

Piece and processes of current Design as Contemporary Art

Peça e processos de design atual como Arte Contemporânea

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Abstract

Art and Design only differ today in the intention when it comes to making one type of piece or another. As a consequence, Art and Design dialogue in their expressive, material and technical concepts, and share the processes of the handmade industry and of the audience purchasing and contemplating visual creation in museums. The number of current designers creating pieces of strong visibility, inspired in local multicultural aesthetics, and whose manufacture process must be handmade, is increasing. This will promote artisans' ability to design up-to-date pieces, as a result of the exchange of points of view, whereas trade fairs will increasingly compete with centres for Contemporary Art.

Key words: design, handmade, art-piece, contemporary art, multiculturalism, glocal, symbiosis handmade-design.

Resumo

Arte e Design só diferem hoje na intenção quando se trata de fazer um tipo ou outro de peça. Como consequência, Arte e Design dialogam em seus conceitos expressivos, material e técnico, e compartilham os processos da indústria artesanal e o público que compra e contempla a criação visual em museus. Aumentam os designers atuais que projetam peças de destacada visibilidade, inspiradas em estéticas locais e multiculturais, cujo processo de fabricação deve ser feito à mão. Isso promoverá que os artesãos sejam capazes de projetar peças atuais, como resultado desse intercâmbio de pontos de vista e, por outro lado, as feiras de mostras de design vão competir cada vez mais com os centros de Arte Contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: desenho, artesanato, peça de arte, arte contemporânea, multiculturalidade, glocal, simbiose entre artesanato e design.

We begin with a fact that constitutes one of the essential values in our Latin culture: crossbreeding as an ability to interact and integrate realities and experiences that will create truly creative and innovative solutions. This implies a predisposition towards an open attitude to receive influences that are bound to a natural motivation in which to encounter new experiences and ideas, enriching our knowledge. Then a process of assimilation would integrate these new horizons and knowledge, and finally, this process would lead to a creation, or manifestation, which translates this wealth of content and emotion. Art, design and craftsmanship could be taken as equals, as an initial hypothesis, once we realise that in the 21st century no conflict exists between each of these terms, although it is interesting to keep their limits in mind, so as to control the objectives involved in each project and benefit from each of them by means of a new impulse and/or innovation, in short, creation.

The best system to study this connection is the classic genre of the dialogue, the Plato's model, at another time helped us to analyze the relationship between art and advertising: Would graphic design be a guest at the banquet

of the Fine Arts? (García Garrido, 1997, p. 115) The same methodology employed Bruno Munari as a basis to develop and compare the qualities of the artist and designer, and whose dialogue beyond time and space was at stake opinions and ideologies of different eras, from Shaftesbury to Mao Tse Tung, from Toulouse-Lautrec to Freud, from Picasso to Kant (Munari, 1974).

"The design approach has a beginning, a methodology in its development process and a different purpose to the work of art. A designer makes design and an artist make art. But both have the domain of the capabilities in the visual language and creativity, there are designers who also works of art made and artists who can successfully solve design projects. However, artists that can make a good design are less common, since it does not correspond to the full freedom of initiation, development and purpose that characterize the art. Professional designer requirements are very different from the artist. This difference, however, was minimal in the

Renaissance, in which artist or architect design projects also addressed as an activity that was not yet defined and it was very similar to the art then, much more functional and objective. In this sense, a strong expressive power and conscience to know that the function of the design work is to communicate an accurate, allows Picasso can make a magnificent poster design for a bullfight, Vallauris 1955, and Dalí made a excellent overall design for the bottle, label, gift wrapping, and even re-designing the brand's visual identity for the Conde de Osborne brandy, 1964. But it is rare for an artist to adopt the mindset of a designer, much less be able to solve a design project that entails research and monitoring of the rigor of the concept, parallel to the procedures of creating the form (García Garrido, 2010, p. 5).

I personally believe that art is an interesting visual experimentation lab for design (García Garrido, 2010). Because the very function of the design of a brand, "the work of art is not 'instant' is 'a product of mind', you must have character and content 'durable' and an intimate 'serenity'" (Matisse, 1978, p. 21). As Paul Rand said "Ars is primarily a question of form, not of content" (in Maeda, 2000).

