AFRICAN STYLE IN CAST PRODUCTS

NEW EXPRESSIONS OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

BY PHILLIP JOHN DU PLESSIS

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SUPERVISOR:
MRS M MARAIS

PROMOTER AND CO-SUPERVISOR:
MR P OOSTHUIZEN
ABSTRACT

This research project aims to invent, in a range of cast tableware, a new vocabulary of uniquely African styles inspired by the artefacts of traditional African art and contemporary African crafts. It suggests an ideology that seeks to unsettle the hegemony of western aesthetics by using strategies that transform selected visual and tactile features of traditional African art and contemporary African crafts into new stylistic features. These strategies rest on the ideals developed during this research. The first ideal seeks to maintain a plural rather than a single identity for contemporary African design. The second exploits the possible intersections between the aesthetic tropes of modern manufacturing technologies and those of traditional African societies respectively, and without reproducing either trope, takes advantage of the potential inherent in the term exotic. The last ideal probes how product styles might emphasise the enigmatic quality of traditional African symbols that often confound the outsider. The application of these ideals dictate three of the styling strategies developed in this dissertation, and are exemplified in five sets of cutlery that form part of the body of practical work for this project.

KEYWORDS

Africa, style, cutlery.
STATEMENT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hereby declare that the dissertation, which I herewith submit for the research qualification M.Tech: Industrial Design to the Technikon Witwatersrand is, apart from the recognised assistance, my own work and has not previously been submitted by me to another institution to obtain a research diploma or degree.

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INTRODUCTION

In this tenth year of democracy, South Africans celebrate a range of achievements marking their transition from apartheid to freedom. Our change in identity is confirmed by our accomplishments. We can boast of, amongst other transformations, the most advanced constitution in the world, a robust economy, a position of leadership in the affairs of Africa, and very recently, the successful bid to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup. However, we are continually reminded of transformations that still need to be made. Poverty alleviation, job creation and crime prevention are amongst the most important tasks still to be tackled.

Improving the competitiveness of our manufacturing industries (whilst adding value to our abundant natural resources) is often cited as one of the more important means to achieve these goals. This project is born out of a conviction that our cultural heritage and unique cultural mix gives us the aesthetic wherewithal to create products that have a competitive edge because they differentiate themselves as uniquely African in style. In the field of product design there are almost no mass-manufactured products that seek to suggest a new African identity. This can be partly accounted for by the demands of the market and the economic pressures that accompany manufacturing in the capitalist mode (economies of scale, scientific management, etc.) and mainly by the lack of successful examples.

By contrast, in those arenas of machine manufacturing that do not rely on large economies of scale, called either high design (Dormer1990:116-141) or batch production, the possibility of aesthetic innovation is both economically viable and is an expectation of the market. This is evidenced, for example, by the success of the products of Carrol Boyes (fig. 1) with their distinct African identity. However, products of this kind present what is as yet an underdeveloped vocabulary which only scratches the surface of stylistic innovation inspired by traditional African art or by the broader issues of identity in contemporary Africa.

1. Selected tableware from the Carrol Boyes range.
This project is based on the conviction that an ideology which intelligently exploits the confluence of tradition and modernity characteristic of much of contemporary Africa, can lead to new modes of stylistic invention. The rich inspiration provided by traditional African art and contemporary African crafts needs to be explored in ways that avoid the creation of stereotypical African styles capable only of superficial borrowings from an African cultural heritage. This requires close observation, and an informed understanding of the traditional art and the contemporary crafts of Africa. In an attempt to broaden the vocabulary for possible new styles this research formulates certain ideals which in turn suggest certain design strategies. Although this project is located in the high design/batch production area of design and manufacture, it is my hope that these strategies act as a stimulus for designers of products for mass-manufacture, and that similar strategies be deployed in this section of the market.

**Background and aims**

This project attempts to address a number of issues. Firstly, it seeks to understand how questions of identity in South Africa and Africa apply to, and might inform the practice of, local industrial design. This terrain has largely been neglected because no local design theoreticians have emerged, a result of the restricted scale of design activities in South Africa, since South African designers serve only a small local manufacturing industry. Secondly, this project seeks to understand how different modes of manufacture promote different aesthetic experiences triggered by products. Thirdly, it explores the potential of enigma (a property of traditional African art) in the creation of contemporary African styles. Lastly, it formulates strategies for developing new styles which reference traditional African art and artefacts (of the sort to be found in museums and collections), and contemporary African art and craft (such as so-called ‘airport’ art)\(^1\) as sources of inspiration. These new styles will be explored in designs for a range of tableware consisting of cutlery, bowls and mugs.

The vehicle for exploring the theoretical strategies formulated in the dissertation is tableware, chosen because it can be made using the technologies of batch production, thus providing

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\(^1\) I use the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ advisedly here. They are problematic because they have been used in the West to artificially periodise African history and culture.
opportunities for strongly individualised forms of expression. The objects of tableware are small enough to be put into production on a very small scale (without requiring large capital outlays), which allows factors such as manufacturability and market acceptance to be assessed, and promotes a shift in the practical work from the speculative (drawings and models) to the real (samples made as metal castings).

The initial stimulus for this project was provided, in part, by the opportunity for putting the cutlery into production at Transwerk, a parastatal producing locomotives, spares, and rolling stock for Spoor-net. At the inception of this project, December 2002, Transwerk were looking to put their spare foundry capacity to profitable use, and this proposal was one that was deemed to have potential. Transwerk have not pursued their original brief, but the work is nonetheless designed with the intention of having at least some of it manufactured for public consumption.

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of four chapters, each dealing with an aspect of the design process.

The first chapter explains the importance of the style of products for African and South African identity. The style of a product can symbolise aspects of the identity of a group of people (a society, a corporation, or a nation), or it can act as a sign when used by an individual to portray a desired identity to others. This project is not about creating national symbols, but about creating uniquely styled products inspired by the plurality of identities that make up the peoples of South Africa and Africa.

The second chapter explains how the monetary logic behind machine manufacture is a strong determinant of the aesthetics of modern products, and limits what can be expressed in them. This makes the creation of new styles difficult. It also explains how the structure of a society is reflected in the aesthetic traits of the objects it creates. Traditional objects are different
from modern ones because they reflect different values, attitudes and ways of relating to objects and to one another.

The third chapter explores the reasons for a society categorising products as being unique or more common. Style, and its interpretation by individuals, forms part of this categorising process. In the context of an over-aestheticised world, the symbolism carried in the features of traditional African art can be used to create styles which suggest the exotic to Western markets.

The fourth chapter explains how the ideals formulated in this dissertation and the practical work, form part of an integrated process. It documents the development of the cutlery of this project as examples of praxis. The styles of the cutlery sets attempt to engage both with the unique and with African identity and are directly related to critical reflection on issues that shape these concepts. Simultaneously, such reflection depends on the expression of these characteristics in concrete form.

A note on terminology

The term cutlery is used in this dissertation to mean utensils for eating and serving food. The term is used in certain parts of the world, North America in particular, to denote the range of kitchen knives, such as a chef’s knife or a paring knife, used for preparing food, and the utensils for eating are called either silverware or flatware. Flatware is the traditional English word referring to utensils for use at table. Silverware refers to the later (19th century and early 20th century) practise of making flatware from solid silver, or of silver-plating it. Most modern silverware and flatware is now made from stainless steel.
CHAPTER ONE
TOWARDS AN AFRICAN IDENTITY

The social transformation of South Africa has been accompanied by the creation of new symbols that act as outwardly visible confirmations that the underlying structure of our society is changed, and that we are making ourselves anew. Examples are everywhere, from overtly national symbols such as the national sports teams and national flag, to more commercial concerns such as the content of TV and radio stations, and ‘Africanised’ interior styling suggestions in decorating magazines.

Successful products designed and made in South Africa also become a source of pride for many South Africans, symbolising for them the ingenuity and manufacturing prowess of South Africans. So it might seem reasonable to expect a South African designer to want to create a South African style, and not a generalised ‘African’ style. However, there are difficulties in claiming that a new style is either ‘African’ or ‘South African’. ‘African style’ is preferred for this project, because although it may be seen as too generalised to allow the creation of a specific style, this very openness permits a wider range of sources. By contrast, the term ‘South African style’ implies the creation of a symbol to help construct a national identity. To claim to create such a symbol is arrogant. I will argue that whilst a designer can lay claim to creating a style, the adoption of such a style as a national symbol can only happen by a process of broad consensus.

This chapter addresses the pitfalls in representing others and ourselves, highlighted in a recent debate about artworks in post-apartheid South Africa. These concerns should also underpin design in post-apartheid South Africa. It also addresses the influence that the postcolonial and postmodern context in which we find ourselves has on the construction of a local identity.

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1 See Atkinson & Breitz (1997).
Representation and legitimacy: someone’s been swimming in my sea

The cartoon (fig. 2) by the late Derek Bauer (1989:64) succinctly captures the absurdities surrounding issues of ownership, legitimacy, and identity engendered by apartheid in South Africa. The Reverend Allan Hendrickse, ‘coloured’ representative and member of the tricameral parliament, took a swim from one of Port Elizabeth’s Whites only beaches in January 1987. The then president P. W. Botha demanded an apology from Hendrickse, and got it.

On the issue of identity and ownership, Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, sparked off an intense debate in the art community of South Africa in his essay, *Reframing The Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation* (1997). The essay challenges the legitimacy of the manner in which many white artists represent the black body in their work. He believes that South African white artists still dominate the arena of visibility, and in their subject matter frequently (mis)represent the black body as abject. This robs blacks of the voice to speak for themselves. The positioning of blacks as abject is racist because, according to Axel (1999:42), it

...mimics the contradictions of racist oppression...[and]...also contains the symptoms and vehicles which perpetuate those very structures of violence and inequality.

Such (mis)representations work against the project of the rainbow nation and deny the creation of a new non-racist, national identity.

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2 The abject is a term used in a specialised sense in art criticism. The psychiatrist Julia Kristeva interpreted this term in a manner that was applauded by feminists, in her book *Powers of Horror* (1984). Dino Felluga of Purdue University (2003: online) summarises Kristeva’s abject as “…the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other.” The abject “…has to do with “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules”” (ibid). However, it is not at all clear that Enwezor means to use the word in this sense. It seems to read, in most places, as the commonly understood ‘without dignity’, or ‘wretched’. See, for instance, pages 386, 388, and 397 of Enwezor (in Oguibe & Enwezor 1999).
Enwezor’s essay elicited a barrage of responses in *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* (Atkinson & Breitz 1999). The more salient points are summed up here. Firstly, Enwezor’s idea of how representation works fails to recognize that there is a significant difference between speaking about and speaking for (representing and being representative). White artists are not necessarily claiming to speak on behalf of blacks in South Africa when they speak about their repression. Secondly, Axel (1999:42-46) notes that Enwezor seems to suggest the apartheid notion of the male white body representing our national identity should be replaced by the male black body for the same purpose. This is problematic because it supplants one monolithic idea of national identity with another. In the process it continues to disenfranchise women and other races.

Thirdly, Enwezor performs the same (mis) representative error of which he accuses the artists. He imputes intentions to the artists that they do not themselves express, and this robs them of the right to speak for themselves. Fourthly, Burnett (1999:79-84) points out that to disallow representation of, and access to, the other is to set up apartheid-like boundaries between race, culture, gender and sexuality. In fact, this restriction of representation does not take account of the importance of the other in the construction of the self. This point is especially important in South Africa today where we continue to grapple with identities that are defined by reference to apartheid, because the old habits of polarising and separating people have not disappeared. Lastly, the categories of race, language, gender and nationality that Enwezor suggests, do not exist in any essentialist way, but are constructs. Their boundaries are fluid and blurred, so that any understanding of representation, advocacy (being representative), and identity formation (e.g. ‘national identity’) must first take account of the inherent artificiality and instability of its own, created, boundaries.

If the construction of identity in post-apartheid South Africa is to be in any sense democratic then it must encompass both the speaking about and speaking for across all previously

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3 This is a philosophical and sociological term denoting those aspects of the universe, including people, which we find strange, mysterious or alien. The otherness of unfamiliar objects, customs, and people from other cultures enables us to see ourselves the way we do because it allows the construction of barriers that show where the self ends and the other begins. A limitless self is inconceivable.
artificially constructed boundaries. Under these conditions it becomes difficult to conceive of a single national identity. Further, the debate about identity in the arts forms only one component of a national identity, and it is a debate that is likely to mutate and evolve along with changes in society. Identity cannot be fixed or finalised, it can only be a provisional locus of discourse about identity.

Although the above debate is primarily situated in the fine art world, it has obvious resonances for this project. I do not intend to make any direct representation of the (black) body, nor do I attempt to speak directly about or on behalf of anyone in Africa who was, or is repressed. However, my intention to reference ‘traditional’ African artefacts to create an identifiable style in products means the research must question rights of ownership (copyright), appropriation and the representation of aspects of traditional cultural artefacts. This is necessitated by my status as a westernised white South African male attempting to represent something about (black) Africa.

However, there are at least two significant differences between this research and the artworks referred to by Enwezor, namely those of differing temporalities, and the different nature of what may be contemplated in the artwork and the designed object. Regarding temporality, the work of the artists with whom issue was taken by Enwezor look mainly at the recent past and deal primarily with politically sensitive questions. This research project, on the other hand, although looking to be influenced by both a more distant traditional African past and a contemporary present, is essentially an anticipation of a future reception of newly invented styles. The greater temporal distances involved, both forwards and backwards in time, makes the research far less politically sensitive, shifts the emphasis to issues of economic upliftment, and positions it in a commercial world where concerns of consumerism take precedence over politics.

