proteze

01

ANALYSING AFRICAN STYLE

By Angus Campbell

Senior Lecturer, Department of Industrial Design, University of Johannesburg.

Shop shelves throughout South Africa evidence an ever increasing and daunting selection of products for sale. Many competing products that are designed to perform the same function, contain similar technologies, are priced similarly and perform equally well. Could it therefore be said that it is the style of the product that is becoming increasingly important in the sale of manufactured items? If this is true, style becomes an increasingly important and powerful tool to be utilised by designers in order to allow them to compete on aesthetic and emotional grounds, not those of function and price. National style has also been used for many decades internationally as a marketing technique to further the sales of company's products, whether locally or abroad. National style in products can be seen as a very powerful and lucrative myth whereby the consumer is not simply buying a physical product but also the idea of the product.

Product design has thus become an extremely important design discipline for commerce, with multinational companies generally retaining their own in-house design teams and consultancies in order to be internationally competitive. Product design, as with other design disciplines, has a traditionally Western history. Product design in South Africa is taught with a similar syllabus and in a similar manner to product design internationally. Industrial design history uses the British, American, Scandinavian and European designers as the benchmarks. It is in this frame of mind that, as a designer, it became apparent that as a developing nation, there is a gap in the South African product design industry. There is an underdevelopment of styles in South Africa that can be regionally or even nationally located mainly because of a slavish adherence to Western models of style. This lacuna in attending to influences on our own back door means that there are opportunities for South African companies to differentiate on the basis of style.

COMMUNICATING STYLE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The culture out of which styles are born may be very influential in determining the character of these particular styles. However, globalisation undermines cultures which were once homogenous, so that they become multilingual, and there is an erosion of traditional languages and values in favour of economically desirable lingua francas and commercially inspired values. This process of pluralisation in terms of culture, religion and social values undermines the individuality of the culture with a content-less, but widely understood 'world style'. For this reason designers need to create culturally distinct styles that stand in opposition to this 'world style' since it is the style of products that are paramount to their success. There are so many products on the market using similar technologies of an equal quality that style becomes a crucial tool to allow differentiation with which to make a product potentially more marketable. Likewise, it is very often the market that determines the style: an unacceptable style will not sell readily, so manufacturers are often forced to satisfy market tastes before 'progressive' design. The idea of national style can still

function as a lucrative marketing technique. For instance, it is possible to view the efforts of Audi as supporting a national style in order to perpetuate the myth of 'German engineering'. Audi's sales slogan is only ever expressed in German - "Vorsprung durch Technik". The perception that Audi's products are superior in quality to other cars on the market is being maintained through its styling and advertising under the guise of 'German engineering'. It seems manufacturing companies like Audi want to support the idea of a German national style to help perpetuate their brand.

Dominic Strinati (1995:225) in his text on Postmodernism feels that 'images dominate narrative'. Strinati questions how deeply, or not, consumers probe the values behind the signs when purchasing/using products - this is not a discussion of function versus style but more one of style versus meaningfulness. What is significant is that style is increasingly important in deciding which variant and for what reasons (to be seen to be as 'in', stylish and hip etc.)

from among many we purchase. For example, if ten cameras function in exactly the same manner, then style is the only criterion by which one can choose which one to purchase. Style was once a marker of status; it is now increasingly a marker of lifestyle. This is to say, status was once a matter of buying a superior product with hidden values of integrity, but now that 'superior product' is less easily distinguishable. There is a proliferation of alternative lifestyles which are now represented by visual styles: sophisticated,

nostalgic, playful and outdoors. In this way novelty, or changes in style maintain the momentum in the consumer market.

How does one go about creating a style, or cultural identity that could be perceived by Westerners as 'influenced by Africa'? It will be important to create a style that will be desirable to the West. This means that what the West appreciates as being 'African' or 'from Africa' has to be better understood in order to create an accessible product within a design conscious segment of European and American markets. There are three elements in African artefacts that differ from those in the West and offer opportunities for an approach

to the creation an African style. These elements are the contradictory views by Westerners and Africans of African aesthetics, abstraction and authenticity. By understanding what Westerners expect of African aesthetics, abstraction and authenticity and understanding the African perspective with relation to their artefacts various devises are discovered for use by the designer to create an African style.

