



Mirror and Discipline: The Material Culture and Gender Coding of the Dressing Table

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Abstract. This paper uses Lacan's mirror theory and material culture studies to clarify how the dressing table evolved as a key indicator of gender politics and contributed to shaping gendered identities. It analyzes pivotal historical periods—ranging from the 18th-century court to modern times—to demonstrate the dressing table's role in both reinforcing and challenging how women are seen and see themselves through changes in its design, materials, and mechanisms. Applying Lacanian theory to design history, the paper establishes the dressing table as a significant material site of gender politics, thus providing new insights into how material culture actively participates in constructing and contesting gendered subjectivities.

Keywords: dressing table; mirror stage theory; gender studies; subject formation

1 Introduction

1.1 A Subsection Sample

The dressing table's evolution signals more than a change in furniture design; it embodies the materialization of gendered culture and power. This process makes visible how materiality and mirror use together shape gendered subjects. Initially functional and gender-neutral, dressing tables became strongly associated with women from the 18th to 19th centuries as their form and location changed and mirroring practices encouraged internalization of femininity. In the 20th century, modernist designs reduced overt gender associations, and recent designs aim to "degender" the object by breaking down traditional forms. Thus, the paper argues that the interplay of material form and mirroring mechanism at each stage maintains or transforms gender coding.

Current research on dressing tables in the field of design primarily focuses on their stylistic decoration, design, history, and case studies. Within this context, furniture history studies emphasize material form; the few studies that touch upon gender tend to prioritize symbolic meaning, whereas the perspective of material culture concentrates on the interaction between objects and people. Using a chronological framework, this study focuses on the dressing table—a gendered piece of furniture that has been overlooked—and integrates mirror theory with material form analysis. It examines how material culture and the mirroring mechanism contribute to its gender encoding and the construction of subjectivity, revealing its transformation from an instrument of disci-

pline into a vehicle for resistance. This provides a supplementary case study for micro-level research on the interaction between gender and materiality in design history.

2 The 18th-Century European Court: Gender Coding and the Construction of the Mirror Image

The early use of the dressing table did not exhibit a clear gender division; aristocratic men and women equally required its use. As the dressing table matured within European court culture and became closely associated with the boudoir—a gendered feminine space—it began to be linked with femininity. This chapter primarily discusses dressing table design in the 18th century, dominated by European court culture and aristocratic aesthetics. Taking the mechanical table designed for Madame de Pompadour by the artisans as an example (as shown in Figure 1), and connecting it to Pompadour's grooming rituals, the analysis of its luxurious material form and ritualized mirror mechanism aims to demonstrate that this dressing table laid the material and cultural foundation for the later gender coding that designated the dressing table as an exclusively feminine object. The mechanical table was designed for Madame de Pompadour by Jean-François Oeben and Roger Vandercruse and represents a typical dressing table of this period^[1]. In terms of materials, this mechanical table employed precious woods such as mahogany, bois de roi, and tulipwood for marquetry veneers, complemented by gilt-bronze mounts. These precious materials inherently possess qualities of scarcity and high value, serving as direct visual representations of wealth and status. Examining the symbolic power conveyed through craftsmanship and decoration, the marquetry design of the desktop is filled with artistic ingenuity. Elements such as the central architectural motif and figures representing music, painting, and love demonstrate a reverence for the arts. This aligns with Madame de Pompadour's influence in the artistic sphere, as her aesthetic and cultural pursuits are reflected in the furniture through masterful craftsmanship^[2]. More critically, the ducal crown at the center of the marquetry's upper section and the bronze coats of arms found throughout are direct expressions of power and identity^[3]. Here, material ornamentation becomes the visual grammar of a social gender script.

On the other hand, the mechanical table features an ingenious and meaningful mechanical structure. The table can be supported by hidden ratchets, allowing the centrally hinged arched panel to rise, which contains a rectangular panel that can rotate forward and be fixed in place. This structure enables the mechanical table to serve multiple functions, such as dressing, reading, and writing. This functionality is intrinsically linked to the transformation of the mirror mechanism: when the mirror is concealed for writing and reading, Madame de Pompadour's engagement with the text produces a form of self-contemplation. In this state, the "self" is not yet disciplined by the gaze of the other; instead, it is primarily an intellectual activity based on personal will. This resembles the chaotic yet authentic state of an infant before encountering its mirror image^[4], corresponding to the "pre-mirror stage"^[5]—a phase of chaotic self-awareness. However, when the tabletop rises, and the mirror is revealed for dressing, she becomes both the observer and the observed. Confronted with the mirror image, she momen-

tarily mistakes that "refined aristocratic woman" as another, and subsequently, through recognizing this image as belonging to herself, accomplishes what Lacan terms the "primary identification^[6]." The ideal image in the mirror becomes her "ideal-I." Simultaneously, as the director of the ritualized and publicized dressing ceremony, she is accompanied by aristocratic visitors who participate in or even assist with her adornment.