We could even compare this proportion belonging to each area as one same project, as a defined alloy that would provide a different and innovative type of material, suitable for each case. Among art's contributions, the quality which I find essential, and that can provide a higher value to the design or the craftsmanship, is its ability to move the spectator, to make us vibrate emotionally with a strength that is way above the norm. Another hypothesis that we aim to prove in this paper is that design is the genuine modality of today's art. In order to approach these matters it is necessary to recognise that our knowledge concerning our era is transversal and that anything that is not an interrelated and global view will not be more relevant than the theoretical exercise that is alien to the new generations.

Meanwhile, Design is becoming a customary piece and collection in museums and also within itineraries specific to art, half a century after MoMA incorporated a collection of design that not only comprised works of art with an eminent aesthetic function, like *Alvar Aalto's vase*, but at the same time purely functional and even anonymous works, like *the pizza cutter*, and from these very simple pieces to others that are as complex and sophisticated as the *Cisitalia Panamerica* of Pininfarina.

Nowadays an increasing and important industry of the most elaborate and elitist design, whose shapes, materials and reduced number of pieces requires manufacturing processes that are typical of the handmade sphere. Processes that, on the other hand, have always been employed in industry of the highest quality including: furnishings, wardrobe, fashion accessories and even automobiles. However, today there is a higher demand for a product of quality of design and not so much for the sake of buying power but for the sheer seductive power of certain products in the market, which

has shifted the satisfaction of enjoying a plastic work of art rather than a product belonging to the industrial market. The preeminence of the unique piece, or the multiple original of the intaglio series, always of unquestionable value in art, exists as a handmade piece and has always been present in design, just as much as a unique piece than as a limited series. The act in itself of choosing this unique product produces considerable satisfaction in the world of leisure of our contemporary man, who partakes in visiting shopping malls, shops and even specialised stores. The same satisfaction experienced whilst finding and rescuing from an antiques market an object that time has consolidated with a value that is way above its utility, the same pleasure of the collector that discovers potential values and takes a personal chance on them, from amongst the offers of young artists. This effect is the consequence of the influence that the products of today's industry acquire, to offer us an object in which we can see ourselves reflected, in our idealization of its shapes, its colours or even its perfect functioning, identifying ourselves with the object in question to the point of being willing to partake in a considerable economic effort to purchase and enjoy it, as if it were a work of art. The last liberalizations reached by Félix González Torres¹ in his work are of special interest; displaying them in conventional places which are outside the art sphere, such as billboards on the street; industrially multiplying their production and liberating it from the act of purchasing, offering it all free of cost to visitors in exhibitions or in museum rooms -obliged to maintain additional stock when acquiring it from the artist-; the elimination of both the signature and the enumeration of a limited edition; and even camouflaging its forms and materials with industrial products, such as a simple square rectangle printed on a sheet, pictures of water waves or clouds in black and white to place two synchronised clocks alongside one another and entitle it "perfect lovers"... And the way in which a person or a group of people can be portrayed with a type of candy that can define them can be considered to be even more interesting and moving, and putting, in a heap, his value in this product that can be purchased in supermarkets, as well as inviting the public to take and taste the portrayed subject in question. With this, Art becomes more like the mass production of the designer-object, and the more exclusive Design becomes more like the 'one and only' handmade piece.

It is needless to say that the manufacturing of pieces with a high value in design and quality require that handmade process in their manufacturing. But within this interaction between design and manufacture we find an increasing interrelation that is reproduced in its design, details and forms which are particular to the handmade object -for example, a sofa inspired in the basketry technique that combines wood and textile cords-.

But this recent liberalisation in the scheme of the forms, materials and manufacturing processes only increases with society's reaction towards global models,

¹ Félix González Torres (1957-1996). From his graphic editions, the work consists of a pile of printed reproductions. Any visitor can take a sample of the work of their choice.