Secondly, the nature of the designed objects themselves have a very different contemplative role to that of artworks, whether one is looking at what may be intended or what may be
interpreted in a designed object. The designer may intend to include his or her own individually conceived metaphorical or figurative meanings into the design of an object, but the intended functionality of a designed object is one that is agreed upon in a cultural and social context. Functionality is, in turn, significantly influenced by the technology used to make the object, the fact of its repeated mechanical manufacture, and the means and rationale of the commercial world by which it is to be disseminated. The range of constraints that a designer deals with thus significantly narrows what may be expressed in the first place. Paradoxically, this widens the scope of interpretations because these factors, which are outside the designer’s control, already encompass aspects of the society we live in. The artist, by contrast, has much greater control over what he or she may express and also thus has a stronger, although by no means definitive, influence on what can be interpreted.

The reception of designed objects, like artworks, is highly provisional. However, the many unanticipated uses to which an object may be put, and the range of contexts (physical, geographical, temporal and social) in which it will be found is very different to those of artworks. Thus its meanings are accumulated, or altered, through factors different from those of the artwork. This is a subject that will be explored in greater detail in chapter three. The designed objects of this project will be conceived in an African context, but are meant to be consumed and interpreted in a world market. They are intended to speak both about and for Africans.

Nefarious boundaries: who am I?

Thus far, identity within the local context of post-apartheid South Africa has proved to be profoundly provisional and complex. But identity is also shaped by interactions with a wider world. South Africa is seen as the economic powerhouse of Africa, and is the most modernised of African states, and thus more globalised than any other region of Africa. It has appointed itself as custodian of peace, the overseer of development, and the gateway to Africa under the guise of various regional bodies – AU, NEPAD, SADEC. Is it reasonable to

4 Almost any designed object can be used in ways not intended by the designer (see Gibson 1979:chapter 8; Dormer 1990:chapter 6).
assume that the influence of a postmodern First world is probably more pronounced here than elsewhere in Africa?

There are a number of views of Africa vis-à-vis globalisation, modernity and postmodernity (and their isms) which entail complexities too lengthy for discussion here (Featherstone 1990, Werbner & Ranger 1996). However, some comments from a Postcolonial Studies perspective are relevant to this study, and so are worth examining more closely.

Postcolonial Studies seeks “…privileging particular methods and problematics so as to subvert the self confident rationality of imperial science.” (Ranger 1996:271). It proposes strategies of connecting the peoples of the postcolonies with “…the subordinated others of the first world…socialists, radicals, feminists, minorities, etc.” (Prakash, quoted in Ranger 1996:271), in order to establish a more significant place and voice for Africans in a globalised, postmodern world. In his introduction to Postcolonial Identities in Africa, Werbner (1996: 40-42) points to the inadequacy of postmodern discourse in talking about Africa, because of its rootedness in ‘Western cultural and sociological self-examination’ which makes it ‘irrelevant to the condition of the Third World’. Nevertheless he allows that two aspects of postmodernism are relevant to Africa: the increasingly cross-cultural nature of individual identities, ascribable to “…technological change and the globalisation of culture…” (ibid); and the increasing relativity of values. He cites Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses as an example that combines “…successfully the art of the West and the inspiration from a non-Western culture…” (ibid). He further points out that this combining is unavoidable: “…regardless of the present condition of Africa, a genuinely creative African literature [or other creative endeavour] would be as resolutely postmodern as its Western counterpart.” (ibid) (words in brackets mine). Africans have established a significant platform for themselves in their confrontation of stereotypical identities assigned to them in the colonising project of modernity.

To situate the above more particularly within a South African context, Robert Thornton (1996:chapter 5), following Appiah (1999:52-73) (who equates colonialism with modernism
in Africa, and fuses the postcolonial with the postmodern) provides an exception to Werbner’s assertion (in the text quoted above) by affirming that South Africa is a special case in Africa, and should be considered as a postmodern, but (contra Appiah) not a postcolonial, state. The Apartheid state was essentially modernist through its development of a bureaucratic administration, but also already postcolonial by 1910 because of its break with Britain. For Thornton (1996:143), the logic of the Apartheid/modernist administrative agenda led inexorably to the logic of a postmodern interrogation and opposition to the rationality of this Apartheid modernism, because Apartheid’s central tenet, unity makes strength, was the self-destructive lie equivalent to the central contradictions of other modernisms.

Although the lie was intended to impose monolithic barriers of identity between invented ‘population groups’, it was this very marking of categories of difference that undermined the notion of unity, since unity demands uniformity, not difference. The lie has resulted in a nation of people whose identities are marked by boundaries that “…are not mere edges: they are themselves the focus of attention and identity.” (Thornton 1996:150). It is at the meeting place of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age, language and culture that identity is formed and expressed. Hence the Afrikaans language may bring together coloureds, blacks, and whites, whilst Islam and Christianity may break apart two blood brothers. Thornton posits that the reason for the confounding phenomenon of the political stability of the post-apartheid solution alongside the extreme violence (of the mid to late nineties) can be accounted for by this very reason. He claims that South African identities cross-cut each other in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. There is no fundamental identity that any South African clings to in common with all, or even most other South Africans. South Africans have multiple identities in multiple contexts, depending on factors of expedience, recruitment and mobilisation, and the company one keeps. (1996:150).

This almost extreme hybridity of identity can also be seen to be a result of our interactions with our own variegated histories, of the traffic in influences of returning exiles and of electronically connected diasporas, of newly established economic and cultural ties with states which previously shunned us, and of influxes of refugees and immigrants from troubled states to the North. South Africa is thus both properly ‘of Africa’ because it sees itself so and is
acknowledged by other African states as so, and also not ‘of Africa’ in that the fragmented political and social identities of its citizens are more postmodern than that of many other African states.

Creating a new style vs. constructing a national identity

In a postmodern world there are at least two important roles (amongst others) that products can be understood to play in questions of identity. These can be aligned along the axes of production and consumption, where the style of products can act as a symbol representing the identity that a collective body of people (for instance, a ‘nation’) wish to present to others regarding their own abilities, technologies, culture(s) and so forth, and the style of products can be also consumed as signs by which individuals construct identities for themselves and present these identities to society. This subject will be expanded upon in chapter three. In line with the schema presented above, symbols can be seen as the speaking for (being representative) and signs as the speaking about (representing) a society. This précis necessarily simplifies these issues. A great deal of complexity comes with the interplay between these two roles, notably that products can act as both sign and symbol at the same time, and that products are unstable carriers of meaning. The following text attempts to address issues of national identity, symbol and style pertinent to the designer.

For a great many South Africans the idea of a national identity is both desirable and deeply problematic. Its desirability probably stems, firstly, apart from political aspirations towards a ‘national unity’, from its perceived ability to confirm within individuals aspects of their own identity. It provides a mirror and a locus for aspects of personal identity such as belongingness to a project bigger than the self, or to a moral and political order reflecting desirable values, etc. For instance, the ability of a national sports team to perform to the expectations of an individual can, because it symbolically represents the nation’s prowess, also magically affirm (if successful), or negate (if unsuccessful) the individual’s worth in his or her own eyes. The symbolic power of a national team to affect the national psyche, and the economy, can be seen in the catering industry: should a national team win an important
match, restaurants, bars and shebeens are immediately filled to capacity with celebrating patrons. Conversely, the industry reports a severe dip in patronage and earnings if the national team should lose.

Secondly, the desire for new symbols also reveals a desire to reflect a ‘new’ identity to the rest of the world. The wholesale replacement of symbols may be cynically viewed as merely a marketing exercise for repackaging brand South Africa. However, it should be understood that the scale of such iconoclastic repackaging would not be successful if there were not a significant and genuine change of heart to support it.

This research is concerned with a generalised and broad ‘African’ identity, rather than a specifically South African identity, prompted by a desire to produce African styles and not to arrogate to myself the erecting of symbols. Designers, like artists, produce styles that are firstly their own, but which may become symbols through a process of social consensus. The desire to see an immediate absorption of symbols in new styles, though supposedly patriotic, is the same conflation of representation and representative for which Enwezor is criticised (see above and Atkinson & Breitz 1999).

Nevertheless, the argument of this text could be met with the rejoinder that objects of South African origin could be used as primary sources of inspiration without assuming that they must be representative or symbolic. If one is going to create styles in the hope that they may become symbolic and improve the profile of South African design to the world, surely, the thinking goes, they should reflect something of South Africa, not of Africa. But as has been demonstrated in the first two paragraphs of this chapter the boundaries of culture, language, race, ethnicity and even geography are so fluid as to make firm boundaries impossible. What is often meant by a South African style is that an ethnically or tribally based aesthetic (Zulu or Ndebele, for instance) should be followed, which would amount to either a close reproducing (as opposed to inventing) of existing traditional African forms and ‘decorative’ motifs, or a stylistic reduction of these forms and motifs. Such stylisations are already in use, and have become stereotypical.
Ethnicity should be recognized as a colonial, and thus problematic, strategy of categorizing. Both of these approaches reinforce the idea that South Africans should, or can only, (re)produce variations on the theme of a traditional Africa – that we should not, or are unable to, invent new styles. Approaches of this nature present problems of an uncritical appropriation of traditional culture that borders on plagiarism. They suggest a proscription of the invention of other, more contemporary, and more representative, South African identities. They also suggest an irrational proscription of what sources designers may consult for inspiration. From this viewpoint the idea of constructing a South African style to consciously reflect a South African identity has the paradoxical effect of denying the provisional nature of South African identity, and does not allow for sufficient plurality. It limits South African identity to stereotypes of ‘Africa’ that border on colonialism. An important rider to this argument is that no one should be discouraged from creating styles that reference a specific traditional ‘ethnic’ aesthetic. To do so would be to commit the same errors pointed to by this text.

Sidney Kasfir, author of *African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow* (Oguibe & Enwezor 1999:88-113), takes issue with a similar desire by Western museums and art collectors to define and proscribe limits for the notion of an ‘authentic’ African art. Kasfir dismantles such categorisation by showing that it is not possible to establish valid criteria by which boundaries can be established for a ‘pure’ precolonial Africa, free of destructive Western ‘contamination’ and intervention in African cultures, or a culturally static period of African history. For Kasfir, the reasoning by which the Western art world proclaims any African artwork authentic or inauthentic is deeply colonial, and in truth merely reflects Western tastes. Taste here is the elitism that attends connoisseurship. It is the selecting of objects for their status value, such status being conferred according to the values and mechanisms of Western markets. These markets have scant regard for the values of the Africans who conceived, made, and used such objects in everyday life (before they became objects for elite Western consumption). I am not here equating the conditions of inventing a new style with those of collecting African art, but wish to point out that it is the same sense of elitism that is operative in both spheres in deciding what may be termed authentically African.

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1 Ethnicity should be recognized as a colonial, and thus problematic, strategy of categorizing.
It should by now be clear that I take issue with the prescription and arrogation that I see as inherent in appending a national label to a newly invented style. The label Africa is also problematic, in all of the same ways as described above, but has the advantage of allowing a far broader range of strategies to emerge for the creation of styles, and is general enough to circumvent the imposition of expectations regarding a South African style. ‘Africa’ is a deliberate strategy to clear a conceptual space for myself, yet still ground this project in South Africa. South Africa is the departure point for identity, and Africa the departure point for style.
CHAPTER TWO
MODES OF MANUFACTURE AS MODES OF REPRESENTATION

The preceding text provides a broad overview of some of the factors that influence the formation of South African and African identities as stylistic options, and a rationale for locating the style of the practical research as African and not South African. In what follows I narrow the focus to deal with the kinds of representation that the machine and craft offer respectively for marking products as African in style, and their possible symbolic value in addressing identity.

Firstly, whilst ideologies are instrumental in the creation of styles in products, the economic and technological factors of manufacturing (in a capitalist world) are stronger determinants of what tropes may actually be encountered in products. For the purposes of this project, only two tropes are examined: modernity and tradition. There may be others. Secondly, from a design perspective these tropes are embedded in the different manufacturing technologies, and in the economic logic that accompanies a given manufacturing technology. Thirdly, these tropes seem, on the surface, to be created as a result of the characteristics of mass-manufacture\(^1\) and of craft respectively, representing a binary opposition of modernity and tradition. However, one must look to the surfaces and forms (level of detail) of objects to understand how the two tropes may be read, or used to construct identity, in the style of a product.

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\(^1\) The terms mass-manufacture and machine manufacture are used interchangeably here. Mass-manufacture encompasses a broader range of manufacturing activities, such as post-production finishing, assembly lines, packaging and so forth, than does machine manufacture. Machine manufacture, in this context, allows one to foreground the specific role of the machine in making products, within the context of mass-manufacture. Mass-manufacture is understood to be manufacture that continues until market forces dictate that it stops, whereas for batch production a limited run is planned. Machine manufacture reaches its optimum in functional efficiency and economic viability as a continuous (mass-manufacture) and potentially unlimited process.
The role of ideology in determining style

Peter Dormer (1990:20,145-146), design critic and author of *The Meanings of Modern Design*, posits that had the dominant aesthetic preceding the Bauhaus been one of utilitarian simplicity (what we now call functionalism), the Bauhaus modernists would have adopted decorative embellishment, instead of functionalism, as the vehicle for their utopian ideas. His point is that the Bauhaus's promotion of a Platonic utilitarianism was as much about establishing a strong new visual identity as it was about creating a brave new design world. This new identity was established to serve political and ideological ideals, and as such had to be clearly visually different to its predecessors. In pointing out that a new visual identity must accompany a new ideology, Dormer ignores the role of other factors, such as technology, in making possible the creation of a new visual identity. The ongoing debate about the styling mantra of modernism, *form follows function*, reveals that the manufacturing technology of the Bauhaus era played as important a role in shaping modernist ideals of style as did the ideology of the Bauhaus. George Marcus, design historian, sums up the two opposing interpretations to this maxim by stating that it should be understood as “...promulgating the idea that form should express function (rather than be determined by it)...” (1995:12) (italics mine). Both interpretations can be shown to be problematic for the same reason, that function is a matter of interpretation, not of the designer's intentions. The heel of a shoe may become a hammer if needs be, and a stone a missile, or a grave marker, or a seat, etc.