Fig. 1. Jean-François Oeben, Roger Vandercruse Lacroix, Mechanical Table, ca. 1761–1763.

3 The Pre-Modernist Era: Gender Reinforcement and Mirror Intrusion

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Western society, particularly against the backdrop of social transformation following World War I, witnessed profound shifts in women's social roles.^[7] This transformation prompted a re-examination of women's position in society, evolving into a new social and cultural topic^[4]. During this period of change, the gender coding of the dressing table solidified further in various forms, becoming a more distinctly "feminine-exclusive furniture. This was manifested not only in the absolute spatial exclusivity described above but also in the evolution of form and symbolism.

As the origin of modernist design, the Bauhaus school rejected ornamentation, emphasizing functionality through industrial materials and geometric forms. Marcel Breuer's 1923 "Worktable Dressing Table" (as shown in Figure 2) serves as a representative example of modernist design intervention: featuring a simple frame of walnut and lemon wood paired with polished nickel fittings, an open drawer, and a sliding tabletop design. Although it appeared "neutral," its narrow dimensions and suitability for the bedroom context still positioned it as a "domestic item for women." It is precisely the vanity's narrow and shallow dimensions, slender legs, and placement that indicate it was designed specifically for the modern woman, whose ideal figure was casually dressed, slender, and possibly girlish (or boyish). The geometric forms of the furniture also carry symbolic meaning, suggesting transgenderism. The circle (mirror and chair seat) represents the feminine, while the square (the angular parts of the furniture) represents the masculine principle (following Kandinsky's teachings). Furthermore, placing the phallic shape of the vanity's oval mirror atop the "hole-like" open square frame of part of the desktop embodies a subtle humor, while the operation of the desktop (sliding back and forth) evokes sexual activity, thereby defining the New Woman from an ambiguous and liberated sexual perspective^[8]. This shift not only altered the appearance of the vanity but also reshaped the relationship between the subject and the furniture. The vanity was no longer merely an object enforcing societal

norms for the "beautiful woman"; it became a material platform for the New Woman's self-expression and social identity.

Despite catering to both traditional and emerging images of women during this period and employing different design languages—one of aesthetic imagery and the other of minimalist functionality—dressing tables in this era all exerted profound effort on the core proposition of "the binding of the dressing table to women." They either reinforced or attempted to deconstruct traditional gender codings, collectively participating in the construction of the female subject's image. They served as vivid footnotes in the realm of material culture to the transformation of women's social roles against the backdrop of post-World War I societal change, witnessing the ongoing contest between gender discipline and subjective awakening within everyday objects.



Fig. 2. Marcel Breuer, Worktable Dressing Table, 1923.

4 Late Modernism: Gender Solidification and Mirror Alienation

Over time, the post-World War II economic boom in the United States fueled consumerism, which in turn propelled the evolution of design and culture. By this period, the dressing table had undergone several transformations. The basic combination of a table and a mirror had been shaped by designers into various forms and expressions. However, the association between women and the dressing table had become an almost taken-for-granted premise. Raymond Loewy's Valet 2000/50 dressing cabinet, designed for men (as shown in Figure 3), thus becomes a notable object for inquiry. Did it successfully degender the dressing table? Inspired by Space Age aesthetics and technology, this piece of furniture fully utilized the properties of plastic materials. Its exterior resembles an eight-drawer cabinet, yet its functionality is ingeniously designed: the flip-top lid contains an embedded mirror and an accessory tray, while the symmetrical drawer panels on the outside are paired to form deeper storage compartments. The integrated, sinuous handle eliminates the need for separate hardware. Equipped with spherical casters at the base for easy mobility, it adapts to open-plan home layouts. Its form continues the convention of being designed for standing use by men, which fundamentally diverges from the design and conception of a traditional dressing table. In essence, its intended function can be understood as that of a valet or wardrobe cabinet.

