

Research on the Contemporary Design Translation and Consumer Culture of 19th-Century French Literary Material Symbols

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ABSTRACT

19th-century French literature holds a significant position in the history of world literature, with its works renowned not only for their profound intellectual content and exquisite artistic expression, but also for portraying the material and cultural characteristics of contemporary society through delicate depiction. Meanwhile, fashion, as a non-subjective social phenomenon, experienced unprecedented development in 19th-century France, becoming an important product intertwining culture and economy. Research shows that the fashion system of this period not only reflected the aesthetic tastes of mainstream groups but also shaped the spirit of the era and social identity through symbolic expression. However, with the rise of contemporary consumer society, why material symbols in 19th-century French literature can be reinterpreted and translated into modern design language has become a question worth exploring. Behind this phenomenon of translation lie not only the mechanisms of signifier and signified conversion in semiotic theory but also the appropriation and reconstruction of historical culture by consumer society. Therefore, this thesis wants to study from this angle why the 19th century material symbols are suitable for current translation and what they mean in consumer culture.

Keywords: French Literature; Material Symbols; Design Translation; Consumer Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

France in the 19th century is not only the cradle of modern literature, but also a society with a particularly developed material culture. The industrial revolution and urban development have brought about a new social relationship centered on commodities, which has turned daily items such as clothes, furniture and interior decoration into symbols that can see social status and cultural power. At the same time, French literature in the 19th century absorbed this symbol system by describing matter in detail, which made the symbol of goods have profound social significance. Our next analysis will focus on the operation of material symbols in French literature in the 19th century, and see how they convey concrete social significance through class and gender. It will study how current designs and brands use these material symbols to spread culture and make more money at the same time. In this process, we will use the theories of semiotics, cultural reproduction and consumer society to help us better understand the relationship between literature and consumer culture. ^{[1][2]} In addition, this study also wants to provide academic support for current design and brand management, and help them make better use of historical and cultural resources and make more creative practices under the background of globalization. By reflecting on the problems of material symbols in modern transformation in the 19th century, it hopes to provide useful reference for cultural inheritance and sustainable development.

This study wants to tell us how these symbols “travel” in modern society and what inspiration they have for design and brand management by carefully looking at the material symbols in French literary works in the 19th century.

2. ANALYSIS OF MATERIAL SYMBOLS FROM A MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Semiotic Theory

Semiotics is a discipline that studies the symbol system. Through the core concepts of “signifier” and “signified”, it provides an important tool for us to analyze the meaning of material symbols in literary works. Energy refers to the form or appearance of a symbol, but refers to the concept or meaning behind the symbol. In the French literature of the 19th century, material symbols such as furniture, clothes and artworks often became cultural carriers with profound symbolic significance, not just their own appearance. Through semiotic theory, we can reveal how these material symbols combine signifier and signified to construct complex social relations and cultural connotations. Therefore, semiotic theory can not

only help us understand the symbolic meaning of material symbols in French literature in the 19th century, but also provide theoretical basis for contemporary design and brand to reinterpret these symbols.

2.2 Theory of Cultural Reproduction

Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory emphasizes that culture is not an unchangeable heritage, but is constantly recreated, changed, discussed and even innovated in society through education, family, media and daily practice, so that it can be passed down all the time. This theory points out that cultural capital-including knowledge, taste, behavior norms and even material symbols-has symbolic value in a specific social structure and can also be transformed into economic or social capital. In the French literature in the 19th century, material symbols, as an important part of culture, participated in the process of cultural reproduction in the society at that time in a special way. In today's society, these material symbols will reappear and spread in new ways, such as products produced through brand cooperation or retro elements used in fashion design, so that cultural reproduction can be realized. This process shows that the material symbols in the 19th century have not lost their value because of the changes of the times, but have revived in today's society through the mechanism of cultural reproduction. The theory of Cultural reproduction provides an important framework for us to understand this phenomenon, which reveals the dynamic changes of material symbols in different historical backgrounds and their significance to cultural inheritance.

2.3 Theory of Consumer Society

The theory of consumer society put forward by Jean Baudrillard and others emphasizes that social consumption is no longer for the practical function of things, but for the symbolic meaning they represent. The value of goods is no longer determined by its use value or exchange value, but is dominated by their differences and symbolic meanings as "signs". Consumption is no longer to meet basic needs, but has become a social coding and decoding language system. People declare their social status, aesthetic taste and which group they belong to by consuming specific brands, styles or designs. This "symbolic consumption" forms the core logic of post-industrial society and changes the way of production, communication and identity construction. From this theoretical point of view, the material symbols in French literature in the 19th century have gained a new explanation and application in the current design and brand operations. Nowadays, brands like to use the retro patterns, colors and patterns of the 19th century to package their products into symbolic commodities with cultural added value, so as to meet consumers' demand for individuality, taste and social recognition. Moreover, the theory of consumer society tells us that current consumption is not only an economic behavior, but also a cultural practice-consumers shape their identity and social status by buying these symbolic goods. This phenomenon is particularly obvious in the popularity of co-branded products. People buy not only the things themselves, but also the cultural significance and social symbols behind them. Therefore, the theory of consumer society provides important support for studying the translation of material symbols in contemporary designs and brands in the 19th century, and reveals the deep logic of symbol consumption in contemporary society.

