized by separation, delimitation and decomposition.

The non-discontinuity of baroque expression is found in extension, transgression, progression and leads to interlacing motifs ('*entrelacs*' in French).

The characteristics of the plan of contents of the two styles are extracted from the effects of meaning produced by the different formal treatments mentioned in Wölfflin's five pairs.

The non-discontinuity of classical content corresponds to the effects of sense mentioned earlier, such as sustainability, stability, a controlled world.

The non-continuity of baroque content is the present, the emergence, 'an instant at the sharpest point', but also the movement and the destruction of the classical stability.

Floch's analysis of Chanel's 'total look' is a comprehensive illustration of the investigative methodology and the degree of depth sought in a typical project to define a brand's aesthetics. Floch first defines the four characteristics of the sensory dimension of the total look:

- Effect of closure of the forms. Black-tipped shoes and clean-cut hairstyle and hats (short hair, ponytail or simple structured boater straw hat).
- Privilege given to the line. Suit with braided edges, drawing of the collar, belt, and so on.
- The presence of masses (significant volumes, as opposed to more precise contours) does not contradict the general linearity of the silhouette.
- The light is captured by the colours (beige, black and navy) and the fabrics (tweed, jersey and crepe). It prevents overflow with respect to shape and contour and restricts the formation of a single unit in motion.

These characteristics are the embodiment of a classical expression according to the definitions introduced earlier. The few baroque elements are mostly jewellery and accessories (the chain and the interlacing of handbags chains) and serve as counterpoints to highlight the classical silhouette.

Floch left it to the historians and sociologists to analyse the figurative dimension of the Chanel look, which led to the expression of a new, liberated femininity. His study is an illustration of the difference between figurative meaning and plastic meaning. The latter, though less easily accessible, is the one that determines brand identity.

Floch said that classical aesthetics corresponds to classical content of non-discontinuity, which he defines as the ethics of '*maintien*' (strictly controlled, somewhat rigid behaviour) manifested especially in the bearing of the head, straight shoulders and upright back. He pointed out that 'because the silhouette that ensures this look was designed by Chanel for herself before being a creation for others', the ethics of '*maintien*' was the basis of the designer's life project.

The classical/baroque pairing is not intended to be universally applicable.

The notions of non-continuity and non-discontinuity are not systematically adequate to define styles or brand aesthetics, yet they are relevant in many circumstances.

Floch used the baroque/classical pairing three times in his writings (in what he himself referred to in 1993 as 'the flochienne obsession') – in

relation to the Strand and Stieglitz photographs (1986), the Crédit du Nord blue star logo (1990) logos, and for Chanel (1995).

He also used it in his consulting activities with Creative Business for Ferragamo in 1992 to demonstrate that the brand aesthetics had drifted from the very baroque aesthetics of the founder Salvatore to more classical expressions from the new designers. He also used it to formalize the Loewe aesthetics as being 'minimalist baroque'. It is possible to deduce from this chronology that his reflections on the baroque and the classical probably led him to introduce the concept of brand aesthetics.

Although the classical/baroque concept cannot be applied in a systematic manner or all forms of expression, it relates to two basic attitudes of external contemplation and of research into immanent meaning in creative activities (Panofsky 1975: 215).

Aloïs Riegl, an art historian and a contemporary of Wölfflin, developed two other pairs of categories for analysing styles and the corresponding spirit of the period which seem extremely interesting in their potential applications to brands and which could be the subject of future studies.

The first is the optical/tactile (or 'haptic') pair presented in his study of the art industry of the late Roman Empire (1992). The second is the objectivist/subjectivist pairing introduced in his study of the Dutch portrait (2008), and which Panofsky (1975) considered to be the nearest to an ideal level of relevance for analysing the meaning of creative activities.

On one hand is the objective and tactile pole of a conservative nature, tending to immobility and closed on itself, found, for example, in ancient Egypt and the Renaissance, which is what we call classical aesthetics.

And on the other hand is the subjective and optical pole, which is the fundamental principle underlying the developments that correspond to baroque aesthetics. Paul Philippot, in his introduction to the French version of *The Origin of Baroque Art in Rome* (Riegl 2005: 20), characterized the baroque *Kunstwollen* as an 'accentuation of feelings and emphasis on the subjective-optical seizure of things'.

The baroque/classical notion finds many applications in the field of brand management. Not only does it apply to analysis and on-going management of the aesthetics of specific brands, but it can also be used to classify brands based on their aesthetics. For example, we note that, in general, northern European brands – Jil Sander, Ikea, Helmut Lang and BMW – and North American brands – Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and Coach – have aesthetics of the classical type. By contrast,

Mediterranean brands – Loewe, Ferragamo, Dolce & Gabbana, Rubelli, Majorica, Lamborghini, Versace and John Galliano – have a tendency towards the baroque. The concept is used also in observing the expressive trends of our time, especially in the 'baroquization' taking shape in the aesthetization of our existence.

4.9   The 'baroquization' of daily life

The word 'baroquization' is an extension of a term coined by Paul Morand in 1932 and can be defined as 'the process of becoming baroque; of taking the character of baroque art'. (Source: *Le Trésor de la langue Française*: http://atilf.atilf.fr/) Attempts to identify substantial aesthetic trends assume, as many art historians do, that any period has a certain vision of the world which is expressed through its aesthetic creations.

Panofsky (1975: 195) referred to Riegl's term *Kunstwollen* as 'this immanent plastic willingness based on some conformity of the behaviour of the soul and not of the behaviour of the eye'.

In a later chapter describing works belonging to the plastic arts, he had this to say about their content: 'this is what the subject, unintentionally and unknowingly, reveals of his own behaviour towards the world and of the principles that guide him. This behaviour is, and to the same extent, characteristic of each creator in particular, of each period in particular, of each people in particular, of each cultural community in particular' (Panofsky 1975: 251).

The content (the ethics) here is expressed by the works of art. Panofsky's definition of *Kunstwollen* not only confirms the importance of the social and cultural context which surrounds the creator, but also highlights his ethics. As mentioned, we extrapolate these notions to any creative activity and thus to the field of brands.

Several clues from the realms of culture, architecture, fashion and art suggest that since the 1990s, at least in the Western world, the overall aesthetic expression has been marked by several simultaneous trends, of which baroque is one. This trend coexists with other currents such as, for example, the four trends identified by Jean-Christophe Vilain (IPod, patterns, fractal, fluid – see Figure 4.6), which are defined by their position on a diagram built on the two axes of continuity and ornamentation in design. These aesthetic fashionable movements participate in the aesthetization of everyday life, as presented in Chapter 2. The upper half of the diagram, where the expression is continuous, represents the movement of baroquization.
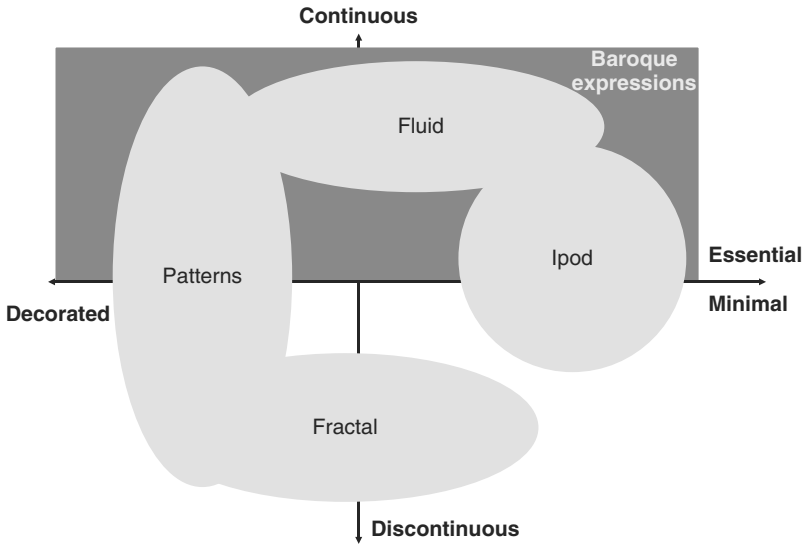
Figure 4.6   Baroquization and four current aesthetic trends

For our purposes, it is less important to reduce this complex phenomenon to a statistical analysis than it is to illustrate the way in which these concepts – brand aesthetics, baroque and classical styles – enable us to study, beyond a semiotic analysis, some expressive social trends. For example, signs of 'baroquization' are to be found in the following manifestations:

- Logo changes moving towards more curved lines and/or depth: Intel, Citroën, Swisscom, Air France, Europe 1, Starbucks, etc.
- Brands moving from an initial classical expression towards more baroque products and communication: Armani, Prada, Jil Sander. Even Louis Vuitton plays with his classic Monogram by mixing it with all kinds of expressions (graffiti, cherries, colours, materials, and so on) with the help of contemporary artists.
- Entire categories of products, irrespective of brand, moving towards the baroque: handbags are now huge by comparison with a decade ago and are covered with layers of different materials and complicated designs. The dials of watches have also undergone a similar gigantism.
- Jewellery design offering an abundance of spirals and organic lines. The heels of women's shoes – with carved wood, stacking blocks and

a wide variety of materials, and so on – have presented the opportunity for unbridled baroque expression.

• Iconic products finding new expression, such as that seen with the introduction of rounded and sinuous lines of the new Zippo Blu lighter in contrast with the perfectly classical lines of its predecessor (see Figure 4.7).

• The use of materials that promote or characterize the baroque: lace, embroidery and trimmings reminiscent of interlacing; leather and fabrics printed with baroque motifs.

• Fashion brands competing in their advertising in the use of chiaroscuro and the systematic blurring between background and subject (e.g. 2009 advertising of Byblos and Bluemarine).

• The achievements of architects such as Zaha Hadid, Santiago Calatrava and Frank Gehry in introducing curvature and challenging orthogonality in this discipline. Baroquization is evident in the flagship stores of brands such as Fila in New York, Marni in London, Comme des garçons in Kobe with an intensive use of *trompe-l'oeil* effects and deforming transparencies. The Stuart Weitzman store in Via Condotti in Rome is a beautiful example of an extreme use of the sinuous curves conceived by the architect Fabio Novembre (see Figure 4.8).

• The same phenomenon is evident in the design of objects (Ron Arad) and in artistic activities (Ryan McGinness).

This is not an absolute trend, however. Classical brands that have an aesthetic heavily pegged to their vision of the world (such as Tod's, for

Figure 4.7   Zippo lighters. On the left Zippo 1932, on the right Zippo Blu 2007

Figure 4.8 Stuart Weitzman © store in Rome (2006) Architect Fabio Novembre

example) prefer their own style. It is, rather, the fashion brands that follow this trend, while baroque brands can overplay their hand by taking things to extremes/new limits.

Other authors have identified this trend. The sociologist Michel Maffesoli (2008: 27–32) devotes a chapter to the baroque where he directly connects 'effervescence, efflorescence, disorder' to postmodern ways of life, to 'a state of mind where the reliance outweighs the separation, where the complementarity replaces exclusion, where relativism takes the place of the universal, where the plural person, finally, overrides the indivisible individual identity'.

Exuberant styling (Christian Lacroix), animal choreography (Jan Fabre), raging music (Eminem, Prince, Michael Jackson), multiplied connectivity (Facebook, MySpace, Second Life) are all facets of a postmodern baroque.

Maffesoli attributes (2008: 29) the quality of tactility to the baroque. He even uses the term 'haptic'. However, according to Riegl, Panofsky and successive art historians, tactility is a characteristic of classical expression. For Riegl, art evolved from haptics to optics; from a sensation of touch to one experienced by the eye alone. Maffesoli's description of the baroque as an iconological development of postmodernism is no less relevant, however. The baroque is optical, visual, as

evidenced by the strong trend towards virtualization in consumption, as evidenced, for example, by the rapid growth of online shopping (Baudrillard 1983).

Omar Calabrese coined the neologism 'neo-baroque' (1987, 1991). His interpretation of the baroque spirit focused on the destabilization of order through turbulence and fluctuations. This was consistent with Floch's *principle of the non-continuity of baroque content*. Calabrese thus highlighted a series of specific mechanisms (not necessarily aesthetic aspects but, rather, processes) that govern this apparent new era of baroque:

- Instability and metamorphosis, the latter being the dominant character of the neo-baroque
- Rhythm and repetition
- Limit and excess. Limit heard as a type of cultural action, a tension on the borders, a questioning of the established limits
- Details and fragmentation, as a mode of knowledge management
- Disorder and chaos
- Knots and labyrinths
- Complexity and dissipation
- *More-or-less* and *I-don't-know-what*
- Distortion and perversion

Apart perhaps from 'details and fragmentation', all other characteristics are consistent with the criteria of baroque expression as defined before in section 4.8. Does this baroque trend reflect the expressive mood of our times, the *Kunstwollen* of the turn of the millennium? Is it a response to the 'dictatorship' of the Bauhaus in the twentieth century, which had so much impact on the minimalist trends of brands in the 1980s and 1990s?

Having tracked down the semiotico-identity nature of the notion of brand aesthetics and having deduced from it managerial tools such as the brand identity hinge, the chain of communication, the exhaustive list of brand manifestations and the classical/baroque pairing, it is opportune to broaden the strictly semiotic approach and pay more attention to brand manifestations, the submerged parts of the iceberg of its aesthetics.

5
The Chain of Brand Aesthetics

> The identity of a brand is the sum of all discourses about it.
>
> Andrea Semprini (2005)

Having defined the brand identity and shown how relationships between its ethics and aesthetics produce meaning, we now venture beyond the strictly semiotic approach to open the discussion to broader considerations and eventually introduce what we call 'the chain of brand aesthetics'.

5.1   Limitations of the semiotic approach

While the science of semiotics makes numerous contributions to brand management, it cannot and does not pretend to resolve some specific issues:

- It cannot be an integral part of the process of creation, although it can define its framework.
- It is not able to invent a style or a bestseller.
- It cannot be a substitute for the creative genius of the designers and publicists.
- It is not exhaustive in its approach.
- It does not take direct (only implicit) account of contexts (Semprini 2005). The hinge of the identity claims to interpret everything starting exclusively from discourses, signs, and statements without taking into account cultural contexts – social, macro and microeconomic – which influence the formation of the meaning produced by the brand.

- Above all, it does not consider the processes that precede and follow the enunciation of the brand discourse. Nor is it interested in the aspects of perceptions of the brand discourse and acts of discourse and in the processes that lead to the aesthetic choices.

Supporters of emotional and experiential marketing add also that, because semiotics stops at the production of meaning, it does not cover all emotional aspects of consumer experience. We saw in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1c) how the traditional separation between the sensory and the cognitive can be overcome and how the concept of experience succeeds in merging these two aspects.

5.2   The dialectics of brand identity

Semprini (2005) suggests a further definition of brand identity, which precisely takes into account the consumers' perceptions of the brand identity planned and proposed by the managers. Consumer opinion cannot be neglected or simply ignored.

After all, Semprini said, the chain of communication can travel in both directions: on the one hand, it is the expression of the ethics of the brand through its manifestations. From the opposite direction, the chain becomes the route of perception and interpretation.

Semprini thus proposed a formula that defines the identity of a brand as 'the sum of all the discourses about it'.

It is in the confrontation of the planned identity – the brand project which materializes in its concrete manifestations – with the identity perceived by the market that the authentic brand identity is born. This continuous confrontation between the projected and the perceived becomes a necessary mechanism (and a method of management) for the adaptive evolution of identity.

Brand identity as a dialectic between the brand project and its market perceptions corresponds with the observation by Greimas (1978) that 'a semiotic object, rather than being a given, is the result of a reading through which it is constructed'. It is clear then that the aesthetic treatment is central to the functioning of the dialectics of brand identity since it is the interface where the brand project crystallizes and where the consumer perceives it.

5.3   The three ends of aesthetic treatments

This dialectic in which brand managers and consumers together build a permanent brand identity should not hide the fact that the brand itself

is the starting point of the process. It is the voluntary act of the brand project that generates its fundamental dynamics. It starts with the designers, creative directors and/or brand managers who make decisions regarding the aesthetic treatment of the various brand manifestations.

The semiotico-identity definition of brand aesthetics introduced in the first chapter is founded on the notion of the aesthetic processing being strictly linked to the expression of the brand ethics. It is the combination of ethics and aesthetics that generates meaning. We are in the presence of a *purpose of representation of what the brand believes in, its vision of the world*.

But the formal or sensory treatments of man's creations or constructions (objects, monuments, art, and so on) have always responded to objectives not solely related to the significations produced, but also to the pleasure and interest generated.

There are two other objectives that should coexist with the representational objective (and which are not highlighted by Floch's semiotic scheme, because they are generally not related directly to brand ethics): the decorative and functional purposes.

It was Aloïs Riegl (1978) who brought these three objectives of any work of art to the fore and, in doing so, carried forward the heritage of the Enlightenment that analytically divided the world into three existential areas: the instrumental, the moral and the aesthetic (Wilber 1998).

With a few adjustments to take into account changes in the social dimension and the greatly enhanced communications that characterize the postmodern brand (Baudrillard 1983), Riegl's approach can be extended to incorporate products of today's brands.

This extrapolation is justified by the creative aesthetic content that most brand products and services possess and the fact that this creativity reflects the creative mood of the time. In addition the brand designer, as the artist, works to be seen by and to communicate with a wide audience.

5.3a   The decorative/ornamental end

For Riegl, this is not only a response to man's strictly visual desire for nature but is, above all, a reaction to humanity's perpetual horror of emptiness (horror vacui). It also reflects man's desire to compete with nature and characterizes the period of Antiquity from Alexander the Great until Constantine, when art became an end in itself.

For brands today, this purpose would correspond to the desire to 'make it look nice', to please, without loading the expression of any

specific content. These are all exercises in style which do not carry any particular message. Most of the aesthetic exercises related to fashion in general are found in this category, together with the repetitive monograms and visual style codes feeding all types of 'logomania'. When a ready-to-wear and accessories designer has to create an average of 3000 prototypes a year (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008), it must be difficult to express the brand's ethics consistently.

5.3b   The functional end

Riegl simply defined this as a response to the desire manifested by the senses other than sight. He took examples from outside the field of art (which supports our extrapolation of its theses to brand products), such as the triangular shape of arrowheads or the square section of beams.

For today's brands an example might be aerodynamic shapes that seek to minimize air resistance, any ergonomic forms or simply the concavity of a plate.

We must also add the functional purposes related to the efficiency of communication, such as the ease of memorization and the readability of the manifestations. For example, the use of black letters on a yellow background will provide maximum contrast for readability in half light, much more than red on yellow or white on blue (Birren 1963; Béresniak 2001).

In the field of design, the authors have traditionally focused on this functional goal. Of the six elements identified by Walsh, Roy and Potter 1993 that affect design, five have a functional purpose:

- Economic production
- Running and maintenance costs
- Performance, reliability, durability, safety, ease of use
- Ease of development and delivery
- Ease of after-sales service

The decorative and representational purposes are barely touched when the authors acknowledge that the design of the product presentation, packaging and display affect the promotion and brand image.

5.3c   The representational end

According to Riegl, this is a response to desires of a spiritual nature, the objective being the awakening of existential, political or religious ideas. The treatment of luxury objects, for example, has always had a strong representative function conveying power and status.

Within the world of brands, this objective corresponds to the desire to express specific brand values or ideas relating to a particular project or design. This may serve several purposes: the projection of the brand ethics, or the disclosure of the 'personality' of a perfume or the 'character' of a car.

A simple illustration of this was the brief given to the Pininfarina design team to develop an electric car in a joint venture with the Bolloré group at the end of 2007. Four words were to guide the work of the designers and the engineers:

> ICONIC
> AGILE
> PREMIUM
> PININFARINA

'PININFARINA' meant that the car had to reflect the brand identity. Its purpose was representational. 'AGILE' was a reference to the personality of the car ('It must give the impression that it is in the starting-blocks', said Chief designer Lowie Vermeersch), but it also incorporated a functional purpose, because it encapsulated a quality of driving the car. 'ICONIC' conjured a dream, an aspiration that the judgement of the market and time would validate. 'PREMIUM' is elitist, and is redundant here because the concept of luxury is explicitly included in the values of the brand.

It is in defining this representational purpose that brands make choices on issues such as their position in relation to social norms, professional standards, and tastes, including the positioning of the object, or of the specific manifestation, on the semiotic square of the values of consumption (Floch 1988; see Chapter 8, section 8.2).

Riegl was the first to take precautions in the application of these three objectives, which often overlap. What corresponds to a functional purpose, for example, is also visible and is therefore subject to decorative considerations as well.

It is same for brands where several objectives are pursued by the aesthetic treatment of certain manifestations. Louis Vuitton's Monogram canvas has an obvious decorative objective, but it also performs two functional roles: one because it is recognizable as belonging to the brand and also for the physical property of the plasticized fabric. Ferragamo's metallic accessory known as the 'gancino' has gone beyond its original functional purpose as a clasp and now serves as both a decorative element and a plastic element of recognition. Gucci's 'bit' follows the same multi-aesthetic purpose.

Table 5.1 presents a summary of Riegl's three ends of aesthetic treatments and their application to brands.

Floch had already noted that some brands were characterized by the emphasis they placed on either the decorative or the representational purpose. He shows this in the semiotic square of two major brand strategic approaches (see Figure 5.1).

Note: A 'caution' brand appeals to a certain social comfort: everybody knows the signs, logo and so on. 'Universe' brands propose their own world, irrespective of social acceptance or the notoriety of the signs they use or the aesthetic they propose.

On the 'good taste' upper-left corner, brands such as Louis Vuitton, Ferragamo and Burberry exploit signs and codes of style in a systematic way, with no link to specific meanings. The 'style' corner is occupied by brands such as Ungaro (when Emmanuel still created haute couture and ready-to-wear collections), Yves Saint Laurent (in his lifetime) and Hermès: brands that 'have something to say', that show an original creativity anchored to their own values. In contrast, on the lower-left corner of 'talent', are brands which are competing on the basis of their capability to read markets' needs and trends. Zara is the absolute model, since its logistic excellence allows it to propose what is already fashionable. On the last corner of the square, we find bold brands like Moschino and Paul Smith who play with signs and norms.

Table 5.1   Three ends to aesthetic treatment. Application of Riegl's approach to brands

Purposes	Riegl's version	Application to brands
Representation	Response to desires of spiritual nature. Religion, relations, Human nature, morale.	Promoting brand ethics, its vision of the world, its values. Developing the founding concept of a project. Offering possible worlds.
Decoration	Responses to visual desires. Reaction to *horror vacui*. Rivalry with nature.	Purely aesthetic objectives. 'Making it look nice'. Style exercises. Generating visual pleasure.
Function	Response to non-visual and non-spiritual desires. Utilitarian.	Functional and utilitarian objectives for products or services. In terms of communication: - memorization - recognition - readability

'CAUTION' BRAND
Ostentation
Label products
Perceptiveness
Perpetuation, conformity

'What we are recognized by'

ASSUMED EXPLOITATION OF SIGNS

GOOD TASTE

'UNIVERSE' BRAND
Products with intrinsic qualities
Perseverance, autonomy, originality
Hedonism and personality
Maintaining its identity, imagination

'What we stand for'

PERSONAL PRODUCTION OF MEANING

STYLE

TALENT

NON-PERSONAL PRODUCTION OF MEANING
Adapting to demand
Sensibility to fashion and
trends
Cleverness

AUDACITY

NON-ASSUMED EXPLOITATION OF SIGNS
Playing with codes
Independence, insolence
Critical spirit, excentricity

Figure 5.1 Two major brand strategic approaches. J-M. Floch's semiotic square

'Caution' brands favour decorative purposes while 'Universe' brands opt for the representational.

A parallel could be drawn between Riegl's three objectives and the three dimensions of culture introduced by Greimas (1987: 90–1): the functional, the mythical and the aesthetic (which he introduced in his studies of women's clothes and of Dogon door locks). The two approaches converge, Riegl's having the advantage of introducing a causal relation helpful in its application to management. Floch (1990) added a fourth term: 'the critical (or economical) dimension', which constitutes the semiotic square of consumption values already cited before and that is commonly used in communication and brand management. This critical dimension is directly related to the production costs and thus fits into the functional purposes of aesthetic treatments.

Riegl applied his three objectives to the different periods of art history. Applied to brands today, the three purposes allow an analysis of the results of the aesthetic treatment of all the brand manifestations in comparison to the initial objectives.

We are now in a position to improve the communication chain presented in Chapter 4 (section 4.4) and build an analytical grid for an audit of brand aesthetics.

5.4   Diagram of the chain of brand aesthetics

The chain of brand aesthetics presented in Figure 5.2 is an improvement on the chain of communication introduced in Figure 4.3, which applies only to the brand identity and its influence on the act of purchase. To cover the aesthetic treatment of brand manifestations in a comprehensive manner, it is necessary to integrate the other two objectives not related to the brand identity.

The scheme now incorporates a number of elements that have been raised in this chapter:

- The three aims of the aesthetic treatments of a brand project
- The four categories of manifestations (communication, products, spaces and behaviours) involving different means and skills to apply aesthetic treatments
- The partial and indirect control that brand managers have on the aesthetics of behaviours
- The dialectic process that takes into account the perceptions of brand manifestations as an essential element of the constitution of the reality of a brand identity

The brand aesthetics chain (see Figure 5.3) complements, in fact, Bloch's model (1995) mentioned in Chapter 3. What was the box
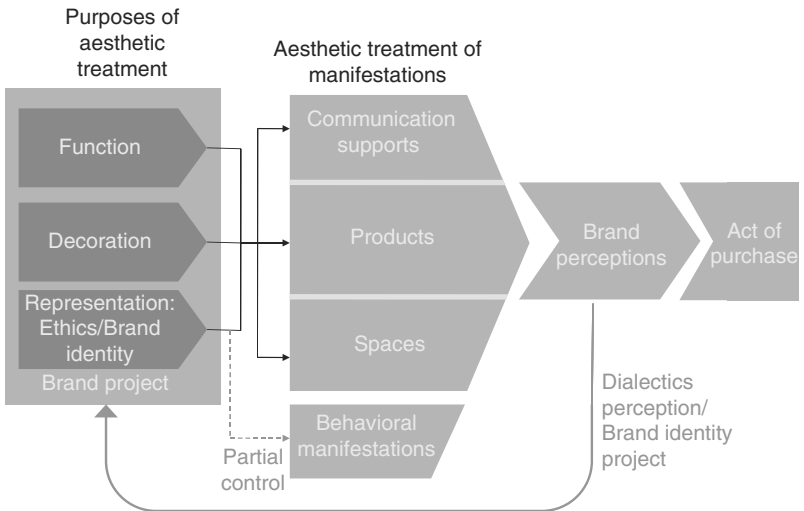
Figure 5.2   Brand aesthetic chain
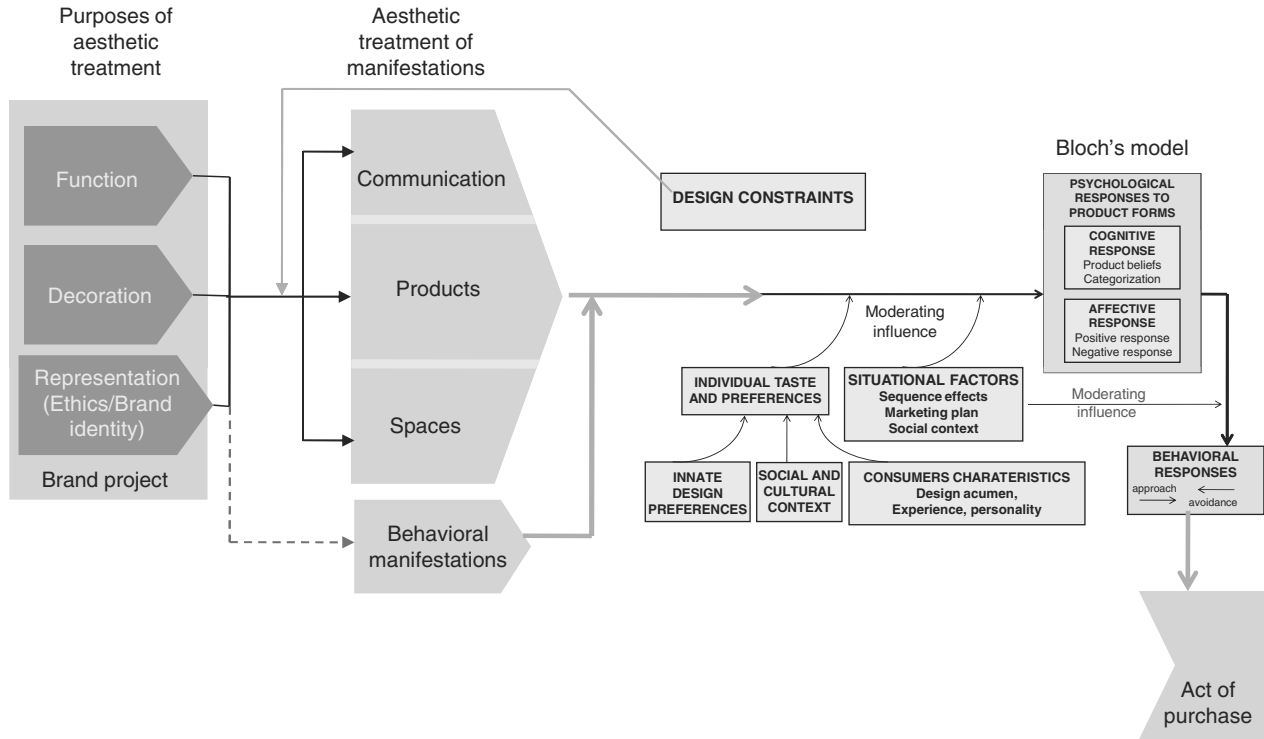
Figure 5.3 Merging the brand aesthetics chain with Bloch's model of consumers' responses to products form (1995)

'Product Form' is replaced by all the brand manifestations; the box 'Design Goal and constraints' gives way to the three purposes; the box 'Perceptions of the brand' in the chain of brand aesthetics (Figure 5.2) is replaced and amplified by the psychological and behavioural responses and moderating factors. This gives us a much more comprehensive model, which starts from the purposes of aesthetic treatment up to the act of purchase, with a detailed logical path, upstream of the consumer interface with the brand manifestations for the persons involved in design decisions, as well as downstream, where it is the consumer who makes his choice.