AESTHETICS

Aesthetics from a Western perspective relate to principles of good taste and appreciation of beauty. When trying to create a product that is aesthetically

pleasing in a Western context some process of design must take place. 'Design' is a Western construct, it is therefore inherently Western, and in this sense it is not the best starting point for discovering a new aesthetic/style which originates in Africa where the term 'design' is necessarily imported. The very concept of design as defined by the West is as foreign to traditional Africa as is the concept of art. Many African objects are not regarded as aesthetic objects in their society despite the fact that they contain images, for example when Dominique Zahan, recognised as one of the great French ethnologists and Africanists of the last century, talks about the horizontal ciwara

headrest from Mali (Fig. 1), used by the Bamana peoples in a dance during agricultural work in order to make the harvest successful, he states, "that very often, if not always, African art objects are created for the goals of ritual." (2000:42). Yet, the West gives these African objects 'Art' status, altering their status so as to suit Western preoccupation and in the process losing, for Westerners, the values (ritual) that are important for the Bamana.

Anthropologist Wyatt McGaffey (1998: 218) quotes Danto: "Neither 'art' nor 'primitive art' is a class of objects existing in the world, to be identified and circumscribed. Both are categories of our thought and practice; they are related as subcategories of a broader institutional set, and have evolved continuously as part of the history of the west."

Three things according to McGaffey (1998:220) are required in order to classify a work as art: the object; a critic or connoisseur; and a public. Someone is needed to mediate the object, just as an institution, such as a museum, is required to authenticate an African artefact. Art needs to be correctly exhibited in an institutionally acceptable space, or publication. This method of placing an object on a pedestal or framing it removes it from its original context. By taking

Fig 1. Ciwara headrest. Bamana, Mali, wood and metal. L.:75cm

African artefacts and classifying them as aesthetic art works before their function in African society removes the artefacts from their intended purposes. The usefulness of objects is of paramount importance in traditional Africa whether the object is designed for ritual or everyday use. This is not to say that Africans do not regard their objects with qualitative judgement, but a 'useless' chair such as Gerrit Rietveld's Red/Blue chair (Fig. 2) would be regarded as absurd, since it is a chair designed primarily to be looked at and not to be sat on. Use is important to the West but not as a means of differentiation or, as for the Bamana, as a source of ritual meaningfulness. Therefore if the market for the practical research is the West, a designer may entertain ideas of beauty or stylishness before use, in creating an African style because the Westerner expects an African artefact to be treated as art. A traditional African craftsman would however create a chair that would firstly satisfy ritual meaningfulness before any consideration of aesthetics could be attached to it.

ABSTRACTION

In African art, abstraction is used to highlight parts of the whole: the reduction in size of the ciwara's body gives the head maximum emphasis (Fig. 1). Adjustments are made to form for ritual or metaphorical purposes. The formal characteristics of traditional African art inspired the West (Modernism) and not the meaning behind them; in fact these characteristics regenerated the whole of Western art. Western artists seemed to be unaware or not concerned with the reasons for African 'abstraction' - they

merely appropriated the abstraction found in traditional African objects. In the West abstraction is an intellectual process whereas in traditional African societies meaning is invested in objects, a meaning that accrues from empirical experience and this meaning is expressed by abstracting elements in an artefact. For example, Zahan feels the growth patterns of the groundnut are translated in metaphoric terms in the above ground (large, detailed head) and below ground (small, simplified body) realisation of form in the horizontal ciwara (2000:38). Although abstraction is used by Westerners to create designs (Modernism) it is the African experience of abstraction that is important in the case of this research. By looking at how Western abstraction affects or determines Western aesthetics and the internal considerations for African art, this contrast could create a new approach for a new style.

AUTHENTICITY

What marks of 'authenticity' would a Western consumer be looking for in a contemporary design? This would be important in order to create an African design. Designs may need to refer directly to pre-colonial objects in order to satisfy the Western consumer; art historian

Fig 2. Gerrit Rietveld, Red-Blue Armchair (1917-23), painted beech and pine.

Sidney Kasfir (1999:91) feels that only pre-colonial artefacts have any value (authenticity) to the West due to the notion that colonialism destroyed African culture as opposed to stimulating a transformation. The use of pre-colonial artefacts as a designer's only avenue of inspiration would be limiting since the availability of pre-colonial artefacts has dwindled. This can be attributed to the West's notion of these artefacts authenticity and therefore value in Western collections. If on the other hand one engages with Oguibe's (1999:320) stance that the West should no longer be permitted to define 'Africanness', radical departures from pre-colonial objects become available to the designer. The idea that Africans define what can be classified as authentically African would allow the designer freedom to draw on many sources that inform the experience of the individual living in Africa. This does not mean that design will benefit from the use of stereotypically African concepts. Design that draws on a multiple African heritage may even incorporate features of Western design, since globalisation has eroded any sense of pure nationalism, and boundaries between countries are Western constructs. The difficulty of this approach would be to redefine and challenge the West's perception of African authenticity, so that the incorporation of testing or alien features inspired by traditional African artefacts still ensures that the 'African style' will be seen as authentic by other Africans and especially the Western buyers.