Nevertheless, this maxim has come to be axiomatic for designers and consumers alike in its seemingly incisive assessment of the styling of modern products. The assessment has nothing to do with the utopian ideals of the Bauhaus, since commercial ones have long superseded these. Rather, the idealised forms promoted by functionalism correspond with the rationalised

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2 This is the central dictum around which functionalism revolves, and was originally coined by the architect Louis Sullivan as *form should ever follow function*, in his article *The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered* (1896: 25) (quoted in Marcus 1995:12). Functionalism is often misunderstood as having to do with functionality, when in fact it deals with the idea that the style of any building, or object, should convey only what its function is, and nothing more.
forms that suit design for the machine. Thus functionalism could not have been, as Dormer claims, merely a means of establishing an historical visual difference. The functionalist ideal that products should be designed to suit the constraints of the machine, whether fortuitously or by design, stands out as being significantly more in tune with technological and ideological developments of the time (the 1930’s) than any notion of the ornamental could have done. Functionalism, and its sister concept, utilitarianism, stem directly from the zeitgeist of capitalism in both technological and ideological terms. So, whilst ideologies are important in creating new styles to reflect new identities, they appear to be most successful only if they also accurately represent important aspects of the culture and times in which they are conceived.

The economic logic of manufacturing technologies

Manufacturing technology played a decisive role in the shift in attitudes towards styling that occurred when the decorative arts of the nineteenth century were superseded by modernist design in the twentieth. Two very similar manufacturing processes, those of casting (processes such as sand casting and investment casting, both of which are still in use today), and high-pressure moulding (processes such as injection moulding and metal pressing), because of their respective predominance within each era, find correspondences in the differing ideas about design of each era. Each process has its own economic logic driven by the demands of differing technologies and the (potentially) different social systems within which they can operate. The economic logic of each mode of manufacture has a strong influence on what trope may be presented.

This project aims to make use of casting technology, which is a craft in a traditional context since it is an ancient technology, but a modern manufacturing method (not of mass manufacture, but of batch production) in an industrial context. Its versatility in reproducing any style, whether it is modern or traditional, without additional cost penalty for complex forms or details, is easily explained. It is a copying technology. However, since the designs for this project are meant to express new style(s) representing ‘Africa’, ideas of both
modernity and tradition need to be explored. For this reason it is important that mass-manufacture, the arena traditionally dealt with by industrial designers, and which is most suited to producing modernistic styles, also be analysed.

The 'overly' ornamented designs of the nineteenth century that so appalled the Bauhaus designers (and other design critics before them) could only have been economically produced using casting methods. Casting technology suits, and also encourages, the reproduction of 'superfluous' patterns and elaborate decorative elements (figs. 3 & 4). This reveals an immediate link between rich detail, such as decoration and patterning, and ancient technology. Casting technology thus already belongs to the trope of tradition, and not of modernity, even though it has been gradually modernised from the nineteenth century onwards.

Sand casting will serve to illustrate the general principles of casting that are pertinent to this argument. In sand casting a two-piece mould is created by packing the material of the mould, a mixture of sand and a bonding agent, over an original model, called a pattern, thereby taking a direct impression from the pattern. One half of the mould is then removed to extract the pattern, and the two halves of the mould are reassembled to allow molten metal to be poured into an opening at the top of the mould. The casting that results is retrieved by destroying the mould. The whole process is repeated to create another casting.

This relatively simple and inexpensive process of direct copying accommodates all manner of detail and irregularity, albeit to a sometimes rudimentary level of accuracy or refinement. What is significant in aesthetic and economic terms is that the design is invested in the pattern and not in the sand of the mould. A pattern can be made from a relatively soft material, such as wood, which allows intricate details to be carved from it, by hand if necessary, with ease and economy. As a result the restrictions on the amount of detail that can be included in a design are technical ones3 and not aesthetic or economic. Irregular forms or surfaces, such as those found in African art, present no obstacle. The economic logic of casting is that it

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3 For sand casting the primary technical considerations are: each form must be able to be released from the mould; a degradation of detail and finish will be transferred onto the cast product because of the granulation of the sand. This last problem can be overcome if one uses the more sophisticated process of investment casting.
requires relatively small amounts of capital investment and machinery, but conversely can only deliver very small volumes at slow production rates. It is not suited to manufacturing on a large scale, but it does allow for any aesthetic style to be produced without incurring significant cost penalties in the moulds.

High pressure moulding, on the other hand, favours the reproduction of mathematically described forms and regular\textsuperscript{4} surfaces. Injection moulding, one of these processes, is a modern technology that was developed during the Second World War in order to dramatically increase the manufacturing outputs of certain factories. The technology is based on the principles of Baekeland’s 1907 invention of Bakelite (Fenichell 1996:90-91). Unlike the moulds for casting, those for injection moulding are very much more difficult, complex, and expensive to make. Some aspects of this technology, especially those related to the production of moulds, will help explain how the trope of modernity works.

The machine: constraints on complexity

To begin with, the moulds must withstand very high pressures and temperatures, so they need to be made from solid blocks of hardened tool steel. The hardness of the steel means that only machine processes such as those of milling machines, lathes, and surface grinders, can be used to cut the negative forms (and various cooling and heating channels) for the desired part. This immediately marks moulding technology as belonging to the trope of modernity, because mechanisation is essential to the process, and the direct application of human skill, such as carving, cannot be accommodated.

Cutting into hardened steel can be a very lengthy process and the time used is measured as costs: of artisan’s salaries, machine time (energy use, hire time, wear and tear, maintenance, etc.) and time to market. Time to market describes the cost of having money tied up in

\textsuperscript{4} To a machinist or a materials scientist this term would be problematic, since no surface is entirely regular. For the machinist, the tolerance variations that any cutting machine produces means that all machined surfaces deviate fractionally from a desired norm. For a scientist, surfaces are made up of molecules that create their own microscopic textures and irregularities. The term ‘regular’ is inadequate for the purpose, but because surfaces are so taken for granted, little terminology has been developed to describe them more precisely.
resources and processes. This money is unproductive until the process being financed, in this case the making of moulds, is completed. The shorter the time to market, the quicker the invested money can once again deliver returns. As a result, designers are usually pressurised to reduce the complexity of forms in designs, because the greater the complexity, the greater the consumption of resources (time is a resource), and the bigger the financial risk.

However, the mould-making process itself contributes its own technical restraints on complexity, which are also worked out as temporal-economic costs. Typically, two precisely matching halves of a mould must be made to enclose a cavity of, ideally, uniform (therefore precise) depth. The cavity is the space into which molten plastic (or metal) will be injected, under pressure, to form a product, or part of it. The precision that is required is possible because the cutting machines are configured to cut along the three Cartesian axes of elevation, horizontality and depth. This system of co-ordinates carves up any bounded three-dimensional mathematical ‘space’ into almost infinite degrees of movement, allowing a machine to perform operations in minutely controllable increments. Some more sophisticated machines even have fourth and fifth axes, but these are essentially further articulations of the other three.

The only coherent way of providing instructions to the machines is to use this same system of co-ordinates, in either graphic form (engineering drawings) or in computer language. This dependence on Cartesian co-ordinates severely limits the amount of detail that can be economically described and created in a mould. Engineering drawings, and here I exclude computer generated drawings for the sake of the argument, must describe forms in precise dimensional detail (fig. 5) if they are to effectively communicate what the mould will eventually produce. Each form needs to be described in two-dimensional geometric format, as flattened shapes, in at least two orthographic planes. Within each orthographic plane, each shape must be described in terms of geometry (line, curve, square, diameter etc.), direction.

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1 It cannot earn interest or dividends, and it is not being used as an operational resource.

2 Computers are limited by how much information they can process. It is possible that in the near future computers with sufficient processing power will be developed to make the manufacture of irregularities and fine detail economically feasible.
5. Engineering drawing of a plastic part for injection moulding. Courtesy of Mr. M. Moore.
(angles, parallels, perpendiculars, etc) and position, the last being the plotting of three coordinates relative to each of at least two datums (starting points).

The more complex the forms are, the more time is required both for describing them in a drawing, and for cutting them using a machine, and the greater the costs that are incurred. For forms and surfaces that are irregular, every irregularity would need to be converted to individual, geometrically describable (known) shapes, and be provided with three positioning coordinates. The weight of detail describing the complexity of decorative forms in, say figure 3 would far exceed any advantage, in economy of scale, to be had from producing them as injection moulded products. The process of cutting such complex forms would consequently also require an inordinate amount of management\(^7\) and time to complete.

The advantages of this system, although it requires large amounts of capital and resources and can only function within an industrial complex, are that very large volumes\(^8\) of product can be manufactured at a greatly accelerated rate. In addition, these necessarily large costs can be amortised over the large volumes to bring down the cost per unit dramatically. This translates into products that are affordable, helping to expand markets and increase the potential for profit. However, in competitive markets the lower the production costs, of which moulds usually form a significant portion, the more competitive a product can be. Market forces thus also play a crucial role in limiting complexity in moulds.

Under this mechanised system it is not the hands-on skills of the pattern maker (in casting) that determine what forms and surfaces will be produced, but the conceptual and planning skills of a designer, embodied in a drawing\(^9\). Thus, because the designer is removed from any direct involvement in the making of products, he or she must take account of the

\(^{7}\) One would need to plan and co-ordinate the fitment of different sizes and shapes of cutting bits to cut different levels of detail and of cutting profile. Each time a machine stops in order to be set up with a new bit (called set-up time) the interruption slows down the process of manufacture.

\(^{8}\) An injection-moulding tool (the name given to a set of moulds) can sometimes be used to produce hundreds of thousands of parts before being retired.

\(^{9}\) See Nigel Cross’s Design and society: the proceedings of the Design and Society Section of an international conference (1982) for a detailed discussion of the forces that brought about the displacement of the craftsman by the designer, and of direct hand manufacture by the drawing as a set of instructions.
technological principles and economic logic of machine manufacture in deciding what forms may be viably used in a design.

The economic logic of machine manufacture is inescapable. It asserts itself visually as a logic of aesthetic reductionism, prescribing to designers and manufacturers what forms and surfaces they may viably use in designing for mass manufacture. This is true wherever those machines may reside in the world, and to whatever design purpose the designer may put them, regardless of his or her cultural background or disposition to create symbolically and culturally different products. Design for the machine is inherently Western because the machine represents and symbolically reproduces so completely the values of westernisation: rationalisation, modernisation, standardisation, progress, economic capitalism, etc.

In conclusion it must be stressed that the above examples, although illustrative, are true for other modern manufacturing processes within their respective contexts. Many other manufacturing processes and factors of production, such as assembly line requirements, standardised parts, transportation, societal attitudes to technology and so forth, also have an influence on the appearance of products in contemporary society.

Of particular significance for this project are the different visual characteristics that each mode of manufacture favours. Casting technology, on the one hand, allows for greater freedom of expression than does the technology of mass-manufacture. On the other hand, the technology of mass-manufacture, because it is dependant on abstracted information in the form of drawings and machine paths and is viable only within a market system, places limits on the complexity of form and surface, and therefore of expression. This does not mean that the machine cannot produce complex, detailed forms with irregular surfaces, but that it does not usually make economic or technical sense to use it for these ends.
Postmodern design and the logic of the machine

Industrial design in the postmodern mode is little different. The logic of design for the machine still applies. A tape dispenser may now also be a stylised elephant (fig. 6) or a stapler a shoe (fig. 7), but the nature of their stylisations demonstrates the constraints of the machine. The forms have been converted to machine permissible information, in mathematically and geometrically precise fashion. Stylisation is the essence of the machine and of rationalism in design. This logic, as for modernist design, reduces postmodern designs for mass manufacture to their geometric essence, on top of which the designer may employ various postmodern strategies in order to produce a layering of meanings as opposed to a modernism of Platonic essentialism. We can see modernism and postmodernism in design as stylistically related, but ideologically different. The mode of mass manufacture has not yet been able to cope with truly postmodern ideas that might encourage rich texture and the ‘imperfection’ of the mark of the hand: the slight variations in surface finish that mark one individual hand-made piece from another. Most avant-garde postmodern designs are of a craft or one-off nature, so that even for the more radical of postmodern designers, the problem of circumventing the association of modernism with the logic of machine production is not solvable.