This diagram explaining the mechanism of the brand aesthetics chain leads finally to a methodology of an audit of brand aesthetics that enables an exhaustive evaluation of the logics governing it and of the coherence and effectiveness of their applications.

5.5   Methodology for an audit of brand communication

The purpose of this study is not to develop a methodology of what might be an audit of a brand communication through its aesthetics. It will suffice to illustrate the inherent logics through:

- Formalizing the three objectives of aesthetic treatment to be able to compare them to the actual results for each manifestation. This requires first of all that the brand identity is formalized in terms of ethics and aesthetics and then to highlight what might be called the brand 'decorative policy' – that is, its ornamental purposes.
- Measuring the perceptions of the brand identity by the targeted consumers in order to set them against the identity project.
- Verifying the consistency between brand manifestations and brand identity in terms of ethics and aesthetics, possibly using the EST-ET diagrams introduced in paragraph 4.3 of Chapter 4.
- Controlling the consistency of the manifestations among themselves. To illustrate the type of managerial application of the introduction of the three purposes of aesthetic treatments, Figure 5.4 presents the crossing of the three purposes (divided into several sub-categories) with the four areas of brand aesthetic expression which are four broad categories of manifestations involving different means and skills needed for implementing aesthetic treatments This scheme provides a methodological grid for a brand audit to classify all brand manifestations according to the objectives of their aesthetic treatment.

3 purposes of aesthetic treatments / 4 categories of aesthetic expression	Representation 'to make know' Cognitive		Decoration 'to make feel' Affective	Functionality/Usefulness 'to make do' Pragmatic		
	Brand ethics	Project of specific products		Product	Communication	
					Impact	Memorization
Products						
Communication						
Spaces						
Behaviours						

Figure 5.4   Examples of application of the three purposes of aesthetic treatments

For some brands, where the product has reached iconic status, the product itself, by its functional qualities, is the ultimate representative of the brand ethics. For the leading French pocketknife brand Opinel, for example, a handle, a blade and a ferrule determine by their forms, materials and functionality, the uses and the users and therefore the brand ethics. (See the chapter 'The knife of the handyman' in Floch (1995: 181–213), for a semiotic study of the Opinel knife. There is no decoration on this knife; no bee as on the Laguiole nor flies as on the Nontron, its immediate competitors.

We could also position Vuitton's Monogram Canvas which was conceived for decorative purposes and memorization. It also possesses remarkable functional qualities of strength and impermeability. However, this is not representative of the brand ethics, if one considers these to be centred on the theme of travel and fashion. The same reasoning applies to Ferragamo's '*gancino*' or to the Burberry plaid.

Even in the Thai language, the Coca-Cola ads, with the wave (two sinuous lines) which echoes the bottle shape and the calligraphy of the name, are universally readable and are the result of an aesthetic

treatment that meets the three purposes: memory, decoration, and the expression of vitality and energy that characterize the brand ethics.

The baroque architecture of the Stuart Weitzman store in Rome, designed by the architect Fabio Novembre, also obeys the three purposes. The originality and the intrinsic coherence of design meet the decorative and communicative purposes. The highly baroque expression is consistent with the vision of the world of the designer Stuart Weitzman, for which irony and eccentricity are central values.

The blue shirt worn by Louis Gerstner (ex-president and CEO of IBM) was a true symbol of change from an extremely rigid and formal culture, and provides a pertinent example of the effective management of behavioural aesthetics. His picture would find its place at the intersection of behaviour aesthetics and representation of brand ethics.

5.6   Conclusions on brand aesthetics

In Part I, we have established the theoretical and practical foundations of our approach to brand aesthetics. The following chapters will move on to a more specific study of the judgements of consumers for certain visual aspects of the aesthetic treatment. After first demonstrating the relevance of the concept and presenting the managerial issues related to creation, communication and organization that can be treated through this new approach to brand aesthetics, the following management tools have been introduced:

- *Floch's hinge of brand identity* and the concepts of ethics and aesthetics are, for internal use, instruments allowing the integration and rationalization of creative and communicative activities. They also serve to facilitate the dialogue between various functional departments. Externally, the hinge serves as the reference with respect to the perceptions of the identity by the different segments of consumers. It makes it possible to compare the perceived identities to the planned identity and possibly trigger the necessary corrective actions. This implies that individuals with decision-making power on the aesthetic aspects of brand manifestations have the desire to satisfy the preferences of certain market segments (Holbrook 1980) and accept the idea that the brand identity comprises the sum of all the discourses on the brand. As a result, knowledge of the consumers' perception of the brand aesthetics thus enables adjustments to be made to the brand aesthetics and therefore to its identity. In cases where certain elements of brand aesthetics are declared immutable

(rigid brand identity, untouchable logo or permanent designs, and so on), the type of study proposed at least makes it possible to define the more receptive market segments (Holbrook 1980).

- *The EST-ET diagram*, which flows directly from the hinge, is a diagnostic tool that can be applied to each individual manifestation in order to measure its adequacy for the desired brand identity.
- *The full description of the manifestations* with the four major categories of aesthetics they belong to. This allows the overall vision and coordination of all the elements which transmit the messages of the sensory world of the brand.
- *The baroque/classical pairing*, although not applicable systematically to all brands, offers opportunities of definitions of aesthetic invariants. Among other things, it allows the identification of trends in aesthetic preferences of the markets and the positioning of the brand with respect to the evolution of consumer tastes. It then allows a possible adjustment of certain manifestations to the aesthetic trends at work, while remaining compatible with the representational purpose of the brand's values.
- *The chain of brand aesthetics* complements the brand communication chain and provides an overview of the sequence of logics at work from the goals of aesthetic treatments to the act of purchase. It is the basis for the development of a methodology for a full audit of brand aesthetics, thanks to the table that intersects the three objectives of the aesthetic treatment and the four aesthetic categories of manifestations.

Among their list of the tangible benefits that aesthetics offers to the organization, Schmitt and Simonson (2007: 21–5) include the following five points that deserve constructive criticism:

- *Aesthetics creates loyalty*. They refer to consumers and insist on the differentiation that aesthetics provides. They cover the identity aspect of aesthetics as well as the operational aspect of memorization, but make no mention of the important aspect of internal loyalty.
- *Aesthetics enables higher prices*. Using the examples of Nike and Starbucks, they conclude that an attractive aesthetic allows companies to charge higher prices than the competition (assuming of course that the competitors' aesthetics have been neglected). The expression 'attractive aesthetics', a sort of pleonasm and an apparent banality, raises nonetheless the complexity of this concept. It leads directly to the notion of 'consumer preferences'. These two last

notions call, simultaneously and to varying degrees, on cognitive, affective and sensory elements (Charters 2006), which will be treated in the next chapter.

- *Aesthetics overcomes media congestion*. Again, the term 'attractive aesthetics' appears as a solution to the problems of differentiation and memorization already mentioned in the first paragraph.
- *Aesthetics protects against the attacks of the competition*. It is easier to protect a brand from copies and counterfeits if its aesthetics are reflected in many identity elements. Aesthetics is here reduced to recognizable elements and distinctive stimuli.
- *Aesthetics reduces costs and increases productivity*. The existence of aesthetic guidelines is supposed to reduce the time devoted to creativity and avoid dispersion.

This could not be further from our concept of brand aesthetics; that is, as a framework defining an approach to the sensory, and not as a set of graphic codes to be applied systematically. The formalization of brand aesthetics does not necessarily reduce the time spent on creation. On the contrary, it probably extends it as a work of interpretation of a brand identity requires a constant confrontation with some predefined invariants which are not always immediate. This type of constant confrontation with a brand's aesthetics requires probably more time than an unbridled creativity where designers' proposals are justified only by the supposed talent of their creators. Schmitt and Simonson end with this sentence, which is characteristic of their overall approach: 'Aesthetics motivates your staff – and it beautifies the work place.' A formalized brand aesthetics, shared and promoted by different teams, certainly contributes to the motivation and integration of the staff. Beautifying the workplace is another matter. The aesthetic treatment of spaces does not necessarily produce beautiful work environments and the notion of beauty is, obviously, all relative.

Clearly, Schmitt and Simonson's approach to aesthetics is fundamentally different from that presented here. It seems that, for them, forms, colours, materials, designs are exclusively associated with purposes of readability, visibility, focus, and economy. This is not a true aesthetic approach, where the representational purpose of aesthetic treatments needs to be pervasive, alongside the decorative and functional purposes.

Not linking aesthetics to the expression of brand ethics weakens an otherwise powerful and unifying concept of brand aesthetics and limits it to purely operational considerations of communication management.

Moreover, introducing the notion of beauty only serves to muddy the waters and does not lead to a better understanding of the management of brand aesthetics.

This first part has been an introduction to the concept of brand aesthetics, providing the contextualization necessary to demonstrate how the approach to the sensory, the aesthetic treatment of brand manifestations, influences how they are perceived, and to show that brands' aesthetics can and should be managed in order to reach finer and more competitive creative and communicative functions and for marketing in general.

Companies are constantly making choices about the plastic elements that make up their products, their communication materials, their sales outlets, and so on. Among these plastic elements, it is with *lines, as significant elements of aesthetic treatment*, that this study will now continue. This will eventually lead, in Chapter 11, to a survey on the aesthetic preferences of a group of consumers for four simple linear plastic elements that will be defined in the next chapters.

Part II
Brand Aesthetics: Applications to Linear Aesthetic Expressions

6
Lines and Forms

There are many elements and attributes that characterize the objects perceived by the human visual system: size, shape, contour, shading, texture, colour, composition, play of light, and so on.

The importance of the choices made about these visual aspects of objects was emphasized in Chapter 1 in the development of the concept of brand aesthetics.

But why focus on lines in particular? Three reasons have guided the choice of the line as the main subject of this work:

- Lines are crucial in the generation of the form of objects and spaces. Merleau-Ponty (1945: 352) declared that: 'The essence of a thing lies first of all in its size and in its specific form'. The line is visually present in three of the four categories of aesthetics of the manifestations introduced in the previous chapter: the aesthetics of communication, of products and of space. It is also present, metaphorically, in the fourth, the aesthetics of behaviour, as 'a line of conduct' or a 'guideline', for example.
- Lines are close, familiar, expressive and spontaneous. Writing and scribbling are common activities.
- Lines have been relatively little studied as specific elements capable of generating consumer preferences.

In Aristotelian thinking it is the form which gives meaning to matter and thus identity to an object (Greimas and Courtès 1986). All things are the product of their material support and form. For Focillon (1943: 2), form measures and qualifies space: 'Not only is any activity discernible insofar as it takes shape, as it draws its curve in space and

time, but moreover, life essentially acts as a creator of forms. Life is form and form is the mode of life'.

More specifically in relation to the field of semiotics, Floch (1985: 191) wrote:

> Form, in semiotics, is not opposed to the content, which would be the only signifier. Form is the invariant and purely relational organization of a plan that articulates the sensory material or the conceptual material, thus producing meaning. For semiotics, it is therefore the form which is meaningful. Substance (or content), is matter, the variable support that form takes charge of.

The semiotician Abraham Zemsz (1985) considered that 'in fact and in law, line precedes form as a fact of culture – and as an unconscious and universal basis of countless plastic visions'. And, in expanding on the judgement by the painter Delacroix on straight lines, he continued: 'All lines are monsters, since they were born in the minds of men'.

At the plastic level, lines define and structure the form, either as contour, or as an axis of symmetry or of direction. Focillon (1943: 7) continued: 'If we merely lay our eyes on simple linear patterns, it imposes on us the idea of a potent activity of forms'.

In the classical tradition, two-dimensional drawing was the basic training technique for the artist, who could then move on to painting, sculpture or architecture – the three art forms that require the mastery of the line. The French painter Anquetin (1930s texts collected by Versini 1970: 195, 198 and 201) wrote:

> All arts arise from drawing, because it is the expression of the form and thus of the plastic arts; i.e. the arts of the form are logically under the absolute domination of this form … to draw is expressing, explaining what has been understood … It is the formalization of the character of things.

Or, as de Pile (1989: 76), put it: 'It is the key of Beaux Arts'.

Today, often consumer goods are born of a two-dimensional drawing, either from a manual exercise, as is the case with designers of fashion, accessories and cars, or generated by specialized software as happens with many consumer products. Even in the latter case, hand-drawing often precedes the transfer to the computer.

6.1   Space, time, force, movement and expression

Focillon (1943) wrote 'If we just focus our attention on simple linear patterns, the idea of a powerful activity of forms is imposed on us'. The line naturally *structures space*, but it is also a *metaphor for time*: the time necessary to draw it; the time that eludes us. Lines begin and end. They are continuous and limited. One can imagine them infinite in both directions.

It is one of the primordial and most natural means of human expression. All children begin with some scribbles with their coloured pencils. It has potentially infinite variety. To borrow two phrases from Henry Van de Velde (1978), Belgian architect, painter and graphic artist (1863–1957): 'The line derives its force from the energy of the one who has drawn it', and 'The line is a force whose activities are comparable to those of all the natural forces.'

The line is always associated with the concept of *force*. First the force necessary to draw it: the line drawn by hand, an extension of the brain, is an expression both controlled and instinctive. Each of us tends to draw unconsciously with a gesture of the hand or arm, the shape of a car, a silhouette or a horizon when we see or describe them. Arnheim (1969: 117) considers these descriptive gestures as forerunners of the actual drawn lines. It is also the force that the author wants to express and the one which will be perceived by others.

Force generates *movement* and the line can symbolize this. This is the paradox of a diachronic element, sequential in its construction, whose resulting creations in 2D or 3D are immobile (excluding film and video) and of synchronic perception. Kandinsky (1991: 67) wrote: 'It [the line] is the trace of the point in motion … it is born from the motion … here is where the leap from static to dynamic occurs'.

The line is expressive. It can represent real or imaginary worlds and generate emotions and understanding. Turning again to Van de Velde: 'The line affects anybody who is not entirely devoid of sensitivity, through the directions, the distances, the accents generated progressively as it is drawn'.

6.2   Concretization of lines

Lines can be involved in two different ways in the expression. They can either be drawn effectively and be visible as such; or they can structure the expression and, although they govern the image or the product, they are not directly apparent. The line is visible directly either as a

stroke, or as the border between two areas of distinct colours, bright-ness or texture.

6.2a Strokes

Figure 6.1 includes two drawings. One shows a woman's face in which the curved and sinuous lines are of the same thickness. The semioti-cian Denis Bertrand tells how Floch, in front of a similar drawing from Matisse, drew his attention to the fact that the lines appeared to be a structured cutting of the white background. Wölfflin (1985: 25) notes that the classical style tends to use pen or pencil with hard lead for pre-cise contours, while the baroque style uses charcoal, red chalk or brush to *wash* for more vague, uncertain and repeated strokes. Lucio Fontana's straight cuts in the canvas also fall into the category of strokes.

The second drawing shows a bottle through some lines with vari-able thickness. The winding line is so attached to the Coca-Cola brand identity (wave, bottle, calligraphy, distributors, and so on) that two black lines on a gray background are sufficient for the brand to be recognized.

When the line is drawn as a stroke, the thickness, colour and length are variables to take into consideration.

6.2b Boundary between two areas

This is the case where the line is consistent with its mathematical defi-nition of zero thickness. The contour of the side of the rectangle fram-ing the Camper advertising on Figure 4.4 or of Smeg in Figure 2.2 shows
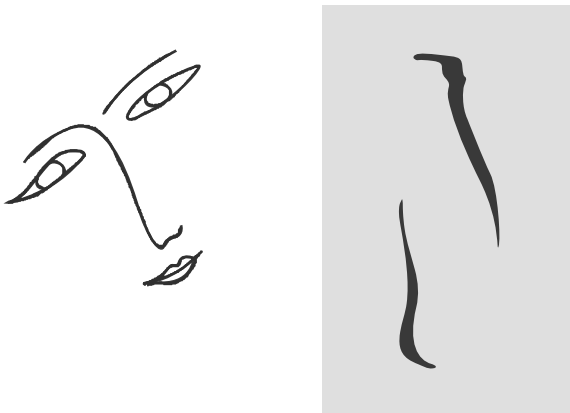
Figure 6.1 Two drawings presenting lines as strokes

straight lines which are defined by the boundary between two zones of different colour.

When the line is a structuring element and is present only virtually, two cases are possible: either the line structures an object or an element of the image or product, or it organizes the entire composition.

6.2c   Axis of an element

Figure 6.2 shows a picture of the Doryphoros by Polykleitos (440 AD). It shows how one can imagine a sinuous line as the axis of the warrior body. In three dimensions, it is a helix. This is best seen by looking respectively at the lines of the knees, of the pelvis and of the shoulders.

Numerous advertising of fashion brands display persons in positions which reveal a serpentine as the axis of the body of the model and bring together the multiple sinuous lines of the body contour. Armani in particular uses this method to promote a relaxed attitude characteristic of his brand.
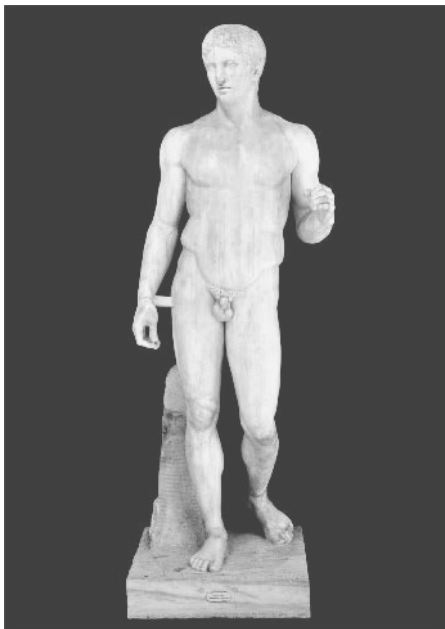
Figure 6.2   *The Doryphoros* by Polykleitos (440 AD). Line as a structuring axis

Figure 6.3   The descent from the cross (1612–14) by Rubens. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen © Lukas – Art in Flanders VZW. Line as a structuring axis

6.2d   Axis of composition

The line can be the basis of the whole composition of an image or a product. The double sinuous line of *The descent from the cross* by Rubens (Figure 6.3) located at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen, organizes the entire painting, just as they may also serve as an axis of symmetry in numerous ads (Ariel, etc.).

6.3   Linear expression and baroque style

We should not think that, following the introduction of Wölfflin's five pairs of concepts (1984) to characterize the visual aspects of baroque and classical styles, the first being 'linear/pictorial', that any linear

expression automatically belongs to the classical style. *It is in the choice of forms of the line, in its concretization and its combinations that the designer defines his expressive linear style.* Wölfflin defines the classical style (1985: 25) as linear because the line dominates this style, being precise 'with pen or pencil with hard lead', with precise contours, right-angles, sharp edges and straight lines. But it is not absent from the baroque. The picturesque baroque style uses 'charcoal, red chalk or brush to wash'. The line can always be presented as the axis of compositions or figures for both styles; however, some lines are more baroque than others. The sinuous line, for example, is better able to characterize movement and progression, which are characteristic of baroque values.

7
The Relevance of Lines in Brand Aesthetic Management

The choice of certain lines governs much of the aesthetic expression of brands. They are important components of their discourses and may even be the main subject of their advertising, as in the case of Pininfarina which developed the theme of the 'Pininfarina line' (*la linea Pininfarina*) in all of its advertising campaigns from 1968 until 1990.

Figure 7.1 shows an example of the utilization of lines for a figurative purpose for the 2010 Paris Car Show.

The line is often used in communication either for its plastic, figurative or symbolic meanings. Examples of this include the Fortis 'Life is a curve' video in 2008 or the Laurent–Perrier champagne advertising campaign which, in its English version mentions a sentence from the painter Watteau: 'All my life I have sought the simplicity of a single stroke' (see Figure 7.2).

In a more humorous way, Wonderbra uses the line in its 'yellow safety line' advertising campaign which shows a second line, considerably behind the usual safety marker on the edge of the subway station platform, for users of the Wonderbra.

The line is present in all visual brand manifestations. The choice of specific lines in the design of products or any other manifestations, knowingly or not, has an impact on the perception that consumers have of the brands and influences their purchasing decisions. It is one of the ingredients that form the basis for brand competitiveness.

The treatment of the linearity of the plastic expression of a brand is a subset of its aesthetics in general. All the reasons developed in Chapter 2 to sustain the relevance of brand aesthetics naturally apply.

Figure 7.1   Paris 2010 car show (Mondial de l'automobile ©)

Figure 7.2   Advertising called in French 'pinceau/calligraphie' for a champagne from the Maison Laurent-Perrier. Advertising agency: Publicis 133. Photograph: Daniel Jouanneau

However, in order to establish more firmly the specific relevance of the line, a few recent cases that demonstrate the impact of the linear aesthetics are presented next, as well as the managerial implications that can bring about the knowledge of consumer reactions to certain types of lines.

7.1   Recent examples of relevant linear aesthetic treatment

It may happen that the change of the aesthetic linear treatment of a product is hardly perceived by the majority of consumers. How many Chanel customers, for example, have realized that the N° 5 perfume bottle has undergone five retouchings since its creation in 1921? However, there are cases where the treatment of the line has a major and visible impact on the fate of a product or a brand. The following examples illustrate this point very clearly.

7.1a   Citroën logo

Citroën is cutting corners (see Figure 7.3). In February 2009, the sharp points of the famous brand 'chevron' were smoothed and have taken a third dimension. To tinker with a logo, supposedly the supreme synthesis of brand identity, is always a delicate exercise in its strategic and communicative importance.

This graphical shift is characterized by the *rejection of the angle*. Not only were the upper edges of the arrows rounded, but the lower ends became wider. The cartridge square, with its four right angles, disappears altogether. Rejecting the angle also has implications in the new typography, which transforms the former block letter N into a small n and softens all the other block letters. The chevrons are metalized and given relief; the red of the square ends up in the letters of the name.
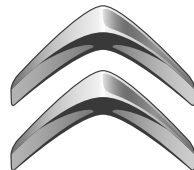
1980   **2009**

Figure 7.3   Citroën © latest change of logo

The choice of curved lines, characteristic of the living world, is not trivial. It will be discussed at length in the study of the meanings of the different kinds of lines in Chapter 9. It symbolizes the abandonment of the abstract and perfect world of straight lines and angles, for the real world where the sinuous and the rounded prevail. The move goes from the abstraction of 2D to the materiality of 3D.

Citroën's choice is towards empathy with the living world; a more immediate relationship with the customer; a greater proximity.

This is not really new for the brand. There is great continuity with some beautiful videoclips from the 1980s created by RSCG. The most poetic of these was probably '*les chevrons sauvages*' (the wild chevrons, playing on the phonetic proximity in French between '*chevrons*' and '*chevaux*') from 1984, where a herd of horses escapes a car park and flees a grey concrete city for the wide-open natural spaces.

It is also interesting to return to the remarks of Barthes (1957) on the DS model. He spoke 'of a return to less sharp aerodynamics; … less aggressive … smoother surfaces' and, particularly, 'as if it was a passage from an order of the engine to an order of the body'.

Is this symbiosis with the living world expressed through the use of organic lines, the new theme of the Citroën communication? Let's study some other brand manifestations.

• Extract from the press release

> [T]he logo, is the first visible sign of change. The chevrons are now liberated, and expressed in three dimensions to evoke conquest, power and technology. Red, its historic colour, can be found on the new typography of the brand name. A deeper red hue to symbolize quality and impose the brand ambition.

If the expression of technology through the metallization of the chevrons (which will continue to remind us of their origin as industrial gears) is successful, it is more dubious in the expression of conquest. The two 'boomerangs', as the chevrons were christened by Internet users, have actually been released from their red square cage and the rounded and thickened shapes inspire a greater stability. The effect of power is therefore reached through this stability and weight, but at the expense of conquest and movement which are also the characteristics of the living world. The impression of authority transmitted by the two arrows indicating a unique direction – to the top – is gone. The appeal to rise has disappeared to make way for a solid and reassuring stability.

- The website
  Here we finally find movement. We are greeted with a stream of thin, red serpentine lines, roads in space, that bring us to a succession of photos and text leading to the message 'Citroën reinvents itself', to the slogan 'Créative technology', to reminders of the brand innovations, the automobile competitions and the willingness to establish a new spirit, new lines and new relationships with customers. This is an ambitious statement of significant change.
- Rounded lines
  The lines of Citroën cars have always been relatively fluid. The DS 'monobranche' steering wheel is probably the most significant achievement of an aesthetic approach that eschews the angle. Applying the same treatment to the logo increases the consistency of the aesthetics of the brand manifestations. It is also a recognition of the aesthetic mood of markets and their current baroquization.
- '*Créative technologie*'
  The slogan is completely legitimate. Technological innovations – hydro-pneumatic suspension, hydraulic steering, disc brakes, automatic gear and so on – have always been the hallmark of the Citroën legend. However, this space is rather crowded. Renault launched its slogan '*créateurs d'automobiles*' a few years ago, and Audi has always communicated on technology.

Citroën's logo change also raises the broader issue of man's rapport with a fast-evolving technology and of the linear aesthetic treatment of technology today, which will not be treated here.

7.1b   Gucci fragrances

In 2007, the Gucci creative team adopted a cursive calligraphy for their new 'Gucci' perfume, a way of writing completely different from the block letters with fonts close to Berlin or Garamond that are used for the brand name or for previous fragrances. They introduced two sinuous lines: one in the leg of the capital G and one in the underlining, which is reminiscent of the calligraphy of Coca-Cola and Carlsberg. These are choices of lines. The two calligraphies coexist on the communication material (packaging, advertising, and so on) to highlight the changes introduced.

In April 2009 Gucci launched another fragrance, 'Flora', for which the calligraphy is identical to that used for the 'Gucci' fragrance. The position of the product name with respect to the brand name is also identical. The capital F allows for an additional sinuous line. This is clearly

the beginning of a series. Flora is of course also 'the new Fragrance'. The objective here is not to analyse in detail the meanings carried by the new calligraphy, but only to demonstrate the relevance of the aesthetic linear treatment, which is instrumental in attracting attention and creating the recognition of a new perfume family.

7.1c Caisse d'Epargne logo

The example of the French savings bank Caisse d'Epargne is also useful and instructive here. Figure 7.4 shows some of the logos that have marked the bank's history.

The evolution towards abstraction and the gradual introduction of the straight line is striking. The initial evocation of the squirrel, a symbol of thrift, reflected the values and function of the Bank: discretion, trust, savings, sympathy, and so on. The last logo introduced in 1991 has removed any winding line, any closed form. All the graphic elements are straight except for a rounded line for the tail. The official Caisse d'Epargne website, explained the latest choice this way:

> In order to better represent a new organizational structure of Caisse d'Epargne, the logo has been transformed completely, adopting a *'high tech' style* to illustrate technology, competence and modernity with a new drawing, dynamic lines on a square, conveying strength. Its more elaborate structure symbolizes the diversification of activities and products offered by Caisse d'Epargne. Its red colour (colour of the square background) evokes the commercial dynamism.

The message was clear. The bank's activities were no longer limited to managing savings accounts. Indeed, today Caisse d'Epargne offers the full range of banking and insurance services and supports the projects of

| 1950 | 1965 | 1968 | 1991 |

Figure 7.4   The last four logos of La Caisse d'Epargne ©

all economic actors – individual, professional, businesses, associations, and local communities.

The graphical treatment of the logo plays a major role in the expression of the identity of a brand.

7.1d   Zippo Blu lighter

Designers make daily choices about the linear aesthetic treatment of their products. The transition from the mythical gasoline Zippo lighter, launched in 1932 and an icon of GIs in Vietnam, to the Zippo BLU butane torch lighter in 2007 is a fine example of the substitution of a straight line by a sinuous one. The object is different technically, visually and tactilely. As shown in Figure 4.9, the central sinuous line, together with the lateral rounded lines, completely changes the perception of stiffness and precision of its mythical predecessor, and gives the new product a very distinct sensual personality. The respective preferences of consumers for the two Zippo lighters will be presented in Chapter 11.