3. THE OPERATION OF "OBJECTS" IN THE 19TH-CENTURY CONTEXT

3.1 Class Dimension: Material Symbols in Home and Clothing

3.1.1 Symbols of Home and Clothing of the Aristocratic Class

In 19th-century French literature, how to decorate and wear clothes in the aristocratic family is not only to show their wealth, but also to represent their social status and power. Balzac, in his work *"The Human Comedy"*, shows how the decoration of furniture and murals quietly tells everyone the class identity of the owner by carefully describing the homes of the nobles. For example, in *La cousine bette*:

"The walls of the living room are full of portraits of ancestors, some wearing marshal uniforms and some wearing judges' robes; Every face exudes the aura of great achievements and unquestionable supreme authority." [3]

These portraits not only show the noble family's pursuit of cultural taste, but also show the prominent position of the family through luxurious materials and unique design [1]. Similarly, in *"Madame Bovary"* de Flaubert, the clothing of the aristocratic class is endowed with profound symbolic meaning. In the scene where Emma attends the Marquis de Vobigal's ball, the author particularly describes the attire of the aristocratic women:

"They wore long dresses made of silk, fine cotton, brocade and cashmere, all luxurious fabrics created by civilisation." [5]

Expensive fabrics such as silk and brocade, as well as intricate design styles, were not only symbols of wealth but also

tools of social differentiation, used to reinforce the boundaries between the nobility and other classes.^[6] Through these material symbols, writers revealed the noble class's monopoly on resources in 19th-century French society and their meticulous construction of symbols of power.

In addition, the home and clothing symbols of the aristocratic class also reflected the cultural values of society at the time. For example, Stendhal describes the attire of the Duchess of Sanseverina attending a court ball in "*Monastère de Bama*":

"She wore a silver-grey taffeta evening gown, adorned with Venetian lace; the dress had been worn by her grandmother during the era of Queen Marie Antoinette, and though skilfully altered, it remained stunningly elegant."^[7]

The detailed designs in clothing, such as heirloom lace and the transformation of old court garments, not only carry the historical memory of the family but also reflect the aristocracy's persistent pursuit of 'pure bloodline' and 'authentic taste'. This meticulous creation of material symbols not only consolidates the social status of the aristocracy but also, to some extent, shapes the aesthetic standards and values of society at that time.

3.1.2 The Domestic and Clothing Symbols of the Bourgeoisie and Commoners

Compared with the luxury and complexity of the aristocracy, the material symbols of the bourgeoisie and commoners in home décor and clothing exhibit distinctly different characteristics. In 19th-century French literature, the home decoration and clothing choices of the bourgeoisie often reflected a combination of practicality and imitation. For example, in the works of Balzac, bourgeois households tended to purchase furniture and decorative items imitating aristocratic styles to showcase their economic status and attempt to integrate into upper society. However, this imitation was often superficial, lacking the cultural depth and historical accumulation of the aristocracy. For instance, in "*Le Père Goriot*", Balzac describes the living room of the Vauquer apartment as:

"A set of red velvet-faced furniture was laid out, covered with white gauze; on the fireplace mantel stood a pair of blue porcelain vases holding artificial flowers."^[8]

This clumsy imitation of aristocratic furnishings precisely exposes the cultural anxiety of the bourgeoisie. In "*Désillusion*", Balzac's depiction of the provincial bourgeois living room:

"The walls were covered with gold-flocked wallpaper, the wall clock was gilded, and on top of the mantel clock squatted two bronze angels with outstretched wings; the sofa was draped in embroidered satin, unfortunately faded, revealing the burlap underneath."^[9]

The cheap essence beneath the luxurious appearance is self-evident. Balzac precisely captures the cultural rupture and identity anxiety that cannot be concealed during class mobility through these rapidly fading satin fabrics and gilt clock bases peeling off, freezing them into a material scene full of dramatic tension.

The household and clothing symbols of the common people are simpler and more functional. The peasant woman depicted in Flaubert's "*Madame Bovary*":

"The fingers are red from years of washing clothes, soap scum is stuck in the nail crevices; the apron is covered with patches, and the cuffs are frayed."^[10]

Clothing became a direct mark of labour and poverty. The attire of the common people was mostly made from inexpensive fabrics such as cotton and linen, with simple and practical styles, primarily meeting basic living needs. Their choice of these symbolic objects not only reflects the economic situation of ordinary people, but also shows that they are in a marginal position in the social structure. Interestingly, however, with the promotion of Industrial Revolution, some ordinary people have begun to improve their image through better home decoration and clothes selection, which shows us that social classes can actually flow. For example, in Zola's "*L'Hôtel*", the worker couple Gu Bo finally saved enough money to buy:

"A wooden bed painted black with a new mattress; There is a mirror hanging on the wall. Although the frame is made of paper; at least people can be seen." Gu Bo said proudly, *"Now we look like a serious family."*^[11]

They want to get closer to the middle class by buying more exquisite household items or better-looking clothes.^[12] This phenomenon not only reflects the dynamic changes of social strata, but also provides an important perspective for us to understand the class relations in French society in the 19th century.

3.2 Gender Dimension: Material Symbols in Home and Clothing

3.2.1 Female Expression of Material Symbols

In the French literature of the 19th century, women expressed themselves through the decorations at home and the clothes they wore, which not only showed who they were and their status in society, but also showed that gender had an influence on the understanding of material symbols. For example, in *“Madame Bovary”* written by Flaubert, Emma Bovary specially decorated her home, trying to create an elegant atmosphere that is much richer than she actually is. Her paintings and small decorations at home are not only because she likes that style, but also because she wants to be recognized by others. She even borrowed money to buy “Venetian-style” mirrors, gold-plated candlesticks and Oriental-style carpets. In fact, these things are of little practical use, mainly imitating the aristocratic salon life written in romantic novels, forming a set of unrealistic and symbolic fantasies. ^[4]

This strategy of constructing identity through material symbols is also evident in other female characters. Stendhal, in *“Le Rouge et le Noir”*, describes Madame de La Mole:

“She changes her dress three times a day, each one made by the most expensive tailors in Paris; even at home, she never wears cotton, only silk or fine linen.” ^[13]

This exacting demand for materials is precisely the daily practice through which noblewomen demarcate class boundaries with their attire.

