

# The Embodiment of Female Body in Furniture Design

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**Abstract**—In furniture design, taking the female body as a form of modeling shows the expression of human desire. From the perspective of feminism, this paper analyzes the game of implicitly and explicitness of female body displayed in furniture design, and compares the form and expression content of the body modeling of different genders in contemporary furniture design, so as to analyze the difference of body expression content in furniture design. On this basis, it points out the creation characteristics and aesthetic experience of contemporary furniture design, and strives to apply the female image reasonably in furniture design.

**Keywords**—furniture design; female body; feminism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The female body that appears in the modern furniture design as the design object shows the way of expressing desire with its unique modeling form. With the improvement of social productivity and the change of productive relations, women are urged to re-examine themselves. From the perspective of design practice, the manifestation of female body in furniture design is also the manifestation of female self-consciousness. Therefore, from the perspective of feminism, the author compares the connotation of modeling form of male body in furniture design, so as to explore the implicit implication of female body in contemporary furniture design. It is of great practical significance for strengthening female care and pursuing dignity and equality in modern design.

## II. THE EMBODIMENT OF THE FEMALE BODY

The female body participates in the design creation process as the design object. Observing life from the perspective of women and expressing life with the sensitive image of women have always been the theme of modern design work of female image. Feminism is not only a theoretical form, but also a way of practice, and the female body as a form of design modeling is the expression of ideology. In furniture design, the female body is presented in an explicit or implicit way, and the appearance of the above two ways is also the creator's presentation of the female image.

The explicit embodiment of female body directly borrows female body as the design subject of furniture. The combination of the form of female body and furniture makes body furniture that has female body characteristic. The device design "Burning Giraffe" becomes the beginning of furniture of the "human body drawer": various drawer forms

either represent a sexual desire or subconscious inhibition and release."<sup>1</sup> Then came the life-size representative design "Hatstand, Table, and Chair" (hat stand, table and chair) designed and produced by British pop artist Allen Jones in the 1960s. In this work, voluptuous pose and hint of sexual abuse are respectively transformed into hat stand, table and chair. This adult entertainment work depicts a waitress in revealing clothes kneeling or lying down, which makes the work itself extremely erotic (see "Fig. 1"). The Dutch furniture designer Mario Philippona presents a series of designs that incorporate features of female body into wooden furniture (see "Fig. 2"). This series of works directly display the female body, with female body parts as the opening and closing part of furniture, in order to provoke consumers' desire to buy.



Fig. 1. Hatstand, Table, and Chair.

<sup>1</sup> Karen Bofinger. Furniture and the Body [J]. Form — the Making of Design, 2010(234). Quote from "Zhang Xin. Study on Body-furniture Design [J]. Design Research, 2013, 3(02): 44-48+55".



Fig. 2. Wooden furniture designed by Mario Philippona.

As for implicit expression of female body, different from the boldness of the former, the female furniture created by this technique is implicit, euphemistic and metaphorical. Sometimes a designer's idea comes directly from a particular character. In 1986, a humanoid chair on the Scandinavian international furniture fair was named after "Miss Eritler" (see "Fig. 3"). This work appeared as an abstract female body image, combining the applicable function of furniture with human body shape. Some cleverly conceived works can also show a high degree of artistry and practicality, such as the imitation of the shape of human body part known as the sofa chair named "Lip of the West". It is covered with red fabric, so that it is embodied as the passionate red lips of women (see "Fig. 4"), which is a metaphor for the physical characteristics of women. The furniture in this form is the product of the combination of Western abstract art and contemporary craft technology, and it shows the characteristic of human body part commonly and pays more attention to delivering content.

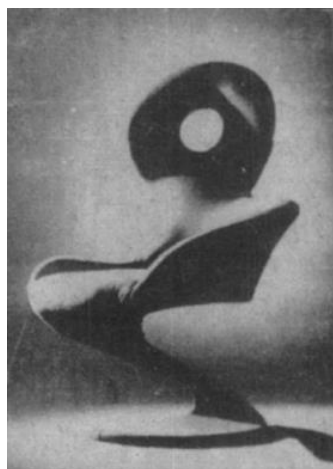


Fig. 3. Furniture named "Miss Eritler".

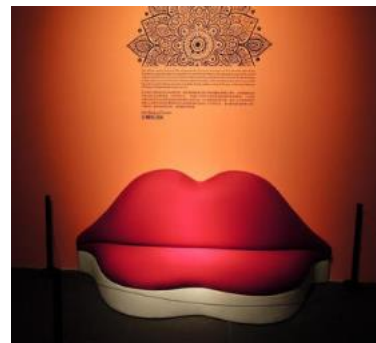


Fig. 4. Sofa named "lips of the west".

Taking the female body as the design target, whether in explicit narration or in implicit metaphor, all making female body the object of appreciation and fantasy, so as to stimulate the senses of the viewer. The explicit expression apply the female body directly on the modelling of furniture, so that it is exposed to the public view, directly expressing the female physical feature on the one hand, and putting the desire into plain sight on the other. The implicit expression is the euphemistic expression of the female body, which leaves the audience to imagine themselves. Both of them are narrations of the characteristics of female body. By distinguishing the modeling form of furniture from that of male, female body becomes the other of male body.

