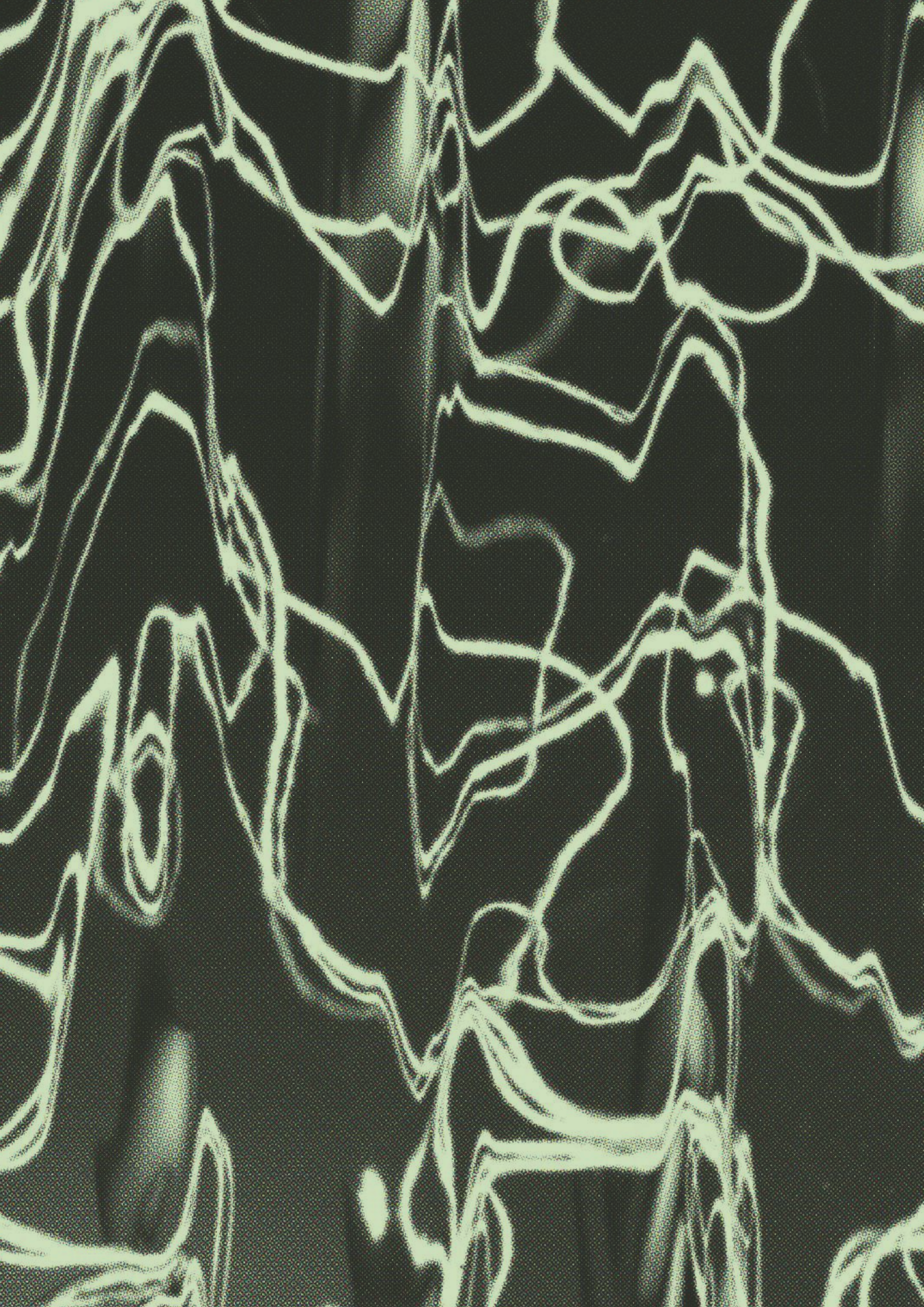


THREADS, TRACES, AND ARTEFACTS,
REVISITING GLOBAL DESIGN HISTORY •
FILONI, TRACCE E ARTEFATTI, RIVISITARE
LA STORIA DEL DESIGN GLOBALE
• FILS, TRACES ET ARTEFACTS, REVISITER
L'HISTOIRE MONDIALE DU DESIGN
• HILOS, HUELLAS Y ARTEFACTOS,
REVISITANDO LA HISTORIA GLOBAL DEL
DISEÑO • 糸、痕跡、そして工芸品, グ
ローバル・デザイン史の再訪 • 맥락,
흔적, 그리고 유물, 세계 디자인사 다시
읽기 • धागे, नशान और कलाकृतियाँ, वैश्वकि
डज़ाइन इतहिस की पुनर्यात्रा • بے گاہد،
نئیازی ڈیم لاء، تارداون روا تاناشن
• 线、痕迹
与物品，重探全球设计史 • 繫、痕跡與
器物，重探全球設計史

Edited by Dan Mu, Deepika Srivastava, Elli Young



Threads, Traces & Artefacts

Revisiting Global Design History

DHS [STUDENTS]

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FOREWORD

It is with immense pleasure that we introduce the first Design History Student Conference publication, *Threads, Traces and Artefacts: Revisiting Global Design History*. This collection of papers constitutes a number of the presentations given at the Student Conference in May 2026. Design History is a continually evolving and expanding field, and it is vital that emerging, as well as established, scholars contribute to the discussions and debates. Not only do these new voices offer fresh perspectives and approaches to what is increasingly global area of enquiry, but they can, and do, question and deconstruct the canons of historical design and the methodologies, beliefs and philosophies with which we approach them.

The DHS is committed to opening Design History to people from many different places and backgrounds. We agree with the position that Dan Mu takes in her introduction to this publication, that:

When design history is written primarily from a Western vantage point, it actively produces a hierarchy of knowledge in which some practices are legible as “design” and others are not.” (pg 5)

This position has shaped the way the DHS has engaged with design history communities. We have introduced new grants such as the Decolonising Design History Grant, which supports research and projects that actively contributes to the decolonisation of design history, and the Accessible Design History Grant, which aims to remove structural barriers that prevent disabled researchers, students, and practitioners from engaging fully with the field of design history. We have also developed the podcast, *Routes to Design History*, which highlights the

many ways people practice design history, and the diverse ways the field itself can be understood. In addition to introducing different ways of approaching design history writing in the Publication Workshop, held before the annual DHS Conference. When The DHS Ambassadors Dan Mu and Pippy Stephenson proposed an online student conference, we were keen to support the idea. It is a valuable opportunity for students to share their research, and as an important new route for wider audiences to encounter and engage with design history.