Moreover, when girls choose clothes, the symbols of those fabrics also hide many special meanings. In 19th century literature, the material, color and style of girls’ clothes are often used to tell us whether they are married, whether they have money at home, and whether they are good people. For example, aristocratic ladies always wear expensive silk dresses to show their high status; Girls who are not married prefer to wear light clothes, because at that time, everyone thought that girls were pure. Balzac’s *“Illusions perdues”* describes Marquise de Espard’s party:

“She wore a silver-grey taffeta gown with sleeves adorned with Venetian lace; it was not for decoration, but to announce to visitors: ‘I belong to the last generation of the old regime’.”

Noblewomen often used clothing to convey the purity of their lineage and cultural orthodoxy, to resist the encroachment of the emerging bourgeoisie.

In contrast, common women sought dignity through limited material means. Zola wrote in *“La petite auberge”* that the laundress Chervise scrimped and saved to buy furniture:

“She bought a wooden bed painted white, paired with blue striped sheets; a lithograph of the Virgin hung on the wall—this was the most decent decoration she could think of.” ^[14]

Her home choices are simple, yet they carry a longing for the identity of a ‘respectable family’, reflecting the symbolic resistance of women at the lower end of society amid material scarcity.

More radical is that some women directly convert their bodies and clothing into exchangeable capital. Nana, in Zola’s writing, during her first appearance on stage in *“Nana”*:

“Wearing a rose-coloured sheer long dress, with her shoulders almost bare and a golden thread belt around her waist; with each step she took, the hem of her dress swirled like waves, leaving the entire audience breathless.” ^[15]

This dress is no longer just a tool to cover the body, but a prop to seduce and show power-she actively controls men’s eyes through those tangible symbols and strives for a little initiative for herself in the cracks of the patriarchal system.

Interestingly, women are not only passive recipients of these material symbols, but also strategic users-they will quietly strive for identity and express their emotions in a limited space through the folds of curtains, the texture of gloves or the angle of brim. This strict regulation of dress symbols not only limits women’s freedom of expression, but also strengthens the stereotype of gender in society. By analyzing these material symbols, we can more clearly understand how women construct their self-identity in 19th century French society and their complicated situation: they are regarded as objects, but they speak through “things”; Bound by symbols, but looking for their own voices in the gaps of symbols.

3.2.2 Gender Power Relations and Material Symbols

Material symbols in 19th-century French literature not only reflected gender differences but also profoundly revealed the

gender power relations in society at the time. Take *“Madame Bovary”* as an example:

“She owed Mr Lel  money: curtains, carpets, armchairs... everything bought to be like those ladies in Wobis  was included.”

Emma’s various attempts in choosing home furnishings and clothing are, in fact, a form of resistance and breakthrough against the constraints of a patriarchal society. However, such resistance often ends in failure, as her choices are always restricted by male-dominated social norms. Emma attempts to elevate her status through the purchase of expensive furniture and clothing, but ultimately finds herself in difficulty due to economic dependence. More fatally, when she asks her husband Charles to sell property, his response is:

“What items in the house should be sold is for me to decide.”

This fully reflects the specific manifestation of gender inequality at the level of material symbols.

At the same time, men dominate the construction of domestic and clothing symbols. In Balzac’s *“Le P re Goriot”*, when Rastignac first enters Parisian high society, his mentor, the Countess de Bauseant, plans his image for him, but clearly distinguishes gender roles:

“Men establish themselves through wisdom and actions, women become famous through dressing up and the living room.”

This admonition reveals the gender division within the symbolic system: men construct subjectivity through action, while women are confined to the realm of objects. Male characters’ clothing often emphasises practicality and functionality, thereby highlighting their dominant position and sense of responsibility in society. For example, in *“D sillusion”*, when the young Lucien from the provinces first arrives in Paris, journalist  tienne Lestou teaches him how to dress:

“Wear a well-tailored black dress, put on a pair of pearl-grey gloves, and especially avoid dressing like a woman.”

Here, “black dress” symbolises reason, restraint, and public identity, while “don’t be like a woman” directly stigmatises ornamentation as an exclusively female weakness.

However, not all women are willing to be confined to the realm of decoration. In George Sand’s *“Consuelo”*, the heroine declares:

“I will not wear the satin you give, nor the jewellery you present; my voice is my gown, my piano music is my crown.” ^[16]

This refusal to wear Chinese clothing is a direct rebellion against the symbolic violence of “women = objects”-she replaces clothing adornment with artistic talent, reclaiming the right to self-definition in a male-dominated public sphere.

In the political arena, clothing becomes even more a tool of power struggle. Alexandre Dumas described Queen Margot attending a court ball as follows:

“She wore a black velvet gown encrusted with diamonds, yet deliberately did not wear a headdress-to protest the king’s interference in her marriage.” ^[17]

Every detail of clothing is a silent political statement: traditional attire signifies status, while the absence of headdresses exposes the monarchy’s attempt to control women’s bodies.

Marginalised women use material symbols in more subversive ways. Carmen in M rim e’s writing:

“Always pinning a bright red pomegranate flower behind the ear, a skirt slit to the knees, a yellow ribbon tied around the waist-the priest said this was sinful, yet soldiers went crazy over it.” ^[18]

Her clothing is not meant to please but to provoke, turning the body into a battlefield of freedom, exercising sexual autonomy in the gaps of moral discipline.