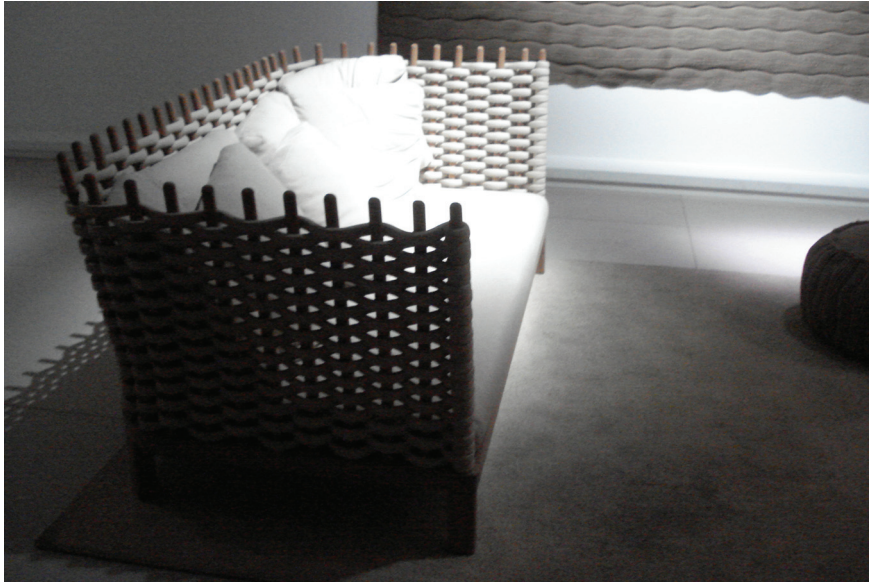


Figure 1. A sofa inspired in the basketry technique, in one of the *interni* of the *Salone Internazionale del Mobile*, Milan 2009. Photo: Sebastián García Garrido.

as a special liking towards multicultural aesthetics and forms reappears, that allows us to recall that fondness for the primitive and for oriental pieces, or for those pieces that come from African tribes, which were also present in society at the beginning of the last century. That same post modernism has given rise to a dialogue between objects which come from completely different aesthetics within the same environment (Dopico Castro, 2009, p. 111-122). That same liberty has conquered Contemporary Art in its materials, techniques, expressive concepts, and also in unique pieces belonging to an authorship or firm. This fact leads us to suppose that now Art and Design share these same basic features. An excellent example of this broadening of design into the realm of handmade activities, moreover, particular to an environment which is very loosely tied to the aesthetic and commercial circuits of our time, is the production of furniture² whose motifs are inspired by any lost country town in Africa, and a weaving technique involving fishing string with its characteristic bright colours, and also tapestries which remind us of the original products from those distant lands. All made indistinctly by African and European designers, they are manufactured by native artisans, this being precisely where these forms, colours and compositions, which intend to captivate clients from any part of the world, originate.

“Looking at Africa through the eyes of contemporary art, photography, architecture and design is perhaps the most appropriate way of approaching this vast, powerful continent, so creatively rich and diverse that today it is still one of western modernity’s greatest sources of inspiration” (Burks in Designboom, 2009).³

Another noteworthy example belonging to a design of the highest level regarding forms, materials and traditional techniques is that offered by the Italian firm *Riva1920* with pieces made on wooden blocks, which is closer to subsistent production than to craftsmanship. However, Bruno Munari himself had previously created one of his most recognised works, the *Falkland* lamp edited by Danese, from the shape of the nets that were used in a specific part of the world for the fishing of shellfish. This material used for fishing nets remains an essential resource in important pieces of contemporary design, such as the anonymous lamp that was displayed on a stand in Rimadesio in 2009. Origami, present among other productions in Arturo Álvarez’s *Model V*, along with many other handicraft techniques are not only the inspiration but the very basis to create contemporary designs. A number of manufacturers, such as the aforementioned, even promote their pieces with the creation of experimental laboratories from which more daring but no less amazing designs

² Presented by the Moroso firm, in *Fuorilassone 2009*: “A fantastic collection of striking colours, patterns and weaves enriched a series of products made in Africa by local artisans and designed by some of the leading African artists such as Fathi Hassan, Soly Cisse and architect David Adjaye, but also by European designers such as Patricia Urquiola and Philippe Bestenheider [...]. This created the success of Tord Boontje’s *Shadowy* collection. The same technique is now used by Bibi Seck and Ayse Birsel who created a wide range of attractive, softly rounded products, such as *Madame Dakar*, a enormous armchair as enveloping as a hammock. Then there’s Patricia Urquiola’s “bench” that sits on the sand like a tree trunk, accompanied by a smaller, single-seat twin and by a low table. The items in the collection are craft pieces: each product is a unique piece and differences in the colours and in the weaves are not to be considered defects”.