These preliminary examples demonstrate how the presence of a certain typology of line, as plastic elements of products, logos, names of perfumes and brand manifestation in general, determines their visual appearance, their perception and governs consumers' preferences.

The managerial instruments to be developed in Chapter 10 will enable more systematic analysis of the linear differences among brand manifestations.

Let us now see how a controlled management of the linear expression can help the brand manager.

7.2   Managerial implications

'To read the lines and between them', to find the underlying meaning of linear expression, contributes to a better brand management in two ways:

- First, the knowledge of the meanings attached to the lines helps designers and managers to ensure that the selected linear aesthetic treatment (if it is relevant to the brand manifestation being considered) contributes to meeting their strategic, commercial, and communication intentions and that the three objectives of the aesthetic treatment are met.
- Then, the knowledge of the preferences of certain market segments for some types of line has many consequences for the marketing and management of brand identity.

Van Breemen and Sudijono (1999) recognized that the aesthetic appreciation of target consumers is a key factor in the success of product development. They also recognized that there is an increasing management focus on the appearance of products. The discipline that strives to find bridges between the aesthetic intentions of designers and the perceptions generated by the characteristics of the shape of goods is just beginning to grow, primarily in the world of industrial design engineering. The present study belongs to this category of research of the relationship between aesthetics, as a vector of the managerial intentions, and the preferences of consumers.

7.2a   Marketing optimization

The knowledge of the preferences of certain groups of consumers for specific lines allows a more effective management of the functions of creation, distribution and communication.

We're referring here to the well-known benefits of market segmentation. This implies that individuals with decision-making power on aesthetic aspects of brand manifestations have the desire to satisfy the preferences of certain market segments (Holbrook 1980).

Bloch (1995) stressed the importance of the shape of goods in the marketing strategy. Knowledge of a link between preferences for a certain type of line incorporated into products and specific characteristics of the consumers will guide the planning, execution and measurement of performance of the creative work in particular and enable a better response to the customers' sensibilities.

The most common segmentation logics are mostly sociological (age, gender, education, and so on), and psychological. We have added taste (baroque/classical, figurative/abstract) features in the market study presented in Chapter 11. The identification of groups of consumers with specific preferences for a particular line enables aesthetic linear treatments to be conceived that match those preferences.

For example:

- Sponsoring cultural events related to baroque or abstract art with the objective of promoting a product (for example, a perfume or car) or a collection (apparel, accessories, jewellery) whose aesthetics are strongly marked by the type of lines preferred by the consumer segments sensitive to these types of artistic expressions.
- Running an advertising campaign with organic linear treatment (curved and sinuous lines) for a segment that is sensitive to these forms.

- Developing stores or showrooms with architectural concepts that are in line with the aesthetic sensibilities of target segments.
- Giving straight and angular graphic treatment for a website addressed to a target market whose taste is anchored on classical aesthetics.
- If the trend is towards sinuous lines (baroquization), making logos with angular aesthetics a little less visible on the products or, as in the case of Citroën, remodelling the logo.

Using market studies measuring sensitivity to specific lines is legitimate for the brand manager curious as to whether the perception of the aesthetic treatments of its brand manifestations is consistent with his expectations and provides basic information for the planning of future activities.

The type of investigation presented in Chapter 11, adjusting the format to each case, can have a direct use for top management. For example, it is possible to measure the preferences for two options for linear designs compatible with the brand aesthetics and evaluate them with respect to the statistical general preferences of the time.

7.2b   Adjustment of the brand identity

Knowing the preferences of certain groups of consumers for specific lines can help in adjusting the aesthetic component of the brand identity.

The analysis of market preferences is justified because originally there is a project, the result of a managerial commitment and hypothesis regarding consumer reactions. If, as we saw previously, the brand identity is the result of the dialectic between the brand project and the perceptions of consumers (Semprini 2005), it follows that knowledge of the consumers' perceptions of the brand aesthetic aspects calls for adjustments to the brand aesthetics and therefore its identity. In cases where certain elements of brand aesthetics are declared immutable (rigid brand identity, logo or permanent 'untouchable' plastic elements, for example), this type of study serves at least to define the more receptive market segments (Holbrook 1980).

A reaction to the aesthetics of a brand manifestation is always valuable information in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the pursuit of the three purposes of aesthetic treatments.

7.2c   Understanding trends

Having knowledge of consumer preferences for certain lines enables the understanding of the evolution of certain aspects of consumers' taste in general.

From market research conducted at regular intervals, we can also determine trends in consumer tastes for certain lines. This allows, for example, locating the brand aesthetics in the context of the recent baroquization of product aesthetics and of the related communication. This is used primarily to adjust all brand manifestations to the aesthetic mood of the moment while remaining compatible with the purpose of representing the brand values.

7.2d   Organizational benefits

Deciding to measure preferences on aesthetic aspects of brand manifestations demonstrates a willingness to rationalize an area often abandoned to the designer's inspiration or genius. The reasons outlined in Chapter 2 (section 2.3) on the managerial implications of an active management of the concept of brand identity apply in particular to linear treatments.

A quantitative investigation into the tastes of some market segments on certain types of lines is tantamount to creating an instrument of measurement and of rationalization of creative work. It is an instrument that brings together merchant and artistic cultures which, while they coexist in most companies, currently have little effective interface.

The work of Giannini, Monti and Podehl (2006) highlighted very clearly the differences in terminology used by design, engineering and marketing departments when dealing with topics related to product aesthetics. Thus, when a brand decides to measure the preferences of consumers with respect to its linear aesthetic expression this has obvious positive organizational and cultural implications.

7.3   A brief literature review

The literature review in Chapter 3 focused on authors who studied experimental aesthetics in general (the category to which the survey presented in Chapter 11 belongs), and on brand aesthetics, which is the theoretical foundation of this work. It also made clear the importance of the work of art historians as privileged sources for this study. This section is aimed more specifically towards the relatively few authors who have studied lines in a specific way.

7.3a   Experimental studies of simple geometric shapes

Except for the numerous studies on the rectangle resulting from the controversy over the golden mean, a limited number of simple geometric figures have been subjected to experimental studies of preferences.

McManus (1980) reported that Fechner himself studied ellipses, but did not publish the results because they did not confirm a preference for the golden mean. McManus led research on preferences for rectangles and triangles in which he confirmed a tendency to prefer ratios close to the golden mean.

Lalo (1908) studied the preferences for crosses and the letter 'i', Austin and Sleight (1951) did it for the isosceles triangle and Eysenck (1968) and Eysenck and Castle (1970) analysed preferences for regular polygons. None of these studies specifically analysed linear elements as such.

Danger (1987) proposed a certain number of basic rules based on forms, such as the preference for simple and regular rather than complex and irregular shapes. He emphasized in particular the preference for convex shapes for tactile purposes and asserted the superiority of the combination of convex and concave (the sinuous line) for practical reasons. His assertions were expressed in the form of a 'handbook' and although he declared that his data were based on 'well conducted' research, he did not describe the methods used.

Two relatively old experimental studies focused specifically on the perception of lines.

The more interesting of these was that of Kate Hevner (1935) which studied the 'affective value' of four types of line: circles, squares, angles and waves. It is the closest to the work that we present in Chapter 11 to the extent that it analyses experimentally the reactions of a group of people exposed to different types of line.

The study revealed that the curves (rounded and sinuous) suggest warmth, sentimentality, lyricism, serenity and grace, while the straight lines (angles and squares) tend to sadness, strength and dignity. The study reveals a mixture of feelings experienced by participants in the test and of apparent attitudes and physical or aesthetic qualities assigned to the images shown.

The other experimental research on the line was that conducted by Edgar Pierce (1894) who used the vertical straight line in his study of the 'aesthetic sense of symmetry'. It is less relevant for our purposes because it focuses more on configurations of straight lines and not on effects directly related to the shape of the line. Pierce showed two parallel vertical lines 10cm long and 5cm thick (in fact, rectangles) spaced 60cm apart and asked respondents to position a third identical line between the two in the most 'pleasing' position. Here again, the chosen site divided the space between the two lines in a ratio close to the golden mean. When Pierce increased the number of lines, subjects tended to place the removable line between and equidistant from the two, in

such a way as to respond to a need for balance between simplicity and variety, an age-old assumption of aesthetic theory.

7.3b   Computer-aided design (CAD)

We have already mentioned how the field of artificial intelligence and computer-aided design contributes to the understanding of aesthetic phenomena. A few more articles on linear treatments are mentioned here.

Parameters able to define the shapes of products are the subject of comprehensive studies because they allow many and rapid digitally based geometric changes to be made in the design phase. Objective studies of the correlation between parameterizable shapes of geometric elements of objects and the preferences of consumers are now frequent. This type of study is similar to ours. The four basic lines that we introduce in the next chapter can easily be parameterized; that is, they are mathematically translatable.

For example, in the study conducted by Vergeest, Van Egmond and Dumitrescu in 2002, consumers showed a preference for car hoods with a raised central area. The lines shown next give an idea of the section of the hood. With the exception of the first, each is actually a combination of three straight lines and two sinuous lines, as illustrated in Figure 7.5.

By correlating the height of the raised area with the opinions of the respondents, they were able to demonstrate a certain preference for an average height.

The discipline of product design focuses on links between visual elements and their possible meanings. Holbrook (1987) noted that the study of signs was emerging as a field of research on consumer behaviour in parallel to a growing attention to the aesthetic aspects of consumption.

Van Breemen and Sudijono (1999) undertook a study to correlate specific forms required by the designer with their meaning to consumers. They managed to establish correlations between descriptive terms of
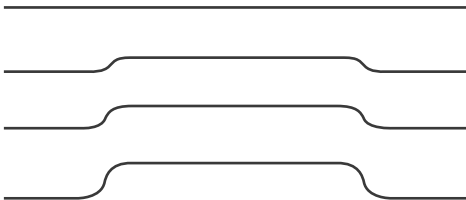
Figure 7.5   Test of different heights of central part of car hood

the forms of products (mugs, vases, computers and door handles) such as straight, slender, swollen, round, basic, undecorated, and so on, and the descriptive terms of perception by the participants, such as melancholic, elegant, fresh, modest, simple, formal, passive, reserved, mature, ageless, calm, and so on.

The structure of their study does not provide a direct indication on the four lines that are the object of our study, but it could be a methodology to be followed in a subsequent study of measurement of perception of the meanings attached to them. The authors pointed out that, despite the need for a continuous assessment of consumers' aesthetic appreciation, the discipline was still in its infancy.

7.3c   Semiotics

Semiotics is by its nature interested in the meaning of all discourses and, in particular, the plastic ones (Pinson 1988). It is a discipline that generates numerous articles on the issues of the aesthetic dimension of brand manifestations and the process by which they generate meaning.

Sara Ilsted-Hjelms (2002) explored the complex relationships between product design and meaning through the semiotic approach. She illustrated the concepts of denotation and connotation by taking two examples of chairs created by Swedish designers (see Figure 7.6).
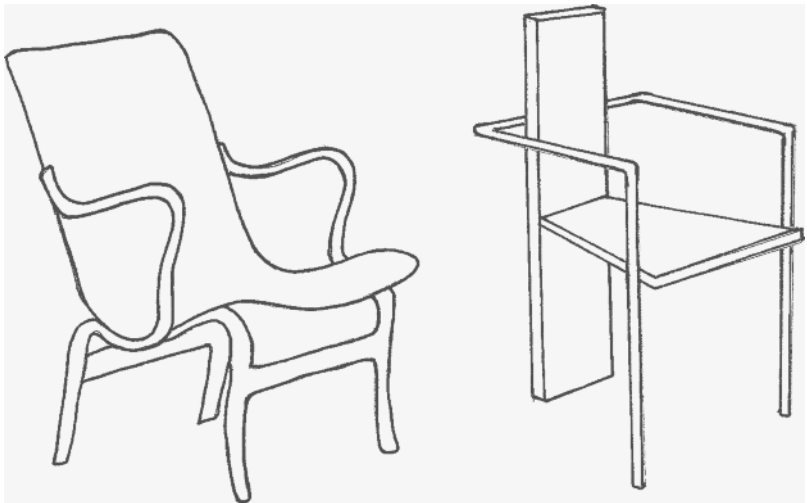
Eva (1934) Bruno Mathsson   Concret (1987) Jonas Bohlin

Figure 7.6   Drawing of two Swedish designer chairs

The denotation is the literal meaning of the sign. In the case of the chairs, both are seats designed by renowned Swedish designers. However, their connotations are radically different.

'Eva' presents organic lines that seem to be made to fit the user's body without drawing excessive attention to itself. It represents a certain modernist (or functionalist) and humanist ideology of the early twentieth century, based on the values of honesty, form, function and materials in the service of man.

'Concrete' is composed of concrete and steel. Its orthogonal angularity gives it a unique identity and denies any comfort. In contrast to previous values, in an end-of-century Sweden, where the egalitarian vision of social democracy has shown its limitations, this chair becomes a formal and provocative experiment reserved for a vanguard that can understand and acquire it.

Ilsted Hjelms opposed the American architect Louis Sullivan's slogan 'Form follows function', the basic principle of modernism, asserting in a semiotic approach that 'function follows form' as 'a way to create meaning in a world of hyper-functional chaos'.

In the following paragraphs, we will see how the semiotic square of linearity allows us to be more systematic and to deepen the plastic meanings of sinuous and angular lines to complement the ideological aspects of the concept of connotation.

Semiotics thus provides the theoretical basis for the concept of brand aesthetics, but its main contribution in respect of image analysis in general and of lines in particular, is the notion of figurative and plastic meanings by which a difference is established between the meanings derived from a physical proximity of the forms to reality and those that are intrinsic to the signs.

In his article on the mode of 'immediate meaning', Thürlemann (1985) used two examples that particularly illustrate possible plastic meanings of lines:

> All our five senses arrive directly to the brain impressed by an infinite number of things and that no education could destroy. I conclude that there are noble lines, lying lines, and so on.
>
> <div align="right">Paul Gauguin, Gauguin's letters to his wife
and friends, (1946). Grasset</div>

If the reader considers any letter of these lines with new eyes – in other words, if he looks at it not as a known sign belonging to a word, but as a thing – he will no longer see in this letter an abstract form created

by man for a certain end – the designation of a particular sound – but a concrete form producing by itself some internal and external impression independent of its abstract form. In this sense the letter is made of:

- A main form – its global aspect – appearing as 'joyous', 'sad', 'dynamic', 'depressed', 'provocative', 'arrogant'.
- Different lines oriented in various ways, producing in turn impressions which are 'joyous', 'sad' and so on.

If the reader becomes aware of these two elements, he immediately feels this letter as a being with an inner life (Kandinsky 1987).

In her study on the communication positioning of design in the white-goods sector, Ceriani (2001: 116) assigns to curved lines values such as heat, emotion, creativity and anthropomorphism, and to orthogonal angular lines the values of technology, coldness, rationality, and technicality. She built a semiotic square on the semantic axis 'orthogonal angular lines/rounded lines which, even though the contradictory elements are not specified, still allows a meaningful positioning of different models of appliances of the Zanussi brand.

7.3d   Other literature

One might expect that any discipline concerned with the appearance of an object or any kind of construction would generate a dense literature on linear treatment. However, there are actually very few articles (except perhaps in architecture, a discipline which has not been considered here).

One such an article is Meyer (2004), which explores the possibility that the famous Blue Ridge Parkway, a route recognized as being the most beautiful of the United States, was inspired by the aesthetic theory of William Hogarth (1997) on the properties of the sinuous line. The author concluded that the artistic training of project designers and their knowledge of Hogarth's principles make plausible the idea that he was an inspiration for or had a direct influence on the project. The article particularly recommended incorporating these aesthetic principles in all road design.

The semiotic square of linearity, which is introduced in the next chapter, will provide the necessary instrument for more structured analysis.

8
The Semiotic Square of Linearity

> The semiotic square is a model whereby semioticians can represent the minimum conditions for the production of meaning … [I]t meets the triple scientific prerequisite of non-contradiction, exhaustiveness and simplicity.
>
> Floch (1983)

In order to carry out the analysis of consumer preferences for certain linear aspects of brand manifestations, an analytical screen must first be developed with a minimum number of basic linear plastic elements. These basic units must have the following characteristics:

- Be primary linear units, that is to say have a maximum level of simplicity.
- Be easy to use and to recognize without any ambiguity. A basic linear element must not be confused with any other one.
- Be able to generate all possible linear forms.
- Must allow the extraction of the meanings of the manifestations analysed.

In short, these basic linear plastic elements must be simple, specific, comprehensive and significant.

8.1   Four basic linear plastic elements

8.1a   Straight, angular and curved lines

Several schools of psychology have studied the mechanisms of visual perception. The most famous of these is Gestalt, which argues that
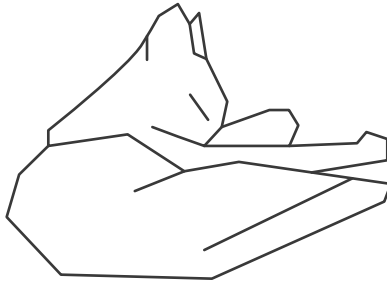
Figure 8.1   Drawing of a sleeping cat (angular lines)
Note: It is done by selecting 38 points of maximum curvature of the image contour and the appropriate connection by straight lines connecting these points.

form is the most important property of a visual configuration (Loncaric 1998). Hebb (1949) maintained that form consists of parts that are able to integrate thanks to eye movements; the simplest elements being lines and angles. Attneave (1954) confirmed by his experiments that contours concentrate more visual information, particularly in places of sharp changes of direction such as the angles and the points of maximum curvature (see the example in Figure 8.1). In fact, it is where the contour is furthest from the straight line that there is most information on the observed form.

These examples borrowed from the literature on the analysis of the human visual process, highlight the importance of angles and lines in their ability to inform the observer. It is therefore natural to include the straight line and the angular line as two of the basic linear plastic elements.

But the informative visual qualities of images are of course only instrumental and preliminary in triggering the observer preferences. Viewing obviously precedes evaluating.

For Attneave, the use of straight lines between points is a methodological simplification, an approximation of the curves that are ubiquitous in the world and especially in the living world (see Figure 8.2). However, the curved convex and concave aspects of the world need to be represented. The curved line is then added logically as the third basic linear plastic element.

8.1b   The sinuous line

The angular and the straight line have been selected for the amount of information they convey through the shape they form. The single curve
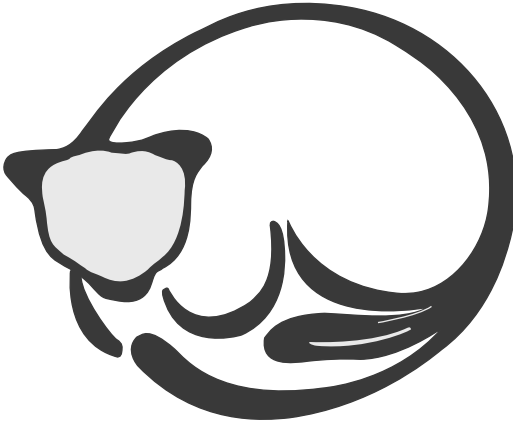
Figure 8.2 A cat can be drawn in an infinite number of ways (single-curved lines)
Note: It becomes a question of style. In this Chinese-inspired drawing, rounded lines prevail.

(or the arc of the curve) was chosen for its omnipresence in the world, and particularly in the living world. The serpentine line (the line formed by the S) is of interest for its alleged ability to generate satisfaction.

In his book *The Analysis of Beauty* (published in 1753), the English painter William Hogarth argued that the undulating line generates more beauty than the straight line or the simple curve, because of its greater capacity to generate variations. He based his thesis on the assumption that the human eye takes more pleasure in variety than in uniformity. This is another contribution to the debate on complexity and simplicity as factors of beauty, as discussed earlier in Chapter 3 (section 3.1b and c).

Here are a few excerpts from *The Analysis of Beauty*.

The waiving line is more productive of beauty than the straight or one-curved line … The Serpentine line has the power of super-adding grace to beauty … Forms of most grace have the least of the straight line in them … The straight line can only vary in length and therefore is the least ornamental … The lines which have more variety contribute most towards the production of beauty.

In fact, in this respect Hogarth was not a complete innovator in that he raised themes already addressed by his predecessors, most notably Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600), a pupil of Michelangelo, who

in his *Trattato dell'arte della Pittura* (1584) reported the words of Michelangelo, for whom a figure must be formed from an S, because that is the way it 'will have its beauty'.

Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy (2008) also mentions in his Latin poem on painting *De Arte Graphica* that 'the parties must have their outline in the shape of waves similar to flames, or to the slide of a snake on the ground'.

The Serpentine characterizes the style of Italian Mannerism and its explosion in the artistic expression of the end of the sixteenth century with Michelangelo.

Mannerism (or baroque) creates a rupture with Renaissance expression and 'breaks and curves the balanced shapes universally received from Classicism, in favour of a more intense system of expression' (Panofsky [1924] 1989: 96–7). And again, '[t]his is a new ideal which is in front of us now: that of the serpentine figure.'

More recently, Hergé, creator of Tintin, acknowledged having been influenced by the French fashion designer René Vincent early in his career, and that his 'drawings start from a decorative line, a line in the shape of an S, and that the character has to manage to be built around this S' (Sadoul 2003).

For its historical, symbolic and emotional importance it seems essential to add the Serpentine, as the fourth basic plastic element for the development of an analytical tool of the linear aspects of brand manifestations.

Hevner (1935) used the Serpentine in her four typologies of line; however, the straight line was not tested directly. It was included in the category regrouping two types of angular lines: the square and the angle.

The serpentine line is a combination of a curve and a counter-curve (the third basic element we have introduced). In fact, it brings additional information: the appearance of the inflection point. The same argument could also apply to the angular line, where the angle consists of two segments of straight lines. In this case also, additional information is being provided. Figure 8.3 provides an exemple of the use of the sinuous line.

Figure 8.4 shows the four typologies of line.

Kandinsky 1912 also adopted this quaternary classification of the typologies of line. Going back to the idea of an external force being necessary to move a point on a plan in order to draw, he regrouped the lines into two categories: those subject to a single force and those subject to two simultaneous or alternating forces.

In the first category, we find the straight line submitted to a force in a determined and constant direction, bringing it to infinity. Kandinsky
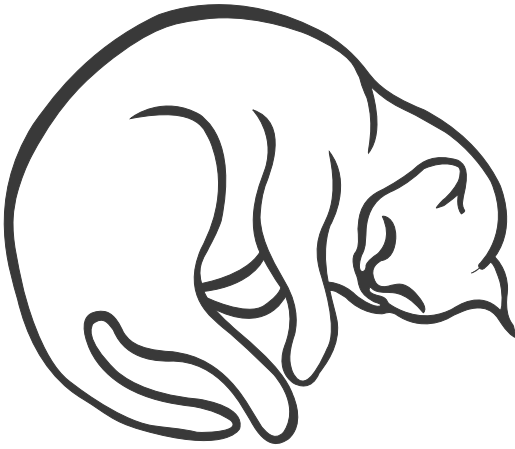
Figure 8.3   This drawing uses many sinuous lines for a representation of a cat more naturalistic than that of Attneave or of the rounded lines drawing shown previously
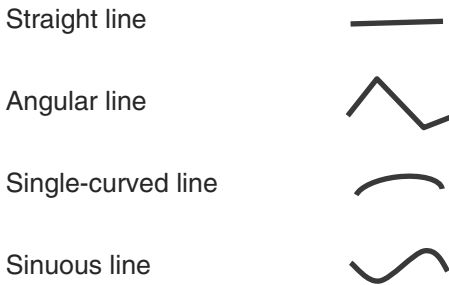
Figure 8.4   Four simple linear elements

put the angular line in this group also, even though it is in fact subject to two successive forces. The first force is necessary to draw the first segment up to the point where a second force launches the second segment.

The second category of lines is first formed by the single-curved line, the result of the exercise of a lateral force to that which 'draws' the line. Then there is the sinuous line, composed of portions of circles or of free rounded curves resulting from alternating and opposite forces lateral to the initial line.

We have arbitrarily chosen to represent the four lines in a 'horizontal' way. The angular one is drawn in three segments to be visually near the serpentine, but could be represented with a single angle.

In the survey (see Chapter 11), we have been careful to compare lines having the same direction, because, as we shall see in the next chapter, the meanings may vary according to the direction of the line.

8.1c   Mathematics of the four lines

The description of the mathematical characteristics of the four lines allows a first approach to plastic essence of each.

- The straight line
  Straight, right or rectilinear. Euclidean geometry defines this as the shortest path between two points. Each point on the line is a centre of symmetry. The straight line separates the plan into two equal areas. An instrument is needed to draw it. Its only dimension is directional.
  Its plastic essence is rectitude (in fact, the absence of curvature).
- The angular line
  Broken or angular. It is built with straight lines. Two half lines from a single point divide the plane into two parts. It is symmetrical relative to the bisector line of the angle in the case of a single vertex, or develops 'local' symmetries inherent in the figures that it can build (polygons, and so on). To draw it requires an instrument.
     It is directional through the two half lines and may be different if the segments are multiplied while maintaining a path in progress on a given axis. The vertex of the angle is a singular point.
     Its plastic essence is the angle, which also implies rectitude (the absence of curvature) contained in the half lines that are used in its construction.
- The single-curved line
  The two terms 'curve' and 'rounded line' are also used to describe it but are imperfect. 'Rounded' implies that the line follows an arc of a circle, which is a special case of curvature. Even 'curved' can mean many different lines which do not necessarily have the properties of this one. 'Single-curved' is a more suitable term as it clarifies the existence of a single curvature. The line in question may be a piece or a combination of ellipse, parabola, hyperbola, cissoid, cycloid, spiral … or simply a curve drawn by hand and not definable mathematically, which Kandinsky (1991: 103) calls 'free curves'.
     Its characteristics are that it separates the plan into a concave portion and a convex portion, that it has a tangent at any point (negation of the straight line) and that it is always on the same side of its tangents (it never goes through). Its curvature does not change sign.

The 'free curve' (single) lines can be drawn by hand, as exemplified in calligraphic writing. At any point on the line, a tangent can be drawn, distinct from the curve.

It can be symmetrical to one axis for some specific arcs and even to one point in the case of the circle, for instance.

It can be directional, if it is only slightly bent (radius of curvature close to infinity) or if it juxtaposes a series of arcs of curves in the direction of a given axis. It has no singular points on the line itself. Some specific curves, such as the circle or its arc, or the ellipse, have particular points necessary for their construction, outside of the curve – the meeting point of the perpendiculars to the tangents and so on – but these points are not located on the line and remain invisible.

Its plastic essence is the 'simple' curvature (always of the same sign), convexity or concavity (the lack of rectitude). See some examples of single-curved lines in Figure 8.5.

• The serpentine line

'Serpentine', the name given by Hogarth to the sinuous or winding line, is characterized by an inflection point where the curvature changes sign. It is the particular configuration of two arcs of curve attached at one of their ends in a manner such that the tangents at those points coincide and that their curvatures are reversed. The resulting curve crosses its tangent at the point of inflection.

Free sinuous lines can be drawn by hand. The question mark (?), the number 8, the ampersand (&) and the mathematical signs ~ (equivalent) and ∞ (infinity), are examples.

It can be directional such as in the sinusoid, for example, or if it is slightly bent. See Figure 8.6 for some examples of sinuous lines.
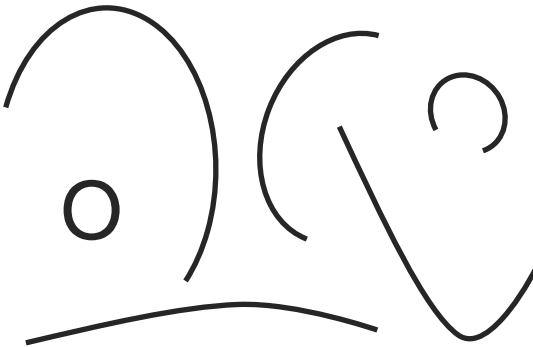
Figure 8.5 Examples of single-curved lines
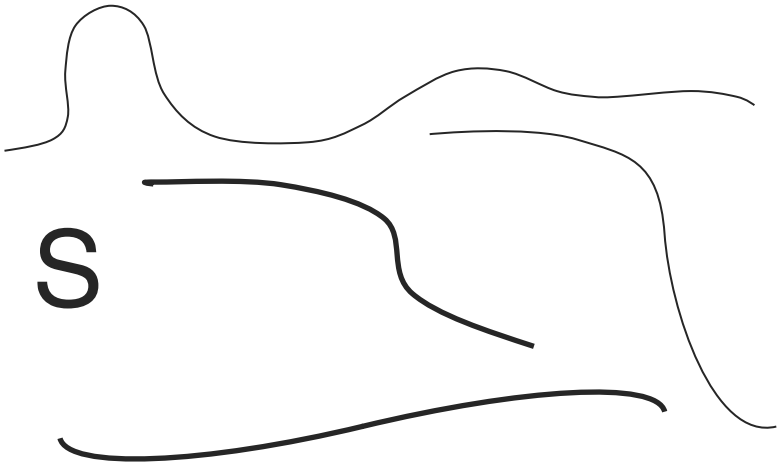
Figure 8.6   Examples of sinuous lines

It can be also symmetrical with respect to the point of inflection, depending on the shape of the curves on each side. The inflection point is a singular point.