When the online student conference was first imagined the priority was to create a space and opportunities for people who might not usually have access to design history events and conversations. As the conference unfolded, it became clear that turning these contributions into a publication could extend that access and make the work of these emerging researchers available to a wider community of readers.

A key aim of this publication is to unsettle the idea that design history must always be written in English and follow narrowly defined academic conventions. Decolonising is not simply about adding more voices into an unchanged framework, but also challenging the Eurocentric and white supremacist logic, routines and gatekeeping practices through which academia organises knowledge. This does not mean that we have to disregard past research but that we should work to understand how it has shaped thinking in the field and the voices that it has positioned as either inside or outside of the canons of design history.

We invited contributors to write in the language they felt most comfortable to them, including their mother tongue, and to experiment with forms of writing that move beyond standard academic essays. However, the responses also revealed how deeply embedded English and academic conventions are: all contributions were ultimately

submitted in English, often setting aside other languages and following traditional scholarly structures. This outcome does not simply reflect individual choices; it also points to the expectations we, as editors and academics working within the field, inevitably carry with us, and to the wider systems that rewards work presented in particular languages and formats. This work is partial and unfinished, but we hope this publication can contribute to loosening those norms and opening up more livable and diverse ways of making and sharing knowledge.

We would like to close by expressing our sincere thanks to everyone who has made this publication possible. We are grateful to the contributors for their generosity, trust and labour in sharing their research that can often be produced under significant structural pressures. We extend our thanks to the peer reviewers, Dr Sabrina Rahman, Dr Yaw Ofoso-Asare, and Dr Wendy Wong, whose careful reading and

thoughtful feedback strengthened each piece and supported a spirit of dialogue rather than gatekeeping. We are also indebted to the publication designer, whose work has shaped how these ideas will be encountered on the page and who has helped us think about access in visual and material terms. Finally, we thank colleagues, particularly who led the charge with this publication and worked diligently to ensure its completion, collaborators and friends who supported the conference and this publication in visible and invisible ways; their collective efforts remind us that design history is always made in relation with others.