Even ordinary women will fight for their little freedom in a limited space. Daudet wrote in *“Petite Chose”* that Dairese refused to wear black mourning clothes to mourn her fiance according to the custom, but:

“Put on the blue ribbon he gave me, put on the washed and faded green skirt, and said, ‘I want him to remember me when I was alive’.” ^[19]

This choice is a gentle resistance to social rules-she uses personal memory to resist the collective mourning ceremony, and uses color to re-emphasize the meaning of life instead of death.

Suits and ties designs of aristocratic men are not only symbols of status, but also reflect their role in maintaining social order. In contrast, women's clothing symbols are more decorative and symbolic to meet men's aesthetic preferences and social expectations. This gendered interpretation of material symbols not only reflects the unequal power structure between men and women in French society in the 19th century, but also provides important clues for understanding the complexity of gender relations at that time. By analyzing these material symbols, we can see more clearly how the gender power relationship is embodied and strengthened through "objects" in daily life.

4. CONTEMPORARY DESIGN AND BRANDS' ENCODING PRACTICES OF 19TH-CENTURY MATERIAL SYMBOLS

4.1 Translation of Objects: Symbolic Implantation in Luxury Packaging

In the packaging design of high-end cosmetics and perfumes, the method of using the French aristocratic style in the 19th century is not just as simple as surface decoration. They recreate the exquisite material world described by writers like Balzac and Flaubert through materials, structures, colors and the sense of ceremony when unpacking. These designs are directly inspired by the detailed descriptions of salon furnishings, cosmetic boxes and perfume bottles in 19th century French literature, which turned the "objects" in the book into modern consumer goods that we can touch and feel.

Brands often use some historical visual symbols to enhance the cultural recognition of their products. For example, Yves Saint Laurent used a gold metal chain to wrap around frosted glass bottles when designing the bottles of its "Libre" perfume series (from 2019 to now).^[20] This design was inspired by the bracelet worn by Paris ladies in the 19th century and the buckles of jewelry boxes. Scholars point out that this design reproduces the decorative tradition of women's personal items in the Second Empire period.

Similarly, Hermès used a yellow gradient bottle in its "Le Jardin de Monsieur Li" perfume package, accompanied by ink box illustrations painted by Li Xin, which looked very similar to the visual style of natural history manuscripts and aristocratic letters in the 19th century. Researchers believe that this can arouse our cultural memories of natural writing and gift exchange in 19th century literary salons.

In addition, Givenchy's "L'Interdit" limited edition perfume (2020) covered a transparent bottle with black lace and a velvet gift box, which formed a strong intertextual connection with the lace handkerchief and black silk skirt used by Emma to hide love letters in "*Madame Bovary*" by Flaubert. Some scholars pointed out: "This strategy of packaging taboo items with luxury materials is just a symbolic translation of the materialization of women's desires in the 19th century." This kind of packaging not only satisfies consumers' pursuit of exquisite lifestyle, but also embeds literary memory into the unpacking experience, making the product a medium for cultural identity display. Consumers buy not only perfume or cream, but also a carefully coded segment of Parisian life in the 19th century.

Therefore, the combination of luxury goods and literature is bringing new vitality to brand culture strategy. In addition to material consumption, providing consumers with spiritual value and emotional experience is likely to be the new direction of luxury goods in the future. As a profound narrative tool, literature is helping luxury brands find new vitality and hope in the complex market environment.^[21]

4.2 Pattern Regeneration: The Transformation of Historical Motifs in Home Design

In modern home design, the material symbols in 19th-century French literature, such as the decorative style left over from 18th century, the mix-and-match pattern of Second Empire period, the cloth pattern in the bourgeois living room written by Balzac, and the detailed description of interior decoration in Flaubert's novels, are often regarded as the source of inspiration. Their visual elements are repackaged through brand strategy and then integrated into the global consumer market. For example, in the high-end wallpaper and textile industry, Zuber & Cie, a century-old wallpaper workshop in France, has been extracting patterns from 19th century archives, including the panoramic wallpaper series "*Les vues d'amérique du Nord*" (Views of North America) carved and put into production in 1834. These patterns were originally used to decorate the houses of European upper-class people in the 19th century, but now they are carefully reproduced by manual woodblock printing technology, which not only retains historical details, but also adapts to the present space through modern materials. This design strategy is to arouse our cultural imagination of the elegant lifestyle in Europe in the 19th century, and at the same time, make these visual symbols have commercial value again with the help of modern material technology or environmental protection practices.

What is more noteworthy is that the spread of these patterns often relies on cross-media narrative methods. For example,

Fornasetti, an Italian brand, turned hand-drawn classical music score patterns into repeated decorations and used them on its “Musica” series trays and screens; In the “Biblioteca” theme product, the abstract texture of hardcover spine stack is designed. These designs turn the material form of the characters themselves into displayable consumption symbols, blurring the boundaries between historical printed matter and everyday objects. As Baudrillard said, the symbolic value of goods replaced the use value, and the traces of cultural production in the 19th century were stripped out of the original context and reassembled into visual symbols representing identity and cultural capital.

From the perspective of consumer culture, the success of this household model lies in its accurate grasp of the “new nostalgia” market psychology: consumers buy not only the practical functions of products, but also a symbolic possession of romantic historical fragments. Designers, on the other hand, play the role of cultural intermediary, turning the description of space and material in literary and historical texts into reproducible visual language, so that the material culture in 19th century Europe can gain a new life form in the contemporary home environment.