The plastic essence of the Serpentine is inflection.

The respective intrinsic characteristics of each line used in the following paragraphs and chapters are summarized in Table 8.1.

8.1d   Degree of complexity

We have seen in Chapter 3 (section 3.1b) how the degree of complexity can serve as a basis for measuring the aesthetic quality of objects, in particular with the formula of Birkhoff (1932). Applying this logic to lines, we can try to classify the four lines according to increasing complexity that will be used in the analysis of the results of the market survey presented in Chapter 11.

There is no difficulty in classifying the straight, single-curved and sinuous lines in increasing order of complexity. They have respectively two, three and four dimensions. The same applies to the straight, single-curved and angular lines in increasing order of complexity.

The problem to be solved is whether the sinuous line is more or less complex than the angular one. Berlyne, Ogilvie and Parham (1968) distinguished several sources of complexity, such as the irregularity of the composition, the quantity of elements, homogeneity, and so on.

Table 8.1　Summary of the mathematical characteristics of the four basic lines

	Instruments to draw	Mathematical characterisitic	Dimensions	Singular points	Tangent
—	Necessary	Rectitude	Direction Symmetry (points)	No	No
⌄	Necessary	Angle	Direction: possible Symmetry (bisector) Angularity Length of segments	Vertex of angles	No
⌒	Not always necessary	Curvature (concavity or convexity)	Direction: possible Symmetry: possible Curvature(s)	Never on the line	Yes
∿	Not always necessary	Inflection (concavity and convexity)	Direction: possible Symmetry: possible Curvature(s) Inflection	Inflection Point	Yes

Staudek (1999) provided some possible answers when he tested Birckhoff's formula on Chinese vases, where he used complexity factors such as the number of points of inflection, terminal points, vertical tangents and abrupt changes in direction of tangents (see Chapter 3, section 3.1b).

In our case, the angular and sinuous lines have four possible dimensions (see Figure 8.7). If one takes the singular points, the sinuous line has only the inflection point, while the angular line closest to the sinuous (with three segments, as we have drawn it) has two vertices at the intersections of the three segments. Both have two ends. One might therefore, in a preliminary way, consider that the angular line is more complex than the sinuous one.

If we consider the amount of information necessary to trace each of the lines (which seems to be a credible measure of the degree of complexity of a line), the result is as follows:

- To draw the sinuous line, one needs:
  The nature of the curve (circle, parabola, and so on) and the length of the arc on each side of the inflection point. It is hypothesized that this is not a 'free curve' as defined earlier. This is the most common case in brand manifestations and especially in the stimuli we presented in our survey. Four data are therefore necessary (two if the curves are identical) to determine a sinuous line.
- To draw the angular line, one needs:
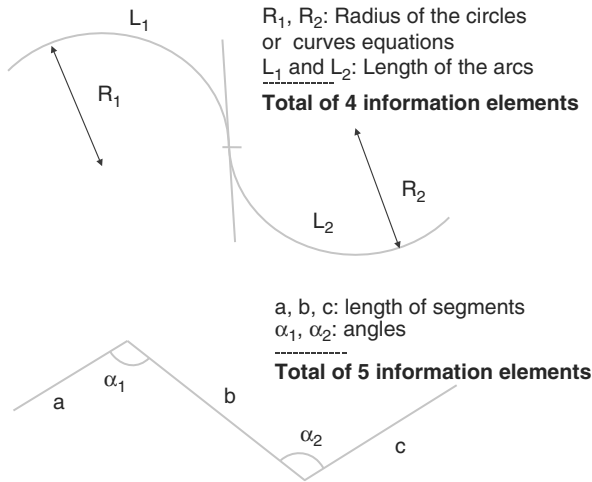
Figure 8.7   Information necessary for construction of sinuous and angular lines

The dimensions of the three segments and the size of the two angles; that is, five elements of information.

More information is required to construct the angular line than the sinuous line, if the latter is not composed of 'free curves' (see Figure 8.7).

This second method confirms the result of the number of singular points and we can deduce that *on a scale of increasing complexity we have the following order: straight, single-curved, sinuous and angular line* (see Figure 8.8). This is based on the assumption that the sinuous curves are mathematical curves and that the angular lines have three segments.

Figure 8.8   Classification of the four basic lines by degree of complexity

Ideally, it is the degree of complexity as perceived by consumers that should be measured. This should be done in future studies. Intuition suggests that the fluidity of the sinuous line and its kinship to the

natural world make it capable of being perceived as simpler than the angular line with its sudden changes in direction seemingly imposed by external forces and reminiscent of the technological world. The scale of increasing complexity of the four lines will be used in Chapter 11 for the interpretation of the results of the investigation.

The existence of this scale of increasing complexity does not contradict the fact that the four proposed lines are simple, easy to identify and well differentiated from each other. Examples in the following chapters will demonstrate the ability of these four lines to describe exhaustively all documents or objects that use lines in their expression. Of the four criteria initially laid down to define a rigorous and reliable analytical tool for linear expressions – simplicity, specificity, exhaustiveness and significance – only the last remains to be demonstrated. We will do this in Chapter 9.

8.2   The SINC© square

As the quote from Floch at the beginning of the chapter points out, the semiotic square is a model that allows the representation of the minimum conditions for the production of meaning.

8.2a   The semiotic square

This square will allow us to structure the relationships of meaning between the four lines that have been introduced. The semiotic square is the visual representation of the relationships existing between distinct characteristics constituting a semantic category (Greimas and Courtès 1986). The word 'category' here is understood on the basis of the structuralist principles and thus indicates a relationship, a semantic axis where the category of 'gender', for example, is conceivable only because of the existence of the two contrary terms of 'male' and 'female'. It is based on the Saussurian principle that says that any meaning system is not only a system of signs but also a system of relations, where relations prevail over the terms that are only intersections.

The example of the semiotic square of gender serves both to illustrate its construction and to introduce the theories of Sandra Bem (1981, 1985) on biological sex and psychological sex typing that will be used in Chapter 11.

The semiotic square based on this semantic axis consisting of the two opposites (male and female) will allow the emergence of nuances of meaning not necessarily envisaged initially. Each of the contrary

terms can interact with another term marked by the absence of the characteristics of the first one (the contradictory term). 'Feminine' will relate to 'non-feminine', which is not the same as 'masculine'.

In this particular case, the semiotic square corroborates Bem's theses, in which she argued that the dimensions of masculinity and femininity are independent and not mutually exclusive. Using Bem's terminology, 'androgynous' individuals, who possess both sensibilities, appear on the upper side of the square; on the lower half are 'undifferentiated' individuals, who have no specific gender sensibility; on the right-hand side, are the 'males' who have no female sensibility; and on the opposite side are the 'females' with an exclusively feminine sensibility (as illustrated in Figure 8.9).

If the square is based on the notion of biological sex, the upper side will show 'hermaphrodites' and the lower side 'angels'.

All the power of the square lies in its ability to organize an abstract universe in a consistent way even if it is not recognized as rational. It allows us to predict logically existing but not yet active meanings and the manner in which new meanings will arise. It also allows drawing a type of 'itinerary' that meaning can follow on from the square (Floch 1985: 200), as we shall see later in the chapter.

Figure 8.10 is the semiotic square of values of consumption, one of the most famous and utilized squares in the world of communication.
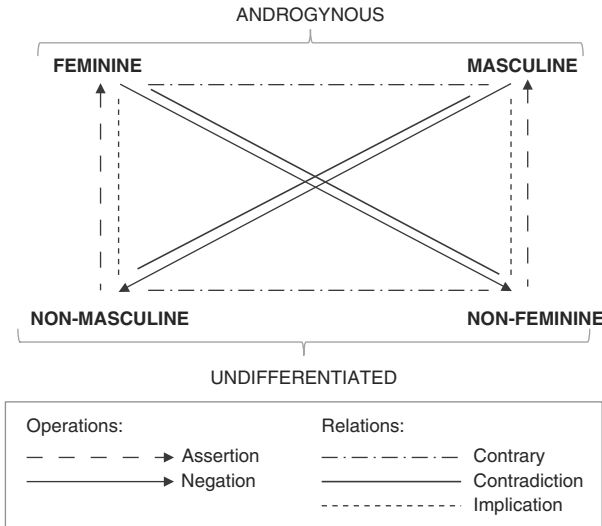
Figure 8.9   Semiotic square of gender

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UTILITARIAN VALUES                    EXISTENTIAL VALUES

      PRATICAL                        UTOPICAL/MYTHICAL




  CRITICAL/ECONOMICAL               DIVERSIONATY/AESTHETIC

NON-EXISTENTIAL VALUES              NON-UTILITARIAN VALUES
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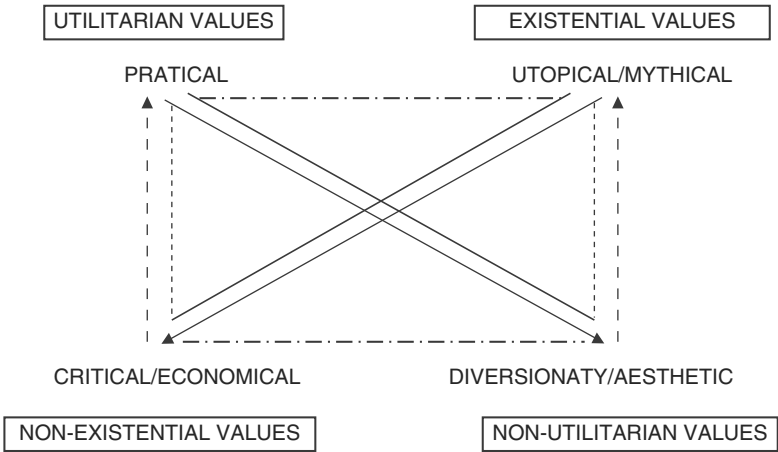
Figure 8.10 Semiotic square of values of consumption
Source: Jean-Marie Floch, *International Journal of Marketing* 4, 1988.

8.2b   The square of linearity

The creative process that leads to choices of lines is always a voluntary act: a cognitive choice, made with an awareness of the objectives of the project (collection, singular object, communication campaign, and so on). The design of commercial products is a process of production of meaning and semiotics is thus an appropriate discipline for the subject matter. The semiotic square, with its focus on the relationship between terms rather than on the terms themselves, seemed particularly relevant and adequate for the method of paired preferences that has been used for the quantitative analysis of the survey (Chapter 11).

Of the four terms defining the selected plastic linear items, 'sinuous' may, at first sight, be considered to be the opposite of 'straight'. The two words in fact constitute the semantic axis 'twisted/straight', where 'twisted' does not extend to the point of rupture, as in the angular line. The semantic axis becomes therefore the axis of contrary between 'sinuous' and 'straight', constituting the first phase of the construction of a semiotic square.

The contradiction of 'sinuous' would then be 'angular', the negation of the wave being the angle. Therefore, the contradiction of 'straight' can only be 'rounded' or 'curved'. 'Curved' is a too general a term and tends to designate any line with either a single curve or multiple bends. It will be kept to define the two left vertices of the square. Kandinsky
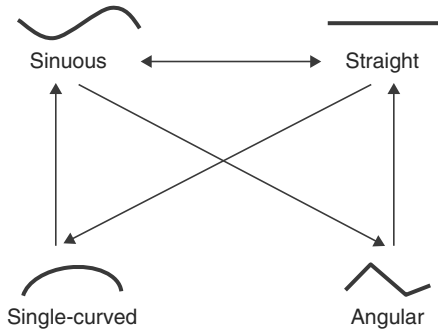
Figure 8.11   The SINC© square

(1991: 79) apparently followed the same reasoning: 'This maturity and flexible harmony of the curve line leads us to identify with certainty the curve, and not the broken line (angular), as the antithesis of the straight line'. Kandinsky's opinion confirms our positioning of the 'curves' on the opposite side to that of the straight line, or, rather, the presence of the angular line on the same side as the straight one.

The terms on the lower part of the square are the single-curved line and the angular one which are also contraries on the semantic axis 'rounded/sharp' and thus confirm the validity of the square. The square of Ceriani (2001: 117) referred to in Chapter 7 (section 7.3c) is built on a semantic axis 'orthogonal angular lines/rounded lines' and is very similar to the axis 'angular/rounded'.

Figure 8.11 presents the SINC© square (so named for the sake of convenience and formed from the 'letters' of the four vertex curves, once put in the vertical). This scheme will allow a systematic analysis of linear configurations of brand manifestations and link these expressions to an explanatory hypothesis for the preferences of certain types of consumers.

The square shown on Figure 8.12 allows the positioning of the three cats introduced earlier in the chapter, to which we can add a fourth, made up principally of straight lines.

8.2c   Relations of complementarity

Numerous relationships of complementarity exist between the vertices of the two vertical sides of the SINC© square: on the left side, among the curves (single-curved and sinuous); and on the right between the straight and angular lines. The most immediate 'vertical filiations' are
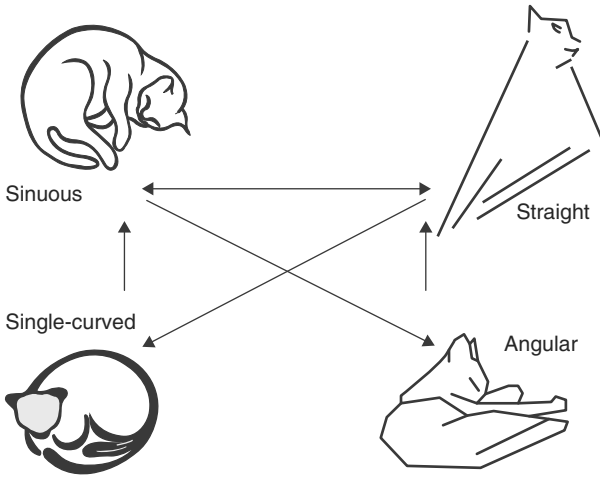
Figure 8.12   Linear semiotic square of cats

of a geometric nature, but they can be also linked to the perception or the genesis of the lines.

• Between single-curved and sinuous lines

The visual kinship between the two left vertices of the square is due to the common absence of straight lines and the presence of two curves within the sinuous line. The Serpentine is born of a particular combination of two single-curved lines. The winding line is in fact the succession of a curve and what is called in architecture a counter-curve.

The relationship of 'descent' between the single-curved line and the sinuous line was clearly expressed in the work of Riegl (2002) on the evolution of vegetal ornament which, according to him, obeys a precise grammar built over centuries. He puts forward a hypothesis on the origin of the vegetal 'rinceau', this undulating stem, which has been an omnipresent architectural decorative element since its introduction by the Mycenaeans (fifteenth century BC), which Riegl (2002: 98) describes as: 'the most beautiful, the most significant conquest of Greek ornamentation'.

The process would start from the geometric art of primitive peoples such as the Maori, where the circle would become a spiral which, by splitting, forms a pattern adapted to the filling of surfaces. Lotus flowers and Egyptian palmettes are often connected by spiral

elements, but it was the Mycenaeans who would release the flexible and rhythmic movement of the 'rinceau' and use all the decorative potential provided by the point of inflection (see Figure 8.13).
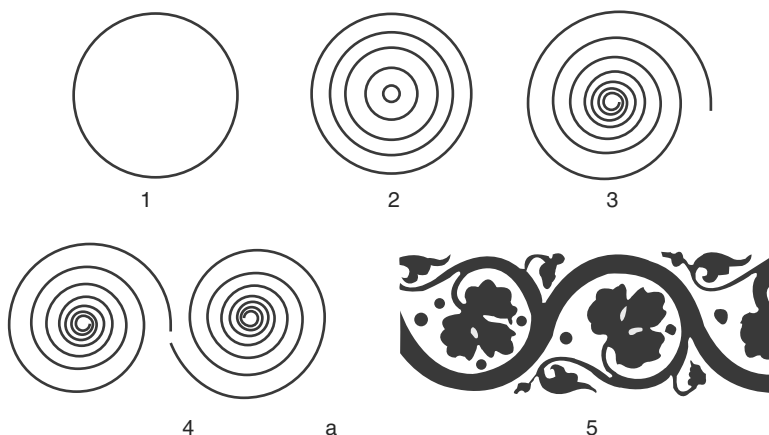
Figure 8.13   Possible evolution from the circle to the decorative vegetal 'rinceau' (Riegl)

- Between straight and angular lines and broken lines

   The visual parental relationship between the two lines of the right side of the square derives from their common absence of curvature and the presence of straight segments in the angular line. There is more.

   Arnheim (1969) quoted Rausch (1963), who presented a sequence of changes of perception when the straight angle gradually changes into an angular line, first with an acute angle growing into an obtuse one after having passed through the right-angle to finally return to the straight line.

   Rausch produced this sequence to illustrate the Gestalt theory's concept of *prégnance* (prevailing content of a form) for certain phases of structure, clearly and precisely determined. The straight splits first into an 'arrowhead' before being perceived clearly as an acute angle, having first passed through one of the four areas of ambiguous nature. Around the right-angle, there are two areas where the angles are seen as being almost right-angles. Then there is a wide range where obtuse angles are clearly recognized. However, in the vicinity of the flat 180° angle, the obtuse angle disappears, to be replaced by a slightly broken straight line.

The highlighting of some of the complementarities existing between, on one side, single-curved and sinuous lines and, on the other, between straight and angular lines, confirms the relevance of the two fundamental types of plastic linear elements: the curve and the straight line, which will be developed in the next chapter.

It should be noted that the 'semiotic orthodoxy' of the SINC© square still remains to be established. Its main weakness is that the contrary and contradictory relations are not necessarily univocal. Is there only one contrary to the straight line among the three other lines? A single contradiction to the angular one? This weakness (or lack of conceptual depth) does not, however, reduce the operational usefulness of the instrument. Indeed:

- The four lines cover exhaustively all possible linear expressions.
- They cannot be reduced to simpler elements.
- Each line has plastic characteristics that exclude the other three.
- They regroup to form the two broad categories of straight and curved lines.

8.2d   History of the tangent

Semiotic squares are often used to determine 'itineraries' of behaviours (Denis Darpy thesis 1992), of meanings, of evolution of brand identity, among others.
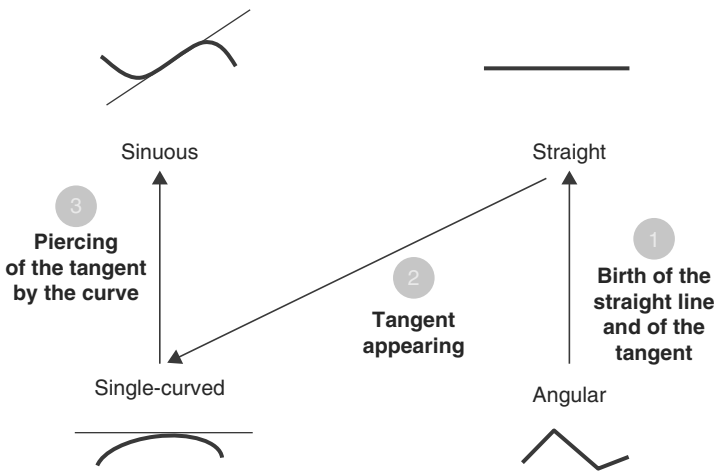
Figure 8.14   Tangent emancipation

Since the straight line is the mathematical equivalent of a curve with an infinite radius of curvature, the tangent at any point can be confused with the straight line; it exists only in a latent state. The passage from the straight line to the single-curved is a kind of liberation of the tangent at a point where the curve bends.

It is said that the inflection point is the place where the curve pierces its tangent. And, conversely, the passage from the single-curved to the sinuous allows the tangent to pierce the curve.

Upstream, the angular line is a kind of straitjacket imposed to the tangent which cannot even take the form of the straight line. Figure 8.14 shows that itinerary of the emancipation of the tangent.

Could the tangent then be an essential element, although virtual, of the phenomenon of the sensitization of the line? It is in fact the same itinerary on the SINC© square as the paths of increasing empathy of the 'flexibility/rigidity' square and all S-C-I-N routes on all the squares (fanaticism/relativism, radicalism/opening, control/freedom) that will be discussed in Chapter 10.

9
Possible Meanings of the Four Lines

The initial purpose of the formalization of the SINC© square is to structure the four basic lines which have just been introduced and to assert their analytical exhaustiveness. It serves primarily as the initial phase of the development of the meanings and sensitive implications carried by each of the lines in comparison with the other three. The understanding of the meanings and sensitive implications of the four lines is essential, although not sufficient, for brand designers and communicators to ensure the effectiveness of their work with respect to the three ends of any aesthetic treatment, as introduced in Chapter 5.

We have already seen, in Chapter 6, the expressive power of the line but it is Kandinsky's thought expressed in the following sentence (1991) that most justifies our study: 'It goes without saying that any phenomenon, whether from the external or inner worlds, may find its linear expression – a kind of transposition.'

He goes so far as to suggest the development of experimental research to translate phenomena in terms of lyricism and drama and to then transpose them into linear forms, taking the example of music, where transpositions of reality are common.

If there are no limits to linear expression, how do these meanings occur and what are they? This search for meaning and values carried by lines poses the problem of choosing the most appropriate methodology for understanding the meaning produced and its mode of production. This chapter discusses:

- Semantic considerations
- The movement from figurative to symbolic and plastic meanings

- Symbolic meanings
- Plastic meanings

The semantic aspects are tackled first because the adjective used to define the drawing of the line is a form of expression different in nature from the drawing itself and has its own life and, above all, figurative meanings that are also transposed in terms of the linear form that represents it.

The formalization of the possible and respective meanings of each of the four lines will lead to the construction of an analytic grid applicable to any brand manifestation where the linear aesthetic treatment plays a relevant role.

9.1   Semantic considerations

The semiotic square, as presented in Figure 8.11, is double in that it contains both the *square of linearity*, which illustrates the relationships between the four words 'sinuous', 'straight', 'single-curved' and 'angular', and the *SINC© square*, the figurative mapping of the initial concepts expressed by the words.

The idea is to try to extract permanent semic content for each of the adjectives of linear description, a kind of minimum unit that can give rise to variations in meaning when placed in different contexts.

The effect of meaning due to the sememe (Sm) is the result of a combination of a semic nucleus (Ns) and contextual semes (minimal unit of being) (Cs):

$$Sm = Ns + Cs$$

This is actually the formula and method used by Greimas (1986: 42–9) in his famous research on the meaning of the word 'head'.

Since the original text was in French, we have used *Le Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé* (http://atilf.atilf.fr/)' as the main source in this section.

9.1a   Straight ('*droit*' in French)

Which does not present any angle or curvature … having no curvature or bending, or inclination to either side.

Littré online

The straight line is defined therefore by opposition to the three other lines of the square of linearity.

The characteristics that are derived from the term, and from the synonym 'rectilinear', are

- It applies to the description of the directional qualities of positions and movements.
- The adjective is mostly combined with the word 'line'.
- It characterizes efficiency by its simple and direct course, but also indirectly the discipline needed to follow the shortest path.

It has a very rich figurative use. 'Straight' defines conduct that does not deviate from principles: fair, true, accurate, direct, well done, honest, frank. Frankness is in direct opposition to the figurative meaning of sinuous.

It can also describe an exaggerated sense, which takes into account neither facts nor possible accommodations; a certain ideological rigidity.

9.1b Angular ('*anguleux*' in French)

That has or recalls a form of angle. That has sharp corners, in the form of very salient and acute angles (of unknown or unexpressed number).

Or, in reference to a trajectory:

That has the form of a broken line (and thus offering a very acute angle at each break), of a zigzag.

The word characterizes sharpness, asperity, edginess, abrupt breaks and changes of direction, and implies tenacious strength and will in pursuit of goals against any odds and even up to a certain radicalism.

Figuratively, it is the opposite of 'rounded'. *Anguleux* defines a character that is not flexible, a person who is abrasive, unpleasant and difficult to deal with.

9.1c Sinuous (*'sineux'* in French)

Which deviates from both sides of the straight line describing irregular curves.

The concept of sinuosity derives its sense when seen in opposition to the straight line.

The characteristics emerging from the many examples of use of the term, as well as for the synonyms 'undulating' and 'winding', are as follows:

- It applies primarily to animated beings and things in motion, or on a journey, such as water, wave, river, road, path, trail.
- It describes elements that are essentially linear (edges, contours, lines, curves).
- It characterizes movement, fluidity, flexibility and variation.

Figuratively, too, 'sinuous' can imply indirection, dishonesty or a tendency to be less than frank. Once again it is in clear opposition to straightforwardness and directness.

9.1d   Rounded (*'arrondi'* in French)

That has taken or has a (roughly) round shape.

Rendering round.

<div align="right">Littré online</div>

Its many antonyms include 'angular', 'sharp', 'straight' and 'rectilinear', which are just located on the right side of the square of the linearity. Its use, as well as its synonym 'curved', serves to specify the following main characteristics:

- It describes aspects of things or people or their movement.
- It is sometimes used to describe a condition that has been subject to an improvement or extension to make it more complete or more satisfactory (accounting, literature, music). This use is specific to 'rounded', but it does not apply to 'curved' where the reference to the perfection of the circle is lost.
- As a past participle, it gives a sense that it has been submitted to an action, erosion, a softening, by time or for people.

Used figuratively, it can connote flexibility of character and lack of aggressiveness.

The words 'curved' and 'curve' are defined as having 'a form or direction containing no straight or flat element'. The definition applies both to single-curved and sinuous lines without allowing us to distinguish between them.

Among the synonyms of 'rounded', 'single-curved' is chosen in this study, because the curve is not necessarily an arc of a circle and we need to differentiate it from 'sinuous'.

The semantic meanings, both literal and figurative, of the four adjectives constituting the four vertices of the square of linearity will transfer almost entirely to the lines which bear their name.

9.2   From figurative to symbolic and plastic meanings

The essence of the notion of linearity is visual. It was born of both perception and a desire to describe reality. The four selected lines are inherently plastic elements and thus belong to the visual world. The meanings will be grounded first in original descriptions of the world before eventually moving towards abstraction and a representation of concepts based on their geometric realities or possible geometrical extrapolations.

9.2a   The straight line

Its directional essence determines most of its meanings.

'It leads the eyes and thereby takes an intellectual character' (Joly 1978: 53). It acquires this character also by the rigour and efficiency that emanate from it. Rectitude is always the effect of a will or an intention. It can represent rectilinear movement, speed, or a border.

While maintaining these common characteristics, multiple meanings are born of its orientation.

- *The horizontal* corresponds to the line on which men move. It is both a support line and the horizon; the Earth, but also the sign of the state of death. 'Cold and flat are the basic resonances of this line'. (Kandinsky 1991: 69). The stability and inertia of the mineral world are also part of the meanings of the horizontal line.
- *The vertical line* develops many valences opposed to its perpendicular. 'What stands is alive' (Joly 1980: 109). It idealizes and often structures the growth of the living world. It represents balance and serenity. 'Flat is replaced by height, and therefore cold by warm', wrote Kandinsky (1991), who associates qualities such as the colour black, passivity, the act of carrying and femininity to the horizontal line and the colour white, activity, the act of growing and masculinity to the vertical.
- *The diagonal line*, or *oblique*, develops a character intermediate between the two previous lines depending on its orientation more or less close to the vertical or horizontal. As it breaks the perpendicularity of the two previous lines, it attracts visual attention and is often associated with signs of aggression. The ability of the oblique

line to focus attention stems from the fact that it breaks the order of a world comprising vertical and horizontal. To quote Gombrich (1996) and to simplify a complex argument, *the oblique 'disturbs our usual expectations'*.

Kandinsky associates the oblique with the colours red, green or grey.

9.2b The angular line

The disruptions and discontinuities of the broken line transmit instability, anxiety, voluntary force and aggression. 'The broken line, this lightning, reports the divine influx, the taking of possession, the domination' (Joly 1980: 69).

As with the directions of the straight line, the angular essence of the broken line will allow variations in meaning depending on the nature of the angle.

- The acute angle is richer in tension than the obtuse angle and it grabs the attention.
- The right angle is the symbol of the vertical constraints to which man is subjected by gravity. Orthogonality is present, actually or virtually, in all material achievements. Joly (1980: 60) argues that any space governed by orthogonality is intellectual in nature. The right angle divides the plan into four equal and symmetrical parts. According to Kandinsky (1991: 85), it is the coolest angle, whereas the acute angle is the warmest.
- The obtuse angle tends towards the properties of the curved line.
  The angular line generally produces a tactile aversion.

9.2c The sinuous line

Active line frolicking freely. Wandering for wandering's sake, with no particular purpose.

Paul Klee (1985: 73)

It is naturally used for the representation of fluids and acquires values of freedom and dynamism.