The point may also be made that modernist styling in thirties America took no cognisance of Bauhaus ideas (Meikle 2001:179-182), and instead celebrated modernity by using streamlining as a motif. In the fifties, American styling became even more flamboyant and mixed together architectural motifs with aerodynamic ones, as in the front grille of Virgil Exner’s 1952 Chrysler Phaeton (fig. 8), or Harvey Earl’s 1959 proposal for GM (fig. 9). But both aircraft and modern architecture are symbols of modernity in themselves, just as the classicism of functionalist styling is a symbol of the (modern) machine. In all cases, what designers recognize is that what may be expressed in design for the machine must be in tune with the times. The machine has a determining effect on what modernity is, on how our lives are lived, and therefore on what can successfully be incorporated into the styling of mass manufactured products.
The qualities of materials: surface deep

If the machine can ostensibly be used, although not optimally, to reproduce ornamental designs or even irregular surfaces and forms (tending to belong to the trope of tradition), and casting the tropes of both modernity and tradition, then where is one to situate either trope? Firstly, it must be noted that casting, in its modern context, is not here equated with craft. Its relevance lies in its suitability for reproducing most forms, and some surfaces, of crafted objects. Secondly, a note on my use of the terms ‘form’ and ‘surface’. For my purposes, recognizing that other definitions exist, form is defined as those distinguishing features, and their arrangement, that can be named and that serve to make one object, or parts thereof, distinguishable from another. Surface, following David Pye (1995:88), craftsman and lecturer in design, has to do with the visible and tactile qualities of one material as against another: warmth, smoothness, roughness, grain, reflectivity, etc.

Pye grapples with the long vexing problem of the difference between ‘craft’ and ‘design’ finally devising a schema to resolve this problem which dispenses with the traditional distinction of the hand vs. the machine, and replaces it in a paradigmatically different fashion as the difference in the application of the workmanship of risk and workmanship of certainty (20-24). Both types of workmanship apply to craft and to design, to the work of the hand and to the work of the machine. The differentiation occurs in the degree to which risk (of failure or of error) has been reduced, or is still present, in the making process. Generally, for machine made products, the risk of failure must be all but eliminated before or at the point of final manufacture. It is the designer’s task to obtain a high degree of certainty through rigorous checking of drawings and testing of prototypes, ensuring that a design will function and be manufacturable before it enters the tooling and manufacturing realms – realms that belong to artisans (craftspersons), not designers. The designer exercises the workmanship of risk in his or her design process, in drawings, models and prototypes, in order to work towards a workmanship of certainty.


10 Terms such as flat, round, square, radius, chamfer, convex, concave, hole, slot, ripple, dimple, lip, flange, arabesque, waist, spoon etc.
For Pye, handwriting (ibid:21) (fig. 10) is one of the few examples of a pure workmanship of risk, and a mass produced hexagonal nut (fig. 11) that of the workmanship of certainty, although not pure because the workmanship of risk has been exercised in the process of designing it.

In most craft activities the crafts-person (who is also the artisan) remains in control (to varying degrees) of the making process him/herself, meaning that the workmanship of risk continues till the end of manufacture. This can be illustrated by a crafts-person working a piece on a lathe, say a wooden table leg. He or she cannot predict with absolute certainty that the leg will turn out as envisaged for three main reasons. Firstly, regardless of the person’s level of skill, he or she cannot, as with the machine, be guided by a precisely incremental system of Cartesian co-ordinates, and so cannot avoid producing an ‘imprecisely’ shaped object. It will be imprecise both in comparison to some desired norm, and to the other legs of the set. Secondly, the risk of making an accidental error, say pushing too hard on the chisel and cutting away too much material, is an ever-present likelihood. Lastly, an engineering drawing of the leg cannot be a normative template (as in the workmanship of certainty), but only a rough guide enabling the crafts-person to perform loose adjustments to the work so that it does not stray too far from the ideal of the drawing.

By contrast the work of technological progress is marked, apart from almost perfect finishes, rationalised geometric forms, or aesthetic strategy employed, by the virtual elimination of the workmanship of risk at the point of manufacture. The forms and surfaces of designed objects are regulated, so that what comes out of the machine is always predictable. There is almost no ‘risk’ that one product will be observably different from the next one produced in the same mould (or whatever other template is being used). Nor can the products that emerge contain the marks of ‘risk’, because such marks would need to be planned in, and would then cease to be marks of risk.

Pye (1995:86-100) refines his analytical apparatus even further when he deals with surfaces. He makes a distinction between the properties of the material and its qualities. A moulded
plastic refuse container (fig. 12), for example, can be soft, pliable and slightly translucent. These are properties, because they can be objectively described using the language of science. Softness can be measured as shore hardness, and pliability as the modulus of elasticity. Qualities, on the other hand, are our subjective responses to the material and the way it has been worked. The moulded plastic container can be thought of as cold, smooth, cheap and slightly luminous. These qualities are discernible because of the particular way the material has been worked, via the machine, to produce a smooth, thin walled, supple and lightweight container. If this same container were to be melted down into a small, irregularly shaped ball, our perceptions of it would change so that it became a hard, rough, opaque and comparatively weighty hand-formed object of indiscriminate function. The properties of the material would have changed little.

Thus the forms, surfaces, and properties of any object, when considered simultaneously, allow us to form an understanding of an object. The example of the plastic container is instructive. It is a modern object because it has the properties of a modern material that can only have been processed in a (modern) machine. A thermoplastic material (almost certainly the material used) cannot be made into the smooth bodied forms of a container except by being heated up and injected into a machine-made mould. The smoothness of the surfaces and the geometrically regular forms of the container reflect the mechanical and social principles by which the machine works.

By contrast, a carved Suku cup (fig. 13) is laden with surface clues telling us that it is a traditional object. It has qualities that can only have been produced by hand. The imperfections and irregularities of the surfaces are evidence that hand-held tools were used to cut into the grain of the wood, because every detail and every form is irregular and has a geometrically imperfect symmetry in relation to any other detail or form. This evidence of the immediacy of human intervention, and therefore of human care, is not possible with the machine, which of necessity mediates and separates us from the work and care of other
human beings. Although wood can be a modern material (its properties allow it), the way the wood of this cup has been worked evokes values and technologies that have nothing to do with modernisation or industrialisation. Its formal and decorative elements have no symbolic correspondence with the contemporary aesthetics determined by the logic of design for the machine. Dorner tells us that

…the craftsman is in one sense an artist – he (or she) is leaving his subjective mark in how he decides to treat the surface. The surfaces symbolise for us a whole range of social relations because those relations are inscribed in the surfaces. (1990:147).

This mark of subjectivity, evidence of the workmanship of risk, is true of all crafted objects, whether they are from the West or from Africa. What marks African tradition as different to Western tradition is a subject for the next chapter, but it is probably accurate to claim that any traditional object symbolises, for many people in the modern world, a close-knit and communally harmonious traditional society. Such positive values may be entirely imagined, but they are nevertheless powerful because they point out the lack and desire for such values.

Of course, tradition may just as easily be thought of in negative terms, as denoting a backward and unsophisticated society. However, it is the aim of this project to show Africa as the place where tradition and modernity can intersect to produce surprisingly new designs. This project seeks to create new styles that take their cue from the liminal space between the two worlds, thus providing a more accurate reflection of contemporary Africa, and an affirmation of pride in the symbols of tradition. Tradition can become a source of new identity that usurps and places into doubt the hegemony of the symbols of modernity. It can mark a return to human values.
CHAPTER THREE
FROM INTENTION TO INTERPRETATION - THE ROLE OF STYLE

In a world saturated with commodities exhibiting a seeming plethora of styles (fig. 14), closer examination reveals that what may at first appear as successive new styles is no distinctively new approach to design, but rather the recirculation of the dominant symbols of modernity. The importance of style in contemporary products means that any attempt to develop an innovative style in products needs to pay close attention to the relationship between factors determining the reception and use of products (including the use of products as markers of lifestyles/identities) and the encoding in the forms, surfaces and finishes of such products, of symbols which can reflect value systems other than those associated with modernist design.

Presently, the sheer volume of designed objects can result in a dulling commonality of features (fig. 15), whereas symbolic inclusion of the ‘other’ or the exotic (fig. 16) can provide a means of differentiation without ignoring the constraints of the technologies of modern manufacture. This project represents an attempt to integrate the advantages of contemporary manufacture with stylistic symbols drawn from the traditions of Africa, and this chapter speculates on the importance of style in their reception.

Creativity: designer and consumer

Since this chapter deals partly with whether the designer’s intentions meet with the expectations of the user, these intentions need to be interrogated. Design critic Adrian Forty (1986:239-245) seeks to address some misconceptions about the degree of creative autonomy that designers have in designing products. For Forty, ‘…most designers…[collude] … with the myth of their own omnipotence and…[wholly ignore]… their rôle as agents of ideology.’ (242). A lack of conscious awareness as to the role played by culture and society in shaping the design process means that designers are frequently unable to recognise that successful products, that is those that are well received, are those that embody ‘…ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended.’ (ibid:245).
One plausible reason for this lack on the part of designers is that the division of labour endemic to industrialisation creates an inescapable and alienating gap between professional, thus ‘specialised’, designers and the ‘unspecialised’ users of their products. This gap gives designers and manufacturers exclusive control over all decisions regarding the functioning and appearance of products. Such concentrated responsibility comes about because designers must satisfy the demands of a range of other specialised occupations (toolmakers, materials converters, product assemblers, accountants, marketers, etc.) in their attempts to produce ‘successful’ designs. As many of the demands as possible dictated by such specialisations must be met before considering the needs of users. A number of design theorists have suggested that designers who wish to be responsible to society, or to produce meaningful and desirable designs, must devise methods which deliberately attempt to reconnect designers with users so that users’ needs and desires (including those ethical ones that promote societal harmony and protect the environment) can be better incorporated into designs for products.

In spite of this call for reconnection, design theorists Peter Lloyd and Dirk Snelders are able to demonstrate that even for an extremely well received product, such reconnection is often absent. In their article *What was Philippe Starck thinking of?* (2003:237-253) Forty’s notion that successful designs necessarily reflect the zeitgeist of a society is tested by applying it to Philippe Starck’s highly successful *Juicy Salif* lemon squeezer (fig. 17), and to Starck’s own comments about this product. They do this to establish whether personal creativity forms either a necessary or a sufficient condition for a design to be considered successful.

Lloyd and Snelders (2003:243) report that Starck responded publicly to criticisms that the *Juicy Salif* does not work very well by claiming that he designed it primarily as an object that would start conversations, something that it in fact does very well. They suggest that this interpretation by Starck of his own intentions is most likely a creative re-invention. Before the item was produced, bought and used, Starck must logically have intended to design, specifically, a lemon squeezer and not a ‘conversation starter’. An exposé of its faults.

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1. See, for example, Donald Norman’s *The Design of Everyday Things* (1990), Klaus Krippendorf’s article *When I see a chair – must I see a sign of it?* (1998: 97-107), and Norman Whiteley’s *Design for society* (1993).
provided him with the opportunity to recast his own intentions to accord with the success of the product and not its failings. In this respect Lloyd and Snelders seem to support Forty by recognizing that the designer’s professed intentions regarding a product are often at odds with what society sees as its ‘purpose’. They conclude that the personal creativity of the designer is indeed necessary for the success of a product, but that it is not a sufficient condition. They disagree with Forty’s contention that the success of a product depends on how well its design anticipates the social expectations of those it is meant to serve. Instead, the sufficient condition necessary for the success of a design ‘…only comes about through the consumer’s engagement with the product.’ (Lloyd and Snelders 2003:251) and results from ‘…the personal creativity of the consumer to use or misuse the products that they buy’ (252).

Such a conclusion raises difficulties. Firstly, it does not explain why so many people choose to buy a product2 (in this case the poorly-functioning but controversial Juicy Salif) in the first place, and in so doing help to make it successful (only subsequently discovering what is really engaging about it). Secondly, there are unexamined assumptions behind the notion of the ‘…personal creativity of the consumer…’ that appear somewhat simplistic. It is doubtful if one can understand what is personal without also needing to understand what is social, since each is a determinant of the other. Both ‘personal creativity’ and ‘consumer’ are notions of identity and social interaction emanating from within a society.

Both Forty and Lloyd and Snelders raise fresh questions whilst providing answers to their own questions. Designers may themselves contribute to the ideological climate of a society by producing aesthetically novel or functionally innovative products that add to the

2 Lloyd and Snelders (2003:251) suggest that the celebrity status of the ‘omnipotent designer’ might help to shape a consumer’s engagement with a product, so influencing the consumer’s decision to purchase the product. However, the engagement of the consumer with the product is still central, because it is only in such engagement that the idea of the celebrity designer comes into play. A product such as the Juicy Salif would initiate, in the consumer, the process of realising an abstract aim of how it might either fit his or her way of living (following Fish 1994), or goals in life (following Scruton 1979). In other words the designer cannot provide any guarantee of how the consumer will engage with the product, and is therefore not omnipotent. Neither are Forty’s ‘ideas present in a society’ an adequate explanation on their own of how the consumer will engage with a product, since it is only in the process of engagement that one particular idea, or a few ideas out of a myriad of ideas, come into play. Which ideas come into play, and why they do so, cannot be predicted beforehand by the designer or by anyone else.
‘ideas…held in common by the people’ (Forty 1986:245), rather than simply anticipating them. However, because these new ideas are always interpreted within a social context, a fuller investigation is needed of how a society structures ideas about products, so as to better explain how novelty affects the reception and assimilation of products.

**Broad perspectives: the role of objects**

In contrast to designers and design theorists, who tend to favour examining the individual’s experience of objects, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and philosophers tend to focus on the social or structural relationships fostered by things, and between things and people. This project does not seek to polarise or set as opposites these different approaches but to search for intersections in both viewpoints. What follows is an examination of the problem of reception and interpretation of objects from a social as well as an individual point of view in order to come to some conclusions regarding the reception of new styles.