### III. BODIES OF THE TWO GENDERS IN FURNITURE DESIGN

As the human body is taken as the object in design, more designers adopt some elements of the human body in their works. For example, the ancient Greek architects created a solemn, strong Doric column by the image of strong male body and created a delicate, beautiful Ionic column by the image of soft female body, creating a myriad of beautiful design patterns for people's life. On this basis, the depiction of the male body corresponding to the female body is more dominant.

The male body in furniture design is distinct from female body somewhat. Dzmitry Samal, by contrast, likes to use male bodies as inspiration when it comes to body furniture. Samal's body furniture adopts a design philosophy designed to disarm hostility. Although some of the poses look awkward and clumsy, they still have an air of male's "sex appeal and power". In addition, the furniture has its structural framework made by metal connection inside, and is covered with density board and plastic outside, so it has better strength and quality, which reflects a certain practical function (see "Fig. 5"). In addition to the expression of muscle texture and male strength, the modeling characteristics of the male body exist in the furniture design through its own body. After the body becomes the dependency of furniture, the furniture design with sex and its desire as the theme is no longer out of reach. Lieshout and his team have created a number of male furniture such as the "Fertility Lamps" that communicate male reproductive rights with exaggerated male characteristics (see "Fig. 6"). These kinds of furniture is the consumption of sex and senses on the one hand, and the interpretation of the status of men on

the other, showing men rich in power and at the same time affirming their rights.



Fig. 5. Dzmitry Samal's body furniture.



Fig. 6. "Fertility Lamps".

In contrast to the dominance and power of the male body in the furniture design, the female body is the object of watching and appreciating, all of which are full of sexual hints. For example, the seat design of Pharrell Williams uses the male legs as the hind legs and the female legs standing on tiptoe as the front legs, indicating a metaphor of sex (see "Fig. 7"). At the same time, the frivolous form of standing on tiptoe implies that the lower limbs are used to convey the dynamics of love between men and women. So some people suggest that they should be "put on socks", not only to prevent the scratch by the ground, but also to prevent the sexual meaning that makes human body furniture more and more deviate from the serious, prudent tendency. The furniture designer, "Novembre claims that his idea is 'to give sex to furniture so that people can have fun with social roles and mixed rules'" <sup>2</sup>. The "Imperial Consort Chair" he designed allows the body of audience fit into the shape of a woman's body and feel close to the female body (see "Fig. 8"). The female body as used as a comfort tool for the user to regulate the mood, relieve the pressure and release the passion, and also becomes a homogeneous object of desire that triggers the imagination of the viewer.

In the patriarchal culture, vision has been given an excessive privilege, while the aesthetic view of the female body has always occupied an important position in the male visual culture. In such culture, the presupposed viewer is

always male, and the object of visual fascination is the female body. What is exposed and revealed is repeatedly anthropomorphized with female images. In the activity of male power's observation and positioning of female body, voyeurism and fetish have become the synonym of male and female bodies in furniture application. The expression content of body of the two gender derived from such design intention must also be different.



Fig. 7. Pharrell Williams's Chair.



Fig. 8. "Imperial Consort Chair".

#### IV. DIFFERENTIAL EXPRESSION OF BODY EMBODIMENT

Either it is promoting the viewer's association through furniture implicitly, or expressing the content directly by use of the female body, is taking the female body as the object of market consumption and physiological pleasure, and regarding this kind of desire as the creation motivation, so as to achieve the purpose of female body display. As Novembre emphasizes, "Artists of any age regard women as sacred objects, constantly painting and viewing them on sofas. Today, I use furniture as a form medium to express the

<sup>2</sup> "Zhang Xin. Study on Body-furniture Design [J]. Design Research, 2013, 3(02): 44-48+55". (in Chinese)

creation motive similar to that of artists — that timeless classic adoration with the female ketone body. That's why when I design seats I aim to make people feel like they're constantly approaching and touching women's bodies."<sup>3</sup> In fact, this metaphorical conflict is to achieve a specific purpose: to create a body desire to satisfy the pleasure. This kind of surrealistic female beauty puts the female body in the position of "watching" and "being watched", making it a kind of naked object of objectification.

In the design process, the female body has been placed under the view of male culture, and the female body has become the central content of the design theme. On the one hand, it conforms to the psychology of "watching" under the influence of patriarchal consciousness. On the other hand, the appearance of furniture design of male body as a symbol of dominant power also emphasizes the power intention of male designers themselves. "Design, as the medium between consumers and products, plays a leading role in industrial production and stimulates people's desire."<sup>4</sup> Designers cling to the narration of women's bodies, pursue the sensory experience of viewers, adopt concrete, straightforward, naked and even secular and metaphorical design language, and express their emphasis on physical consumption and physical pleasure as contempt for the dignity of women, thus provoking consumers' desire to buy. "Under the patriarchal framework, very few women are recorded in the design text. They are either identified by gender as designers and users of female products, or listed under the names of their husbands, fathers or brothers."<sup>5</sup> This allows male designers to place women's bodies in a state of "being watched". In other words, the expression of the female body is controlled by the male designer, who places the body in public in the gender power discourse construction.