It is, together with the single-curved line, characteristic of the living world, but the change of curvature adds a measure of sensuality and a very strong connotation of tactile pleasure.

It is the sign of a gradual transition, of change within continuity. It is indeed surprising to see that the winding line is not more widely used when change within continuity is the quest of most brands.

Gombrich (1996: 240) stated that the price to pay for its ability to fill any space is the relative complexity it introduces to the level of perception of the fluctuating interaction between the figure and the background.

The figurative quality of the soft connection between two distinct levels clearly reveals the notion of flexibility and elasticity. It is more positive than the 'non-direct' and lack of frankness of the purely semantic content of the adjective seen in a previous paragraph. The sinusoidal sign contains the positive concepts of flexibility, of a capacity for negotiation and of seeking satisfactory solutions for two competing parties, which are not particularly present at the semantic level.

9.2d   The single-curved line

Like the sinuous line, it is characteristic of the living world, but in a more instinctive than sensual way.

It carries all the valences of convexity and concavity (protection, containment, welcoming, and so on). The rounded releases stress, softens angles and erodes asperities. This line transmits flexibility, smoothness, tranquillity and serenity. It also has a positive tactile dimension. It is less lively, simpler and more continuous than the sinuous line. It connotes the ability to accommodate opposing positions in 'filing away' the more conflicting aspects. This is the 'user-friendly' line par excellence. It is clearly the opposite of the angular line.

9.2e   Questions of conviction

On the basis of the semantics of the four descriptive adjectives of the lines and the first meanings highlighted from the signs that symbolize them, one possible reading of the SINC© square seems to be that of the square of the semantic axis 'relativism/rigour' or, more explicitly, that of the opposing vertices 'smoothness/rigidity'. The flexibility of the sinuous line represents relativism, the absence of rigid belief and openness to the arguments of others. Its opposite is the rigour of the straight line, with its connotations of strong belief and a principled but tenacious attitude in the face of possible critics. The non-tenacity is represented by the rounded line that seeks accommodation. The non-flexibility will be the aggressive attitude that symbolizes the radicalism of the angular line.

It is the same path (coincidental?) as that in the history of the emancipation of the tangent presented in Chapter 8 (section 8.2d).

Here the itinerary is the intensity of belief or, rather, the degree of aggressiveness in the attitude of defence or promotion of an ideology. In other words, this is the path of an *increasing degree of empathy* (see Figure 9.1).
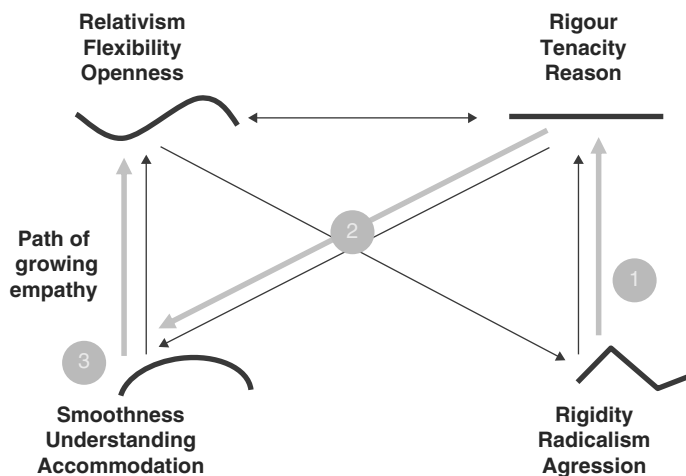
Figure 9.1   The 'relativism/rigour' square

In Chapter 10, other meaningful paths on the SINC© square will be developed more systematically.

9.2f   Triangle, square and circle

These are closed forms constructed from specific configurations of two of the lines of the SINC© square: the single-curved and the angular. One might even argue that the circle is a regular polygon with an infinite number of sides.

They remain outside the scope of our study, but will be met in many cases. Their symmetry and 'closure' generate specific meanings drifting away from the angle for the triangle and the square and from the arc of curve for the circle. However, it is necessary to mention them briefly for the sake of completeness.

In his constant quest for plastic meanings Kandinsky proposed (1991: 89, 99–100) a correlation between lines, plans, and colours, as shown in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1   Kandinsky's correlations

Lines	Plan	Colour
Sharp angle	Triangle	Yellow
Right angle	Square	Red
Obtuse angle and arc of curve	Circle	Blue

He insisted on the fact that the triangle and circle represent 'the pair of surfaces originally opposed'. This reinforces the choice made to position the single-curved line and the angled line on the two lower vertices of the SINC© square.

Joly (1980: 70) summarizes it this way: 'We live the circle, we invent the square and we believe the triangle'.

The perfection, the homogeneity of the circle and its eternal movement on itself generate particular valences. It characterizes gestation, happiness, protection and the absence of division. It symbolizes the sky or cosmos.

The square structures construction. It represents our intellectual space where all we know is registered while what surrounds it exceeds our intelligence. It is the antithesis of the transcendent. It often symbolizes the Earth. It is anti-dynamic and of a perfect stability.

The triangle is a religious sign par excellence. Its terrestrial horizontal base connects with what is above. Pointed upward, it symbolizes goodness, overreaching and transcendence. It often represents divinity, harmony and proportion.

Section 9.4c will show how these three geometric figures can also organize the meanings of non-closed linear expressions.

This first approach to the usual meanings of the four lines, which melds both the figurative, symbolic and plastic meanings, calls out to be deepened, particularly as regards the last two.

9.3 Symbolic meanings

The concept of symbolic meaning differs from the semiotic significance. A symbol receives an interpretation imposed from outside but it does not necessarily create a relationship between a signifier and a signified, which can exist independently of each other. 'The same semiological level can be used and is used to articulate different symbolisms' (Greimas 1986: 60).

The symbolic, even if it does not exhaust the possibilities of meaning, cannot be ignored, however, insofar as it is part of the cultural background of consumers.

To cover this part in a homogeneous way, we have used as reference only the definitions of the symbols given in Chevalier and Gheerbrant's dictionary (1982). Often, the line itself is not a recognized symbol, and we chose therefore the closest symbols, even though they are not necessarily applicable systematically to the analysis of the meanings of the four specific lines. The exercise is in no way exhaustive. Other symbolic

meanings certainly exist; they are born and disappear in multiple micro-cultural realities.

9.3a   The straight line

The straight line symbolizes the communication from cause to effect, from uncreated to created, not as structure, but as passage of flux. It takes advantage of the directional nature of its geometry. When it appears as an arrow (indicating a choice of one of the two possible directions), it becomes the symbol of going beyond normal conditions, 'a mental anticipation of the conquest of something out of reach'.

Its directional essence commands different meanings depending on the orientation. The vertical, for example, can materialize in the form of a column and symbolizes assertiveness, and the relationship between heaven and Earth. The horizontal, as the horizon, is the limit of the field of man's actions.

9.3b   The angular line

The closest elements to the angle that are recognized as symbols are the compass, the square and polygons. The compass is the emblem of exact sciences and mathematical rigour. Together with the square, it is used to measure and draw geometric figures. In addition to being the emblem of most corporations in the Middle Ages, it represents, in the Western world as well as in China, the spirit of measurement and of good moral customs. The compass is also a symbol of the dynamism inherent in building/construction activities.

These objects acquire their own symbolic meanings in the history of their usage. As the case may be, their correlation with the symbolism of the angular line will be more or less relevant.

These assertions become invalid as soon as the broken line is composed of more than two segments. Specific symbolism corresponds to each polygon and does not automatically apply to the open angular line.

However, *the breakdown*, represented as a broken column, a ruin, a tree struck by lightning (and with broken lines), symbolizes the duality of all being and all things that carry within them the seeds of their own destruction.

9.3c   The sinuous line

The letter S is often used as decoration, in the horizontal or the vertical. In Indian, Roman and Greek civilizations, it symbolizes, like the spiral, a movement of unification between 'creatures, elements, different levels or opposed focal points'.

The interlacing and the snake are the figures closest to this line.

Interlacing represents undulation, the overlapping of waves and the vibration of air. In many cultures, it symbolizes the infinite movement of evolution, the reconstruction of a lost unity. In a more modern context, interlacing symbolizes the chemical and electrical connections in the human brain and, from there, complexity itself.

Of course, the snake is the figure nearest to the wavy line and has a rich, varied and often contradictory symbolism. 'It is just a line, a living line alive, but according to André Virel, it is an incarnate abstraction' (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982: 867).

From the 12 pages Chevalier and Gheerbrant devote to the serpent, it emerges that it is a fundamental archetype, related to the sources of life and imagination, often carrying apparently contradictory valences. Vivifying and inspiring, master of women and fertility, sexually ambivalent, its nature is movement and water; it is what drives and maintains, a dual symbol of soul and libido. It is also the devil, the seducer, pride, avarice, lust and selfishness.

The lizard can be considered an attenuated version of the snake and the salamander is identified with fire. The Caduceus, symbol of the balance of opposing forces, composed of a vertical line and two symmetrical snakes, takes us too far from the single sinuous line.

9.3d The single-curved line

The arc of a curve is not in the dictionary of symbols. Bows as weapons or rainbows are too far from the single-curved line to provide significant guidance.

Closed shapes such as the circle and an ellipse carry valences too specifically related to their particular geometry and are not always directly relevant to the analysis of the 'open' lines.

The same comments apply to the spiral.

The arc of a curve is sometimes combined with the square (triumphal arches, Islamic and Roman art) where it represents the dialectics between the terrestrial and the celestial. The change of pace created by the juxtaposition of the two types of lines calls for movement, for a new balance, and symbolizes the aspiration to a higher world.

9.4 Plastic meanings and more

The concept of plastic meaning, which is superimposed on other types of meanings such as the figurative, the symbolic, or the psychological, was introduced in Chapter 4 (section 4.7). It is linked only to the strictly

visual features of objects or images, without any direct relation to recognizable elements of the world.

Lines are in the world and they are naturally used to represent it. Yet, it is not utopian to search within them for an intrinsic meaning that is not directly related to attempts to reproduce beings or things, and find their *immanent meaning*.

A relevant example of plastic meaning is Schiller's discussion on the angular and sinuous lines quoted by Wessel (1982: 153). Schiller argued that the undulating line is an analogy of freedom because *the force driving its pace is born of the dynamism of its own flux*. It is animated by an inner force, whereas the force that determines the abrupt changes of direction of the broken line is imposed externally (see Figure 9.2). This expression of freedom by the sinuous line has already noted before in the quote from Klee (see section 9.2c). The external force acting on the angular line is also cited by Kandinsky (1991).

The work of the five authors that are presented in this part have in common their search for the deeper meanings of plastic treatments beyond their immediate figurativeness, just as Floch did in reopening Wölfflin's concept of the classical and the baroque (see Chapter 4, section 4.8).

Riegl and Worringer divided artistic expressions into two generic styles, organic and crystalline, corresponding to specific visions of the world. The meanings they propose are cultural in nature.

Arnheim and Joly conducted experiments on representation of abstract concepts through plastic elements. Solomon, from the silhouettes of cars, reached the same linear classification as Riegl. These three authors propose plastic meanings related to the four basic lines.

Force inside the flow

Force external to the flow
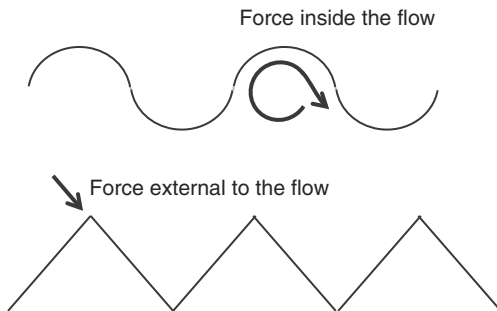
Figure 9.2 Some plastic characteristics of angular and sinuous lines (from Schiller)

9.4a   Riegl: Organic and crystalline styles

We return once more to Riegl, though he is rarely called upon by researchers in management science. One of the reasons for the relatively easy application of his theses as an art historian to today's brands is that he did not exclude even the smallest object from aesthetic study. What he did exclude, however, were value judgements ('It is good', 'It is right', 'It is beautiful') about the quality or worth attaching to the artistic production (1978: XXIV).

Two elements of Riegl's approach (1978) to the history of art are particularly relevant for a semiotic approach to brands:

- The first is that, according to him, each view of the world generates its own stylistic laws. It is the production of meaning through the expression of content.
- The second element, which is a major contribution to the understanding of the meaning of linear expression, is derived from Riegl's assumptions with respect to the relationship of man to his environment, a subject that is very topical today. He considers that man, in all his creative activities, competes with nature and Riegl applies this principle to major historical periods.

To illustrate the relationship between man and nature, Riegl stated that there have been two major changes in the history of plastic arts, thus defining three major periods:

- Antiquity is the era of anthropomorphic polytheism, which ended in 313 AD with the first proclamation of Christianity as a state religion. Artistic activities correct nature through their depiction of the beauty of the human form. It is a period where man becomes aware both of his superiority over the things of nature (at least in haute antiquity) and of his inferiority to the powers that generate them and where 'only perfection has the right to artistic existence' (1978: 9). After the art of ancient Egypt, this period reaches its apogee with Greek art before Alexander the Great, to decline then in the Greco-Roman period. Riegl saw Byzantine and Islamic arts as appendages of this long period although they happen after the reign of Constantine the Great. The period is placed under the sign of 'harmonism' (see Table 9.1).
- The Middle Ages, from 313 to 1520 (the year of the deaths of Raphael and Leo X), is the era of Christian monotheism, where art corrects nature, spiritualizing beauty. Arts are faced with the impossible

task of expressing in concrete terms the grandeur and perfection of divine power. This is a recurring theme in the arts of the primitive Christians, the Romans of the Bas-Empire, Roman art, German art, Carolingian-Ottonian art.

- Modern times, after 1520, where sciences apply the laws of causality in natural phenomena and where 'art – whether profane or religious – is free to compete with ephemeral nature' (1978: 41) whether to represent the body or to express spiritual aspirations. It is the Renaissance, Michelangelo, Canova and the reign of organism.

In nature, things are either organic and animated such as in the vegetal and animal worlds, or inorganic and inert like minerals.

Man like nature, shapes his artistic works from inert material. Nature models it into crystals and crystalline patterns, integrating the principle of symmetry and that would also be the basis of the primitive art forms. And then, in the struggle for survival, life and movement came to destroy or disrupt the crystal symmetry in the two fields of art and nature.

With respect to the four lines, it goes without saying that the left-hand side of the SINC© square, with the sinuous and curved lines, belongs to the field of the organic; and the right-hand side with right-angles and broken lines belongs to the crystalline world.

If, as Riegl (1978) thought, 'that man's artistic creation moves between the two poles … of "harmonisme", which obeys the eternal formal and eternal laws of crystallization, and organism whose objective is the reproduction of organic patterns in their instantaneous, accidental and short-lived manifestations', then these two poles are for us an instrument for analysing and managing the creative expression of brands.

These two areas of aesthetic expression correspond to distinct 'visions of the world', in fact, to different beliefs regarding the relationship between man and nature. This allows us, if one adheres to Riegl's conclusions, to link types of expression to content.

The worldview of 'naturalism' has an organic expression corresponding to an attitude of acceptance of the imperfection of natural things or beings; 'harmonism'/idealism has a crystalline expression corresponding to a refusal of the imperfection of the world.

The meanings Riegl proposed for linear expressions are cultural in nature since they arise from customs and beliefs.

Table 9.2 shows the characteristics of expressions and contents of organic and crystalline styles of visual arts, which are exploitable for the creative activities of brands.

Table 9.2 Organic and crystalline styles (according to Riegl)

expression	organic	crystalline
	incurvation, roundness	flat surfaces, angles, zigzag …
	not easily visible symmetry, asymmetry	symmetry, proportions, harmony
	fortuitious aspects, imprecision	precision, cleanness, completeness
content	**naturalism**	**harmonisme**
	illusions, simulation	Idealism, stylization, abstraction perfection
	Movement, life, animation	inertia, immobility
	ephemeral, instantaneous	eternity
Rapports man/nature	man depending on nature imitation	man equal to nature creation without models
	accepting nature imperfections	non accepting nature imperfection
Purposes	art as an end in itself mainly purpose of representation	mainly decorative and functional
	newness	tradition

The crystalline style according to Riegl

Straight lines and angles, the absence of curvature, precision, and symmetries represent the vision of a world where man tends to perfection, idealization, abstraction and the timeless.

This representation is based on 'harmonism', the idea that man is interested in nature only to the extent that he can improve its formal representation. Man creates on the spur of desire and without model. This tension towards perfection is consistent with the symbolic value of the arrow mentioned previously; that is, going beyond normal conditions. This is the case of the classical periods, within Wölfflin's meaning. 'Harmonisme' often pursues decorative and functional purposes.

The geometric style is generally present among all primitive people, but it is best symbolized by the style of the Greek Dipylon (first millennium before Christ).

The organic style according to Riegl

Curves, approximation, a lack of rectitude represent movements, ephemeral moments and a world where man accepts imperfection.

Incurvation, characteristic of the living world, is a reaction to natural forces through 'elastic displacement'.

This expression is based on naturalism, the desire for the spiritual improvement of nature and therefore the acceptance of its bodily imperfections.

The Renaissance, in its 'purpose of representation together with a determined emancipation of the fortuitous organic' (1978: 96), is the period that best defines this style.

The presence of the circle in crystalline expression

Riegl does not avoid the problem posed by the presence of circles in crystalline expression, including its use in the earliest period of Egyptian art. The circle leads to the loss of a premise of the art of antiquity – the sharpness, accuracy and compactness of the crystalline expression. The use of the circle is reserved primarily for small common objects, and very rarely for furniture and architecture, especially in periods where the art is not an end in itself.

Riegl cites the case of vases where the circle can be present in the context of a harmonic and inorganic style without reference to anything of organic nature. In this case, the round shape 'is not temporary, it is complete, eternal because it always comes back on itself' (1978: 73). One might add that the compass (the concretization of the angular line), as mentioned previously, also serves to draw the circle in its perfection.

Correspondence between the 'organic/crystalline' and the 'baroque/classical'

One cannot help but note the many analogies between the organic and crystalline styles shown in Table 9.2 with the expression and content of classical and baroque styles shown in Tables 4.4 and 4.5. Classical and crystalline styles echo those of the baroque and organic, respectively.

Movement (or lack thereof) is expressed consistently by the two pairings. The immobility of the classical is found in 'harmonism'. The illusion of the pictorial in contrast to the sharpness of the classical is expressed by organic and crystalline styles, respectively. The same is true for temporal expression where the ephemeral and the instantaneous are expressed both by the baroque and the organic.

Harmonism's constant aspiring for perfection finds its equivalent in the desire to please that drives the classical.

Phrases such as 'all "harmonisme" refers to tradition, all "organism" leads to the creation of new patterns' (Riegl 1978: 77) resonate with classical conservatism and baroque revolution.

Another common point: the classification is not dependent on the historical period, but, rather, on the values expressed. In much the same way that we did in Chapter 4 with Wölfflin's approach, the analysis of

the linear treatment of today's brand manifestations may well utilize Riegl's classifications in Table 9.2 to discover relationships between the plans of signifier and signified.

Without waiting for a detailed comparative study between the two approaches (all the more legitimate as Wölfflin and Riegl were contemporaries), which is beyond the scope of our work here, it can nevertheless be said that for brand analysis there is a high probability that a classical aesthetic approach is also a harmonic approach and a baroque aesthetic approach is also likely to be organic. The two methods, without being exact equivalents, reinforce and complement each other. Riegl's contribution with respect to the analysis and management of brands addresses mainly man's rapport with nature and his degree of tolerance of its imperfections.

It should be noted also that Riegl's work is more immediately applicable to the analysis of linear aesthetic treatments as introduced with the SINC© square than is Wölfflin's scheme, where linearity is only one aspect among the five aesthetic pairs which characterize the baroque and the classical.

Applications to brands

While they reflect opposing visions of the world, Riegl's two styles between which man's creative activity oscillates can be applied to brands. However, this is not a straightforward process as reality, with its simultaneous, close and antagonistic trends, is not always easily grasped. The following sentence from Riegl captures this complexity: 'The Egyptians separate the rigid crystalline expression from the slavish imitation which leads to organic expression. The Greeks balance one and the other by introducing the curved organic into the inorganic and by organizing the organic in an inorganic way' (1978: 83).

As for baroque and classical expressions, there is a full spectrum of brand aesthetics that go from one extreme to the other and many cases where the aesthetic treatment is not sufficiently 'typed' to ensure that the concepts introduced are applicable in a relevant way. It could also happen that the visions of the world normally associated with classical/baroque or organic/crystalline expressions are completely foreign to the identities of the brands considered.

There are, however, some cases where visual differential gaps are purely linear in nature and where the concepts introduced by Riegl can be applied directly for a better understanding of the meaning of objects. An example of this can be seen in the comparison between the perfume bottles for Chanel Nº 5 and Hermès 24, Faubourg.

Both brands are references to the French luxury industry. In each case, the name of the perfume is based on a number and both liquids are yellow. Both bottles have a parallelepiped form, but the two smallest vertical sides of the Hermès are slightly concave. In fact, when looked at from the side one can notice that the bottle has two double sinuous lines. The edges of the Chanel bottle are bevelled. The cap takes the form of a parallelepiped with bevelled edges. The cap of Hermès is an arc of a sphere weighed down by a parallelepiped with a horizontal rib.

While the Hermès bottle has a certain vagueness and is suggestive of the fortuitous, the Chanel bottle is all precision and sharpness. In this example are embodied the differences between the descriptive vocabulary used in the expression of organic and crystalline styles in Table 9.2.

In content, there is a strong coherence between the two styles. Hermès uses a figurative approach (illusion and the simulation of naturalism), reproducing in the form of a glass bottle its famous silk 'carré', the headscarf – an almost insubstantial object which, when it flies behind the passenger on a Vespa or in a convertible car, captures the grace of movement and gives concrete expression to the wind. Here, this is represented 'in elevation', but the sinuous vertical edges are enough to suggest potential movement. Like all bottles with sinuous lines, it invites the hand to grasp it and possesses a strong tactile attraction.

Chanel, on the other hand, expresses abstraction, idealization, perfection, with no model to emulate or from which to derive inspiration. The shape of the bottle suggests great stability, if not total immobility. It does not invite the hand but pleases the eye.

Curved lines decorate the glass of the bottle of the Hermès fragrance as they would a scarf. The name '24, Faubourg' is inscribed in letters with multiple curves, where the block letter F displays two sinuous lines. Two inconsistencies appear: the base of the cap, with its rectangular shapes, weighs down the object and seems somewhat out of sync with the rest of the bottle. Then, the name of the perfume refers to the old headquarters and mythical store of the brand, suggesting permanence. Obviously, the silk square and the iconic place make this fragrance emblematic of the world of Hermès. However, a name more befitting the scarf or, rather, its vaporous nature, would have been more consistent with the linear treatment of the bottle and its figurative objective.

'N° 5 Chanel' is inscribed in black block letters (angular lines) on a white square that strengthens the orthogonality of the bottle. There is no significant inconsistency in the choice and execution of the object. The discrete ring of the logo with its single-curved lines is hardly visible.

The aesthetic treatment of the Chanel fragrance is profoundly consistent with the ethics of control ('*maintien*') at the heart of the brand identity as defined by Floch and referred to in Chapter 4 (section 4.6).

For a more comprehensive comparative analysis, the study should be extended to incorporate the packaging, advertising campaigns, and architecture of the stores to compare the content expressed relative to the perceived identity of the two brands. (For Hermès, for example, it is immediately obvious that the aesthetic treament of "24 Faubourg" perfume is compatible with the horse (movement, nature) that is so important within the brand mythology). But that would distract us from our purpose. The objective was simply to illustrate the relevance of the categorization of both organic and crystalline styles in terms of expression and content in the analysis of certain brand manifestations.

9.4b Worringer: Empathy and abstraction

In his best-known work, *Abstraction and Empathy* (1997), Wilhelm Worringer draws on Riegl's work but offers significantly different interpretations of the same expressive typologies. For him, crystalline and geometric designs made of straight and broken lines, the most rigorous in their exclusion of life, belong to the abstract art forms. He equates them with the expression of the most ancient civilizations, such as ancient Egypt, where men sought to transcend reality, away from the confusion and darkness of the world that they feel they do not control. 'It is the consummate expression, and the only expression of which man can conceive, of emancipation from all contingency and temporality of the world-picture' (1997: 44). It is abstraction as a consequence of the need for withdrawing from or transcending the world, a result of a general sense of alienation, which is also at the base of transcendental religions. This expression denies space that characterizes life (here we find the lack of depth of the classical style).

In contrast, the organic style uses rounded and undulating lines to imitate a nature in which there is a relationship of trust between man and the phenomena of the external world and reached its apogee in Greek civilization. It is naturalism as a consequence of the need for empathy with the ambient world. It expresses a certain sensuality, rationalist and confident in a spirituality which never reaches transcendence. As with Riegl, these are meanings that are culturally determined. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the thoughts of the two men. Riegl argues that any creative activity is designed to represent the world. Worringer pretends that when the art is not meant to represent the world, it becomes abstract. Table 9.3 summarizes the positions of the two authors.

Table 9.3   Rapports Man/Nature according to Riegl and Worringer

	organic style	crystalline style
RIEGL		
Nature always as a reference in artistic activities	Spiritual improvement of nature Tolerance for its imperfections	Formal improvement of nature Search for perfection
WORRINGER		
When art does not represent the world, it becomes abstract	Representation of nature Empathy man/nature	Non-representation of nature Evasion from, exceeding, forgetting nature in abstraction
	Immanence	Transcendence

This broadens our range of possible meanings for the interpretation of brand manifestations. According to the contexts and realities analysed, it may be, for example, more relevant and more fruitful to consider brand ethics more as a quest for perfection than as an escape from reality.

For brands, another interesting aspect of Worringer's approach is the psychological aspect that he introduces. For him, each individual is naturally predisposed to either a need for abstraction, or a need for empathy. The relationship between psychological characterization and a preference for particular artistic expressions did not escape Jung.

Jung devoted an entire chapter (Chapter VII) of his book *Psychological Types* (1977) to issues of psychological types in aesthetics, with reference primarily to the work of Worringer. He argued that the attitude of abstraction is an effort to break free from the influence of an external object that is considered as threatening or offensive. 'Worringer's conception of abstraction therefore corresponds to the introverted attitude' (Jung 1977: 292). The attitude of abstraction is centripetal and therefore introverted. This assumes that abstraction is preceded by an unconscious transfer of negative content to the object in question.

Conversely, the empathy for an external object presupposes a subjective attitude of confidence in it. There is unconscious projection of subjective content in the object. 'Empathy, therefore, is a form of extroversion' (1977: 290).

In the case of Jung, we are in the presence of a meaning of a psychological nature for the two main types of lines (curves and straight lines).

9.4c   Joly: The instinct of forms

A simple way to understand the meanings carried by the four lines would be to interrogate consumers directly. However, the constraints of this research project have not allowed this and we have relied on the work of other researchers.

A particularly effective method of obtaining the meanings of the lines as perceived by consumers is to present them with meanings and ask them to draw them. This is a method that Luc Joly used on a large scale in 1976 and which is described in his book *Formes et Signes: Une Géométrie Originelle* (*Forms and Signs: An Original Geometry*) (1980). He assumed that humanity retains the instinct for a certain number of basic forms, a natural and universal sense of forms, 'well rooted in all of us (and) where instinct and feeling preserves a genuine vocabulary of forms transmitted continuously since the appearance of humanity, some 30 to 40,000 years ago' (1980: 7).

He sought to confirm his hypothesis by conducting the following survey: he proposed 15 terms ('life', 'death', 'water', 'God', 'man', 'woman', 'shelter', 'love', 'sun', 'day', 'heat', 'food', 'night', 'cold' and 'war') corresponding to the basic needs of human beings in a natural environment and requested the participants to represent these 15 words exclusively through graphic signs, schematics, or drawings. After investigation, he added 50 other terms related to feelings and more abstract concepts derived from the original 15. The sample of respondents, while not exceeding 1000, comprised different cultures, social classes, professions, ages, genders, and so on. He summarized his results on a chart positioning all the signs on a structure consisting of the interpenetration of a square, a circle and a triangle (symbolizing, respectively, intelligence, feeling and spirituality), as shown in Figure 9.3.

The disposition of signs follows an order based on the activities of man and his material, intellectual, and philosophical concerns. A complete and detailed version of all signs created and expressed during the investigation is presented in Figure 9.4. Many of the signs emerging from the survey were of a linear nature. The signs can be regrouped according to their proximity to the four lines of the SINC© square and indeed they form clusters within specific areas.

From this we can deduce the following correspondences (see Figure 9.5).

