

Do you have to be cognitively connected to your landscape to have an appreciation for materials?

Manipulating materials and natural resources is something man has been doing since the beginning of time. It is inevitable that as the human race evolves both socially and technologically, we then begin to relate to objects and materials differently. In the process, however, this evolution impacts the way we use, interact and associate with particular materials and/or artefacts. An important consideration when asking why our appreciation increases or decreases is the environmental context in which we see or have seen the material. Because of our rapidly advancing social landscape, for many this experience is often done so in an already processed form, from significantly altered materials.

One's relationship with a material can often be understood by their perceived spiritual identity within the landscape. The Vikings as a civilisation had an extremely deep understanding of their surrounding environment. One thing that came with this was their ability to technologically advance materially far quicker than their European neighbours, both on land and sea. Their Norse gods were particularly influential in this advancement as can be referenced in many physical artefacts found from that period of time. Thor, one of their most respected gods, second to Oden (O'Donoghue 2007). Was thought to be a hammer-wielding 'protector' of the land, in spite of the fact that his hammer 'Mjölner' is related to other European words for thunder, it can be seen that his protectoral role is transferred to the physical process of forging. Blacksmiths used hammers to forge iron and steel into all sorts of objects, one of the most obvious being weaponry such as swords and axes (Price 2010). But blacksmiths also created everyday tools, which were then used to manipulate all forms of raw materials. It can be seen from that symbolism of the hammer, they had from the very beginning, engrained in their culture was an appreciation for the workmanship of raw materials into functional objects (Nevelson et al. 1972). When transforming something from its raw state the Vikings would look at its natural form, for example, to pick a section of timber which grew a certain way to then naturally add strength to the end object. Accepting that nature is at the centre forced them to broaden their expectations of what something was or was not, for example when making pitch it's near impossible to imagine that a physical living tree with

the addition of heat can be destructively distilled into a semi-solid black substance within a number of hours (Destructive Distillation of Wood n.d.) (Leirpoll 2002). But it's because of this deeper understanding of what a material could be in its natural environment, that they could then go on to create products which were natural and at the same time highly efficient.

Knowledge of the land is something that can also be passed down in a metaphorical sense, which in turn then leads to a far greater recognition for materials. Through the dreaming, it's understood that Aboriginals actually believed they were born from the land. This belief that the land essentially was their mother, brings with it an obligation to care and nurture everything that grows within the land. Because they had a very strong affiliation of what the landscape was and believed parts of the land were once created from 'totemic' animals (with examples such as the snake forming rivers still inhabiting the landscape today)(The Dreaming n.d.). This in turn forced them to see the land, not as an adverse object which had to be overcome but rather harmoniously worked with. When European settlers first arrived in the 1700's (Role of Aboriginal people in the exploration of Australia n.d.), they had no knowledge of their surroundings and the abundantly available 'bush tucker' around them. This forced them to bring their own source of food with them. However, when going on expeditions for extended periods of time it wasn't feasible to carry large quantities of food aboriginal guides were brought along just so that they were able to survive. Although the Aborigines practices perhaps seemed unconventional, there was a very effective methodical approach to their practices(e.g. fire stick farming, middens etc.) (Bliege Bird et al. 2008). Because of aboriginals' spiritual connection with the land they were able to identify the 'potential' of a material. An example of this would be extracting the toxic thiaminase from 'nardoo seeds' (commonly known as wattle seeds) to then make it edible, a skill many believe European explorers 'Burke and Wills' didn't execute properly (Role of Aboriginal people in the exploration of Australia n.d.). When thinking of what I can make with the material tar I have tried to take a similar approach, in highlighting its waterproofing qualities as opposed to its texture or smell. To put into context if you actually haven't seen what water over time can do to timber in its raw state, you would have no comprehension that waterproofing it is a positive.

Advancing technologically basically creates and puts objects into a landscape, which we 'want' but don't necessarily 'need'. The industrial revolution in recent years has significantly altered the setting in which we view and experience artefacts. Thus also changing societies connection with the material to a more idealistic connection in contrast with as a pure material connection or a metaphysical spiritual connection (Latour 2007). With objects being manufactured on such a large scale, they are often carried over into your surrounding environment as both functional objects and at their end of life, if they're not able to be recycled will become 'rubbish'. This then creates an environment which is basically dominated by 'unnatural' matter, creating an augmented reality of what the landscape should look like. The landscape is often the one that is modified to accommodate the needs of the object, for example, asphalt is laid on most main roads so that heavy cars can now move seamlessly over it at high speeds (History of Roads n.d.). Moulds have the potential to pump out millions of high tolerance objects, however often attached to these objects is a planned lifespan of only a few years, this degenerative practice is called planned obsolescence. This then makes a product which once may have been considered a piece of craftsmanship, in its initial conceptual stage to a repeatedly morbid eyesore (Latour 2007). What makes objects that are crafted by hand intriguing is the subtle or sometimes not so subtle references to how the raw materials would once have lived in their natural environment (Ingold 2007). Though even with deliberately imperfect objects without backing knowledge of the landscape in the first place, it's difficult to attach sentimental value.

Understanding what an object means may often become misconstrued. It is clear however that there is an inherent relationship between appreciation and understanding the process of transforming living material from its landscape into a finished end product. But is it possible that we have advanced to the stage where the initial raw materials have little to no meaning? As long as the processed raw material conforms to it's desired shape? Once the object has been manipulated from the processed material it can be seen as then carrying its very own personality and story to what happened along the manufacturing process. However, when the object has established itself, could it potentially create it's very own harmonious landscape, much the same as it had in its living raw state?

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