Since Marx’s seminal analysis of modes of production within capitalism, first published in 1876, numerous and diverse approaches have been proposed for understanding the role of objects in structuring social relations. The fact of such diversity points to the difficulty of unravelling the complex nature of interpersonal and societal relationships surrounding people making, selling, exchanging, using and disposing of objects. For a designer wishing to understand how the style of an object will affect its reception, the problem is that of deciding to which approach he or she should give prominence. Sociologist Tim Dant (1999:17-39) surveys the most significant of these approaches and argues for an eclectic approach that cuts across various themes over and above consumption. Dant’s themes suggest understanding objects:

- as signs of status and identity (Veblen, Bourdieu)
- as vehicles of meaning and equivalence within and between different cultures (Appadurai, Sahlin, Douglas and Isherwood, Baudrillard)
- as bearers of aesthetic value (Simmel, Baudrillard and Featherstone)
- as components of ritual (Douglas and Isherwood, McCracken)
- as indicators of lifestyle and identity (Featherstone, Dittmar, Lunt and Livingstone)
- as knowledge and ideas (Appadurai, Campbell)
as potentially inalienable (Miller)

[ ] as the focus of discourse, both institutional and local, about their values (Leiss, McCracken, Jhally, Ewen and Ewen)

[ ]...One key element... is the idea that humans interact with objects, sometimes as if they are human, sometimes because through them we can interact with other humans and sometimes because they reflect back something of who we are. (38)

It is these last two aspects of Dant’s ‘humans interact[ing] with objects’ that are of most interest for this project. They offer clues as to the reasons for a new style or a new product being favourably received or not. An individual’s choice of products reveals to others how he or she wishes to be perceived (a personal choice) but is itself conditioned by the way a society is structured.

On the subject of meanings other than those of physical use being attached to objects, the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986:64-91) provides a very useful analytical framework for understanding how societies form taxonomies for objects so as to give them different meanings and degrees of status. Such cultural structuring of objects allows a society to understand aspects of the identity of individuals who own, or have access to, one kind of object and not another. His framework for looking at things has, at two extremes of a continuum, the ‘singular’ and the ‘common’ that correspond conceptually with other polar opposites, namely the sacred and the profane, heterogeneity and homogeneity, and commodity and culture. Kopytoff claims that:

Culture serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous and presents an endless array of singular things. Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity. (1986:70)

Every society classifies the things that it produces, or acquires, to accord with a structure of social values. Culture acts to ensure that the most singular of things (such as the Mona Lisa, or the Crown jewels) remain highly unattainable thus providing a repository for an extreme of

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3 Kopytoff adopts a biographical approach to things that assumes that a thing has a ‘career’ in which its uses, values and status change as it moves about within a society, and as it ages. Such changes can reveal much about the way people relate to one another within a society, and the relations between different societies.
(sacred) value by which the value of other things may be measured. Common things, on the other hand, are marked by their ready exchangeability. Both singular and common things can become commodities when people agree to exchange one object for another, ‘…the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value’ (ibid:68). Objects are therefore only commodities at the point of exchange and can have a different status and meaning before and after being exchanged. A single object can thus be markedly common or markedly singular at different points in its life, or in different social contexts.

Money, being one of the most readily exchangeable of things and thus very common, is the most profane in value and stands at the opposite extreme to the most singular of objects. Money is innately ‘anti-cultural’ (ibid:73) because it has no power to be used as a marker of discriminatory value, a property that makes it a very efficient form of exchange. This efficiency of money as an exchange technology explains the proclivity of modern societies to move towards ‘…optimum commoditization - the drive to extend the fundamentally seductive idea of exchange to as many items as the existing technology will comfortably allow.’ (ibid:72). Kopytoff believes that complex societies, that is modernised societies, are so partly because of the extreme commoditization that characterises them. Such commoditization brings with it difficulties in agreeing on what the taxonomic order of things should be, with Kopytoff suggesting that:

There is clearly a yearning for singularization in complex societies. Much of it is satisfied individually, by private singularization…. (1986:80)

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4For Kopytoff commoditization is anti-cultural because it tends to homogenize value, putting it in opposition to culture’s essential drive to be heterogeneous, or discriminatory, about value. Because money promotes commoditization, it is also anti-cultural.

5Exchange technology is the term Kopytoff uses to describe any system of exchange by which seemingly disparate things, such as physical labour, food, and precious metals, can be made equivalent and so be made exchangeable. The exchange technologies of pre-industrialised societies are tiered into commodity spheres, where it is desirable to exchange the items of a lower commodity sphere, for instance food, for those of a higher commodity sphere, say a length of precious metal, but it is not desirable for the exchange to work in the other direction. Trading ‘upwards’ or ‘downwards’ acts as a marker of upward or downward mobility or social prestige. Money is a sophisticated exchange technology because it largely eliminates exchange spheres and the flux of social prestige associated with them by facilitating commoditization across all classes of goods and services.
This ‘private singularization’ occurs because there is an absence of visible means to confirm that one is exchanging things of lesser value for ones of greater value, leading to the use of other value systems alongside those of public commoditization, such as aesthetics or morality, to justify singularization. Such schemes of ‘... valuation and singularization devised by individuals, social categories and groups...stand in unresolvable conflict with public commoditization...’(ibid:80). This conflict helps to explain why the objects of art, design (of the sophisticated sort), history and the like are elevated above those of commerce and acquire an aura of elitism.

Kopytoff’s framework helps to explain the use of products by individuals to construct identities. Many people construct private schemes of singularization by choosing to own products that are unusual (fig. 18), because the distinctive properties of such products provide a clearer means of visually differentiating a person as being discriminatory. The more singular an object, which is to say the better it differentiates itself from other similar objects and the greater cultural cache it is perceived to have, the more likely it is to appeal to personal visions of taste and sophistication. By clearly marking the cutlery and crockery of this project with symbols influenced by African artefacts, the likelihood that they will be interpreted as being significantly singular is increased. The point has been made that traditional African artefacts are collectible (exotic) and often enjoy the status of Art.

For designers, a biographical understanding of objects may help to close the gap between designer and consumer. For a consumer, choosing a product to enhance individuality requires imagining, inter-alia, how the product will be interpreted by others, which social contexts it may be used for, and what other products it may be combined with to afford a greater degree of singularity. Designers need to imagine these same kinds of scenarios in order to avoid thinking of products solely as commodities, or as purely functional objects. This strategy of imaginative repositioning has been most useful in designing the cutlery and crockery for this project, where the question, ‘what surface qualities and physical features will make these objects intriguing, exotic and novel for individuals?’ has been a major directive.
Individuality: experiencing products

A prominent characteristic of Western societies is their emphasis on individual experience, as opposed to that of communal experience. Industrial designers are required to design products to satisfy a particular, although imagined, individual who is the consumer, but such an individual is in fact an aggregate of the expectations of all the individuals a product is meant to serve. In other words, a good design is one that anticipates and satisfies as many individual preferences as possible whilst alienating as few as possible. This tension between the individual and society partly accounts for the tendency of many designers to dissociate the product from the user, because the user is in fact a fiction, and focus instead on the product as object sans audience. A focus on the object rather than the user has characterised much design discourse of recent decades.

Design critic Victor Margolin (1994) believes that design discourse needs to shift focus from a discourse about things (designed objects) to a discourse about experience or the ‘…relation between things and the experience of users.’ (ibid:55). Margolin agrees with the ideas expressed by John Dewey (1938:35-49) that we need to be aware that things form part of a continuous experience of living, and that their meanings alter according to the situations in which we experience them. Experience is something that is not restricted to what happens inside a person’s mind and body, but is strongly affected by interactions with the (dynamic and ever-changing) environment, which for Dewey is the totality of persons and things (buildings, roads, objects etc.) with which we interact (Margolin 1994:54-58).

Experiences are personally and socially continuous so that accumulated experiences alter our awareness and understanding of ourselves and of our environments. An understanding of a new product depends on an ability to integrate the new experience that is brought about in interacting with the product with that of past experiences of similar products. If such integration is successful, sense can be made of the product and the experience of it deemed to be satisfying. The cutlery, bowls and mugs (fig. 19) developed in this project are...
Margolin maintains that because designed objects play such an important part in the creation of conditions of experience, such conditions of experience should feature prominently in the designer’s approach to designing products. A designer needs to pay attention to the interactions people have with the objects of the designed environment, in addition to improving their mechanical, manufacturing and marketing functions. Margolin proposes a simple schema for understanding human interaction with products. Two dimensions apply, namely the operative which ‘...refers to the way we make use of products...’ and the reflective which ‘...refers to the way we think about a product and give it meaning. These dimensions work together, however, since we don’t use a product without considering what it means to us.’ (1994:57).

It is easier to articulate the operative parameters of a product than its reflective ones. For example, for a chair (fig.20) the operative parameters are based on a person’s past experience telling him or her that the chair can be used to sit on. As far as the chair’s function goes the operative dimension is fairly narrowly circumscribed by the configuration of the chair determining that it can only allow certain functions and not others. However, the operative dimension of products is not limited to physical use, but extends to those other uses, such as the marking of status and the recognition of categories of products and styles (in this instance, of the category ‘chair’, in the style of the Bauhaus, thus indicating discriminatory taste), all of which require social agreement and thus necessarily proscribe what may be understood in this approach to the product. By contrast, there is no limit as to how a person may (privately) contemplate the meaning of a chair, whether it be its ‘...operative value, its evocative qualities or its social significance.’(1994:58). An awareness of a product’s reflective qualities will differ in degree and kind from person to person and from context to context, so that the reflective meanings that are possible for a product are highly variable and largely unpredictable. The operative dimensions are far more conventionalised.
Even though the question of style is not within the ambit of Margolin’s enquiry, the implications of his thinking for questions of style are clear. Firstly, whilst the gap between designer and user can be significantly narrowed by paying attention to the operative dimensions required of a design, it can just as significantly be widened by not paying enough attention to the reflective ones, which are more synonymous, although not exclusively so, with style. Style is the expressive link between designer and user. It is the humanising element that can transform a mere product into a desirable object.

This goes some way to accounting for the success of products like the Juicy Salif, in which it is the styling that provides the greater opportunity for reflection and which recognizes that a satisfying human experience of an object demands more than simply paying attention to its operative dimensions. Perhaps it is somewhat insignificant that Starck’s original intentions were not consciously those of creating primarily a reflective object. His ludic arrangement of shapes, forms and surfaces demonstrates an intuitive fit with the zeitgeist of modern societies, reflecting Forty’s ‘…ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended.’ (1986:245). Starck’s stylistic reinterpretation of a common object allows for much symbolism to be read into the Juicy Salif, and has generated much speculation worldwide as to the meaning of objects in general, and the specific role of the designer. If one considers Dant’s ‘humans interact[ing] with objects’ (1999:38), the styling of the Juicy Salif has been successful in encouraging human interaction around products, and in lending the product a uniqueness by which those who have chosen to own an example can reflect a more distinctive identity. Because the style of an object is a strong reflection of the human thought and labour that goes into its design and manufacture, it can reveal the humanity of the designer in his or her need to communicate meanings in a product. The expressivity of the designer thus meets a corresponding need on the part of consumers for more satisfying reflective dimensions in their experiences of products.

By bending Kopytoff’s continuum of singular and common to apply to the meanings of objects as a means of ‘exchange’, it is possible to discern a surprising equivalence with that of Margolin’s operative and reflective dimensions. For Margolin (1998:58), the operative
dimensions are ones about which people readily share judgements, whereas the reflective
dimensions are entirely personal. It thus becomes possible to suggest that objects are used as
vehicles for trading in operative ‘signs’ affecting our social interactions, but that each object
may trigger, through symbols, personally meaningful interpretations, each symbol opening its
own realm of meanings. What is operative has much to do with a social and conventionalised
understanding of the meanings of objects, and what is reflective has much to do with
individual interpretation and private meaning making.

Style that uses expression as an element of the reflective dimension can be applied to the
practical work of this project. This suggests that a new style, if successful, will need to
surprise the consumer by incorporating features like the unusual, the exotic, the tactile, and
the visually suggestive, which, because they do not fit neatly into past experience of similar
products, attract greater reflection. The products of this research deliberately engage with
these features in order to maximise the potential for reflection.

Style, symbol, and differentiation

Whilst the previous theorists assist in mapping the space between design intention and
reception they do not directly examine the issue of style. Economist Christoph Hermann
(1998:27-35) believes that style is an important category on its own for understanding the role
of objects in social relations. For Hermann aesthetics plays an increasingly decisive role in all
spheres of modern culture, not only in consumption but also in politics, science,
communications, epistemology and the like. This pervasive aestheticism, which is especially
prevalent in the arena of products, means that style should be seen as a ‘…form of expression
determined by the particular situation…’(31) and which involves understanding how the
object, the subject and the context all contribute to a particular expression of style. In a world
in which differentiation is becoming increasingly important, consumers must act reflexively if
they wish to negotiate their way through the stylistic universe in a stylistic way. Style is thus
as much a matter of strategising intelligently about which style of product to use in which way
and in which context, as it is about the characteristics of the product. For products this means
that the more distinctive their physical characteristics, the more possibilities for expressive advantage they can provide. In a world in which ‘The museum of culture ceases to be a guardian of the integrity of tradition and becomes an archive of styles, whose geographical and historical dispersal is a matter of contingent fact’ (Crook, et al, quoted in Hermann:31) the potential for choice explodes in a profusion of brands, self images, and lifestyles.