³ Stephen Burks was commissioned by Patrizia Moroso to design and curate the *M’Afrique* exhibition, held at the Moroso showroom during Milan design week. For his research he travelled to the African city of Dakar to understand the production process of furniture making, work with local artisans and buy the Senegalese and Mali fabrics, which covers all the pieces of the installation. *M’Afrique* celebrates the African continent through works by designers, artists and craftspeople.



Figure 2. Fabrics and pieces of the Moroso firm, belonging to European and African designers and manufactured in a small seashore village in tropical Africa.

Photo: Sebastián García Garrido.

emerge, such as the *Fluo*⁴ model. Just as if we were dealing with the study of a contemporary artist, new possibilities for expression are tested from already existing forms, also new materials and new techniques that give way, in many cases, to exclusive pieces or to a limited series, such as prototypes which are sent to various different trade fairs: furniture, illumination, etc. Some of them will be destined to fulfill the functional needs of exclusive private or public places, with no kind of complex at being put up against any work realised as a work of art. In this sense, it is interesting to take into account the definition that this manufacturer (born in 1994) provides of his objective: “*Emotional Light*: We put all our hopes and means into offering handmade designs which care for every detail and which are able to satisfy humanities illumination and emotional needs”.

In this advanced technique that combines design, art and handicraft reference designers stand out on an international level. Perhaps, those which are best known are the Brazilian designers Fernando and Humberto Campana. In turn, Asturian Patricia Urquiola has her studio in Italy. She began alongside Achille Castiglioni and usually works for the Moroso firm and, specifically, in the aforementioned African project. Particularly interesting is the work carried out by North-American Matthias Pliessnig, who develops organic forms by means of precise info graphic modeling which has the total appearance of the most sophisticated craftsmanship. Many different designers project their work in this same manner for the Italian firm *Edra*, with proposals that each year surpass the expected limits regarding innovation and aesthetics, those which, without a doubt, succeed in international furniture and interior decorating trade fairs.

Now we only need to gauge whether the public in general actually enjoys attending these great furniture, lighting or automobile trade fairs more or less than attending Contemporary Art trade fairs. The lack of interest in contemporary art was also common for more than four decades ago: “En cada *centro cultural* habitan millares y millares de artistas de este tipo, que únicamente buscan formas nuevas de crear millones de obras de arte sin entusiasmo, con el corazón frío y el alma dormida” (Kandinsky, 1979, p. 19). On the one hand, this fact will undoubtedly enable artisans to design up-to-date pieces, a result of the exchange of viewpoints in the designer’s production and, on the other hand, it will allow the trade fairs to compete, more and more, with those centres of contemporary art in attracting a public that wishes to be moved with the vision and purchasing of the production to which design is destined.

Obviously, the new generations are more drawn and aesthetically identified with design rather than with contemporary art. If the product we are viewing is considered a work of art that includes the aesthetics of design and a handcrafted manufacture, it will be more likely to satisfy this new public than any product that may separately represent any of these three characteristics. Design gives the work of art an aesthetic with which the viewer is identified, and its production, industrial or handmade, allows the socialisation of its acquisition as a work of art that is within everyone’s reach. In turn, handicraft is able to achieve this excellence in the manufacture of those designer pieces which are most in demand, a point argued by William Morris in the 19th-century, and also, as was customary, it was able to achieve that expertise in the procedures of those works

⁴ *Fluo* model, Laboratorio Arturo Álvarez, La Coruña 2009.



Figure 3. Furniture in blocks of wood belonging to the *Riva1920* firm. Salone Internazionale del Mobile, Milano 2009.

Photo: Sebastián García Garrido.



Figure 4. *Falkland* lamp by Bruno Munari (1964) inspired in fishing nets, from the Danese firm, Milano.