4.3 Reconstruction of the Setting: Spatial Immersive Experience in Display Narratives

In the present commercial space display and brand story, people will find some representative material symbols from French literature in the 19th century. The purpose of this is to create a historical atmosphere and build a tall brand image, so that consumers can identify with us more in feelings and values.

In the exhibition of commercial space, designers accurately restore the material environment of a specific social class in the 19th century, and transform the shopping experience into cultural immersion. A typical example is the French high-end jewelry brand Van Cleef & Arpels. The brand established the flagship space group “Place Vendme” at No.20-24 Place Vendme in Paris. After renovation in 2020, it continued the classical architectural context of the square with customized furniture and carved wood ornaments. At the same time, there is a “Salon des Parfums” dedicated to displaying perfume in Building 22, which promotes the art of brand hospitality through a more private reception line.^[22] This space combines the elements of Art Deco and neoclassicism in the early 20th century, and uses light velvet walls, mahogany display cabinets and Louis XVI style seats to create a quiet and noble atmosphere. The privacy, cultural taste and sense of ceremony embodied in this space just continue the social function and symbolic significance of the bourgeois living room repeatedly described by Balzac in “*La Comédie Humaine*”, which naturally endows jewelry appreciation with a sense of historical ceremony.

In addition, brand stories often borrow the cultural atmosphere related to the 19th century to shape their unique cultural personality. For example, French salon fragrance brand Diptyque: its brand aesthetics comes from a nostalgic memory of the artistic atmosphere on the left bank of Paris in the middle of the 20th century. Although the brand was founded in 1961, a long time has passed since the 19th century, its visual and olfactory language (such as yellowed pages, handwritten labels, pictures of old wooden furniture, and the fragrance that wants to recreate the atmosphere of the old shop at No.34 Saint-Germain Avenue) has successfully created the overall feeling of a yellowed old study. Although this storytelling method does not directly mention specific writers like Flaubert or Zola, it subtly activates consumers’ overall imagination of European literary traditions, which can often be traced back to the 19th century in everyone’s cultural memory. Similarly, these literary works also provide inspiration and material for the plot and structure creation in current film and television advertisements. For example, the classic romantic style of “*Les Misérables*” is a model of success by telling a complete story. Influenced by these works, film and television advertisements have performed very well at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity. They will tell a complete story, with the products to be advertised as the key elements, and capture the audience with attractive plots.^[23] In this way, buying products becomes an emotional investment in the romantic historical lifestyle.

This strategy of combining space display with brand story not only greatly enhances the cultural value of the brand, but also makes consumers' behavior no longer just buy things. What they buy in the experience is actually something carefully designed with historical fragments and cultural identity hints, so that a stronger and deeper emotional connection can be established. This is an important source for high-end brands to gain core market competitiveness.

5. THE DUAL DILEMMA OF 19th-CENTURY MATERIAL SYMBOLS IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER CULTURE

5.1 Detachment from Historical Context: Simplified Translation of Material Symbols

In the process of moving those physical symbols in the 19th century to modern times, we found that they gradually lost their original historical flavor, with less cultural connotation. This is mainly because people often extract the physical

symbols in 19th century French literature from their original historical background, and then simply use them in current design and brand operation. For example, in the “Epilogue” series in 2021, the Italian brand Gucci used a lot of old-fashioned elements representing Belle Époque style to create a nostalgic and romantic feeling. However, in the stories told by the brand, these elements are only described as Romanticism's inheritance and retro inspiration, and their original complex meanings in the historical background are all gone: leg-of-mutton sleeves and corsets are not just for looking good, they are actually tools used to restrain girls' bodies; Many luxury fabrics used for making clothes, such as dyes and silk, come from the exploitative production system in the French colony. Through this beautification transformation, the brand has simplified a material language with gender constraints and colonial history into a retro visual symbol that is harmless and can be consumed casually.

In addition, it is particularly obvious to turn class oppression and colonial violence into a retro trend to beautify. In our shopping-loving society, one of the characteristics of symbolic consumption is that the meaning of a commodity is no longer just whether it is good or not, but what it represents and what symbolic significance it has. However, when this symbolic meaning is over-commercialized, it may lead to the beautification of historical pain. For example, when Dior, a French brand, promoted its classic Cannage pattern, it said that this pattern was inspired by those Charles Louis Napoléon on Bonaparte-style rattan chairs at Christian Dior's home when he was a child, emphasizing its connection with French living art. However, this personal story doesn't mention the global resource network that made French decorative arts flourish in the 19th century-the rattan needed for weaving mainly came from colonies in Southeast Asia, while the dyes and wood were often obtained from colonies in Africa and America. Therefore, the sense of French luxury brought by the Cannage pattern is actually divorced from the differences of imperial history and class, and has been simplified into a brand myth about personal memories and craft inheritance.

This cultural and political deviation not only changed the original meaning of those physical symbols in the 19th century, but also had a bad influence on the spread of these cultures today. What we are exposed to now is actually a simplified and beautified version history. Those parts that need us to think and criticize have disappeared in the process of simplification.

5.2 Platform Logic and Superficial Translation of Symbols

After the rise of social media platforms like Rednote, “Instagrammability” (suitable for posting Instagram) has become the main standard for people to see things now. This trend has completely changed the way those physical symbols spread in the 19th century. In order to pursue traffic and interactive data, design is increasingly inclined to make visual fragments that are easy to recognize, like and share on the screen of mobile phones, and the efficiency of picture dissemination is more important than the process, historical depth and immersion experience in real space.