Furniture design often inadvertently emphasizes women's nature of be appreciated, because the female body in this process is the female body under the view of patriarchal culture, and its nature of being appreciated or how beautiful it is, are also determined by men. The objectification of the female body in the patriarchal society is mainly reflected in that male power controls the female body through watching, examining and evaluating the female body, rearranging and setting it so that it is placed under the meaning of patriarchy and constantly transformed into objects. In the process of furniture design, women's bodies are further materialized and used as commodities, and then derived as objects to be appreciated, forcing women's bodies to appear as furniture design objects. This broke the humanism of freedom, equality and fraternity, and made furniture move towards the design form of male aesthetic stipulating female body.

## V. THE EQUAL CARE OF FEMINIST DESIGN

The appearance of female body as the object of furniture design breaks the equality proposition emphasized by feminism and makes furniture design move towards the expression of desire. Mike Featherstone has pointed out that "There are a lot of visual images that dominate the way people perceive bodies in consumer culture. Indeed, the internal logic of consumer culture depends on cultivating an insatiable need for imagination. To stimulate sales at the social level, numerous images are produced."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the application of female body image in furniture design has become the pursuit of consumer desire and commercialized as the source of inspiration for designers.

The female body thus becomes a kind of aesthetic perception from the perspective of male culture, while women's subjective feelings of beauty or independent personality were ignored. "This male cultural perspective is not only reflected in the fact that men always take the initiative in the aesthetic process, but also in the fact that they measure women according to whether they are sexy and attractive to men."<sup>7</sup> Designers often infer the whole knowledge from the male experience world to the female experience world so that the female design needs are determined by the male perspective. "The standard of 'design for women' is not formulated by women as the object of design, but by designers in a specific historical and cultural context"<sup>8</sup>.

Under this standard, the cultural purpose of designing for women turns to "viewing" and "being viewed", that is, the female body is used as a design work, in order to please others or yourself. This kind of design intention is not only out of contempt for female body image, but also indirectly contributes to the female's lack of their own main body, causing to the female esthetic gradually attached to male. From a female perspective, women have autonomy over their bodies. The narration in which the female body is sold and used as a part of the commodity until it is viewed is the desecration of the female image by the patriarchal ideology, which is a kind of gender provocation to the female and also shows the loss of the female dignity.

Female body language is used for reference by designers in furniture design out of curiosity and desire for female body. There are some successful cases, such as the "Uterus" chair designed by Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) in 1946, which was interpreted by the design circle as a masterpiece of organic design, with distinctive characteristics as his architectural design. Another example is the "Le Fablier" designed in 2010, which takes the form of a couple kissing as the main body of the wardrobe; and in the work "tavolone", a series of furniture products, such as tea tables

<sup>3</sup> Karen Bofinger. Furniture and the Body [J]. Form — the making of Design, 2010 (234).

<sup>4</sup> Li Wanjun. Criticism of Modern Design [M]. Wuhan University Press, 2018, page 17. (in Chinese)

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Buckley. The Product of Patriarchy: Feminist Criticism Towards Women and Design. 1986.

<sup>6</sup> (UK) Mike Featherstone. Consumer Culture and Postmodernism [M]. Liu Jingming Trans. Nanjing: Yiling Press, 2000, pp. 165-166.

<sup>7</sup> Bo Wei. "Interpreting the gender discourse in the magazine 'Love'", "Chinese female culture No.1", China Federation of Literary and Art. Beijing, 2000, p. 89. (in Chinese)

<sup>8</sup> Bao Yixi. Analysis of Feminist Design [J]. Decoration, 2006(12): 9-10. (in Chinese).



and beds are designed with a face as the theme; the body furniture designed by Pace's is not limited to the definition of female hemline, and integrated with the symbol of human body, his architectural logic quickly adapts to the needs of the new era; the application of waist-to-hip ratio to women of Coca-Cola in 1915 is a typical case of successful application of female body — the personification of the bottle makes the it present the curvy beauty of female body. This kind of game expression, which is based on the explicit and implicit expression of female body characteristics, combines the practicality and aesthetics organically, and reflects the concern for women. Therefore, while considering the application of female body elements in the creation process of furniture design, it is particularly necessary to take psychological care of women themselves.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the form of female body modeling in the furniture design is mainly reflected in the development and evolution of the design connotation. Strengthening the female care in modern design, enhancing women's sense of independence through the analysis of female body, and pursuing the design of female dignity and equality, is a process of self-seeking of feminism, but also a gradual realization of respect and equality process, is a kind of self-realization. Taking the female body as the object, observing the female body in furniture design to generate, identify and follow new moral standards from the perspective of feminism is of important practical significance for strengthening the human concern of modern design and pursuing gender equality.

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