**Truth to Materials**

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The concept of truth to material develops from ideas of true and false design consolidated by Henry Cole,

Owen Jones, and Richard Redgrave in the “design reform movement” of the 1850s. It is one of three key values

of the Arts and Crafts movement, along with “form following function” and “fitness for purpose.” All three

were taken up by the modern movement and remained central to modernist design theory.

Truth to material suggests that the material should be “respected,” it precluded all “visual lies,” such as

veneer, along with processes that looked like handwork, for instance stamped metal or wood. It was refined

further in modernist design where decoration was largely eliminated to show the inherent beauty of the

material itself. In the studio crafts this was developed into a concept of purity of discipline. In this, for example,

“true” ceramic was reduced to throwing only, as throwing was unique to clay; while slab building and other

techniques could be replicated in other materials. This concept of truth to materials is closely related to that

developed by the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg regarding true expression in paint.

The concept of truth to material was particularly problematic when applied to cast iron in the

nineteenth century and plastics in the twentieth century. The nature of casting was such that the material was

utilized most effectively in complex decorative molds and it was very difficult to define what “truth” meant

when the material was, effectively, liquid. The Arts and Crafts movement avoided the issue by considering

such materials products of capitalist industry, in itself morally bankrupt, inhuman, and therefore untrue.

Modernists, on the other hand, wished to embrace industrial technologies. They adopted an idea that the

material should be true to its time, therefore plastic should be employed for entirely new applications where it

was appropriate to technological demands, such as electrical equipment, and should not be used merely to

substitute for others.

Postmodernists progressively discredited the idea of truth to material after the publication of Robert

Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). However, this does not prevent it still having considerable currency in the critical assessment of designed goods.