From the above, it is evident that this dressing cabinet designed for men differs significantly from traditional dressing tables intended for women. The concealed mirror and the requirement for standing use serve to avoid prolonged male contemplation before the mirror. Features such as the built-in cigar box emphasize its storage function, thereby diminishing the emphasis on the act of dressing or grooming itself. This inversely confirms that the dressing table has been thoroughly gendered as an exclusively feminine object. According to Lacan's view, human desire is the desire of the big Other (symbolizing the social order, which varies across eras)^[4]. Within the symbolic order (the big Other) of patriarchy, a prolonged, decorative self-gaze is constructed as a feminine, vain desire. Male desire is directed toward action, production, and the conquest of the external world. Consequently, items designed for men, such as this one, must negate any association with grooming and gazing by concealing the mirror, emphasizing a standing posture, and highlighting storage functions, thereby demarcating a boundary from femininity^[9]. This reveals the power dynamics within visual culture: men are the subjects who look, while women are the objects being looked at^[10]. Men are not required to engage in the alienation of an ideal self through the mirror of dressing. Consequently, this dressing table not only fails to accomplish the degendering of the dressing table, but also deepens the solidification of the dressing table as exclusively feminine within the gendered binary of the dressing table itself.



Fig. 3. Raymond Loewy, Valet 2000/50 dressing cabinet, 1969.

5 Contemporary: Gender Dissolution and Mirror Fragmentation

Contemporary design operates within a context intertwined with globalization, digitalization, and consumer culture, while simultaneously confronting challenges of sustainability and social responsibility. It continuously reshapes its role against a backdrop of diversity and interdisciplinarity. This has led contemporary designers to gradually begin deconstructing and challenging historically long-entrenched mechanisms of gender and self-identity.

The mirror in traditional dressing tables served the function of stabilizing the self and confirming identity, a function often continuously alienated through societal gender norms and the external gaze. South Korean designer Byonghoon Choi's 2013 work *Beyond the Image 013-01* (as shown in Figure 4) reveals the inherent fragility of the mirroring mechanism itself. Through methods of distortion, dissolution, and re-

construction, it opens new possibilities for subject identity. This vanity consists of two contrasting parts. The sword-shaped upper section, made of polished stainless steel, rests on a similarly gleaming steel disc, its simple yet towering form drawing inspiration from ancient bronze mirrors. In contrast, the base is a solid, circular piece of natural stone, chosen for its color, natural grain, and weathered surface. According to the designer, "Beyond its functionality and pure image reflection, this piece (especially the mirror) as a whole aims to provoke self-reflection in the user^[1]."

When a user attempts to locate their reflection, they are fragmented and divided by the structure at the mirror's center. This design violently interrupts a three-century-long tradition of self-gazing. In Lacanian theory, this "unified mirror image" is precisely the prerequisite for the emergence of the ideal-I, serving as the entry point for the individual into the symbolic order and for the acceptance of social norms and gender scripts. The absence of a unified mirror image prevents the establishment of the narcissistic and alienated self described by Lacan, compelling the person before the mirror to reflect upon and recognize that the self pursued in the mirror has always been merely a fantasy. The foundation of the gendered ideal-I is thus destroyed, making it possible to enter what Lacan terms the Real^[11]. Ultimately, this dressing table serves the purpose of awakening the subject and questioning the gender scripts of social discipline. However, it must be emphasized that this mirror image equally invites anyone standing before it to embark on a quest for self; it functions as a thought-provoking work of art, not merely as a woman's dressing table.



Fig. 4. Choi Byung-hoon, *Beyond the Image* 013-01, 2013.

6 Conclusion

In summary, the trajectory of the vanity table's development is not merely a formal evolution within the history of furniture, but more importantly, a concrete inscription of gender politics in everyday materiality. From its initial position as an object for "being looked at," to the differential encoding of traditional and new feminine images reflected in the vanity during the early modernist period, and further to the process of solidifying its exclusive feminine attributes under consumerist culture, the vanity table has consistently been situated within the dialectical tension between gender discipline and subjective resistance. Contemporary designers, through strategies of distorting mirrors and deconstructive materiality, have further ruptured the stability of the mirroring mechanism, opening possibilities for overthrowing the gendered script of the vanity

table. The theoretical contributions of this paper lie in: 1) expanding the application of Lacan's mirror stage theory within design history, transplanting the mirror mechanism from a psychological context to the study of furniture design and material culture; 2) emphasizing the academic value of the vanity table as a "material carrier of gender politics," revealing the logic of social power it carries through its form, materiality, and interaction with the mirror. In this way, this paper not only enriches the case genealogy of interdisciplinary research on gender and design history but also provides methodological insights for further exploring how material culture participates in the construction of subjectivity.

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