The sinuous lines appear in the area of sensation with a small incursion in the area of instinct. The single-curved lines, mainly circles and spheres are located primarily in the area of instinct, with a presence also in sensation.
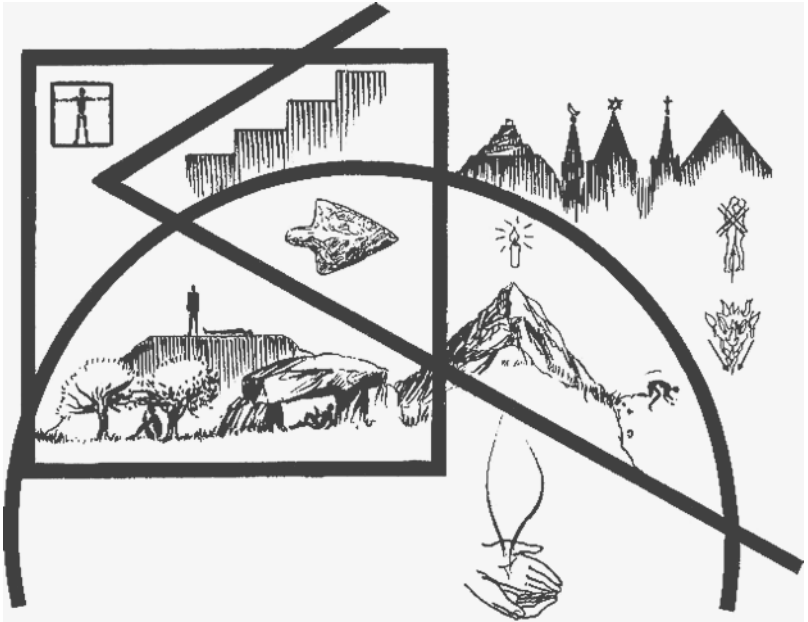
Figure 9.3   Topological diagram of classification of instinctive forms (according to L. Joly)

Joly's results, although expressed in different dimensions, are not at all incompatible with those of Riegl and Worringer. Instinct and sensation are consistent with tolerance of the imperfections of the real world and in symbiosis with it. These are aspects that humans share with the other creatures of the living world. Reason and spirituality, on the other hand, are qualities unique to man and necessary for abstraction and the quest for perfection.

9.4d   Arnheim: Lines and concepts

Arnheim explores the expressive possibilities, with total indifference to nature, of organic and/or crystalline lines. Pure geometry, the configuration of the points among the lines, produces the meaning without any external reference. This is the genuine plastic meaning introduced in Chapter 4. In *Visual Thinking* (1969: 116–34), he described a number of experiments with his students aimed at drawing concepts. These were spontaneous doodles, which had no statistical significance, but which demonstrated once again the expressive strength and versatility of lines. Particularly
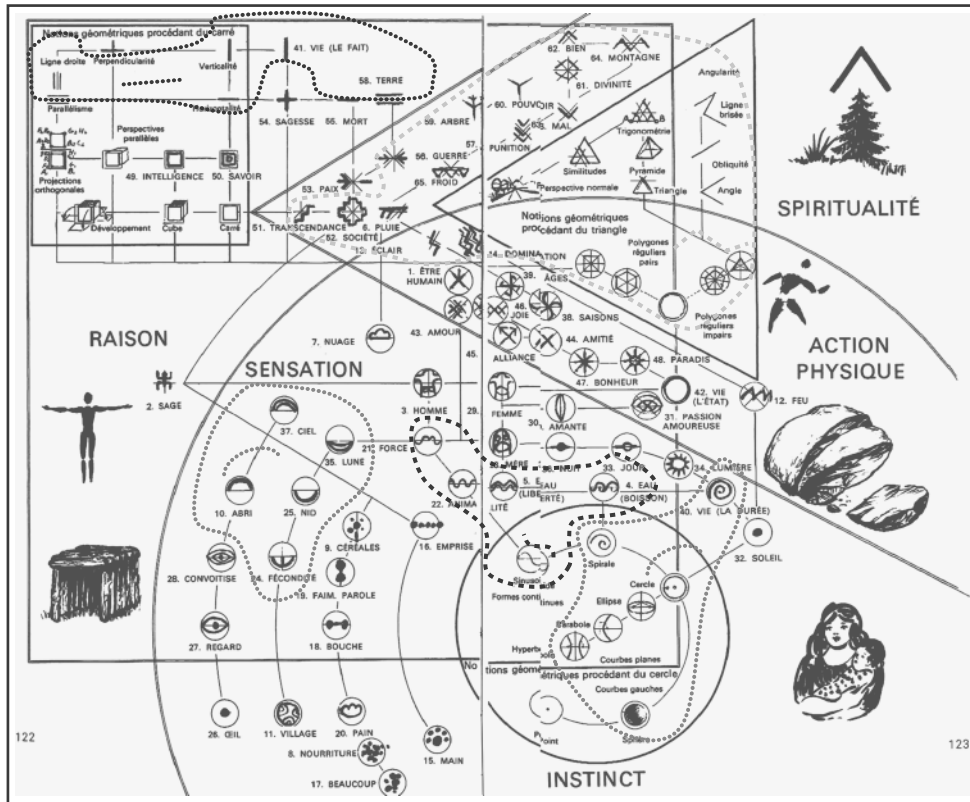
Figure 9.4 Clusters formed around the four lines of the SINC© square on Joly's diagram

interesting are the results for the representation of the concept of time. 'Past, present and future' are three concepts which are often represented on a continuum such as, for example, the first drawing in Figure 9.6.

Here, everything happens continuously, horizontally from left to right. The past is represented by a straight line, accurate and without fuss. An angular line with broader swings represents a present apparently
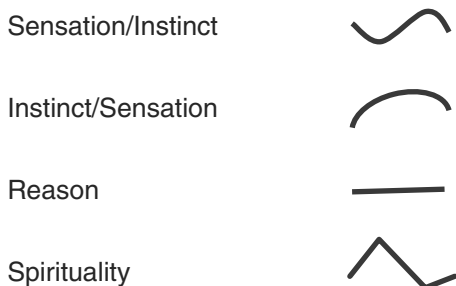
Figure 9.5   Instinctive meanings according to Joly
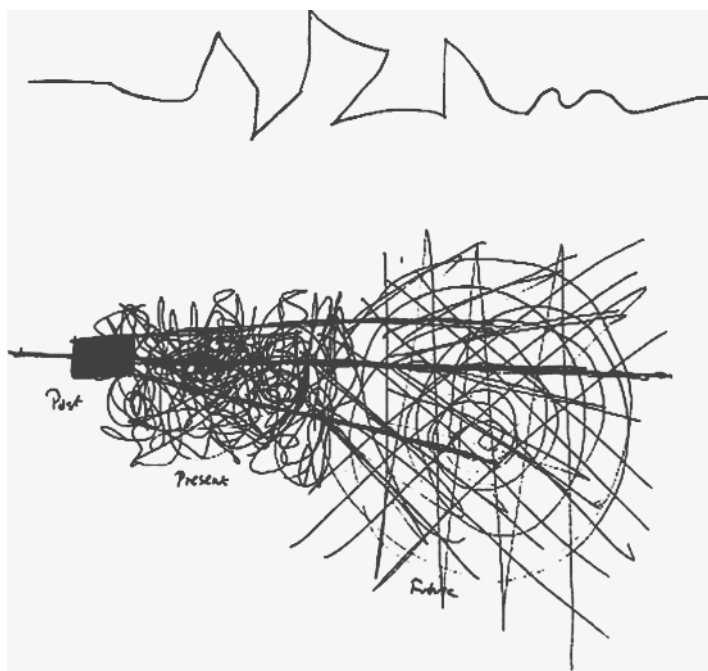
Figure 9.6   Lines representing 'Past, present and future' (Arnheim 1969)

tormented, full of breaks and changes of direction. An irregular sinuous line, apparently a little hesitant, with smaller and vaguer forms, speaks of a dynamic future, open to the world and more peaceful.

The second drawing is more complex and to which is added the following text:

> The past is strong and complete, but still influences the present and the future. The present is complex and is not only the result of the past, but it also influences the future. It overlaps with both, but is an autonomous entity. The future is less limited and is influenced by the past and present. The common line that passes through is a common element: time.

Arnheim adds that

> Life is generated in the past, solid and full, which projects its strong and formative rays. But the present is not completely determined by the past. It has its own shape and essence. The complications that result are represented by a busy texture.

The design progresses from left to right, from darker to clearer. The future is represented by a spiral with angular lines (right and acute angles). The text added to the drawing makes it possible to begin to decipher the semi-symbolic system set up by the student and to examine some considerations of the meaning he attributes to certain lines:

- In this case, the straight line signifies direction, strength and continuity.
- The future is clearer and in infinite expansion with the spiral, although hampered by angular lines. The rounded shape of the spiral projects all its symbolism (expansion in continuity, preservation of identity in the midst of change, optimism).
- The few sinuous lines in the representation of the present are not significant because they are lost in the angular and single-curved lines forming a scribble of gray fill.
- The angular lines are disruptive and are used to blur the presence of the others. They form a black rectangle that expresses strength and stability: the base of the past from which present and future flow.

These two examples illustrate some essential qualities of the line: continuity in various forms and intensities; and the ability to represent time.

9.4e   Solomon: Attempt at a plastic grammar

By applying a semiotic approach to the study of the shape of certain automobiles, Odile Solomon (1988) reached conclusions consistent with the work of Riegl. She argued that the expressive qualities of forms, still called 'plastic semantic markers', of natural or artificial origin, have obvious psychological connections and even determine behaviours, beyond the conventional symbolisms.

In linguistics (Greimas and Courtès 1986), the grammar is traditionally composed of morphology (the study of the components of the sentence) and syntax (the study of the rules of construction and the relationships between the terms). Solomon tries to lay the foundations of a semiotic grammar of plastic elements. Solomon's approach, both at the level of syntax and morphology, is consistent with Riegl's dichotomy of organic and crystalline expressions.

She divided the syntactic possibilities for the forms of cars into two categories, syntax being the organizing logic of morphemes (minimum units of sense like, for example, the four lines of the SINC© square, polygons, angles, plans, segments and so on).

On the one hand, there is a syntax that obeys the logic of order and stability, based on the research of harmony and symmetry, and subjected to idealization and simplification processes. Here, forms are simple, geometric, axial and respond to intellectual and rational arrangements. This is the archetypal form of purity and perfection, outside of time and space. This is exactly the vocabulary of the world of crystalline expression.

On the other hand, a syntax of disruption of the stable order appeals to emotions, affect and senses. The forms conceived and incorporated into time and space are often drawn from mimesis. This is the world of organic expression.

Solomon presented what she called a 'grammar of formal plastic discourses'. She went from the morphological level (basic forms of the plan of expression) to the semantic level, giving the values associated with the morphemes, passing through the syntagmatic stages (see Figure 9.7), which is consistent with the distinction between the two modes of aesthetic expression of Riegl and Worringer: on one side, the straight line; on the other, the curved line.

At the syntagmatic level (the chain of interconnected elements), she introduced the concept of 'assembly' (rhythm, tension and direction) on the side of the straight line. This notion is rather close to the vocabulary used by Floch and Wölfflin to describe the classical style (the assembly of independent components). Then the notion of 'spiral' (beat, intensity, poles) appears on the curve with its implications of fluidity and movement clearly associated with organic and baroque expression.

The straight line   **The curve**

MORPHOLOGICAL LEVEL

Main forms

Derived forms

Solid forms
with faces and
edges

DIAMONDS   SPIRALS

PENTAGONS   HELIX

Solids,
hyper-solids,
undulating
surfaces

SYNTAGMATIC LEVEL

ASSEMBLY   SPIRAL
    notions of: notions of:
        - rhythm   - beat
        - tension   - intensities
        - direction   - poles

SEMANTIC LEVEL

Inclusion of mineral world   Inclusion of organic world
(always indicate a direction)   (living forms have curves)

Define the referential notion of   Define the referential notion of
PERPENDICULARITY   SPHERICITY

Notions of limit, of analysis,   Notions of space, of synthesis,
of syncopation   of fluidity

Figure 9.7   Elements of formal plastic discourse according to Solomon

The values introduced at the semantic level do not go beyond the concepts of sphericity and perpendicularity; however, this is a relevant example of the application of the knowledge of forms to the analysis of products, consistent with the results of our search for meaning for the four basic lines.

The proliferation of various meanings carried by the four lines calls for a synthesis that would transform the SINC© square into a managerial tool and develop an embryo of analytical methodology of brand linear expressions. This is discussed in Chapter 10.

10
Managerial Applications of the SINC© Square

> Meaning occurs only through the production or perception of differential gaps.
>
> Floch (1983)

Given the complexity of the multiple meanings that lines generate and that the SINC© square helps structure, it becomes necessary to demonstrate the uses it is possible to draw from these results.

10.1   Summary of the meanings structured by the SINC© square

Figure 10.1 summarizes the majority of the meanings of the four lines highlighted in the previous chapter. It categorizes the general dichotomy of curves and straight lines that will often be sufficient to provide an explanation of the meanings of the documents or objects being analysed.

The space dedicated to each of the four lines has been divided into two parts. The first is entitled 'physical/figurative' to gather the terms which describe the physical appearance of the line and the resulting figurative meanings. The second is named 'attitude/values' and represents either values and concepts, or character traits or modes of behaviour that reflect specific values.

10.1a   Semantic nuclei

The initial idea of trying to find a semantic nucleus which, coupled with contextual semes, would allow variations in meaning (Sm = Ns + Cs – see Chapter 9, section 9.1) remains to be demonstrated. A purely semiotic study would be necessary to explore this theme but that is

CURVES	STRAIGHT LINES
The living world Ephemeral, instantaneous Tactility, flexibility Empathy with the world and others Tolerance for imperfections Extroversion Heat	The constructed world Inertia, eternity Non-tactility, rigidity, willingness Abstraction, idealization, harmony Quest for perfection Introversion Coldness
⌒ **sinuous**	— **rectilinear***
physical/figurative Complexity, 'happy' link Movement, variation, fluctuation, fluidity, Flexibility, elasticity, progressive transition, Changes within continuity	**physical/figurative** Simplicity, clarity Constraint, speed Direction, efficiency Continuity or separation
attitudes/values Dynamism Relativism, openness, non-frankness Sensuality Freedom	**attitudes/values** Rigour, tenacity frankness Reason, intellect Correctness, truth, honesty
⌒ **single-curved ****	∧ **angular *****
physical/figurative Simplicity Softness Erosion, protection	**physical/figurative** Complexity Repulsive aspect, tactile aversion Instability, rupture
attitudes/values User-friendliness, sentimentality Quiet, serenity, non-aggression Comprehension, accommodation, instinct	**attitudes/values** Creating distance Strength, violence, aggression, inquietude Radicalism, domination Spirituality

Figure 10.1 Lines: Meanings and values
Notes: ***** Additional variations according to orientation (vertical, horizontal and oblique).
** Specific meanings for the circle and other closed figures.
*** Specific meanings for the square, triangle and other closed figures.

beyond our scope here. Perhaps there are several nuclei with relatively loose relationships among them?

The term 'formant' was not used for the four lines as its semiotic definition involves an univocal relationship between this element of the plan of expression and a unit of the plan of the content, allowing

it to constitute a sign, in our case a morpheme (minimal unit of meaning). The four lines are therefore not formant because they refer to multiple meanings, some of which are similar, and others completely different.

The multiplicity of possible meanings does not, however, preclude a prudent use of the SINC© square for the analysis of the linear treatment of brand manifestations.

10.1b   Operating precautions

• The description of the possible meanings is not exhaustive.
• It does not aim to be universal. Relevant applications are in minority.
• The application of Figure 10.1 is complex. It is used to record the meanings of the four main lines, with respect to each other, but is not an excuse to ignore the contexts that led to these proposals of meanings and the legitimate complications created, for example, by the directions of the straight line or by the closed geometrical figures.
• There may be meanings that are seemingly contradictory. For example, the rectilinear can express stiffness and constraint, along with speed. Yet, they are not inconsistent qualities (a train on its rails, for example). It is the same for openness and non-frankness of the sinuous line that can very well coexist, the first being related to 'perception' and the latter to 'expression'.
• The meanings have been placed in such a way that they correspond horizontally with those of the other line for the same type of values between sinuous/rectilinear and single-curved/angular.
• Additional variations of meanings depending on the orientation of the straight line (vertical, horizontal and oblique) are superimposed on the meanings valid for the overall category of line.

10.1c   Gradients of signification

As indicated earlier with regard to the emancipation of the tangent (see Chapter 8, section 8.2d) and the square 'relativism/rigour' (Chapter 9, section 9.2e), there are routes on the SINC© square. These first two examples highlight the progress of a condition, a quality or value; that is, the variation of a property in space/time, or space/another dimension, while moving from one vertex to another on the square. It is the very definition of what is called a 'gradient' in the physical sciences.

Figure 10.2 includes a number of gradients of significations. The first series follows the sequence S-C-I-N (named according to the order of the

Route S-C-I-N   **Route I-C-S-N**

Gradient from relativism to fanaticicism
Gradient from openness to radicalism
Gradient from freedom to control
Gradient from flexibility to rigidity

Gradient from tactile pleasure to aversion

Gradient from simplicity to complexity
Gradient from continuity to discontinuity
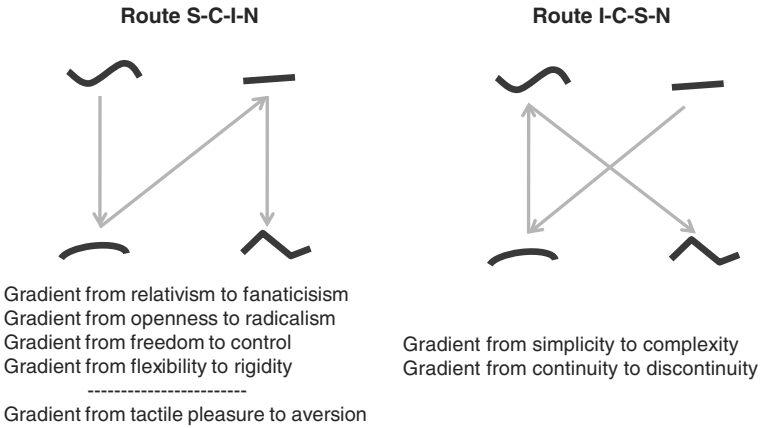
Figure 10.2   Gradients of significations

vertices of the square on the itinerary) and repeats the first two routes previously identified, while adding variations on 'related' concepts such as those of control, radicalism, fanaticism and rigidity. *The emancipated tangent would then become the symbol of empathy towards others*.

Another gradient appears, related to tactile aversion (or pleasure if taken in the other direction), a notion which applies particularly to three-dimensional objects. The route I-C-S-N corresponds to the gradients of simplicity/complexity (see Chapter 8, section 8.1d) and continuity/discontinuity.

When the degree of variation in the value expressed is not significantly different between the lines on the vertical sides of the SINC© square, the gradient can be represented by a simple horizontal arrow and follows the concepts outlined at the top of Figure 10.1 for the general category of curves and straight lines.

10.2   Examples of applications of the SINC© square

Three examples are presented here to illustrate the use of the table of meaning and values of the lines introduced in Figure 10.1.

10.2a   Mercedes

The Mercedes advertisement (from Spring 2009) shown in Figure 10.3 presents the E-class, CDI Blue EFFICIENCY model. The background consists of what looks like a concrete wall of overlapping rectangles and

Figure 10.3   Mercedes © advertising

squares. The floor is made of coloured marble, granite or cement where the joining of four tiles is apparent. The shape of the car is marked by two rounded lines: one for the roof and the other one for the wings.

The aesthetic treatment of the picture presents a double contrast between the object and its context, involving both the lines and the texture of the materials: angular and orthogonal lines for the context (background and ground), which is made of 'raw' materials; rounded lines for the car, which can be regarded as consisting of a complex, composite and especially 'constructed' material.

The initial contrast of the linear treatment of the car and the context is reinforced by the contrast of the materials. This double contrast has a functional purpose. It highlights the single-curved lines of the body of the car, enhancing the effectiveness of the communication.

This contrast naturally extends to the meanings of the lines and is used to develop the effect of a car ready to leap in perfect safety.

		Object	Context
Aesthetic treatment	**Lines**	Single-curved	Angular orthogonal
	Materials	Complex constructed	Raw mineral
Significations		Mobility	Inertia
		Protection	Hostility

Maximum contrasts between object and context, first to highlight the car curves, then to legitimize the product qualities (purpose of communication functionality)

Paradoxical use of the lines the least adapted to express the material world they represent (purpose of representation of the brand mastery of both technology and natural matter)

Consistency between the lines used and the car qualities

Consistency between the lines used and both object mobility and matter inertia

Figure 10.4 Linear analysis of a Mercedes advertisement

The rounded lines signify protection and smooth movement, while the angular lines are indicative of inertia and the hostility of the environment (see Figure 10.1).

The fact that, paradoxically, the organic lines are applied to the constructed object and the crystalline lines to the natural world has a representational purpose in showing a brand that is master of two worlds: that of nature and that of technology and mobility. It also reveals the use of technology in the service of man.

This analysis is summarized in Figure 10.4.

10.2b SAP

SAP is a German company that designs and markets business software. The image in Figure 10.5 shows a large glass area with white frames reflecting a landscape of tree-lined mountains and valleys in shades of green and blue that fade into the horizon. Two workers in orange shirts are cleaning the windows from a working platform. Their presence confirms that the landscape is reflected by the glass, rather than behind it.

A horizontal rectangular orange cartridge contains the text announcing that the time has come for a new and clear world. The fine print is

Figure 10.5 SAP advertising © SAP AG. All rights reserved

		Landscape	Glass area	Text zone
Aesthetic treatment	**Lines**	Curved sinuous	Angular orthogonal	Angular
	Colours	Green blue	White	Orange
Significations		Nature imperfection imprecision	Intelligence clarity/perfection sharpness	

Natural world — SAP world

↑↓ **Consistency between lines and the characteristics of the represented worlds**

←- -→ **Contrasts between the lines which reflect the opposition between the clarity brought about by the SAP software and the natural world imprecision and imperfection (purpose of representation of SAP quest for perfection clearly expressed in their motto '*The best-run businesses run SAP*'**

Figure 10.6   Linear analysis of the SAP advertisement

promoting software called Clarity, which provides the right information to the right people at the right time.

The reading of the image is relatively straightforward. The mirror of the glass area represents the SAP Clarity software that structures the perception of the world. An imprecise and imperfect world, with cool colours and characterized by curved lines (even the mountain peaks are relatively smooth), is reflected through SAP's pristine transparent orthogonal screen, whose perfection and intelligence (artificial) are represented by angular lines. It is a clear allegory of nature controlled by intelligence.

The white working platform integrates with the white frame and is also composed of angular lines. The orange-shirted men from SAP are at work to ensure clarity. The orange (almost yellow) of both the shirts and the textbox has been chosen for its contrast with the green and to differentiate from the white.

Figure 10.6 summarizes this analysis.

10.2c   Gehry's bench

The architect Frank Gehry has already been mentioned several times in the text. In addition to his architectural projects, he sometimes designs

objects such as jewellery for Tiffany, for example. He also designs furniture such as the bench shown in Figure 10.7.

This is the prototype of a three-metre-long bench, designed by the Canadian architect for the Emeco company, a U.S. manufacturer of aluminium chairs. The object, which used 80 per cent recycled aluminium and weighs only 55 kg, took advantage of aviation technology in its construction. It was auctioned in New York in 2009 and the proceeds were donated to the Hereditary Disease Foundation. The shape and material used for this bench are innovative for this type of object. It probably marks the beginning of a series of seats that gravitate around the same concept.

Viewing it from the front, we are in presence of the combination of a sinuous line (four inflections) and an angular line (five angles). Troughs and peaks of the two lines are in phase and they meet at the three vertices. This similarity between the two lines suggests a kind of gradual transformation of one line into the other. Two readings are then possible.

On the one hand, there is a downward movement which forces the top plate, with its smooth and imprecise shape, into the rigid mould of the angular shapes, where any concavity and convexity disappear. Conversely, it can be read as an upward movement where the sharp, angular shapes soften and tend towards a perfect and horizontal plane.
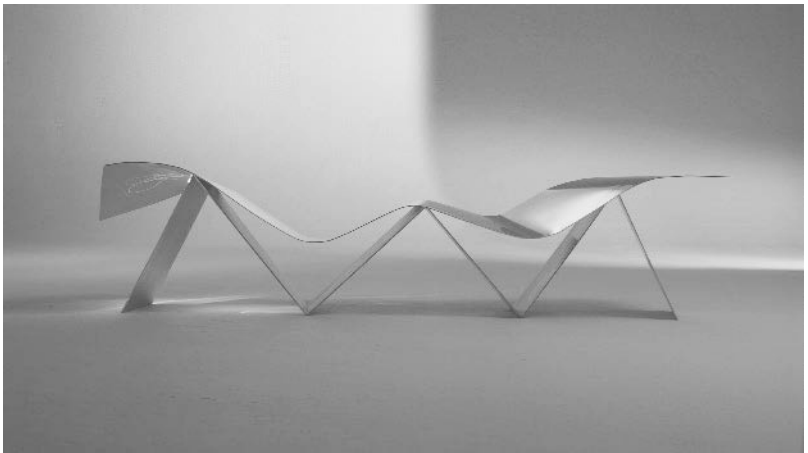
Figure 10.7   Tuyomyo bench designed by Frank Gehry for Emeco ©. Photographer Mikio Sekito

A phrase from Frank Gehry himself (see www.floornature.info) confirms his commitment to a double reading of the bench: 'Form must be free and light, it must be structural in nature, and yet poetic, and somewhat dangerous'.

Reading upwards, the poetic interpretation deals with a form that is evolving towards freedom, lightness and even weightlessness, as suggested by the wing-like shape of the sinuous line. The structural reading downwards, on the other hand, introduces a contrast between the angular and the sinuous lines that triggers a strong initial visual impact and serves the functional communicative purpose of attracting attention. The lines help to establish the credibility of the object. The part intended for contact with users is curved and, even if it may appear a little uncomfortable, it seems designed to fit the human form. So we have organic shapes for the interface between the user and the crystalline forms for the engineering of the weight-bearing structure.

The visual contrast echoes the contrast of meanings in which the movement and freedom of the sinuous line acts as a counterpoint to the stability, strength and danger (aggression, violence) of the angular (see Figure 10.1). Each line represents one aspect of Gehry's vision and serves a representative purpose. Gehry's reference to the 'poetic' has been understood here as corresponding to the qualities of lightness, fluidity and freedom; 'structural' as meeting the technical needs of the realization of the object (rationality, orthogonality, and so on).

Here we have the paradox of a seat that is both poetic and dangerous; whose structure provides organic forms for sitting, which, at the same time, are not adapted to a comfortable sitting position; and whose sharp, angular shapes are, when viewed from the front, suggestive of a fragile house of cards. Figure 10.8 provides a summary of the analysis.

The simultaneous presence of two lines becomes necessary to express the paradoxical vision of form proposed by the architect and that a single line cannot embrace. Gehry's work is marked by the quest for lightness, the liberation of constructed forms from the shackles of orthogonality – all with a hint of contradiction (that produces a humorous effect) – otherwise what would be the purpose of conceiving a 'dangerous' bench whose purpose is to rest and therefore relieve tension?

In most of Gehry's work, there is a mixture of the four lines. If the curve appears so prominently, this is mainly due to recent innovations in construction technology that make it possible and because Gehry makes intensive use of them. But, in fact, a careful analysis of his later achievements, such as the Walt Disney concert hall and the Marqués de

		Seat	Support
Linear aesthetic treatment		Sinuous	Angular
Significations		Movement freedom approximation	Stability inertia/solidity sharpness danger
Gehry's vision	'the free, light, structural, poetic and dangerous form'	Freedom lightness poetry	Structurality danger
	Other paradox	Little comfort	'House of cards' effect

← - → Contrast between the two types of lines in order to attract attention. Functional purpose of communication

← - - - ► Contrast between the lines significations. Movement and freedom of the sinuous against stability and solidity of the angular. Purpose of representation of Gehry's vision of form.

↑↓ Coherence between the lines used and one aspect of Gehry's vision. Representational purpose

← - → To the paradox of a dangerous and poetic seat corresponds the paradox of apparently little comfort and a structure looking like a house of cards

Figure 10.8   Linear analysis of Tuyomyo bench from Gehry

Riscal Hotel, shows that in the chaos and entanglement of curved and sinuous surfaces there is a mixture of the four lines, with many angles and a lesser presence of straight lines.

One can certainly say that Gehry's works belong to the stylistic trend described by Calabrese (1987) as 'neo-baroque'. Many of the characteristics of the neo-baroque mentioned in Chapter 4 (section 4.9) apply to the achievements of the architect: instability and metamorphosis, rhythm and repetition, details and fragmentation, disorder and chaos, knots and labyrinths, complexity.

10.3   Analytical methodology of linear brand manifestations

To make the SINC© square and its meanings a credible and effective tool, it is necessary to precisely define the conditions for using it and to insist on the necessarily comparative aspect of its proper utilization. All the examples mentioned in this chapter have in common the fact that there are one or more meaningful differential gaps at the linear expression level.

