

# From Philippe Starck's Design Product 'Arm Chair' to Interpret Formalism

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## Abstract

People usually appreciate art and design works on the basis of their subjective judgment. However, with the emergence and development of formalism, people gradually have different opinions towards evaluating beauty. This essay mainly combined the formalism concept and Philippe Starck's design product to explain what is 'formalism'. This essay will analyse the characteristics of Philippe Starck's design products 'Miss Lacy' and 'Pat Conley'. Moreover, this essay will explain the concept of formalism. In addition, this essay will be based on Starck's armchairs' appearance characteristics and how formalism theory is embodied in Starck's design works.

## Keywords

Miss Lacy; Pat Conley; Formalism; Philippe Starck; Aesthetic; Design.

## 1. Introduction

When talking about Philippe Starck's design works, people may think of various strangely-shaped furniture, daily necessities, and even architectures. Philippe Starck's unique design products have raised people's interest in his particular 'aesthetic concept' (VanHouten, A., 2013). However, should we try to understand the connotation behind the products? Or do we only need to focus on the appearance of the design products? In view of Starck's unique design style, using formalism theory to grasp Starck's design work could be an excellent way to help us better understand the meaning of the work itself (Lloyd, P., & Snelders, D., 2003). This essay aims to connect formalism and Philippe Starck's design work to explain how formalism affects people's aesthetics.

The objective of this essay lies in the following steps. Firstly, this essay will briefly introduce Philippe Starck's design products — armchair 'Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy'. What's more, this essay will give a more detailed explanation of Starck's armchairs' ('Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy') characteristics. In addition, this essay will be based on Philippe Starck's armchairs ('Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy') to interpret how the 'formalism concept' is embodied in his products. Finally, this essay will conclude the options we have mentioned in the former paragraphs and discuss how the formalism concept affects people's cognition of art and design.

## 2. Philippe Starck's Design Product — Armchair

As we have mentioned in the introduction part, this essay will give an introduction to Starck's armchair — 'Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy'.



**Figure 1.** Armchair 'Pat Conley', designed by Phillip Starck)



**Figure 2.** Armchair Driade 'Miss Lacy', designed by Phillip Starck)

However, it could be difficult for people to connect these two products with armchairs only from the appearance. Let's first talk about the armchair 'Pat Conley'. From figure 1, we can see that this armchair has a clear and simple structure, and it only consists of one curved plane and two pillars. In terms of its appearance, many people would think that the 'Pat Conley' looks more like a 'recliner' or a 'clothes hanger' rather than an armchair. Moreover, regardless of practicality, if we only focus on the appearance of the 'Pat Conley', we can say that whether in shape or color, this armchair is a beautiful design product which full of artistic and design sense.

In addition, if we only look at the armchair 'Miss Lacy' from its appearance, we can also say that this armchair looks more like a piece of artwork. As Lee (2016) used mentioned in his article, "Characterized by the expertly pierced shiny mirrored stainless steel, the armchair 'Miss Lacy' represents and makes accessible a baroque lace by transforming it into an embracing shell". From Lee's introduction and analysis, we can realize the cultural background contained in this armchair design product. However, if we pay attention to the practicability of this armchair, we may come to a conclusion that 'Miss Lacy' is uncomfortable because it is made of stainless steel and its texture is excessively hard. Moreover, its complicated decorative patterns may also make it uncomfortable to sit up.

From the former introduction and analysis of the armchair 'Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy', we may come to a conclusion that these two armchairs both have a unique design sense and beautiful appearance, but their practicability could be a little 'worrying'. Compared to the other normal armchairs, 'Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy' can be considered beautiful but impractical products.

Philippe Starck has always made his design products unique but confusing. However, Starck's unique design style has also made people both like and confused by his design products. Here, this essay will combine Starck's design products with formalism to interpret the 'beauty' of his design works and explain the formalism aesthetic.