However, in spite of this abundance of choice and dispersal of cultural influences, the dominant styles produced within the ambit of industrial mass manufacture still prioritise symbols cannibalised from the history of Western culture. Differentiation becomes increasingly difficult within such a stylistically incestuous world. The differences are often so small that the sociologist Baudrillard (1996:137-155) is able to speak of a system of objects where the model (highly singular) and the series (highly common) almost become one another, and where the Marxist philosopher Frederick Jameson (1994:129-205) takes great pains to discover what interventions against the hegemony of postmodern stylistic swamping are possible. With the need for differentiation in mind, a design approach has been selected which adopts a deliberate strategy of inserting into the typically Western product forms, details, and decorative elements that can symbolise the exotic.

The question arises as to how the exotic may be symbolised for a modern audience. For this chapter it is the symbol, rather than the sign favoured by semiotics, that is of interest. For my purposes symbols, unlike signs, have a degree of stability and fixity of meaning not easily modifiable by being situated in new contexts. A sign functions by having a provisional meaning that can only be determined within a system of differences, whereas a symbol can encompass a relatively autonomous realm of meanings (Molesworth 1992:412-414) that does not rely on comparison with other symbols for meaning differentiation. Symbols, especially visual ones, are read in a gestalt fashion so that a great deal of information can be absorbed and processed in one glance. One must keep in mind that symbols reside in our heads and not in any feature of an object or product. We read them into objects and products, meaning

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6 Design critic Adam Richardson (1994), in A designer’s work is never done: or, there is nothing outside the context, provides a very convincing account of how objects are interpreted by being read in a gestural (gestalt) way as opposed to a structured or semiotic way.
that different social or cultural groups can understand the same referent in symbolically different ways.

The difficulty of accessing symbolic referents drawn from another culture is illustrated by structuralist ethnographer Dominique Zahan in his study of the horizontal *ciwara* crests (figs. 21 & 22) of the Bamana people of Mali. Zahan (2000:34-45) reveals that the two-piece construction of such crests reflects an ideological imperative rather than a technical necessity, since it is technically feasible for Bamana artists to make them in one piece. The horizontal *ciwara* crests make reference to animals that represent for the Bamana aspects of their close relationship with the soil, and in particular with the growing of groundnuts which have an inverted pattern of growth compared to those of other flowering plants known to the Bamana. This inversion is most strongly symbolised by the junction (fig. 23) between the lower and upper registers7. The junction represents the border between the lower world of the earth, which delivers food and wealth (the groundnuts), and is also a place of darkness and obscurity, and the upper world, a place of daylight, luminosity and vegetation. The manner in which the animal figures are carved acts symbolically to flesh out the story of the ‘above the soil’ and the ‘below the soil’. Zahan says that

Bamana art... is so close to the realities of nature that it is not possible to understand it if one does not first grasp what it attempts to symbolize through very sophisticated artistic devices (ibid:39).

For the Bamana, their objects substitute a ‘... “sculptural language” for oral and written languages.’ (ibid:41). The language that the *ciwara* speaks becomes magically efficacious when the crest is used for performing the ritual dances around farming. The meaning of the symbols is thus located directly in the lived experiences of the Bamana people, so that what is symbolised is always a relationship, whether it be between humans and other animate beings (other humans, animals, God), between humans and things (trees, plants, the earth) or between things and things.

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7 Register is used here in the sense of correspondence. Each half of the *ciwara* has a symbolic correspondence with a narrative that is significant to the Bamana in their lives as farmers.
To the uninformed, a *ciwara* crest cannot but symbolise something exotic and mysterious. The strong density of motifs and strangely stylised forms suggests that something other than an aesthetic response is being called for by the *ciwara*. For Zahan

...Africans believe that they can act on things by calling upon other things similar to them, through the ancient principles of homeopathy and sympathetic magic. ...In African thought, not just any similarity allows one thing to work upon another, and when one places similar things in proximity, their juncture is effected by the formal arrangement (ordonnancement) we call “ritual”, without which the desired efficacy is inoperative. (2000:45)

The meanings and ritual arrangement of such dense symbolism may be hidden, but the intention to symbolise, or at least to have some meaningful purpose above mere decoration, must form part of the puzzle of such an object. To an outsider this impenetrable intent reveals itself in the strongly stylised forms, in the unusual proportions of overlarge head to small body, and in the rich decoration, none of which appears to have any utilitarian function or discernable correspondence with Western canons of aesthetics, thus preventing an entry point for unravelling their true meanings. Many traditional African artefacts rely on this kind of culturally significant symbolism, even those that are clearly utilitarian.

When compared to the values being presented by the rationalised forms and surfaces of most mass-manufactured products (figs. 24 & 25), it is easy to recognize, in such forms and surfaces, that the motivation is reductive – to achieve the greatest effect through the least means. Such forms and surfaces most often accord with marketing strategies that seek to minimise risk and maximise profit, by ensuring that the styling of a product is never so different from its predecessors as to be unacceptable. The market largely accepts that which symbolises modern life, partly because marketers have successfully enlisted the modernist propaganda of the superiority of utility to ensure that the clean forms and smooth surfaces in modern products symbolise progress. Clean (unadorned) surfaces are more hygienic. They reflect the efficiency of the processes that created them. They sometimes tell us a story about what happens ‘under the bonnet’, where finely engineered components move in choreographed synchronicity to produce optimum functionality. They do not symbolise much other than the utilitarian values of modernist ideology, and where they do symbolise other

23. Detail (from fig 22) of horizontal *ciwara* showing iron staples holding lower and upper registers together (Zahan 2000:43).

values, it is that of postmodernist eclecticism, where irony and wit are used to amuse, to appeal to nostalgic yearnings, or, as with the *Juicy Salif*, to question the nature of the modern object. They cannot symbolise a spiritual dimension and cannot confirm direct relationships of humans to humans, humans to the earth, or humans to God.

There are thus clear ideological differences which correspond with clear visual differences in what may be symbolised in modern machine-made products and traditional African art and artefacts. These ideological differences are determined as much by the social structures that govern their making and use, as by the culturally determined values, beliefs and rituals that reside in each different society.

What makes African art exotic to non-Africans can be summed up as follows. Firstly, in traditional African art as it might be experienced in its original settings, both the architecture of stylised forms and decorative elements, and the symbols they represent, are efficacious in themselves for effecting human interaction, for performing rituals, and for interacting with all the other actors of the environment (other beings, the earth, plants etc.). Such understanding of the workings of stylised forms, decorative elements and symbolism is not available to non-Africans, but the strangeness of these forms and decorative elements has the potential to hint at their role in determining human interaction, because they imply a conceptual space governed by values unfamiliar to contemporary non-Africans. By contrast, contemporary Western products, and what may be symbolised by them, only work indirectly as facilitators of human interaction. Their aesthetic makeup suggests no specific symbolic efficacy. Such differences in belief systems and values are clearly visually and tactilely marked in each type of object. Secondly, in terms of Margolin’s operative and reflective dimensions, there is an indissoluble connection between what is operative and what is reflective in traditional African artefacts, whereas in modern products there is a discernible uncoupling between the two. For African artefacts situated in their original contexts, the way in which a symbol is efficacious (operative) is a reflection of what may be thought about it (reflective), and what may be thought about objects is always socially determined. Both modernist and postmodernist objects need not symbolise anything other than their own functionality, or added meaning.
making, respectively, and what may be contemplated about them is entirely a matter of individual determination. Lastly, African artefacts affirm their visuality and tactility as having being determined directly by a human being, whereas the visual and tactile aspects of modern products show the mediation of the machine and the systematisation that necessarily accompanies it.

This research project has sought to pay attention to ideology and different theories as determinants in creating a new style or styles. It has also sought to locate such styles in the perceived psyche of national identity in order to create objects that are distinctive precisely because they stem from beliefs and values that run contrary to the current hegemony of contemporary designed products and the mark of the machine. By using obviously ‘alien’ and exotic symbolism, I wish to mark the products designed for this project as not only culturally different but symbolically dense. This is a strategy to make them deliberately enigmatic and somewhat impenetrable, alongside the need to make them sufficiently familiar to allow a degree of comfort and accessibility. They should be markedly novel in that they avoid the recycling of motifs and styles of the west and instead introduce new forms, shapes, textures and surfaces that can be seen as ‘other’.

In conclusion, there is a postmodern irony in trying to invent a new identity by referring to tradition. Whilst Africa is evidencing increasing westernisation, it is this very Western influence that creates the conditions for wanting to preserve and ‘update’ the ‘Africaness’ of Africa. Africa, once the ‘heart of darkness’ to a colonising Europe, to many Westerners still provides a foil of esoteric otherness with its strange superstitions and myths. Even in scientifically anthropological terms, Africa as ‘the cradle of mankind’ could suggest the beginning from which to measure how far (Western) man has progressed. This traditional Africa performs as a margin to define the centre, but Africans, both craftspersons and designers, can reinforce the trope as a deliberate strategy for differentiation in the competitive arena of global markets.
This chapter explains the processes employed in developing the products. The theoretical ideas for this project and the practical work have informed each other in a series of iterations. The postulation of ideals necessary for judging a style to be both unique and African depends first on embodying fledgling ideas as drawings and models. These media readily permit the expression of intuitively understood ideas without the need to first name or categorize their distinctive conceptual features. Once expressed in concrete form, the ideas are analysed carefully for their expressive qualities. These qualities are then articulated as ideals for further analysis and refinement. The ideals that emerge from this dialectic of theory and practise (praxis\(^1\)) provide a constructive rationale by which to proceed more confidently in proposing new ideas, and for assessing the validity of earlier ideas.

Both the theoretical and practical outcomes of the research strengthen the conviction that there is rich potential for stylistic differentiation of African products in using traditional and contemporary African art for inspiration. However, I have argued against any straightforward borrowing of the features of traditional or contemporary African art, calling instead for styling strategies informed by the ideals developed in the theoretical research. These ideals are summarised here as a reminder of what I have sought to achieve in the practical work. Firstly, the nature of African identity must be questioned so as to avoid producing stereotypical or ethically questionable presentations of Africa in the styling of products. Secondly, the tropes of modernity and tradition, found in the manufacturing technologies of modern and traditional societies respectively, should be extracted to develop styles that do not reproduce either trope uncritically, but rather make use of the liminal space between the two to develop unique

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\(^1\) Educator Mark Smith explains the use of the term praxis by educators such as Paulo Friere (in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1972) and Shirley Grundy (in *Curriculum: Product or praxis*, 1987) to describe the interdependency of areas of knowledge once considered disconnected (for instance, Aristotle’s threefold distinction of knowledge into theoretical, practical and productive areas) so that “There is a continual interplay between ends and means…. a continual interplay between thought and action…. [involving]… interpretation, understanding and application in ‘one unified process’ (Gadamer 1979: 275).” (Smith 1999: online)
styles. Lastly, in the context of an aesthetically crowded world the use of exoticism, in particular that of a mythical ‘Africa’, is suggested as a particularly suitable strategy for stylistic differentiation. Thus, for this project, any inspirational source (whether of traditional or of contemporary African origin) is filtered through these ideals so that it can be transformed into a visual or tactile feature that is intentionally new and exotic.

The main challenge for successfully including such ideals in the practical work has been to strike a suitable balance between the poles of modernity and tradition and their respective aesthetic logics. To follow too closely the aesthetic logic of modernity is to inscribe mainly Western values on the surface of a product, thereby losing the distinctiveness to be had from a more obviously African (exotic) flavour. To buy too strongly into the aesthetics of traditional African art is to risk creating an impression that the products have not gone far enough in interpreting and transforming such influences into something new. The practical examples that follow illustrate three strategies suitable for developing new styles. The first and second strategy are exemplified in one concept each, and the third is explained in three concepts. I have chosen to expand upon those products which most clearly embody the theoretical intentions. Since the cutlery is the most developed of the products, I have elected to provide an explanation of all five of the finalised sets.

**Strategy one: traditional African art**

**Concept 1** (figs. 26 & 27)

This set is one of the first developed, and is meant to be exclusively inspired by traditional African artefacts. The idea came about because the feature on the heads of some Northern Nguni dance staffs (fig. 28) reminded me of eating utensils, so these features became the basis for the decorative elements of each utensil. The designs went through two iterations, the first set of models (fig. 29) being rejected because the formal features of each resembled too
19th century. Wood. 74.5 cm - 78 cm
(The art of Southeast Africa 2002:118).

29. Concept 1 cutlery- developmental models.
closely those of the Nguni staff heads that inspired them. Also, their handles were too thin, lacking the robustness that characterises much traditional African art. In the second version of this set the handles have been integrated with bowl (of spoon and teaspoon), blade (of knife) and palm (of fork) respectively to accentuate and transform some of the inspirational features from which they have been sourced. For instance, the spoon and the teaspoon no longer look like staffs but have a twig and leaf like quality, even though the ridges on their undersides (fig.30) are inspired by the heads of the Nguni dance staffs (fig. 28). This ridge has been echoed as a valley on the upper sides of the spoon and teaspoon. The forked legs on the end of the handle of the spoon prevent it from tipping to one side, something the ridge would otherwise cause it to do. The legs struck me as the type of zoomorphic solution that many African craftsmen would use to solve this problem (fig. 31), so the same strategy is used on the teaspoon. In the teaspoon the placement and shape of the feet are influenced by the feet on the Northern Nguni snuff kerrie (fig.32).