10.3a Meaningful linear differential gaps

To repeat the epigraph at the head of this chapter, 'Meaning occurs only through the production or perception of differential gaps'. This is the first constraint which makes the SINC© square a non-universal tool. To make it relevant, two conditions must be fulfilled:

- A differential gap related to the linear expression must exist in the documentation or objects under consideration. The difference of linear treatment should be obvious at first glance and virtually the only variation. That means that other visual aspects must be practically similar or neutral in the production of meaning.
- The second constraint is that the linear differential gap must be significant; that is, that its existence is decisive in the production of meaning of the manifestations under consideration.

The differential gaps can arise from different types of comparisons:

- Between products from the same brand (Zippo) or with those of competitors (Chanel No. 5 and Hermes 24, Faubourg perfumes)
- Changes in logo over time (Citroën, Caisse d'Epargne, Intel)
- The coexistence of differential gaps within the same manifestation (Gehry's Tuyomyo bench, SAP advertising, perfume Gucci by Gucci, Mercedes advertising)

The examples, mainly product comparisons, used in the survey presented in the next chapter, will strictly meet this requirement of meaningful linear differential gaps. This difference, however, is only the necessary condition to start analysing the aesthetic expression of a brand manifestation. The second step is the confirmation or refutation of consistency (or inconsistency) produced.

10.3b Forms of coherence

There are two main types of coherence:

- The coherence between the selected lines and the other plastic components of the image or object, such as composition and, particularly in the case of advertisements or websites, colours and text.
- The coherence between the lines utilized and the purposes of the aesthetic treatment, primarily the functional purpose (especially the effectiveness of communication) and the representational purpose

CFA Institute stands for excellence, not only in knowledge but in character of the individual. As such, it is a touchstone for the whole financial industry, building discipline, character, and excellence in the financial world.

Figure 10.9   CFA Institute © Mission. Extract from website

(consistency with the identity of the brand, of the project, the values promoted).

The semi-symbolic Figures 10.4, 10.6 and 10.8 built for the analysis of the three brand manifestations used as examples in this chapter are useful from a methodological point of view. They relate the plastic elements (in this case, the lines) to their specific meanings.

The example of CFA Institute, a global not-for-profit organization comprising the world's largest association of investment professionals, is a case of strong consistency between their graphic codes and the brand values expressed by the text. Their Web site and advertisements (see Figure 10.9) promote the four virtues they have chosen to differentiate and characterize the qualities of their members.

The graphic patterns which serve as background to the four selected values consist of symmetrical combinations of the same oblique parallelogram. There are no curves or inflection points, only angles and straight-line segments. Here we are clearly on the right-hand side of the SINC© square.

The four values expressed by the text belong to the meanings of the straight lines utilized (see Figure 10.1).

- 'Ethics' corresponds to the spirituality of the angular line
- 'Tenacity' and 'rigour' are expressed in the characteristic attitudes embodied in the straight line
- 'Analytics' requires the intelligence expressed also by the straight line.

In the underlying text, 'excellence' and 'discipline' are the result of the search for perfection that characterized the straight lines.

Here, there is complete coherence between the desired meanings and the choice of linear aesthetics.

These examples help to highlight two fundamental aspects required for a judicious use of the SINC© square and its meanings and which are in fact the criteria of relevance of the application of the square: the differential gaps and consistencies of the elements of the discourses generated by the brand manifestations.

The SINC© square has many other potential applications.

10.3c   Other applications of the SINC© square

When the linear dimension is relevant to a brand's aesthetic expression, the SINC© square can be used both 'upstream' and 'downstream' of the manifestations and make the connection between the creative and commercial intentions and market perceptions.

The square enables us to trace back the intentions of the designers and/or communicators through the interpretation of the three purposes of aesthetic treatments (representation, decoration and functionality), as evidenced by the previous examples of SAP, Mercedes and Gehry. It can also compare and measure in a structured way the consistency of the linear aesthetic treatment from other elements of the brand discourses.

The square can be used to analyse whole areas of linear creative expression. For example, it can be used to classify certain manifestations of a whole industrial sector, from which it is certainly possible to infer aesthetic trends and/or opportunities for strategic and aesthetic differentiation.

With regard to the logos of brands in the automotive sector, for example, the sinuous line, despite its ability to express fluidity and movement, is very little used.

Mazda is the only active brand to have a logo of an abstract nature (A kind of a flying bird facing forward within a rounded rectangular frame) using the sinuous line. This represents just 0.9 per cent of 113 brands identified on the automobile website (www.car-logos.50webs.com). Studebaker (an elongated S separating a circle, with a red left part and a blue right part) and Trabant (a round black background with a white obliquely oriented winding road) also used the sinuous line in their logo in a purely plastic way, but they are not active anymore. Brands that use, or have used, an animal represented figuratively – Ferrari, Peugeot, Jaguar, Lamborghini, Dodge, Simca and Vauxhall, for example – where the use of organic lines is necessary, represent 6.2 per cent of total brands. Ford uses a horizontal oval around the

name Ford, which is written with a rounded calligraphy where the upper part of the letter F is a sinuous line.

It could be interesting to study the use and the perception of the four lines in the logos of automobile brands in greater depth and possibly draw implications from this on their competitiveness.

A detailed analysis of all the ads of a particular period, for example, could also allow an audit of the meanings for the four lines of the SINC© square most commonly used by a specific industry.

The SINC© square also makes it possible to structure studies on how the intentions of brand managers are perceived by consumers and directly identify their responses to linear expressions. This is what the survey presented in the following chapter proposes to do, by analysing the reactions of consumers to objects and logos containing the four linear elements of the SINC© square.

11
Consumers' Preferences for the Four Lines

The dialectic, introduced in Chapter 5, that generates brand identity by integrating consumer's perceptions to the intentions of the brand manager, requires that the interface created by brand manifestations be a 'permeable membrane in both directions'. If the identity of a brand is the sum of all discourses related to it, it becomes essential to be constantly abreast of market perceptions and to assess the extent to which the three purposes of the aesthetic treatment of the manifestations are actually perceived.

In addition, if lines have the expressive significance established in Chapter 6, it is natural to look at how consumers perceive them and what preferences they trigger. Preferences for lines, as measured by our survey, will be considered as a measure of the degree of aesthetic satisfaction, regardless of their underlying reasons.

The proposed investigation measures and analyses the preferences of respondents for products, logos, and packaging containing one of the four linear elements of the SINC© square. The square will serve as a methodological tool to structure the choice of stimuli and analyse the results. The survey will also be an opportunity to check the possible existence of correlations between certain characteristics of the profiles of the respondents and the preferences expressed for certain types of line.

11.1 Research hypotheses

The whole of this study is based on empirical research, supported by the literature review (reported on in Chapters 3 and 7), into the impact of the aesthetic aspects of brand manifestations and, in particular, their linear aspects, and on the commercial success of those brands. What has not been shown previously, however, is the existence of preferences for certain lines over others. While a positive answer to this question had

been anticipated axiomatically up to this stage of the study, it remains now to be proven experimentally that these preferences exist and to determine their nature.

11.1a   General question on the existence of preferences for certain linear aspects

Are there preferences for lines? If so, what kind?

This general issue is one aspect of the research that is of an exploratory nature. It is an epistemological approach based on inductive logic, a test of the relevance of the most basic of linear graphic signs.

Once the reality and the nature of the linear preferences have been established, the investigation has been the opportunity to identify many of the characteristics of consumers who participated in the research. For reasons of space, we will only mention those relating to the gender of the participants. Other issues are presented briefly in section 11.5 and will be the subject of other publications.

11.1b   Hypotheses of links between gender and consumer preferences for lines

Popular opinion has it that women prefer objects with rounded lines while men prefer angular lines. There is a whole range of publications on the subject. In a comprehensive review of the subject, Damak (2007), for example, had this to say:

> Some psychologists such as Erikson (1973) suggested the existence of 'profound differences between the sexes with regard to the sense of space'. A large number of works have highlighted the differences in graphic expression (painting, drawing, writing). Majewski (1978) studied the assessments by 65 boys and 62 girls of 31 descriptive characteristics of drawings and paintings (shapes, colours and dimensions). Significant differences according to gender have been proved in nine features. In particular, there is a clear divergence in preferences of forms: *they are rounded for women and rectilinear for men*.
>
> Other studies comparing the drawings of men and women have confirmed these results. Men tend to deploy forms in a vertical direction, using angular lines, whereas women develop forms in a limited area and avoid the use of angular lines.

Some brands appear to have integrated this fact into their discourse. Paul Smith, for example, applies it in his 'EXTREME' perfumes for men

and women The lines on the packaging for women are single-curved and sinuous, while those on the men's product are straight.

This is also the case for Biotherm, which uses a sinuous logo for feminine products and a vertical red rectangular logo for men's products.

The proposed hypothesis is therefore as follows:

Men have a more positive attitude than women towards angular lines.
Women have a more positive attitude than men to single-curved lines.

11.2   Research methodology

In order to answer the question and verify the hypothesis, an online survey was conducted to measure the preferences of a sample of consumers for brand manifestations containing significant linear elements. These preferences were then correlated with the gender of the respondents. The quantitative analysis was made with the method of paired preferences, on a Likert scale of 1 to 5. The SINC© square was used for structuring the choice of stimuli. The survey was carried out by means of an online questionnaire which was answered exhaustively by 204 people.

11.2a   Conceptual design of the survey

Figure 11.1 describes the theoretical basis of the research methodology. As for the question on general preferences, the responses on the
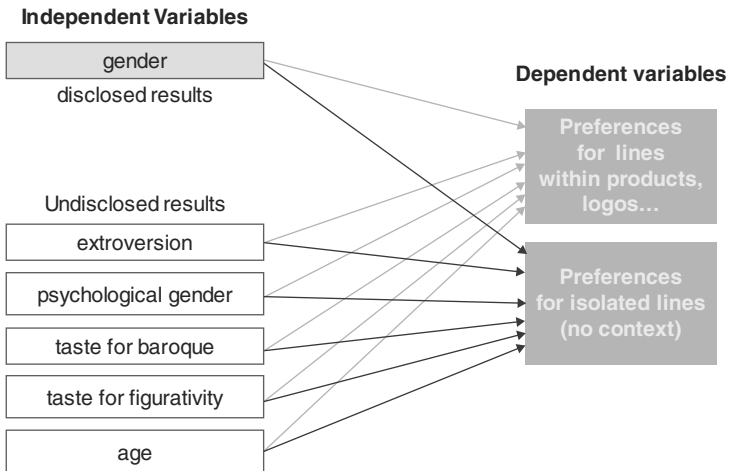
Figure 11.1   Dependent and independent variables

dependent variables were analysed according to an exploratory approach. The possible correlation between gender (independent variable) and the dependent variables corresponds to a hypothetico-deductive approach.

The dependent variables are the preferences expressed by the interviewees.

The choice of the line, as the element influencing consumer choice, allows a greater spontaneity on the part of the respondents when they express their preferences. For most products, the line is not perceived as having a life of its own. Therefore, the preferences are not expressed directly and consciously on the line.

Indeed, although lines govern a large part of the plastic expression of brands, they are rarely perceived as independent elements. The 'Gestalt' school of psychology (Koffka 1935) posited that the line is 'upstream' of the form. This is why the survey questionnaire separates the questions on the preferences where the line is incorporated into products from those where the line is presented out of context.

Some experiments have also shown the non-conscious aspect of responses to aesthetic stimuli. It has been demonstrated, for example, that people are unable to quantify the usual proportions of a face, while being extremely sensitive to the slightest alteration thereof (Lewicki 1986). This suggests the existence 'of internal algorithms-processors' which the individual cannot access consciously.

11.2b   Method of paired preferences

This method was chosen for measuring the dependent variables.

Historically, the method most used for recording preferences in experimental aesthetics was rank ordering, as used, for example, by Fechner (1876), Berlyne (1971), Lalo (1908), and Eysenck and Tunstall (1968).

Russo and Rosen (1975) demonstrated that the expression of preference for a single stimulus is based on an unconscious series of consecutive paired preferences. The direct recourse to paired preferences addresses the methodological issue. Interviewees must simply determine their degree of preference for one stimulus with respect to another. This degree of preference for one stimulus also represents the degree of dislike (or aversion) for the other one and thus provides two sets of data.

Weber (1931) used this method as early as 1930. Piehl (1976), too, utilized it to reach conclusions in favour of rectangles with proportions very close to the golden mean. McManus (1980) also used it in his research into triangles and rectangles.

The method of paired preferences is particularly adapted to aesthetic research where the choices are sometimes difficult. The introduction of a comparative dimension facilitates choices.

11.2c   Likert scale from 1 to 5

This scale has been used to record preferences between two stimuli. It offers two benefits:

- A classification with an odd number of choices allows for a central position (3) to indicate indifference between the two stimuli presented.
- The choice of five levels, rather than seven, facilitates judgement and gives more weight to the differences in valuation.

The five levels of possible judgement correspond to the following decisions:

1. I strongly prefer A
2. I moderately prefer A
3. I equally like or dislike A/B
4. I moderately prefer B
5. I strongly prefer B

11.2d   The SINC© square

The semiotic square, with its focus on the relationships between the terms rather than the words themselves, seemed particularly suited to the method of paired preferences. The SINC© square structures the choice of stimuli. Each stimulus has been selected so that it can be positioned atop a vertex of the square and is differentiated from similar stimuli positioned on the other three vertices only by a linear appearance. Each vertex of the square is thus respectively compared to the other three. There are therefore six comparisons for the four terms.

Figure 11.2 shows an example of a page of the questionnaire, which illustrates the positioning of four stimuli (transparent glasses) on the vertices of the SINC© square and their six binary comparisons with the Likert scale.

11.2e   Choice of visual stimuli

As shown in the previous example, the search for a meaningful linear differential has guided the selection of the stimuli of the dependent
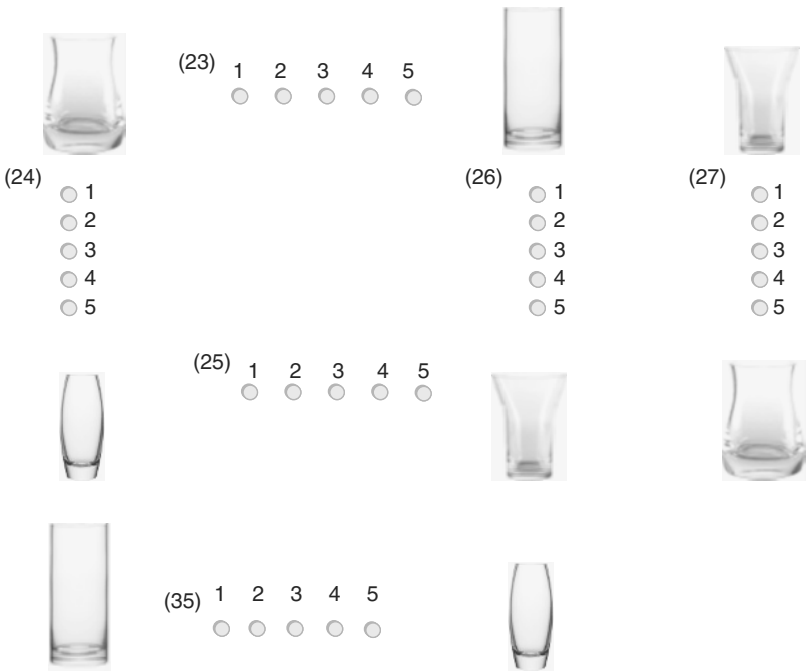
Figure 11.2   Extract from the questionnaire
Note: Questions 27 and 35 correspond to comparisons between diagonals.

variables. Each transparent glass varies from the other ones only with respect to their vertical linear treatment.

Table 11.1 summarizes all categories of stimuli used, the number of questions and the number of preferences expressed by types of line. For each question, two preferences are being expressed.

The total of 106 preferences expressed by the participants can be broken down as follows:

- 29 for sinuous lines (abbreviation SIN in the statistical tables and diagrams)
- 24 for single-curved lines (CUR)
- 27 for rectilinear lines (REC)
- 26 for angular lines (ANG)

Out of the total of 53 questions, six only are raised at the end of the questionnaire on the abstract lines. They correspond to the six questions

Table 11.1 Stimuli utilized and preferences requested

Objects type	Objects number	Questions number	Requested Preferences				
			SIN	CUR	REC	ANG	Total preferences
Lamps (crystal)	2	1		1	1		2
Lamps (paper)	2	1	1	1			2
Lamps (Chinese)	2	1	1			1	
Lamps (orange)	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Lamps (floor)	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Lamps (ceiling)	3	3	2		2	2	6
Total Lamps	**17**	**18**	**10**	**8**	**9**	**9**	**36**
Jugs	2	1	1			1	2
Clear glasses	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Black vases	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Dark glasses	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Total Glasses	**14**	**19**	**10**	**9**	**9**	**10**	**38**
Zippo lighters	2	1	1		1		2
Chewing gums	2	1	1		1		2
Paul Smith fragrances	2	1	1		1		2
Cigarettes	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Total Packaging	**8**	**8**	**5**	**3**	**5**	**3**	**16**
Intel logo	2	1		1		1	2
Abstract lines	4	6	3	3	3	3	12
Totals	**47**	**53**	**29**	**24**	**27**	**26**	**106**

necessary to exhaust the number of possible comparisons between the four lines of the SINC© square. The other 47 questions refer to objects of everyday use. We follow the recommendations of Bloch (1995), whose conceptual model presented in Chapter 3 (see Figure 3.3) stressed the importance of positioning the stimuli in the context of consumption, rather than in an abstract way.

Criteria for the selection of objects

Priority was given to objects that can be treated aesthetically with all four lines being studied. Out of the 15 typologies of objects presented (including logos), six present the four lines, one three lines, and the rest show two lines.

In no circumstances should the lines correspond to a functional aspect of the product. Sofas, for example, were removed from the questionnaire because winding and angular backs appear to reduce the

comfort of the furniture. For the same reasons of lesser functionality, shelves that were not strictly horizontal were not taken into account. The deletion of all the possible functional aspects of the lines results in the logical elimination of any considerations on the functional purpose of aesthetic treatment, focusing only on the representative and decorative purposes.

The objects should not be too strongly related to consolidated consumption patterns. This also applies to the non-horizontal shelves, which are still too rarely used in order to be considered in the study.

The lines should not be charged with a meaning of representation clearly recognized by the subjects of the investigation, nor be an element of notable recognition strongly associated with a brand. We also thus eliminated the answers to questions involving the Marlboro package because the fame of the 'sharp' design probably influenced preferences.

Typology of selected products

The 47 photographs of the objects presented in the questionnaire were as follows:

- 17 lamps, subdivided into six subcategories of types or styles of lamps, floor lamps, ceiling lamps, and so on.
- 14 glasses, vases and jugs, classified into four sub-categories.
- Eight examples of packaging, four of which were packets of cigarettes each of them with one line of the SINC© square. All four lines were made of boundaries of red and white forms. It is this homogeneity of graphic treatment of the four lines which was the main reason for their selection. The brand names were eliminated, but the legally required health warnings were maintained. Of the other four products, two were for chewing gum and two were the boxes from Paul Smith's EXTREME fragrances.
- Two photos of Zippo lighters. The new gas lighter, Zippo Blu, was distinguished from its legendary predecessor mainly by the introduction of the sinuous line at the place where the lid and the body of the lighter meet.
- Two photos of Intel logos. The old 'e drop' logo, with its angular linear treatment, was replaced by a new, clearly rounded version
- Abstract lines, de-contextualized, were presented at the very end of the questionnaire for two reasons: firstly, to measure the differences in preference for the lines as part of everyday consumer objects and lines in all their abstraction; secondly, to avoid giving clues as to the purpose of the investigation from the beginning of the questionnaire.

11.2f   Software support

The responses to the online questionnaire were collated using Wysuform software, which was also employed in the preparation of the questionnaire and the collection of responses. The first data were provided in the form of an Excel spreadsheet for the 256 responses, which was later reduced to 204 after elimination of those that were incomplete. Then the analyses were performed using SPSS statistical software.

11.2g   Composition of the sample

In any online survey, 'the fishing net' is thrown somewhat blindly and the composition of the sample is known only once the participants' answers have been received. The first data received related to the composition of the sample of participants: 51 per cent were male, 49 per cent female. The overall average age was 39. The statistical distribution was almost normal. The average age of the women was 36, while that of the men was 42 (see Table 11.2).

Table 11.2   Sample characteristics. Gender, age and country of education

	Frequence	**Percentage**
Gender		
Men 1	104	51,0
Women 2	100	49,0
Total	204	100,0
Age		
1. Less than 20	15	7,4
2. Between 20 and 30	45	22,1
3. Between 30 and 40	52	25,5
4. Between 40 and 50	41	20,1
5. Between 50 and 60	35	17,2
6. More than 60	16	7,8
Total	204	100,0
Country of education		
France	119	39,0
USA	41	13,4
Spain	31	10,2
Italy	31	10,2
UK	22	7,2
Asia	12	3,9
Germany	11	3,6
Latin America	4	1,3
Others	34	11,1
Total	305	100,0

The sum of the frequencies for the country of education was greater than 204 because 29 respondents had a double or triple education. The largest group had studied in France. In total, 71.2 per cent had studied in Europe.

11.3   Responses to the general question on the existence of preferences for certain linear aspects and discussion

The results of the investigation were made in a table of 204 responses to 105 variables. The Likert scale was used in ascending order, from 1 to 5, to record the degree of aversion, where 3 is the level of indifference: the lower the number, the greater the degree of preference expressed; the higher the number above 3, the stronger the aversion. In order to make the presentation of results more immediately readable, the raw data have been deducted from the number 3 (3-x). Therefore, preferences are expresses by a positive digit from 0 to 2, and aversions by a negative number between 0 and –2. Table 11.3 presents the final general preferences and averages by categories of stimuli according to the following scale:

$$\text{Indifference} = 0$$
$$0 < \text{preference} \leq 2$$
$$-2 \leq \text{aversion} < 0$$

Figure 11.3 summarizes in histogram form the results of the survey on the preferences expressed.

The transformation of the values of the Likert scale by the introduction of the level of indifference of zero has the advantage of graphically illustrating the fact that there are only two units on each side of the level of indifference, and absolute variations, even of only 0.1, are significant. This is particularly the case if one adds that for everyday

Table 11.3   General preferences by category of stimuli (3-x)

Averages of expressed preferences	sinuous	curved	rectilinear	angular
Glasses	–0.07	0.50	0.23	–0.50
Lamps	–0.19	0.38	–0.04	–0.09
Total products	–0.13	0.47	0.10	–0.38
De-contextualized lines	0.30	0.49	0.09	–0.88
General average	**–0.08**	**0.47**	**0.10**	**–0.45**
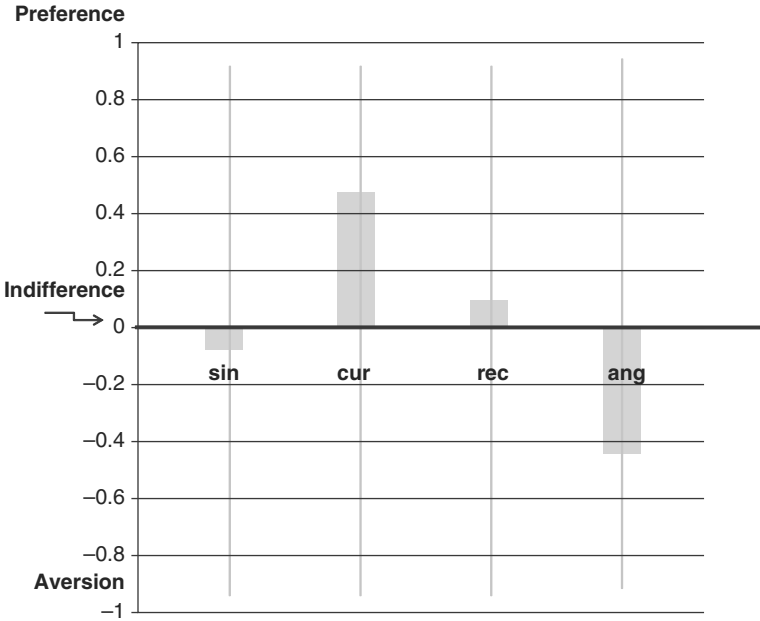
Figure 11.3   Histogram of general preferences

objects such as glasses or lamps there is a certain tendency to avoid the extremes of aesthetic judgement. *The research confirms the initial intuition that there are indeed preferences for certain types of line.*[1]

- The curved line is clearly the favourite of the respondents (+0.47).
- The angular line is one that generates most aversion (–0.45).
- There is a very slight aversion to the sinuous line (–0.08) and a very slight preference for the straight line (+0.10).

With due respect to William Hogarth (see Chapter 3, section 3.4), the serpentine line is not the preferred line today, at least within the limits imposed by the survey.

On the basis of the theories and literature cited in previous chapters, three types of explanations can be advanced to explain the results obtained:

- The degree of complexity of the lines
- The trend towards the 'baroquization' of everyday life
- The postmodern trend

11.3a   The degree of complexity of the lines

The first explanation is related to a purely plastic dimension of lines: their degree of complexity.

It was established in Chapter 8 (section 8.1) that the degree of complexity of the four lines increases according to the following sequence: the straight, the single-curved, the sinuous, and the angular.

A diagram of the values of the average general preferences for each line classified by their degree of complexity is in the form of a Wundt curve (see Figure 11.4) identical to that of Berlyne, described in Chapter 3.

Berlyne asserts that the level of complexity is the main stimulus in the field of aesthetic preferences. An increase in the complexity of an image initially creates pleasure, but this decreases after a certain threshold of complexity, ending up generating aversion.

This explains why the straight line, the simplest of all, generates preferences barely above the threshold of indifference. Because people prefer stimuli of average complexity, the single-curved line gets the highest score of preference. The sinuous line, more complex than the first two, produces a mild aversion. The angular line, being the most complex, causes a major aversion.

> The preferences expressed for the four lines therefore follow the rule established by Berlyne according to the respective degree of complexity of each line.

A stable preference for the 'moderately complicated', or in the words of Gombrich (1979) already cited, of the 'right balance between boredom
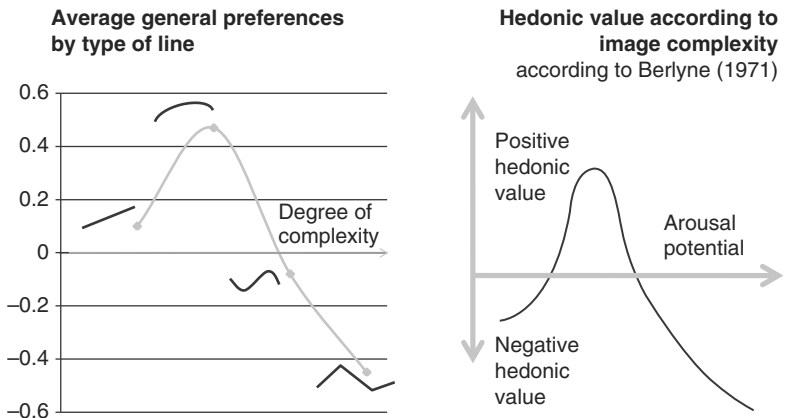
Figure 11.4   Wundt curves

and confusion', in the field of lines may appear incompatible with the evolution of tastes and aesthetic expressions. An immutable preference for the curved line would inevitably lead to the absurd possibility of unique and eternal baroque expression.

It has to be kept in mind that although certain lines are more adept or more apt at expressing the baroque or classical (see Chapter 6, section 6.3), they are not the only criteria for defining expressive styles. The arrangement of lines and other plastic elements determine the expression. Wölfflin's five pairs of concepts characterizing the visual aspects of the respective styles were introduced in Chapter 4 (section 4.8). The rectilinear line may very well express the baroque. Floch (1993) speaks of the 'iconic abstraction' of the sculptor Giacometti, which reveals a 'vision by the depth of edges' which he classifies as being baroque. Baroque architecture is full of straight lines and, conversely, curves can express the classical.

A model should eventually be considered where the preferences for the lines of average complexity would be subject to the influence of moderators such as the weight and homogeneity of the ambient aesthetic expression, the feelings of physical and psychological security, as well as any reason for the evolution of the vision of the world of a specific society or civilization. This would result in changes in the *kunstwollen* and tastes that could be positioned on the SINC© square in accordance with the N-I-C-S route as presented in the following paragraphs. This is, however, beyond the scope of the current study.

The other two explanations of the expressed preferences are of a sociological nature.

11.3b   The 'baroquization' of daily life

The major preference for single-curved lines for the products tested in the survey belongs to the current overall trend of baroquization highlighted in Chapter 4. If one accepts the correspondence between the organic lines (single-curved and sinuous) and the expression of a baroque nature as discussed in Chapter 4 (section 4.9), and if, in addition, one accepts the idea of a 'baroquization' of consumption, then the results of the investigation on glasses and lamps are a further illustration of this trend. Indeed, a major preference is expressed for rounded lines (an affinity with baroque expression) and a major aversion for angular lines that belong to the category of crystalline lines (an affinity with classical expression).

