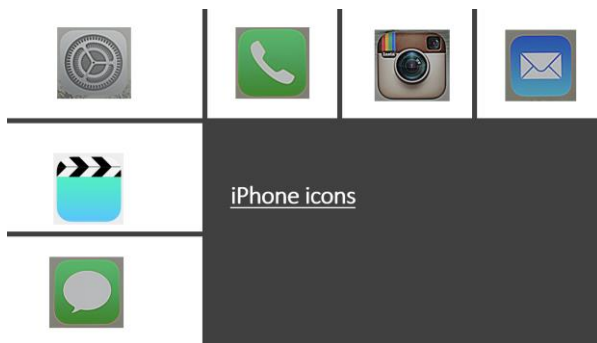


Skeuomorphs Assembly

I'd like to talk this morning about skeuomorphs and why they are important to you. It is probably an unfamiliar word to you, but I guarantee that you are very aware of the idea that the word describes. There's no reason why you should have come across the word skeuomorph. It doesn't even appear in the Cambridge Dictionary and as I typed this the computer underlined it in red as a spelling mistake. Although the word is obscure, the idea behind skeuomorphs may just have something to tell us about how we think and feel. What is a skeuomorph? It is an image or design that draws upon how that thing used to look, or how it was once used.

That sounds complicated, so perhaps it's better to show you. Skeuomorphs are very important to technology. Here are some iPhone icons that will be familiar to you.



You will recognise them instantly: here you have 'settings', 'phone', 'camera', 'emails', 'videos' and 'texts'. You know the images, but have you noticed what the images have in common? They are all skeuomorphs, as they refer back to how those functions were performed in the past. Look at the 'settings' icon. This controls the workings of the machine. In the past, machines ran off cogs and gears. Your phone doesn't have any moving parts in it at all, but its settings are represented by the way the previous generation of machines worked. Now you have the idea. Next we have the 'phone' icon, which is not a smart phone but the old device that I used in my childhood and you probably hardly use at all. The 'camera' is an older camera, which would use photographic film and is completely unlike the tiny aperture on the iPhone. 'Emails' are represented by an actual letter, which would travel through the post, be delivered by a postman and wait on your mat until you came home. 'Videos' are represented by the clapperboard for films and 'texts' by a spoken exchange. In each case, the new is represented by the old.

We can track skeuomorphs from the digital to the real world.

From the digital to the real world



Here you can see a rubbish bin from the real world used as an icon for deleting something, and a real shopping cart represented in the virtual store that is Amazon. On the far side, we see a modern electric light, but in this case, the light evokes memories of when lighting was provided by candles rather than incandescent bulbs and electricity.

Once you begin to spot skeuomorphs, you see them everywhere. What about speed cameras? These are the nasty devices that lie in wait to snatch points off your license or catch you with a fine. So they are represented in the most comforting way possible – as a Box Brownie style camera from a hundred years ago.

Speed Cameras



Sometimes skeuomorphs can go the other way too – so far we have seen our modern world represented by reference to the past. But the futuristic communicators from the first version of Star Trek were referenced by early mobile phones.

Star Trek communicator/early mobile phones



Design devices that are necessary in some contexts can also be transferred across as skeuomorphs. Take the spokes on a bicycle wheel. They are important as they hold the shape of the bike wheel and allow it to function as it should. But they have somehow leapt across onto the design of car wheels, where they serve no such purpose. They appear on cars just because we have grown accustomed to seeing them and it would look odd if they did not appear.

Spokes on wheels



Where else are skeuomorphs? You probably wore a skeuomorph over the weekend. The rivets on your jeans don't serve any practical purpose – they are a hang-over from when denim was too thick to be held together just by stitching and needed metal links to hold them together. Now they are there for reassurance and because you expect to see them.



All my examples have been from modern times, but the idea of skeuomorphs has been around for a while. As with the iPhone icons, any new technology will often be interpreted or presented in terms of the more familiar technology that preceded it. Take the first cars. Their very name invites the thought of a skeuomorph: they were called 'horseless carriages', referencing back to the technology that preceded them.

Horseless carriages



The likeness went further than the name. Their design was clearly influenced by horse-drawn vehicles, and an early 1890's car actually had a carved wooden horse stuck on the front of it. Going further back in time, the decorations on Greek temples show that the idea of the skeuomorph was familiar to the Ancient Greeks. In the Doric style, certain features of stone temples, such as the guttae and triglyphs, look like the design of earlier wooden temples. They can be found on the most famous temple of them all, the Parthenon at Athens.



Elements of Doric architecture: guttae and triglyphs



We can go even further back. The very first clay pots are called linear groove ware pottery. The style dates back to 5500–4500 BC. The distinctive design that give it its name is striking – it resembles the intricate pattern of woven cords that make up wicker baskets, which would have been the earlier means of carry things around.



Skeuomorphs are one of the very first things humans invented.

So far we have considered skeuomorphs in terms of offering familiarity and comfort, when we have to come to terms with something new or revolutionary. However, they can work in other ways too. Take the central tower of Dover Castle.

Dover Castle



The Tower of London



Built between 1179 and 1188 by Henry II, it is designed to resemble the Tower of London even though that tower's design was outdated by the 12th century. The Tower of London was originally built by the Romans, and was improved by William the Conqueror. Although the design at Dover was weaker defensively than it should have been, its actual effectiveness was less important to Henry II than the opportunity to link himself as a new king with William the Conqueror to make a political point. He was stating in stone that the chaos and civil war of his predecessor Stephen was over and matters had returned to their former stability. Here the skeuomorph was asserting authority.

In the same sort of way, when Tintagel Castle was built in 1233 by Richard, 1st Earl of Cornwall, the castle was built to establish a connection with the legends of King Arthur. The Earl quite deliberately built the castle in a self-consciously old-fashioned style to make it appear more ancient.



Tintagel Castle

Here we see the skeuomorph again, this time as medieval reflection of Arthur's legendary importance.

Skeuomorphs can also be auditory. The shutter-click sound emitted by most digital cameras or smart phones when taking a picture is an auditory skeuomorph. They are totally silent, but you want to know that a picture has been taken. Another familiar example is the paper-crumpling sound when a document is trashed.

About ten years ago, car manufacturers had to respond to new safety legislation that altered the sound of the car door closing. Doors were much more tinny sounding, rather than closing with a satisfying 'clunk'. Engineers went to work introducing dampeners to muffle the tinny sound and produce the more expensive sounding deeper note. At the same time they altered the locking mechanism to give it the right sort of click. More reassuring skeuomorphs. Finally, hole in the wall ATM machines make a ruffling sound to indicate they are counting out money. They don't need to make this noise – it is a skeuomorph.

So we are near the end of the assembly. I hope I have opened your eyes to an element of your world. One that you knew, without previously being aware of. Skeuomorphs are everywhere. They are used to help you navigate an intuitive path though some new device or new context. They are intended to reassure you and make something feel familiar or unthreatening. They can be political: sending a message of continuity, a message of enduring power or authority. They can manipulate your emotions. As a species, it seems that skeuomorphs have always been important. I suppose that they remind us that we can only make sense of the future in terms of the past. I'm reminded of the great last line of the novel *The Great Gatsby*: 'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.' The past is essential: like rowers we are forging forward, but our gaze is forever

backwards. Although you had never heard the word before this morning, now you know the important role that skeuomorphs play in shaping and guiding our thoughts, perceptions and emotions. They also remind us that our history is more than a memory of what has happened – it is a powerful force shaping our future. Perhaps we should rethink the importance and role of our own History Department – it has one foot in the past but its other foot is firmly planted in the future.