Dr Sally-Anne Huxtable
Chair, Design History Society

Deepika Srivastava
Teaching and Learning Officer

Dr Elli Michaela Young
Grants and Awards Officer

INTRODUCTION

A Spoon, a Saree, a Wall

This book opens with an invitation: imagine three objects. The first is a porcelain spoon, sitting quietly behind glass on the fourth floor of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. On its underside, a small stamp reads: “Y.T. Hong Kong Decor, Made in Japan.” The second is a cotton sari folded inside a mother’s wardrobe in New Delhi. The fabric itself was woven in Varanasi, its patterns borrowing from Persian tradition. A daughter used to hide in that wardrobe as a child, curling herself small among the hanging clothing, breathing in the mingled scent of mothballs and perfume. The sari holds that memory too, somewhere in its folds. The third is a hand-painted billboard on a wall in Kinshasa, made in 1974 to mark the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. The paint will survive three to five years, perhaps, before the rain takes it. Yet the writing on that wall reaches back much further than the image it carries,

back through a history of script and inscription that began long before the Portuguese ever set foot on the banks of the Congo River. None of these objects belongs neatly to one place, one people, one time. Each is threaded through with trade routes and colonial histories, with the movement of goods and bodies and ideas across borders, with the small private griefs and joys that larger histories so often forget. It is precisely this kind of entanglement that the eleven papers in this book set out to follow.

Revisiting Design History

Clive Dilnot (1984) observed that design, unlike architecture or literature, had not, ‘pursued the historical, cultural or philosophical-analytical study of itself’. Forty years on, the discipline has come a long way, but the questions Dilnot raised about whose histories get told, and by what methods, remain as pressing as ever. For much of its existence, the field has been organised around a familiar

set of coordinates: the Industrial Revolution as origin point; Europe and North America as the primary sites of innovation; the Bauhaus, Modernism, and their afterlives as the dominant narrative spine. These coordinates reflect real histories of industrialisation, institutionalisation, and intellectual influence. But they are also, inescapably, partial, and that partiality has consequences.

When design history is written primarily from a Western vantage point, it actively produces a hierarchy of knowledge in which some practices are legible as ‘design’ and others are not. A lacquered screen made in sixteenth-century Japan for the Portuguese trade becomes a curiosity or an influence; an embroidered fabric produced by women artisans in Lucknow over four centuries becomes craft rather than design; a hand-lettered wall in Kinshasa becomes street art rather than typography. They are, as Walter Dignolo (2011) and others in the decolonial tradition have argued, symptoms of what he calls the

‘colonial matrix of power.’ a system in which the authority to define, classify, and historicise knowledge has been concentrated in particular hands.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have begun to challenge these inherited frameworks through the Global Design History Project (Margolin, 2015), through decolonising design initiatives (Escobar, 2018), through feminist and postcolonial interventions in the archives (Buckley, 2020), and through the slow but important expansion of what counts as evidence in design historical research. This volume does not claim to resolve these debates. But it does claim a place within them.

Themes and Threads

The eleven papers have been arranged into four thematic sections, moving from questions of knowledge production and pedagogy, through material culture and historical exchange, to living craft traditions and, finally, to the politics of typography and writing.

Design history as a discipline is itself a product of particular relations of power. The three papers that open this volume interrogate this problem directly, each from a different angle. *A Curious Daughter in her Mother's Wardrobe: Experimental Pedagogies of Storytelling for Decoloniality in Visual Culture* uses autoethnographic narrative as its method, asking how a Eurocentric design education estranged an entire generation of Indian designers from their own visual culture while training them to treat Western design as the universal standard. *A Critical Re-examining of the Design Promotion System in Korea since the 1990s* scales the analysis from the individual to the institutional, revealing how Korea's design promotion apparatus, despite undergoing a rhetorical shift toward ‘publicness,’ never truly escaped the frameworks of developmentalism and nationalism that had always structured it. *Salesian Didactics: A Pedagogical Model for the Training of the Italian*

Graphic Designer reminds us that even within Europe, design history is written with systematic omissions: it tells the story of a printing school founded by a Catholic religious order to serve working-class youth, a school that has long been excluded from Italian design history's dominant narrative, centred as that narrative is on Milanese modernism and its connections to industrial capital. Together, the three papers converge on a single question: how has the ‘canonical narrative’ of design history been constructed, and whose voices has it suppressed in the process?