Photo: Sebastián García Garrido.

belonging to the academic art. Ultimately, the permeability between these three areas of production will achieve important individual goals for each of them and, moreover, in what could become one single area of production. Regarding the younger generations, wherein we should explore the future of design and the type of production which will be most appealing to them, we should bare in mind one of the key points recently expressed by Eduardo

Punset in the *I Congress of Brilliant Minds* which was held in Málaga: “it is not a case of attention deficit, it is that they are not interested in the same things that we are” (Punset in Mejías, 2010). This same well known scientific divulgator and politician belonging to the Spanish transition to democracy asserts that he considers an essential pillar in education to be “the training of the unconscious [...] It is only possible to innovate by solving problems when we accept that intuition and the unconscious are a source of knowledge which is as valid as reason (Punset in Mejías, 2010).

The artist should be ahead of the society in which he or she lives, presumably led by the intuition provided by his or her sensibility. The artisan could be considered to work midway between the artist and the designer, whilst the designer is equally devoted to creation, according to the new definition of this concept, which emerged from the Italian term *disegno* (drawing) as a product of the Age of Enlightenment, which carries out important reforms in the qualified production, those which were modeled on the Royal Factories, such as Saint Leucio’s, devoted to the manufacture of silk and pioneered by Charles III of Spain himself, as the king of Naples, or those that he founded later in Spain. Consequently, the new term *design* is defined in the foundational text itself belonging to the *Escuela Gratuita de diseño* (free school of design) as “the adaptation of drawing to the requirements of mechanics and serial production, without neglecting good taste and a creative spirit”, created in Barcelona in 1775,⁵ and in subsequent years in Zaragoza and in Madrid. This way, this specialised concept, which lies within the area of the creative project, emerges in Spain half a century before it appeared in London, with the adoption of the term *design* during the Industrial Revolution.

The designer, on his part, should equally resolve society’s emergent needs as well as satisfy the public’s practical and aesthetic needs. But, unlike the artist who attends to his or her own personal conditioning, the de-

⁵ Book of Agreement of the National Chamber of Commerce, 30 March 1775 (in Ruiz Ortega, 1999, p. 248).



Figure 5. *Fluo* lamp, product belonging to the Experimental Laboratory of the Arturo Álvarez firm. Good Design Award 2009.



Figure 6. *Crinoline* chair, Patricia Urquiola.

Photo: Sebastián García Garrido.

signer, as a promoter of advanced ideas, must take part in the presentation and defence of his projects before businessmen and other members in charge of any kind of corporation, as well as what is known as product system, presentation and communication of the product in question to the recipient.

In this sense, it would be necessary to steer the education of that individualised form, that to which the present system is said to via towards, notwithstanding this, it is also slowed down by the stagnation of schools and a passive attitude held towards a wide series of technological resources and media. It would be necessary to counteract these factors in order to develop, in the individual and also in the



Figure 7. *Sushi* chair, F. and H. Campana.

future designer, creative skills, in every sense. According to J.A. Marina, creating is "an activity that resolves problems (including the pursuit of happiness, among others) efficiently" and also "a habit"; "to play as best as possible with the cards we are given" and for this it is necessary to instruct talent.⁶ Thanks to design and to the typical strategies of the presentation and communication of a product system, the public can be sensitised into the approval of a new offer, a new concept and new sensations, becoming a cultural mission that will provide society with a more creative mentality as regards to expression and comprehension, such as the bidirectionality that is typical of a language that can also be an instrument or a means of public utility.

Ultimately, as with other cultural manifestations, such as music, literature, film, etc. in design the public strays from the routine, it is placed before new proposals that can be either accepted or rejected; proposals that can allow the public to experience a feeling of happiness which can be duly verified, as this philosopher would explain: "everything we do has to do with happiness and in our routine,

⁶ According to the philosopher José Antonio Marina, in the cited congress, Málaga, October/2010 (in Mejías, 2010).

when we give in to the need to create, we feel dejected" (Mejías, 2010). Clearly, the pleasure of creation is also experienced when appreciating the creations of others. In this manner, this idea-sharing session and the possibility of enjoying others designs is a cultural good that new generations especially value.

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