### 3. Formalism and Starck's Armchair

As Bowman (2020) has stated, "Formalism focuses on object's compositional elements, emphasizes the color, shape, texture, and other perceptual aspects of the object". On the other hand, formalism does not emphasize the object's meaning, historical and social context". Therefore, if we look back at Starck's armchair 'Pat Conley' and 'Miss Lacy' from the perspective of formalism, then we can pay more attention to the 'perceptual aspects' of the armchair rather than go deep into understanding the designer's intention and the creative background of the design work. Thus, people can straightforwardly observe the armchairs' appearances to get their own feelings about these two armchairs. For example, someone might think 'Pat Conley' is a deck chair and directly use 'Pat Conley' as a deck chair. Although the practicability of the armchair 'Pat Conley' can be dissatisfying, it still has a fluent shape and nice color matching, and it will be a good choice for people to use it as a decoration.



**Figure 3.** Armchair 'Pat Conley', designed by Phillip Starck)

People usually say that there is no lowliness and nobleness in art, but a lot of people still appreciate art pieces from a very subjective view (Crippa, E., 2016). However, with the emergence and development of formalism, many people gradually learn to evaluate art pieces from a more objective point of view. From the perspective of formalism, if people put aside politics, race, gender, social class, and all the other factors only focus on the artwork itself, then they will have a more realistic and intuitive insight (Challinor, M., 1971). However, it could also be too superficial if we only create and interpret artworks or design works from a formalist point of view. Formalism is a way to help people better interpret the artwork itself and put some subjective prejudices aside (Morgan, B., 2014). However, formalism sometimes could also be too idealistic, so that ignore the connotation and essence of creation.

Greenberg (1972) has stated that "Form has not only opens a way to inspiration but also act as a tool for people to express inspiration". From Greenberg's point of view, we can conjecture that many artists and designers probably embodied their emotions in the artworks or design products they created, but what is more important is that artists and designers can express their instant inspiration in their favorite form. We may not know what Philippe Starck thought

when he was creating his armchairs, but we can still ‘interpret’ his unique inspirations through the appearance of his design products.

The enrichment and development of formalism theory is a long process (Moore, K., 2013), from the age of enlightenment philosopher Kant’s interpretation of beauty to post-modernism age Clement Greenberg’s criticism of art, people’s understanding of aesthetics is constantly changing. As Rose (2019) has stated, “Different people have a different interpretation of beauty, we cannot judge whether people’s understanding of beauty is right or wrong”. Probably some people would think Starck’s armchair (‘Pat Conley’ and ‘Miss Lacy’) might be too excessively emphasize expression and neglect of practicality. However, from the perspective of formalism, the perceptual aspects of the armchairs could be far more critical than their practical value. Formalism is a way for people to understand and interpret art, and formalism has also provided a new way for people to appreciate art.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this essay, we first briefly introduce the designer Philippe Starck and his unique design style. Moreover, we have also introduced two of Starck’s representative products — armchair ‘Pat Conley’ and ‘Miss Lacy’ and discussed the appearance and characteristics of the armchairs. In addition, this essay has introduced the concept of formalism and the characteristics of formalism. What’s more, this essay has also explained the peculiarity of formalism aesthetics and discussed why Starck’s armchair is ‘beautiful’ from the perspective of formalism.

The development of formalism theory has a long history. From Kant’s interpretation of formula in the enlightenment age to people’s criticism of art in the post-modernism period, formalism theory has been constantly enriched and influenced people’s interpretation of beauty. People usually say there is no lowliness and nobleness in art (Crippa, E., 2016). However, many people are used to appreciating artworks (so do design works) with their subjective point of view. Formalism has broken people’s inherent concept of art appreciation to a great extent (Sarafianos, A., 2010). Formalism empathizes with artwork’s perceptual aspects rather than social content, which has also provided a new perspective for people’s artistic creation and appreciation. However, formalism could also be too ‘impracticable’ for people who work on the design. As designers, we can design products and embody our inspirations and emotions in our products, but we actually cannot ignore the practicability of the products. Generally speaking, a good design product should be both beautiful and practical. Starck’s design products have made an innovation in the design field, which inspired people that a design product can also be an artwork, although the practicability of this product may not be so satisfactory.

In conclusion, formalism has brought changes and inspirations to people’s aesthetic perception, and formalism has also inspired people to break the secular and social class concept to create artworks. Although formalism could be too idealistic when people associate it with the design and production field, it still can stimulate artists and designers to create their ideal works.

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