A typical example is Zuber & Cie, a century-old wallpaper workshop in France. In the 1820s, they created a set of panoramic wallpaper series with the theme of “fête galante”, which depicts the dream scene of aristocratic couples sailing to the island of love by swan boat. Later, people usually call it “*L'Île d'Amour*”. This design was inspired by the theme of “Embarkation for Cythera” initiated by Jean-Antoine Watteau, a rococo painter in the 18th century, creating an idealized romantic atmosphere. In the 19th century, such panoramic wallpapers were widely used in bourgeois living rooms, becoming a comprehensive artistic medium for building a complete interior atmosphere and demonstrating the owner's cultural taste, and can also be seen as a typical material manifestation of the living room culture depicted in Balzac's works. Its original value lay not only in decoration but also in constructing an immersive, idealised vision of society and nature through expansive continuous imagery and delicate narrative.

However, on contemporary social media platforms, this artwork, which carries complex historical context and spatial narratives, is largely stripped of its original logic and meaning. Users share portions of its imagery through tags like French vintage, Zuber wallpaper, and dreamy home décor-perhaps just an elegant swan, a classical temple arch, or a tangle of vines. Platform algorithms tend to promote visually striking, colour-pleasing fragments that are easy to understand quickly, further amplifying the spread of these symbolic fragments. They are widely converted into phone wallpapers, nail art patterns, or used as backgrounds for aesthetically styled home photos. The core criterion for translation is no longer the complete narrative, craftsmanship value, and social metaphors emphasised in the 19th century, but whether it can quickly catch the eye in a feed, fit vertical framing, and provide clear style tags for imitation and sharing. This results in cultural translation becoming a simple transfer of visual elements, failing to achieve the full “decode-reconstruct-reproduce” logic. [24] Ultimately, a panoramic narrative that once required immersion and quiet contemplation is simplified into a series of instantly consumable, easily replicable vintage aesthetic visual elements.

This platform-based translation leads to twofold consequences: first, the virtualization and flattening of experience. The value of design increasingly depends on its performance on a two-dimensional screen, while tactile qualities, spatial scale,

and temporal traces-core aspects of 19th-century material culture, such as the subtle embossing of handcrafted woodblock prints, the texture of paper, and colour changes over time-are greatly diminished in digital dissemination. Second, the homogenisation of symbols and contextual rupture. Within algorithmic recommendation feedback loops, symbol types that best fit the prevailing platform aesthetic-such as high saturation, strong contrast, and simple composition-are continually reinforced and repeated, while more complex, nuanced, or historically informed symbols are systematically marginalised. Platform logic does not transmit history but continually selects, simplifies, and reorganises historical symbols according to its own interaction rules and traffic logic, perfectly adapting them for immediate visual gratification.

Therefore, the profound challenge faced by contemporary design and cultural dissemination lies in how to adhere to platform visual logic to achieve effective communication while resisting the risk of historical symbols being completely flattened into superficial decoration in the ‘photogenicity’ competition. This requires practitioners to consciously construct entrances for deep experiences-for example, by using digital technologies (such as AR interaction) to restore the narrative panorama and craftsmanship details of the work, or embedding concise historical context explanations in dissemination-thus reserving a space for contemplation and reflection in a fragmented traffic ecosystem. It is necessary both to prohibit entertaining interpretations of cultural symbols through preemptive review and to guide ‘technological benevolence’ through mechanisms such as algorithmic diversity and cultural protection taxes, ensuring that digital tools are always “media for cultural interpretation” rather than the “subject of cultural reconstruction”, achieving an organic unity of technological empowerment and cultural authenticity. [25]

6. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY DESIGN TRANSLATION PATH OF 19TH-CENTURY FRENCH LITERARY SYMBOLS

Facing the issues of historicisation, platformisation and aestheticisation of 19th-century material symbols in contemporary consumer culture, there is an urgent need to propose systematic response strategies. This concerns not only the authenticity of cultural heritage but also the social responsibility of design in a globalised context.

6.1 Interdisciplinary Dialogue between Literary Studies and Consumer Culture Studies

The current appropriation of 19th-century material symbols by brands often stops at the visual surface, lacking a deep understanding of their literary and social context. The solution lies in promoting a substantive intersection of literary history, material culture studies and design studies.

Specifically, universities and research institutions can establish literature-design collaborative workshops, inviting literary scholars (such as experts on Balzac and Flaubert), art historians, and brand designers to jointly decode the material descriptions in texts. For example, in analysing the green velvet sofa in “*Madame Bovary*” or the panoramic wallpapered living room in “*Père Goriot*”, one should not merely extract velvet or wallpaper as decorative elements, but explore how they reflect the identity anxieties, gender segregation, and colonial consumption of the French bourgeoisie in the 1830-1850s. Such knowledge can be transformed into design reference manuals for brands to use when developing products.

Furthermore, museums and archives should make 19th-century interior decoration digital databases accessible (for instance, the furniture catalogues and fashion journals already available on the French National Library’s Gallica platform) and annotate their social history context. When designers extract patterns or structures, they can simultaneously obtain information about the original usage scenarios, class affiliation, and production chains, avoiding ungrounded appropriation. For example, the “Designing History” project launched by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in the UK, in collaboration with literature and design departments, converts home descriptions in Dickens’ novels into teaching modules, which have been incorporated into the curriculum at London College of Arts. Practices in France demonstrate that the combination of technology and culture is the best driver for the development of the cultural industry. [26]

6.2 Providing More Historically Sensitive Guidelines for Contemporary Cultural and Creative Design and Brand Operations

Brands need to move beyond the habitual thinking of “vintage = luxury” and establish design ethics based on historical context. It is recommended that industry organisations (such as the French luxury association Comité Colbert and the Italian Altagamma Foundation) develop a “*Historical Symbol Translation Guide*” to clarify the following principles:

Firstly, the principle of transparent provenance. When using 19th-century elements, the historical source must be indicated in product descriptions or on the official website, along with a brief explanation of its social context. For example, when we mention a Victorian-era pattern, we should also explain why it is popular, what is the relationship between it and all

kinds of foreign materials brought by colonial trade, and the decoration demand generated by the rise of the middle class. This is done to prevent historical knowledge from being privatized or only regarded as entertainment content. It wants to turn a single story of a brand into a text that everyone can openly discuss. This requires the brand to undertake the basic cultural and educational functions, ensure that every historical statement can be verified, and thus establish cultural trust based on truth rather than fantasy in consumers' hearts. Transparent source explanation, in essence, makes the design process more open. It invites everyone to explore the history of how these symbols were created, instead of passively accepting a beautified and packaged past.