When the second version of the knife was taking shape its handle resembled the bone of an animal, a natural material often used by traditional African artists in jewellery, combs and other objects. The resemblance to bone is then carried through to all the handles of the cutlery set. The shape of the blade of the knife and the squared teeth behind the blade are inspired by the shapes on the head of the Northern Nguni staff (fig. 33). The teeth on both suggest the serrations on knives. The decorative triangulated spines on the fork (fig. 34) have no specific inspirational origin, but take their cue from the widespread use of the triangle as a motif on objects of traditional African art. The protuberances of the Northern Nguni sweat scraper (fig. 35) and the decorative motifs carved on the sides of the Swazi neckrest (fig. 36) are just two of many examples.

30. The ridge on the Northern Nguni dance staff head (detail from fig. 28) is the basis for the ridge on the undersides of concept 1 cutlery spoon and teaspoon. Similarly, the feet on the Northern Nguni snuff kerrie (see figs. 31 & 31, opposite) are the basis for the feet on the teaspoon.


3 I have coined this term in the absence of any authoritative source naming the flattened part of the fork between the handle and the tines. This flattened blade is visually analogous with the palm of a hand, the tines forming the fingers. It would be difficult, without naming this part, to describe the position of the features that are attached to it.
33. The influence of the Northern Nguni dance staff head (detail from fig.28) on the knife of concept 1 cutlery.

34. Concept 1 fork - detail showing triangulated spines.

35. Northern Nguni sweat scraper. 19th century.
Horn. H. 32 cm.; W. 3 cm. (The art of Southeast Africa 2002:146).

36. Swazi neckrest.
19th century. Wood. H. 16.5 cm.; W. 41.5 cm. (The art of Southeast Africa 2002:165).
Strategy two: contemporary African crafts

This second strategy celebrates the resourcefulness and inventiveness of the many African craftspersons who set up operations of manufacture and merchandising together, along the sides of roads, next to shopping centres, in flea markets, or wherever else they deem suitable. Much of their work reinterprets Western products by caricaturing them in miniature form (fig. 37), and much of it simply recognizes the gaze of the tourist in its production of iconic figures by which Africa can be characterised and remembered (fig. 38). Their work succeeds at being either functional or sculptural using the most elementary of mass manufactured materials, such as wire, recycled aluminium from cold drink cans, and beads. Such work is typical of the adaptability that African craftspersons display in their ingenious use of age-old hand skills to transform modern materials into crafted objects.

Concept 2 (figs. 39 & 40)

This cutlery is inspired by the wirework sculptures of these contemporary African craftspersons (fig. 41). The utensils follow the kind of interpretation of conventional cutlery that I imagine a contemporary African craftsperson would make. The shapes of the utensils are outlined using a suitably thick length of ‘wire’ (the models were made from plastic rod, turned down to the required thickness, heated and bent into shape around wooden jigs), with the junctions between the handles and the palm (fork), the bowl (spoon), and the blade (knife) being ‘connected’ in typical fashion by wire windings. The blade of the knife is made as if it were a piece of wire that had been flattened.

The idea for the tabs that retain the amulets came about because I was having great difficulty in coming up with a suitable and conceptually appropriate way of locking the amulets into the backs of the utensils so that they would not become hindrances in normal use. When I asked my assistant, August de Wet, to see if he could solve the problem, he immediately suggested that I make the ‘wire’ appear as if flattened into tabs. This is almost certainly the kind of solution that a contemporary African craftsperson might have employed, where the properties...
40. Concept 2 cutlery, view of underside.

41. Wire sculptures by contemporary African craftspersons.
Tortoise: galvanised wire and beads. L. 12.9 cm.
VW Beetle: galvanised wire and recycled rubber. H. 7 cm. L. 14 cm.
of materials (in this case malleability) are seized upon to arrive at simple, low-technology solutions.

In their use of hand made decorations tied to machine made wire handles, the amulets on the ends of the cutlery (fig. 42) heighten the contrast of craft to machine. These particular amulets are inspired by Tuareg adornments (fig. 43), but any amulet could be used. In fact these amulets could be designed and hand-made by skilled craftspersons, thus providing jobs and ensuring that each set of utensils is individualised. The cutlery could be marketed as promoting harmony between crafts and industry.

Strategy three: tactility

The third strategy seeks to use the neglected sense of touch as a point of departure. Touch suggests closeness, intimacy and human relating, all of which, from a modern perspective, seem to be more intact in traditional societies than in modern ones. This is not to say that modern products do not pay attention to the tactile, but that tactility in modern products tends to be given a servile role, supporting either what is visually intelligible in them or a utilitarian requirement, or both. For example, the pattern of bumps on a knob for controlling the temperature on a plastic laminating machine (fig. 44) gives the user better purchase in turning the knob. The pattern has obviously been designed to be visually appealing too, but it is primarily intelligible as an ergonomic aid and is only a source of tactile pleasure or contemplation as a secondary design consideration. By contrast, many traditional African artefacts express a strong belief in the need for tactility in objects that is neither a factor of visual intelligibility or of utility. As an example, the patterns on the surfaces of the shafts of the Shona snuff bottles (fig. 45) and the Tsonga spoon (fig. 46) do not seem to have an operative role. They go beyond being visually contemplative in strategically positioning their
44. Temperature control knob on a Rexel plastic laminating machine.

45. Shona snuff bottles (Zimbabwe). Wood, brass wire. 5 to 21.7 cm. (Ginzberg 2000:115).

tactile qualities for haptic effect. It is as if the craftspersons wanted to remind the owners 1 of these spoons of their human provenance, the direct work of the human hand.

The tactile characteristics of my products seek to contrast the work of the craftsperson with that of the machine, where textures and patterns emphasise ‘crafted’ features, and smooth surfaces emphasise machine fabrication. The crafted nature of the textures and patterns used in the cutlery is a palpable reminder of the work of the hand, which, when made to contrast with cleanly rationalised machine-made surfaces, acts against expectations to produce a surprising juxtaposition of the visual and the tactile. In most of the products illustrated below the more obviously tactile features (those of texture and pattern) are ‘hidden’. When first seeing the visually seamless and flawless upper surfaces of these objects, the discovery that there is more to be contemplated when grasping the deliberately roughened underside of a utensil results in surprise. The deliberate suppression of visual clues, that might otherwise prime the user for a tactile experience, foregrounds the faculty of touch and its attendant sensual gratification. Thus the intention of the design is conveyed through touch rather than through sight.

Concept 3 (figs. 47 & 48)

The process of taking an idea from concept (drawings) to reality (models and prototypes) is illustrative of the praxis, or reflection in action, that directs this project. Although ostensibly inspired by ‘nature’, the first drawings for this set (fig. 49) also contained the germ of the idea for using tactility as a differentiating strategy. The potential of this aspect only became evident to me when my supervisor, Marialda Marais, made me aware that the drawings also pointed to tactility as a significant conceptual direction. This idea, of tactility as a suitable

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1 In the original context of the pastoral societies in which such spoons were created, it is very likely that they would have been made for just one owner. Art historian Karel Nel (2002), in his introductory commentary for The Art of Southeast Africa, tells us that because the portability of objects was essential for nomadic herders such as the Shona and the Tsonga, possessions were few, were prized, and were personal. Such possessions often symbolized, or came to symbolize, something of the identity of the owner, such as his or her status, family and spiritual relationships, or history.
48. Concept 3 cutlery, view of underside.

49. First drawings for concept 3 cutlery.
strategy for stylistic and ideological differentiation, then became a focus for developing appropriate directions in the products.

This cutlery seeks to reflect the popular myth that Africa is an unspoiled Eden, or at least is undeveloped and therefore predominantly a place of ‘nature’. It uses plant-like forms for the visual, functional, and tactile aspects of its design. Although the tines of the fork resemble the branches of a tree (some may see it as a baobab tree) and the handle the trunk, the resemblance is unintentional but fortuitous. The organically sculpted handles of all the utensils are meant to suggest biomorphic forms only in a generic way, without reference to specific plants or trees. The asymmetry of the forms, and their offset arrangement within the composition of each utensil, emphasise both the biomorphic nature of these utensils and their break with the Western tradition of symmetry in cutlery design. It reflects a lack of concern with geometric rationality and emphasises instead an earthy sensuality that is more characteristic of much traditional African art. The inclusion of translucent jewel-like red inserts (made of either glass or resin) provides a point of visual contrast designed to emphasise the asymmetry of the designs, and is inspired by the apparent freedom, characteristic of much African art, to embellish objects with non-functional but symbolically rich and aesthetically pleasing elements. These ‘jewels’ symbolise nothing more than this freedom.

The contrast between the highly polished finish on the upper surfaces, and the rougher bark-like textures on the undersides provide the tactile revelation in each utensil. There is an irony in the use of hygienic (polished) finishes on objects representing ‘nature’, because nature is a Western construct that is often understood as the opposite of culture, of which hygiene is a significant symbol.

**Concept 4 (figs. 50 & 51)**

This set was inspired by the carved patterns to be found on many objects of African art (figs. 52 & 53). It seeks to emulate both the physical processes of creating these patterns, and the
51. Concept 4 cutlery, view of underside.

52. Ibo stool (Nigeria). Wood. 30.8 and 35.5 cm. (Ginzberg 2000:22).

53. Pipe (Cameroon). Wood and terra cotta. 48 and 112 cm. (Ginzberg 2000:126).
frequent inclusion of symbolic references that accompany such carvings. Each utensil has a handle of triangular cross-section that creates a regularised (machine inspired) ridge along the underside of the handle. This ridge provides a perfect ‘line’ that the sculpted indentations interrupt to create rhythmic visual and textural patterns. The ridge becomes a visual metaphor of the interruption of the trope of modernity by that of tradition. In the process of making the models, the indentations were carved out in a spontaneous and deliberately irregular fashion to attempt to echo the work of craftspersons.

A Dogon ladder (fig. 54), with its steps carved into a tree trunk, is the source of inspiration for the indentations on the underside of the handle of the knife (fig. 55), and also provides the conceptual rationale by which the indentations on the other utensils are made. The steps of the Dogon ladder are functional, but the fork at the top of the ladder is both functional and symbolic, in that it refers to ‘… the Nommo, a crucial figure of Dogon mythology, with upraised arms, as if praying for rain.’ (Ginzberg 2000:46). Although the stepped incisions along the ridge of the knife are not functional, the serrations they form are meant to symbolise the knife’s function of cutting. Similarly, the indentations on the spoon and the fork make symbolic reference to the kind of function for which each utensil is intended. The spoon has dish-like concavities along its ridge that allude to the scooping action of the bowl of the spoon, and the angled and irregularly spaced slots on the ridge of the fork echo the piercing action of its tines.

These patterned indentations also provide the tactile surprise in each utensil. The symbolism of these indentations, referring to the function of each utensil, may also be seen as alluding to the tactile sensations that each utensil brings to the mouth. We put knives (sometimes), forks, and spoons into our mouths as part of our culturally determined eating practices, but we hardly ever contemplate these actions, or the nature of the shapes we put into our mouths. The protuberances found on the underside of the bowl of the spoon (fig. 56), and of the palm of the fork (fig. 57) help to emphasise the oral tactility of these utensils. These protuberances are primarily designed to keep either utensil in an upright and elegant attitude on the table (the ridges, because they run the length of the utensil, would otherwise tip them onto their sides).
and to hide their tactile secrets. They also serve the function of creating an unusual, and potentially thought-provoking, effect on the tongue. The irony here is that although these utensils are inspired by African style, their stylistic elements make symbolic reference to Western cultural practices.

The hieroglyphs on the upper surfaces of the utensils (fig. 58) provide an additional symbolic puzzle. They are schematic representations of the profiles of the indentations on the underside of their respective utensils, but their meanings may not be immediately evident and they may appear to be either arbitrarily decorative, or symbolically unfathomable. Such veiling of intentions assists in making the utensils more exotic. It is also perhaps a good test of the contemplative dimension of a product that it should provide new opportunities for reflection over time, rather than being immediately accessible.

**Concept 5** (figs. 59 & 60)

This cutlery was initially meant to be distinctly Western in form so as to provide a strong visual/tactile contrast with the distinctively African tactile patterns on the undersides. However, once realised as models (fig. 61) these designs were deemed to be too aesthetically conventional, because they provided no immediate visual clues as to their African origins. The inclusion of pattern and texture was not, on its own, sufficient for differentiating them as African. Hence the introduction of an attenuated neck, pinched into shape between forefinger and thumb as if made from clay. The neck is pleasant to hold between thumb and forefinger, reminding one of the tactile pleasures that a craftsperson might experience in shaping a pliable material into this form. The patterns on the underside are inspired by carved patterns found on functional surfaces of Zulu spoons (fig.62).

The knife presented a special problem, because it naturally lies on either one of its sides, meaning that there is no guarantee that placing a textural pattern on only one side will mean that the texture will be hidden from sight. I have partially solved this problem by using
60. Concept 5 cutlery, view of underside.

61. Concept 5 cutlery, preliminary models.

62. Zulu spoons (South Africa). Wood. 33.5 to 42 cm. (Ginzberg 2000:99).
different patterns on either side of the handle, so that the revelation, on picking the knife up, lies in finding that the pattern that is grasped is different to the one that is seen.