This time, however, information does not come from the supply side of the market, as it did in the earlier chapter, but from the demand side, the consumers themselves, who express their judgements on categories

of specific products, but also on the lines presented out of context, as we shall see later.

These results reinforce the thesis of the trend towards the 'baroquization' of daily consumption.

11.3c   Postmodern trend

As mentioned earlier, Maffesoli (2008) speaks of 'postmodern baroque', integrating the trend towards the baroque with postmodernism. He matches the disorder and profusion associated with baroque expression to 'a state of mind where complementarity replaces exclusion, where relativism takes the place of the universal'. Postmodernism is often characterized as the end of hard and bellicose ideologies.

These are the same words used in the research of the possible meanings of the four linear expressions outlined in section 10.1b of Chapter 10. Figures 9.1 and 10.2 show the proposed routes on the SINC© square that would go precisely from radicalism to relativism.

In our case, the results of the survey highlight a gradient of growing relativism up to the single-curved line, but which decreases again when reaching the sinuous line (see Figure 11.5). The path N-I-C-S seems stuck in the accommodation, understanding and smoothness of the single-curved line before reaching the relativism of the sinuous line.

A possible explanation for this would be to give a temporal dimension to the gradient labelled the 'path of growing empathy' and to make the
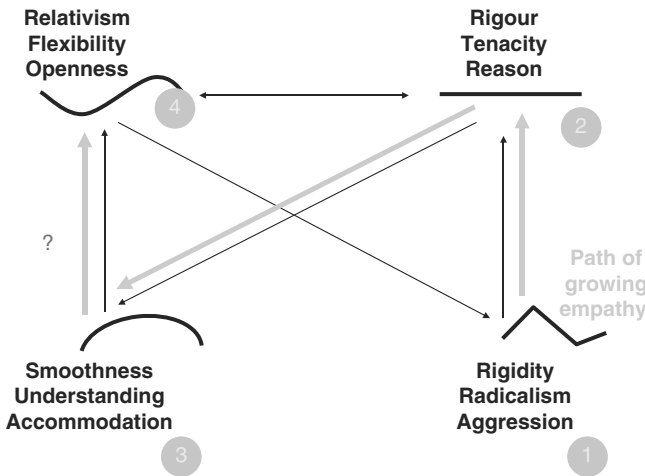
Figure 11.5   The path N-I-C-S on the 'relativism/rigour' square

hypothesis of an evolution of tastes that has not yet reached its final stage. We would then be in presence of an evolving scheme moving from a classical period towards a more baroque one, passing through two stages in each phase before returning to a new classical period. In such an evolutionary process, tastes are underpinned by visions of the world characterized by various degrees of empathy, tolerance, and rigidity of belief.

Indeed, a number of authors, including Eugenio d'Ors, Alejo Carpentier and Henri Focillon, consider baroque not as a historical style but as a cyclical phenomenon, a regular period of reflux valid for all artistic developments that goes beyond the classical apogee; a constant of the human spirit. As Jean-Claude Vuillemin (2001: 487) put it: 'From this perspective and to use the Nietzschean categories, the 'baroque' would be like the Dionysian, wild side of culture, whereas 'classicism' would be the Apollonian side, enamoured of order and clarity'. This goes beyond the scope of this discussion but can be a basis for further research in other areas. An instrument for predicting tastes would be certainly appreciated by many.

One thing is certain: the research findings with regard to the existence of preferences for certain linear expressions corroborate the characteristics of the baroque iconological evolution of the postmodern era cited by Maffesoli, among others.

A dimension not explored, but one potentially rich in developments, is the notion of predictable variation. Bergson (2003) wrote: 'If grace prefers curves to broken lines, it is because the curved line changes direction at any moment, but each new direction was indicated in the preceding one'. It is the same theme raised by Schiller in his comments on the sinuous line (Chapter 9, section 9.4). Are curves in general (sinuous and single-curved) more 'predictable' than broken lines, and thus psychologically more 'comfortable'? This is another possible line of research to be explored.

11.4   Results for the hypothesis of the correlation between gender and preferences for lines

Figure 11.6 shows how the women interviewed in the survey were more positive than men with regard to single-curved lines and how men have a lesser aversion for angular lines than women.

The hypothesis inspired by the popular view that men have a more positive attitude than women towards angular lines and that women have a more positive attitude than men towards single-curved lines was therefore experimentally confirmed in the context of the investigation.
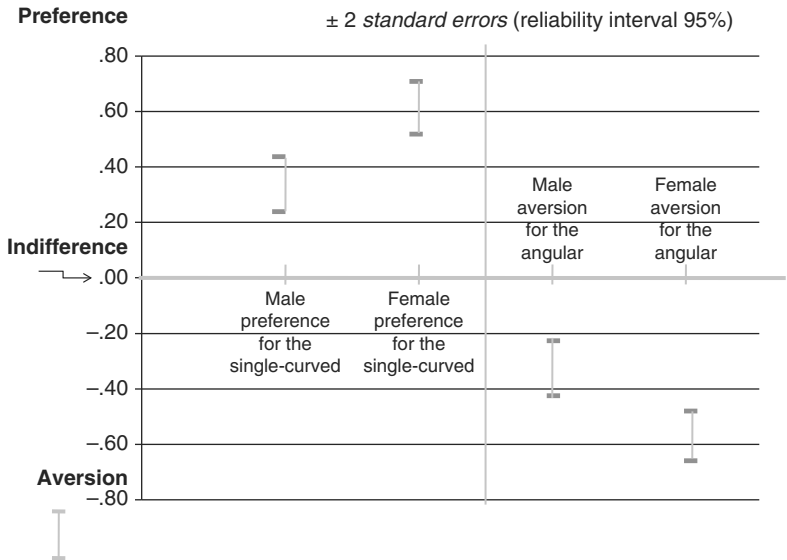
Figure 11.6　Male and female preferences for the single-curved and the angular lines

11.5　Other results

The following correlations between certain consumers' characteristics and their preferences for lines were also uncovered in the course of the analysis of the survey responses and will be the subject of subsequent publications. For the moment, a preliminary and non-exhaustive summary of these findings is set out next:

- A hypothesis about a general link between the degree of introversion/extroversion of people and their preferences for crystalline/organic lines which was inspired by Jung's (1997) use of the theories of Riegl and Worringer could not be confirmed, probably because of the choice of stimuli. On the other hand, a correlation was found between the taste for landscapes by Corot and extroversion, as well as between the taste for the works of Kandinsky and introversion.
- A correlation was discovered between the taste for drawings by Rembrandt and the preference for de-contextualized sinuous lines, and between the taste for Huber's drawings and the aversion for these same lines.

- A hypothesis of correlation between the preferences for the baroque/classical aesthetic expression and organic/crystalline lines could not be confirmed, probably also for reasons of choice of stimuli. However, there is a relationship between the taste for the landscapes of Monet and a preference for sinuous lines and an aversion for straight lines.
- There was evidence demonstrating another relationship, that between age and a preference for angular lines.

11.6 Examples of managerial use of the research results and methodology

The most immediate usefulness of this type of inquiry is the knowledge it provides of the tastes of a certain population with respect to linear aesthetic treatments at a given time. This opens the door to new and multiple segmentations of consumer profiles.

It can also be used to test the aesthetic aspects of new brand manifestations. Figure 11.7 shows how to measure preferences expressed on specific products, packaging or logo where changes to a linear element are critical, in comparison to the general preferences for the lines. The following examples are part of the stimuli of the survey questionnaire.
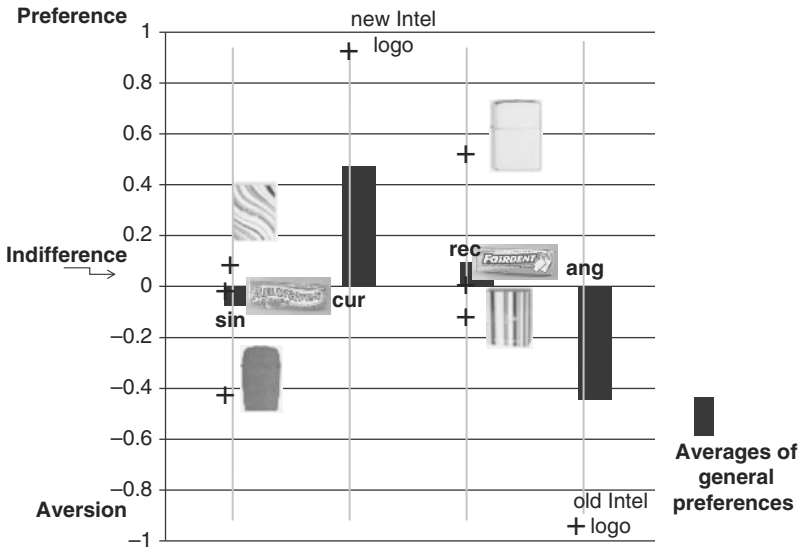
Figure 11.7 Assessment of preferences for specific brand manifestations

11.6a   Paul Smith fragrances

There is a slight average preference (0.15) for the packaging featuring a wave of multi-coloured lines of the perfume aimed at female customers.

The frequency distribution (see Figure 11.8) shows a clear separation between preferences for each version of the fragrance.

However, the histogram by gender (Figure 11.9) presents no particular preference and there is no correlation between gender and preferences.

If the purpose was to provide a specific fragrance for persons of each sex, the results show that consumers develop a preference for one of the two types of packaging which has nothing to do with their gender.

On the other hand, significant correlations exist between preferences for the packaging of perfumes and preferences for the lines which they present. There is a 30.5 per cent correlation between the 'wavy' packaging and the average preference for the sinuous line, and only 14 per cent for the single line. There is a 29 per cent correlation between the packaging with straight lines and the general preference for the straight line.

This indicates at least an *aesthetic consistency* in 'linear' tastes within the survey participants. The aesthetic judgement is here more important than the gender which formed the basis of the design of the two versions of the perfume.
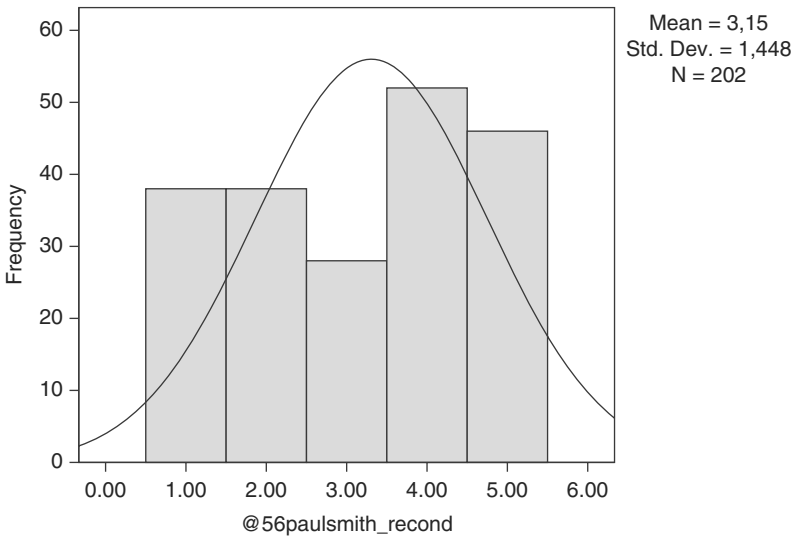
Figure 11.8 Distribution curve of the preferences for Paul Smith 'Extreme' fragrances
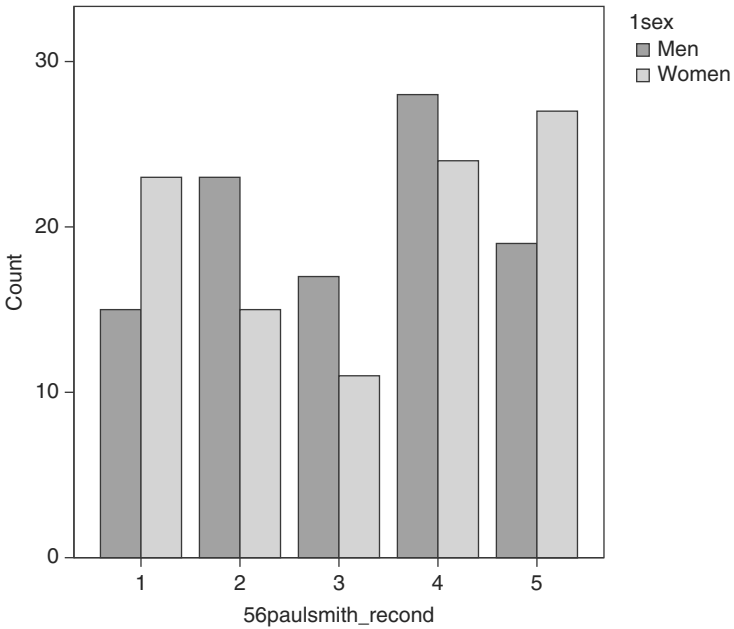
Figure 11.9   Preference distribution by gender for Paul Smith 'Extreme' fragrances

Figure 11.8 also makes it possible to measure the preferences expressed on the two versions of the perfume with respect to the average taste for the lines used. Both are in slight opposition to their respective general average.

11.6b   Zippo lighters

In Chapter 4 (Figure 4.7), we examined changes in the shape of the iconic Zippo lighter. As Figure 11.7 shows, the 'old' Zippo enjoys a clear preference (0.42) over the newer version. This preference is significantly higher than the general average preferences with regard to their respective lines.

The ethics of the Zippo brand have been shaped over the years both by the plastic qualities of the object and the lifestyles of its users (GIs during the war in Vietnam). The values of masculinity, efficiency, robustness and simplicity are at the heart of the brand's identity, as exemplified through its association with Harley Davidson in joint communication campaigns. The straight line carries meanings related

to simplicity, efficiency, honesty, fidelity (see Figure 10.1), which are obviously consistent because they are part of the main visual aspects of the object.

The sinuous line of the new lighter promotes the values of flexibility, sensuality, relativism and fluctuation, which are not compatible with the Zippo brand identity as currently perceived. The aesthetic treatment of Zippo Blu probably has a purely decorative purpose. The success of the new product will therefore depend heavily on current consumer attitudes with respect to the sinuous line. It could also be that the commercial objective is to develop a new consumer segment with a major inclination towards the sinuous line.

If the objective was to seduce the female market, it is a failure because women also prefer the old lighter, even if less so than men (see Figure 11.10). With respect to functionality, it can be assumed (and an engineer might confirm this) that it must be more difficult to ensure a good closure with a sinuous line rather than with a straight line.

The preferences expressed for the 'old' Zippo are certainly influenced by its reputation. The Zippo Blu appears more as a '*faire-valoir*' and
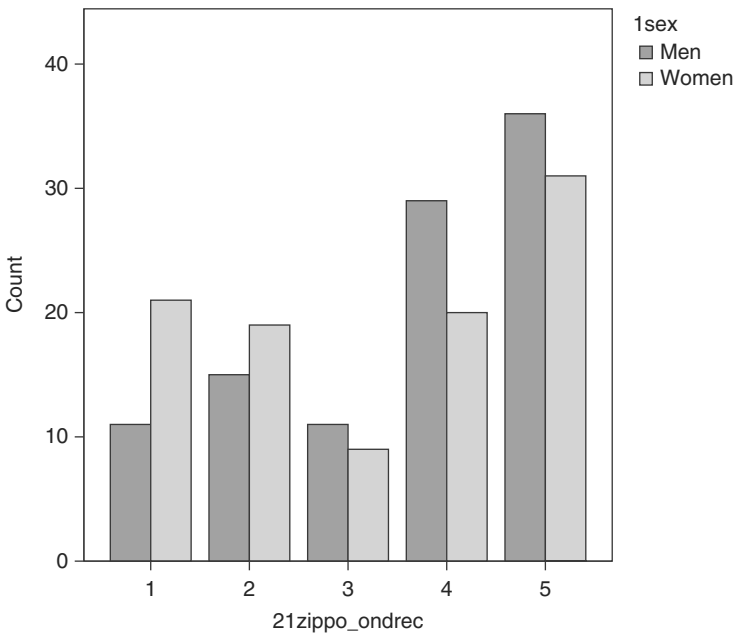
Figure 11.10   Preference distribution by gender for Zippo lighters

would then exist only to show how good its predecessor is, as high-lighted by the contrast in its aesthetic characteristics.

As with the Paul Smith perfumes, there are correlations of 'aesthetic consistency': first of all between the taste for the new 'sinuous' Zippo and, in this case, the two organic lines (44 per cent correlation with the sinuous and 23.5 per cent with the single-curved line); then, between the taste for the old Zippo and the straight line (49 per cent).

11.6c   Intel logo

In 2005 Intel Corp. changed its logo after 37 years of use of the famous dropped 'e' logo which had a clear angular 'flavour', in favour of a near oval swoop around the company's name providing a 'rounded' feel-ing. Preferences for the new Intel logo (0.92) are significantly higher than the average of general preferences for single-curved lines (see Figure 11.7). The frequency distribution curve is highly concentrated on the side of the new logo (see Figure 11.11), confirming the correctness of the company's aesthetic choice.

Again there is a strong 'aesthetic consistency', which covers three of the four lines. There is a correlation coefficient of 42 per cent between the taste for the new logo (surrounded by a circle) and preferences for the single-curved line, and of 21 per cent aversion to the straight line and 29 per cent for the angular line.
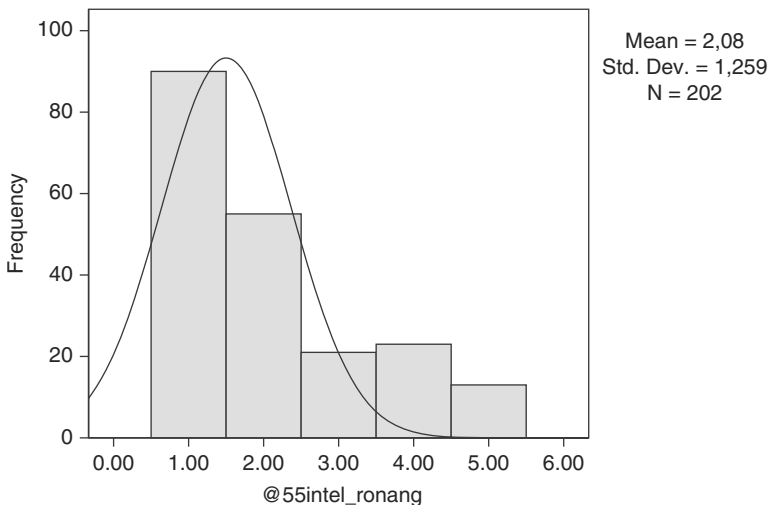
Figure 11.11   Distribution curve of the preferences for Intel logos

11.6d   Chewing gum

The packaging of two brands of chewing gum shown in Figure 11.7 generates a total indifference (0.06), far less than the general judgement on the sinuous and the straight line. The linear aspects of the design of the packaging here are not significant at the communication and commercial levels. The 'aesthetic consistency' applies this time to the four lines with coefficients of correlation between 20 and 34 per cent.

These four examples of brand manifestations have shown with varying but significant degrees that under certain conditions – when the linear treatment is a relevant element in the visual perception of the product or the manifestation of the brand – aesthetic inclinations for some linear treatments are a determining element in the development of preferences for brand manifestations. *The strong correlations between preferences for the lines in general and judgements on products that incorporate them, as revealed by the survey, can lead to new ways to design new brand manifestations.* An initial investigation on preferences for lines may become a preparatory stage in a project to design a new logo, for example.

A secondary use of the survey is to show respondents how their personal judgements fit in with respect to the average population.

11.7   Limits of the investigation and future research

11.7a   Methodological limitations

The methodological limits are related primarily to the nature, number and shape of the selected stimuli.

The choice and number of photos of objects condition the responses. The non-confirmation of hypothesis often comes from an unsuitable choice of stimuli.

The number of questions to frame the profile of the consumers surveyed was already quite high and did not permit, in this study, the depth required by the complexity of certain traits (introversion, tastes for the baroque/classical and the figurative/abstract). The questionnaire used was, rather, a preliminary investigative tool. Each hypothesis will need separate further deepening.

The study of aesthetic preferences for lines through the paired comparison method directs the judgement towards structural and immanent aspects. This is the plastic meaning of lines, rather than the figurative, which is offered to the judgement of consumers. Yet there is no more effective alternative to isolate the linear aspects.

11.7b   Conceptual limitations

The main conceptual limit is determined by the fact that the line, in general, is part of a whole. It belongs to a context which is often visually complex and in which it is just one of the elements among others. This explains the somewhat limited number of cases of application of linear analyses based on the SINC© square.

Moreover, the sense developed by the single line may be different from the meaning generated by the full image. Kandinsky (1987: 217) wrote:

> Lines taken in isolation can be 'joyful', while the overall impression (element 1) can produce an effect of 'sadness'. The different movements of the second element are organic parts of the first. In any melody, sonata or symphony, we observe the same subordination of elements isolated to an overall effect. And we can say the same of a drawing, a sketch, a painting.

The natural continuation of this work on simple lines is to develop the research on the combinations of these primary lines. The first necessary step was to analyse the simplest plastic unit still producing meaning on its own, before considering a higher level of complexity. The introduction of the SINC© square and the results of the survey should serve as a basis for further work on the various associations of the four basic lines.

In 2007, Lowie Vermeersch, the director of design at Pininfarina (the design house that has designed almost every Ferrari since 1950), stated that the silhouette of a Ferrari is always the combination of a sinuous line and a rectilinear line (see Figure 11.12).

The examples of the Mercedes advertising and the Gehry bench studied earlier (see Chapter 10, section 10.2) are themselves studies in the combination of lines.

Figure 11.12   The combined lines of Ferrari

Conclusions

This investigation in the field of brand aesthetics, through both theoretical and practical considerations, essentially follows utilitarian purposes: to provide brand leaders with the means to better manage their brands, understand their nature as well as the behaviour of consumers, in order to be more competitive.

The choice of brand aesthetics as a new managerial approach was born of personal experience, that of having been witness to the lack of integration of departments of design, creation and communication with other departments; the lack of logic and common vocabulary, with the effect of the non-optimal functioning of organizations. Faced with these shortcomings, it appeared necessary, or even urgent, to deploy and deepen the concept of brand aesthetics, continuing thus the reflection of the semiotician Jean-Marie Floch.

This itinerary also responds to a personal requirement, nourished by the observation of the work of many designers. It is a response to a need to return to founding texts that have described and attempted to explain the artistic and creative expression in general, less to add a supplement of soul to the often arid area of commerce than to wonder *on impregnation and* 'survivance of the forms' (expression borrowed to the art historian Georges Didi-Hubermann) in the current creative expression.

The trip into the 'country' of brand aesthetics is full of pitfalls. The subject is new, ample and complex. It embraces both the difficulties of establishing a new approach to brands and those of understanding the subjective and fluctuating field of tastes and preferences. It took convening authors of disciplines as different as those of marketing, psychology, semiotics, artificial intelligence and the history of art to overcome, at least partially, the difficulties encountered.

The task is arduous and ambitious that wants to manage the sensory world of brands, that is all that is known and experimented with a brand through all its manifestations. What is proposed is a new managerial approach to brands.

First, it is the notion of brand aesthetics, in its semiotico-identity nature which was introduced and which allowed the highlighting of a number of its analytical and methodological implications.

Floch's contributions have been critical, including the introduction of the couple baroque/classical as an example of characterization of brand aesthetics. They have helped to introduce and identify the baroquization trend of everyday life as a component of the postmodern aestheticization of consumption.

Various plastic elements could have been used to illustrate the potential managing brand through their aesthetic. The lines were selected to lead the reflection.

The introduction of the **SINC © square** helped structure the approach to the linearity of brand aesthetics as well as the online quantitative survey.

The main results obtained can be classified into three categories:

1. A certain number of theoretical and practical managerial tools were developed, either as analytical instruments or as methodologies that offer the advantage to elucidate, plan and control the aesthetics aspects of the multiple discourses of brand manifestations.

   Table C.1 presents the *13 different instruments* developed in the study, most of which have been actually applied to concrete examples. These instruments and methodologies enable the analysis, planning and control of the development of design, creation and communication activities in general. Their utilization can be both upstream, at the stage of planning and implementation of the activities of the functions mentioned and downstream to the level of perception by consumers of the effects of these activities.

   The instruments introduced have been applied to specific brand cases such as *Samsonite*, *Citroën*, *Intel*, *Gehry*, *Caisse d'Epargne*, *Gucci*, *Mercedes* and other car brands, *Pininfarina*, *Zippo*, *Chanel*, *Hermès*, *SAP*, *CFA Institute*, *Paul Smith*, etc.

   The research outlines then two types of information useful for the development of market segmentations.

2. *The discovery of a preference for the single-curved line, an aversion to the angular line and a quasi-indifference for the sinuous and straight lines*, in the statistical limits of the investigation. These results are consistent

Table C.1 Managing tools introduced by the study

Brand aesthetics	Lines	Quantitative study
The brand Identity Hinge of Floch	The SINC© Square	Methodology of the online survey
	Meanings and values of lines	
The EST-ET© diagram	Gradients and Meaning Path on the SINC Square	
The Communication Chain	Organic/crystalline styles	
Four aesthetic categories of brand manifestations		
The Chain of Brand Aesthetics		
Three purposes of aesthetic treatment		
Audit of brand aesthetics		
The couple baroque/ classical		

with the postmodern baroque tendency and meet Berlyne's rule on aesthetic preferences according to the degree of complexity of the stimuli.

3. The demonstration of a relationship between preferences for lines and consumers' gender which shows that *women prefer the single-curved lines more than men and that women dislike the angular lines more than men do*.

The quantitative work performed so far should be envisaged more as a preparatory phase requiring more focused and detailed follow-ups. It allows identifying immediately and logically, a number of avenues for future research:

1. Perception of lines' meanings
   In order to enrich the work done, it will be interesting to check consumers' perception of the meanings generated by the four linear elements (Table 10.1. Lines: Meaning and Values). This will measure 'the transition of effectiveness' of the chain of communication

(Figure 4.4). The triangle made of the intended sense, the perceived meaning and the consumers' preferences will allow more in-depth considerations on consumers' behaviour and on the effectiveness of the brands managers' actions. A similar type of study flows directly from the approach of brand identity as being the sum of all the discourses related to it.

2. Lines combinations

Following the logic of the work presented, it will be appropriate to move from considerations on isolated basic linear elements to considerations on the combinations of these basic lines. This may take the form of a study of the impact of the combinations of the four lines in brand manifestations, by focusing on their contrasts, their complementarities, the relationships among them and with the whole. The goal being to understand the mechanisms of production and perception of meaning produced by linear combinations, in order to use them for a finer brand management.

3. Other criteria for consumers segmentations

There are still some data from the survey to exploit, on dimensions such as tastes for figurative/abstract and baroque/classical expressions, extroversion/introversion, economic policy, education and other surveys to launch on cognitive styles.

4. Meanings and preferences for other plastic elements

Lines were chosen to illustrate some of the operational implications of the concept of brand aesthetics. We can extend the methodological process developed around the SINC © square to other image elements, such as colour, composition, light, textures. The idea being to understand how each of the simplest elements contributes to the formation of the meaning and to continue by a triangular confrontation of intended sense, perceived meaning and consumers' preferences.

There are many tools, especially at the service of designers, which link colours and meaning. An analytical scheme for the production of meaning from the colours, derived from semiotics has been developed (Mazzalovo 2008): the 'chromatic square' which can exercise a similar role as the SINC © square to the present study, applied to colours.

5. Transparency of brand ethics and aesthetics

Brands seem to have a natural interest in displaying an easily noticeable identity. However, it would be relevant to deepen the relationship between the success of brands and the degree of transparency of their ethics and aesthetics.

6. The couple optic/tactile

   In addition to the couple organic/crystalline, Riegl has developed other categories of dimensions to analyse the styles and the corresponding spirit of their times. It would be certainly fruitful to consider the couple optical/touch in its relationship with that of baroque/classical and the possibility of applications of this confrontation to brands.

Tracks are thus numerous that invite to explore the applications of the concept of brand aesthetics and consolidate the demonstration that its rational management is possible, innovative and can contribute to brands' competitiveness.

Notes

4 Brand Identity

1. The French original reads:

   Catégorie de l'esthétique permettant de caractériser l'organisation des formes verbales, plastiques, musicales, que l'histoire de l'art a identifiées et décrites comme ayant fait époque ou comme étant marquées par un artiste particulier.

   Dans le domaine du langage: Ensemble des moyens d'expression (vocabulaire, images, tours de phrase, rythme) qui traduisent de façon originale les pensées, les sentiments, toute la personnalité d'un auteur ...

   Dans le domaine de la peinture et de la sculpture: Manière personnelle d'utiliser certains moyens artistiques (choix du sujet, des formes, des lignes, jeu des couleurs) qui permet de reconnaître un artiste à travers ses œuvres.

11 Consumers Preferences for the Four Lines

1. All the research data and results have been statistically validated ('Paired sample T-test', 'One sample T-tests', Anova, validation of scale, and so on) and are available (including the detailed questionnaire) on request from the author: gerald@mazzalovo.com.

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