Secondly, we should not beautify the old things that oppress people. Things that are obviously related to colonial exploitation, such as ivory and some dyes, or things that represent gender restriction, such as corsets, cannot be described by the words "romance" and "elegance" casually. This is not to say that we can't touch sensitive history, but we need to look at it critically. Brands must understand that if they copy these oppressive aesthetics mindlessly, they are actually recognizing and continuing the hidden unequal relationship. For example, when displaying colonial styles, we should use the methods of material contrast, narrative juxtaposition or artistic deconstruction to let everyone see the unfair history behind these beautiful things. This marks the transformation of brand ethics: from passively avoiding "what can't be done" to actively thinking about "how to do things responsibly". The ultimate goal is to cultivate a more reflective aesthetic, so that we can not only appreciate the complex historical crafts, but also remember the price paid behind them.

Third, encourage telling different stories. Actively support designers and brands, and use their works to show the little people's history and ordinary people's experiences that are covered up by mainstream big stories. This is a very positive cultural restoration. The core of these different stories is to give the power to explain history to the previously neglected groups, so as to break the single historical authority. For example, when we use rattan materials, we should not only talk about its application in the history of European furniture, but also systematically show how people collect and process rattan in Southeast Asia and what role the colonial trade network plays in it. The most advanced way is to carry out in-depth and fair cooperation with the communities where raw materials are produced, and turn the collection into a platform to support community cultural preservation and economic autonomy. This makes design not only a cultural extraction, but also a bridge to build relationships and return value.

At the same time, in order to make these principles truly become the brand's long-term ability, a cultural consultant mechanism should be formally established. In the conceptual stage of developing important series, historians, sociologists and cultural researchers in related fields are invited to participate in the review, and the themes, symbols and stories are preliminarily evaluated in ethics and facts. The purpose of doing this is to systematically integrate the external academic critical perspective into the internal creative decision-making process, which not only forms constraints, but also provides nutrients. A stable team of interdisciplinary consultants can help the brand to install a set of "sonar" system in deep cultural waters to detect potential risks. In the end, it will be transformed into cultural depth and long-term ethical reputation that others can't copy, and realize the real unity of commercial value and cultural responsibility.

6.3 Technological Empowerment: Artificial Intelligence as a Lightweight Translation and Creative Engine of Historical Symbols

In the process of translating French social symbols in the 19th century into modern creative and light fashion products, AI technology is changing from a helper to a core creative engine and production mode. Its key breakthrough is that it can intelligently analyze massive historical data with no fixed format and rebuild its style, thus building a bridge between historical depth and modern market efficiency and promoting the democratic spread and innovative transformation of cultural symbols.

First, intelligent extraction and style transfer of symbols based on multimodal large models. For modern cultural and creative products (such as phone cases, scarves, and stationery) that require rapid iteration and diverse styles, artificial intelligence can use specially trained multimodal models to deeply deconstruct and reorganise 19th-century visual materials. For example, a trained AI system can simultaneously analyse text fragments from Balzac's novels, fashion prints from the corresponding period, interior decoration charts, and the colours of Impressionist paintings. Designers do not need to spend time on laborious manual research; they only need to input the decorative elements of the Paris Opera House extracted from *"The Rise and Fall of the Great Socialite"* and convert them into a form suitable for Gen Z aesthetics, or combining the tailoring language and metal button details of Second Empire men's formal wear with contemporary street hoodie silhouettes. AI can quickly extract relevant visual genes (such as velvet texture, metal buttons, Rococo curves) from associated databases, and intelligently blend and style-transfer them according to the target product style (minimalist, street, retro-futuristic), generating a large number of design sketches for selection and optimisation. In addition, when dealing

with difficult problems in literary translation, the help of AI can greatly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of solving these difficult problems. ^[27] This greatly reduces the threshold for professional historical symbols to enter the consumer market, and enables small creative teams to make high-quality micro-narrative designs.

Second, data-driven consumer insights precisely match symbolic narratives. Artificial intelligence can analyse social media, e-commerce platforms and cultural consumption data to accurately identify the differentiated interpretations and emotional appeals of different consumer groups towards the “19th-century style”. For example, by analyzing customers’ discussions about retro, Victorian and steampunk with natural language processing, AI can find that young people may prefer to deconstruct the industrial style with a little sense of rebellion, while mature customers prefer exquisite, craft-oriented elegant symbols. According to these findings, AI can help brands accurately develop “story+product” solutions. For example, in a market that likes subculture, it may automatically suggest designing printed T-shirt series based on the re-imagination of alley space in “*Secrets of Paris*”; In the market that attaches importance to life aesthetics, it may recommend the flower shapes in the 19th century plant atlas to be used in the household clothing series. This changes the transformation of historical symbols from one-way output of designers to a cultural coding process that can be dynamically adjusted according to market dialogue.