Educational benefits

For this project B.Tech degree students Terese van der Merwe, Nkululeko Dhlamini and Wayne Michell, and my research assistant, August de Wet helped complete much of the practical work for me. Our working relationship was that of master/apprentice, instead of the usual lecturer/student relationship. This collaborative arrangement meant that students, probably for the first time in their learning careers, were required to produce work that met the intentions and the working methods of an experienced designer. They were thus exposed to ways of thinking and working that differed in some respects from their own, so opening up new approaches in the design process. The collaborations allowed me to observe their working methods and approaches to design, and vice versa, something that seldom happens in a teaching environment. There are a number of educational benefits to this arrangement that conventional design education does not address.

Firstly, collaboration can be the opportunity to open up dialogues between master and apprentice, during which students (apprentices) can be coached to deal with the often vexing problem of making appropriate design decisions. My assistants did not lack for imagination, but were insufficiently skilled in dealing with what designer and mathematician Horst Rittel (quoted in Buchanan 1995:13) calls *wicked problems*. *Wicked problems* are characterised by the indeterminacy that accompanies any decision to settle on either a design problem or a design solution. Design problems and design solutions are interdependent, since the way in which the conditions of a design problem are framed has a determinative effect on what solutions may be offered. Experienced designers know that any design solution is always a compromise between the conflicting demands of aesthetics, functionality, manufacturability, personal expression and the like, and negotiating the ‘best’ compromise depends as much on how the problem has been framed as it does on the years of design experience brought to the design process. The *wickedness* of the design process is that there is no such thing as a right
answer to a problem, only well (or poorly) defined problems and better (or poorer) solutions. No problem and no solution can ever be perfect.

In each interaction where a design problem needed to be solved, I asked the assistant concerned to explain to me what they understood the problem or difficulty to be, or how he or she was going to go about solving it. The dialogue that ensued allowed us to discuss the merits or demerits of a range of problem framing and problem solving approaches and strategies. This is a very effective way of negotiating wicked problems satisfactorily. Often these dialogues involved more than one assistant, inviting input and feedback from the group and exposing each to a broad range of strategies for resolving wicked problems. The informality and immediacy of these dialogues allowed me to present my own thinking processes in a manner that did not appear to be a critique of the reasoning processes of the assistants, but rather a working out together of the best possible solution.

To implement collaborative projects of this kind may not be practicable under normal teaching circumstances, but the notion of close collaboration, or master/apprentice relationships, may be the starting point to devise new teaching and learning strategies that begin to address this lacuna.

The second benefit of collaboration is that students were exposed to the idea of praxis, since both in being briefed and in subsequent discussions the aims of this project and the ideals that guided it were central. Students got so used to asking the questions ‘is it African, is it new, and is it unique?’ that they took to making their own suggestions for ideals of African style, and for altering models to more closely suit these ideals.

Thirdly, these collaborations revealed to me knowledge and skills not being taught in classroom situations that could otherwise help to streamline the design process of students. These are the personalised tricks of model-making, sketching, and planning learned from others, or developed for myself, which do not get passed on to students because they (the tricks) fall under the aegis of subjects that I do not teach. This awareness of what students...
know, or can put into practise, can only come about through collaboration. Working on a project together with students gives them access to this more tacit knowledge and allows them to see firsthand how a lecturer integrates skills and knowledge otherwise taught as separate disciplines. Students will have developed their own ways of integrating skills and knowledge, but can benefit from being exposed to alternative methods of integration, or from having their own ways confirmed.

Lastly, the collaborations provided inspiration for the students. They were exposed to the requirements and opportunities that a Masters degree presents, and found that this avenue of study is full of promise. The subject of this project, in particular, opened up the realm of African style as an exciting terrain full of new design possibilities. It also engendered in students an interest in the cultural heritage of Africa, especially as a rich alternative source of ideas to those of Western design. My research assistant, on the basis of his involvement in this project, has made a commitment to register for a Master’s degree in industrial design (see appendix A) on his return from a planned trip to Europe.

**Manufacturability**

Although nothing has come of the proposed collaboration with Transwerk foundries (see introduction), the practical work of this project has been developed with the prospect of manufacture always in mind. There is little choice to be made regarding a suitable material from which to make the cutlery. Stainless steel has, since its invention in 1913, been the material of choice for cutlery because of its tensile strength, durability, hygienic properties and resistance to rust. Although it is feasible to use other metals such as high carbon steel plated in silver, there are no advantages to be gained, except ones of different surface finish, that stainless steel cannot do better. The more important decision is that of selecting an appropriate manufacturing process to make the products of this project into stainless steel cutlery.
Much ‘flatware’ is stamped or punched from stainless steel sheet and then pressed into shape and polished. This is a very cost effective process because the tooling is relatively inexpensive and the rates of production can be very high. It is not suitable for my purpose because it does not permit sculptural forms to be made, and only allows limited decorative features to be included (in the pressing process). The two processes most suitable for producing the work of this project are drop forging and investment casting. Investment casting is a very suitable process because it can reproduce fine surface finish and detail at a respectable rate of production. It also produces castings with desirable degrees of hardness and toughness.

However, for certain features, especially the blade of the knife and the tines of the fork, further hardening and toughening through drop-forging may be needed. It is most probable that these two utensils will be made by first casting the handles and then drop forging the blade of the knife and the tines of the fork into shape. The cast pieces will have rudimentary shapes on the ends of the handles of the knife and fork, acting as billets from which the blade and tines can be drop forged. Drop forging strengthens the blade and tines in three ways. Firstly, forgings are usually achieved in stages, from rough shaping to refined detailing. For the first stage of forging, the billet is heated up to make it plastic and then allowed to cool at a slow rate to allow further forging. This heating and slow cooling process is called annealing and toughens the metal by allowing the re-crystallisation (softening) of the metal. Secondly, forging realigns the grain of the metal (called anisotropy) in the direction of the shape of the object, thus alleviating stress points and making the work-piece both harder and tougher. Thirdly, the last stage of forging will be a cold forging process performed at room temperature, in which the cold working of the work-piece leads to surface hardening (called work-hardening).
CONCLUSION

Frederick Jameson (1994), in speaking about the effects of modernisation on the Third World during the earlier stages of colonisation, makes this observation:

…in that older period ... most Third World societies were torn by a penetration of Western modernization that generated …...a counterposition that could generally be described as traditionalism: the affirmation of a cultural (and sometimes religious) originality that had the power to resist assimilation by western modernity and was indeed preferable to it. Such traditionalism was of course a construction in its own right, brought into being as it were, by the very activities of the modernizers themselves ...(19-20)

A similar challenge, that of asserting an original identity in the face of an assimilatory globalisation, faces African nations (and all other third world nations) today. However, the insidiousness of globalisation has changed the parameters of the challenge, so that any ‘affirmation of a cultural originality ’ must make use of the tools of globalisation (capitalist economics, modern marketing, modern manufacturing technologies, electronic media, etc.) if it is to create new identities. Within the dictates of globalisation, reference to tradition becomes the only alternative by which such new identities (in products) can have any cultural distinctiveness. Jameson refers to the current tendency to turn back to the past for legitimacy as a form of neotraditionalism which is ‘...a deliberate political and collective choice, in a situation in which little remains of a past that must be completely reinvented.’ (1994:19-20).

Traditionalism

This project sought to avoid any straightforward traditionalism, proposing instead recognition of the realities of Africa where tradition and modernity lie side by side. It set out not to reinvent the past, but to use the past to invent a new future. Tradition has been used throughout the project to unsettle the hegemony of the dominant Western aesthetic that inheres in machine made products. Such unsettling is possible because globally accessible technology permits local inflections. Traditionalism, both as positive and negative influence,
can be seen as the spur driving most of the outcomes of this project. The conclusions to be drawn from this project are as follows:

**Innovation**

This dissertation has insisted that a plurality of identities be maintained to ensure that there is always room for the cross-fertilisation of ideas. Innovation, which is important in our drive to transform, depends on such cross-fertilisation of ideas. Also, in the context of the new political freedoms in South Africa, the freedom to explore a range of new identities must be protected and expanded.

**Style**

This project attempted to unravel some of the complexities of style. The research positioned features of traditional African art as suitable foils for the self-consciousness which Western style requires. Tradition is thus not only a source for ideas for new styles, but also provides the impetus for understanding the (modern) category of style itself. This theoretical territory is rich grounds for further speculation and investigation.

**New design approaches**

In addition to inventing new styles, this project has aimed to reflect new ways of thinking, the new values and the new-found optimism of post-apartheid South Africa. It seems to follow then that the uniqueness of the South African situation in the world, its history of political emancipation and the general drive towards transformation that triggered the search for new expressions for our new identities, gives a very compelling legitimacy to the aims of this project and to others of its kind.

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Praxis in design

The theoretical issues dealt with in this dissertation were pivotal to the number and the diversity of possible styles that have emerged. The intellectual processes of dealing with questions about identity, modernity and tradition, style, and exoticism opened up numerous avenues for interpreting both modern design and the objects of traditional African art and contemporary craft. This stimulus to the imagination works by suggesting connections between conceptual categories that would otherwise remain separate, which in turn stimulates innumerable imaginative visualisations of new African styles. For designers wishing to expand their stylistic horizons and enhance their powers of imagination and visualisation, the study of traditional objects of diverse cultures is certain to bring fresh patterns of thought to their practise of design.

The way forward

The products of this research, possibly and in retrospect, erred on the side of conservatism but they proceeded from an uncharted base and a mindset that market acceptability places constraints on the designer’s freedom of personal expression. It is easy to recognize, once the work is completed, that further research would permit more radical and extreme experimentation. This project only begins to explore what now appears to be a field of limitless new stylistic possibilities.

Marketing potential and Job creation

Products were designed with marketability and economic upliftment always in mind, but the focus was on differentiation through unique identity in design. The collaboration with Transwerk, had it become a reality, worked on the understanding that Transwerk were looking to employ and train a small new work force to produce the designs of this project. Even though this opportunity did not reach fruition, if the products of this project are found to be desirable enough by the buying public, then they will, as a matter of necessity, create work for
people. It should be remembered that no product becomes successful simply on its own merit. It requires the co-operation and expertise of manufacturers, marketers, distributors and the many other interdependent actors in the industrial complex that make up capitalist societies, to be a success. Here I would remind the reader of the observation of Lloyd and Snelders (2003:237-253), quoted in the third chapter of this dissertation, that the creativity of the designer is necessary for the success of a product, even if it is not sufficient.
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Note: Drawings reproduced in this document represent conceptual work done for the project, and include those of the author and of the assistant August de Wet.
The idea of drawing inspiration from African art has interested me from as early as my first year in industrial design (2000) when we had to design cutlery for our exam project. It just made sense. We live in Africa, a continent with an extremely rich cultural history, and we might as well draw inspiration from African things rather than European (Western) culture. It is inevitable that the end result will be a mixture of both, but it is this mixture that will make it new and exciting. Throughout my studies I often tried to incorporate African elements into my design with relative success. After a project I usually felt that I didn’t achieve my goal (in terms of successfully developing a new style) but that I could see it on the horizon. In my third year I tried my hand at ceramics to design a crockery set inspired by African art/artefacts. During my fourth year I also produced drawings and models for Phil’s masters project as part of a bursary program. The big frustration with exploratory type projects at college is that you often don’t have time to reconsider and change aspects of a design. At the end of fourth year (2003) I approached Phil with the idea of working for him a research assistant/design developer for a few months in 2004. This would give me the opportunity to follow through with design concepts and develop ideas thoroughly and Phil would be able to concentrate more on the theoretical/intellectual part of the master’s degree. Phil agreed to this suggestion and I started working in February.

One thing that is absolutely crucial for the success of a project like this is the relationship between the two designers. Each designer should have a good understanding of the other one’s job/process/role. This will ensure that both designers are on the same page and can communicate effectively. With this project we both had an understanding of the other’s thinking and were able to work accordingly. I also learned a lot from Phil about how to approach this problem of African design. In a sense this relationship is very similar to an apprenticeship where a student/apprentice will work under a senior designer and learn through practice, not theoretically. This one-on-oneness is not possible in the classroom and is more direct and effective when dealing with design.

This project created an intellectual climate that is different from that of studies and the normal working environment. There is more emphasis on exploring and developing ideas and less emphasis on the production and implementation of them. The timeframe for developing concepts is also substantially longer than usual - 3 months as opposed to 5 weeks. This lengthened timeframe allows for more thorough development of concepts where designs can be evaluated and changed without the pressure of a deadline.
I would like to briefly explain some of my findings throughout my studies (including this project) in terms of approach and understanding of “African design”:

One of the most important things to keep in mind as a designer is that the idea is to develop a new style and not just an application of African motifs onto western products. This can be difficult because we are trained and conditioned to approach things from a modernist/western perspective. A designer should thus refrain from a “cutting and pasting” of elements as this will only produce a superficial western interpretation of Africa. Instead one must look at the intentions and purposes behind the artefacts and develop a deeper understanding why African objects look the way they do. This deeper understanding will allow the designer to look past the surface and actually develop an original aesthetic that might differ slightly from original objects but contain the same values. Looking at the world from an African perspective as well as considering their traditions and beliefs will help in developing this deeper understanding.

During this project I had the opportunity to see what a Master’s degree in industrial design is all about. I don’t see myself as an academic as such but I am fascinated by the possibilities of exploring new areas of design. As a result I am strongly considering doing a Master’s degree when I come back from Europe.

It has been a pleasure working for Phil and I have learnt a lot from him in terms of design. This project has made a positive impact on my own development as a designer and I will probably refer back to it in future as a positive experience.

August de Wet
Research assistant to Phil du Plessis