Third, Generative Artificial Intelligence promotes the co-creation of personalized customization and interactive experience. In the realm of fast fashion, artificial intelligence enables entirely new modes of consumer and production interaction. Brands can leverage AI platforms to allow consumers to directly participate in design. For example, a “My 19th Century Study” cultural and creative customisation tool lets users first choose a literary figure (such as Flaubert or George Sand) or a social space (such as a literati café or department store). AI then generates a base visual theme and element library (patterns, fonts, colour schemes) based on this choice. Users can further fine-tune through natural language commands, for instance: adding more handwritten notes or brightening the colours, ultimately producing a unique design for a canvas bag, notebook, or phone wallpaper. This process not only achieves large-scale personalised production but, more importantly, transforms a single consumer action into an in-depth cultural exploration and identity construction experience. Consumers, in their interaction, unconsciously receive historically contextualised information correlated through the AI system. For example, when selecting the George Sand theme, the interface briefly introduces the female writer’s groundbreaking practice of cross-dressing and independent lifestyle, thereby allowing the consumer to gain a personalised product while also engaging in a miniature historical learning experience.

Therefore, the application of artificial intelligence in the cultural and creative and fast fashion sectors is far from simply digitising historical patterns. By establishing libraries of historical materials, intelligent analysis engines, modern design grammar, and closed-loop market dynamics data, it enables dynamic, interactive, and participatory reinterpretation of 19th-century French social symbols. This allows culture to escape a static fate, merging into the ongoing flow of daily life in a light, mutable, and contemporarily resonant form, truly transforming heritage into a living creative resource. The development of AI technology has allowed those of us living in the information age to reap the benefits. ^[28]

6.4 Reaffirming the Social Responsibility and Cultural Mission of Design Translation

In today’s globalised cultural landscape, design has long surpassed mere form and function; it is essentially a practice of power that involves choosing, weaving, and conveying meaning. When the new wave of nostalgia reduces past symbols to consumable aesthetic labels, designers must remain vigilant and transcend this, consciously taking on the dual mission of cultural decoder and meaning reconstructor. This requires us to no longer view history as a static reservoir of stylistic materials, but to understand it as a dynamic field full of tension, awaiting dialogue. As true interpreters of history, the responsibility of designers is:

First, critical honesty, rejecting sterile history. True nostalgia should not be a comfortable zone of selective amnesia, but a deep affection that includes reflection. This means acknowledging and confronting the shadows behind the splendour of the nineteenth century-the colonial plunder, class divides and gender oppression upon which its luxury depended. Preserving this complexity in design is not to demean it, but to establish a more complete, honest and profound cultural connection. For example, inscribing miniature historical notes within product packaging, or using AR technology to let classical patterns “tell” the story of global trade and labour behind them, transforms commodities into “conscientious objects”, inviting consumers to achieve a profound historical understanding through aesthetic pleasure.

Second, practising inclusive co-creation, empowering diverse narratives. Contemporary design has both the responsibility and the ability to act as a medium to correct historical perspectives and activate silenced voices. By actively inviting previously marginalised groups, whether descendants of craftsmen from colonial resource sites or female artisans obscured by industrialisation, to directly participate in the recreation of symbols, the design process itself is elevated into a restorative

practice. This is not only a collaboration of skills but a sharing of knowledge systems and historical interpretive authority. It ensures that the final work is no longer a unilateral replication of the past, but a symbiotic entity that carries multiple memories and promotes intercultural understanding.

Third, creating heuristic experiences to educate conscious citizens. In an era of fragmented information, products can and should become an entry point to deep cognition. Designing merchandise cleverly as miniature cultural textbooks means turning every consumer interaction into a potential learning opportunity. Just like a perfume inspired by Parisian literary salons in the 19th century, if the QR code at the bottom of the bottle can help us understand the publishing story of that era, the reading history of girls, and how the public space was formed, then this private fragrance experience is related to the broad social history. This kind of design cultivates not passive consumers, but wise people with cultural awareness and historical curiosity. Therefore, we should strengthen the consciousness of fine products, carefully organize, carefully plan and create with heart, and strive to make works with deep thinking, exquisite art and excellent production. ^[29]

7. CONCLUSION

In the French literature of the 19th century, those material symbols had deep historical precipitation and cultural meaning. They not only represent social class and identity, but also imply gender power structure and cultural values at that time, and become an important metaphor carrier in the text. In contemporary consumer culture, these symbols are recoded through packaging design, pattern innovation and brand stories, and become a visual and narrative link connecting history and present. However, this transformation process is often accompanied by the flattening of the original meaning of symbols, the dissolution of historical context, and even the cultural misleading of consumers, which weakens their cultural depth and critical tension.

Therefore, the significance of this study lies in systematically revealing the multiple meanings and values of material symbols in 19th century French literature in the contemporary consumption environment, and at the same time promoting the communication between literature research and consumer culture research. This not only helps us to understand the spread of symbols in history, but also provides an important critical perspective for the practice of contemporary cultural creativity.

Based on this understanding, future research and practice should pay attention to the following aspects: First, we should continue to deeply study and analyze material symbols in literary works, and make clear their original background and cultural significance, so as to lay a solid academic foundation for modern adaptation. Secondly, the theories of consumer society studies, semiotics and reception theory can be introduced to analyze how consumers understand the symbols that have been recoded, and why they understand them so, so as to provide theoretical reference for cultural and creative design, brand storytelling and marketing strategies. Finally, we should find a balance between cultural inheritance and commercial innovation, and be careful that symbols may lose their historical realism or become too commercialized in the process of circulation, so that the adaptation practice can truly become a conscious and responsible cultural reproduction.

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