If the first group of papers asks who writes history, the next section turns to a different question: when written archives are absent or distorted, how can objects themselves serve as historical witnesses? This question draws together four papers from different periods and geographies. *Namban Art: Mobile Material Culture and Global Connections of Japan in Early Modernity (16th to 17th Centuries)* reads the lacquerware and folding screens produced at the intersection of Japanese and Iberian cultures as material traces of Jesuit missionary and trade networks. *Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan: What is the role that Canton enamelled porcelain (Guangcai) played in the Hong Kong trading environment in the 1950s to 60s?* takes as its entry point a small porcelain spoon held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, reading the inscription on its underside, ‘Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan,’ as a compressed record of Cold War trade embargoes, colonial politics, and transnational production. *Dismembered Forms: The Japanese Grotesque in Christopher Dresser's Linthorpe Pottery Earthenwares* examines how a Victorian British designer misread Japanese grotesque aesthetic traditions, exposing the asymmetries of power embedded in cross-cultural ways of seeing. *Rails of Resistance: The Railroad as a Political Artifact in Colombia's Banana Zone (1880 to 1930)* extends the discussion of objects to the scale of infrastructure,

arguing that the railway itself became the material embodiment of colonial capitalist violence in the banana-producing regions of Colombia. Taken together, the four papers demonstrate the analytical power of material culture as a methodology: through the careful observation and close reading of objects, we gain access to the micro-level realities that macro-level historical narratives have obscured.

The third group of papers turns toward traditions that are still living, challenging the assumption that ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ stand in opposition to one another. *Material Culture in Tier-II Cities of India: A Study of Chikankari Craft in Lucknow* immerses itself in the informal economic networks of Lucknow, showing how an embroidery practice with four centuries of history has continued to evolve under the compounding pressures of globalisation, commodification, and state policy, while sustaining forms of social solidarity that cross religious and class boundaries. *Tradition Meets Modernity: A Conversation with Kelvin Peng* uses the personal narrative of a Beijing-based furniture designer as a window onto how individual practitioners negotiate between a Bauhaus-inflected education and the pull of Chinese aesthetic philosophy, feeling their way toward a creative language that is neither nostalgic revival nor Western imitation. Both papers carry the same underlying insistence: tradition is not merely a museum artefact in need of protection, but a living and constantly recreated resource for design practice. Recognising this is a precondition for escaping the colonial temporality that equates modernity with the West and tradition with backwardness.

The volume closes with two papers on typography and writing that carry the discussion of visual design history into its most politically charged territory. *Typographic Promotion as a Cross-Cultural Mediation Channel: Reading Type Specimens through the Case of the Nebiolo Type Foundry* uses

systematic analysis of type specimen books produced by an Italian type foundry to argue that typographic promotional materials are themselves media of transnational cultural transmission, and to develop a methodological framework for writing design history beyond the boundaries of the national frame. *Sign Writing in Kinshasa: A Practice Negotiating Coloniality through Typographic Mark Making* brings this discussion into a postcolonial present, reading the hand-lettered signs on Kinshasa's walls as evidence of a society with its own pre-colonial writing traditions reclaiming visual sovereignty in public space, through bodily labour, in the aftermath of the Latin alphabet's forced imposition. In dialogue with each other, the two papers make a shared argument: typography and writing are not merely formal concerns, but questions of power over who has the right to leave a mark.

A Note on Method

One of the most striking features of this collection, taken as a whole, is the diversity of its methodological approaches.

Archival research, material analysis, oral history, autoethnography, policy analysis, visual semiotics, comparative historiography, all are represented here. It reflects the conviction, shared by many contributors, that the expansion of design history's geographical and cultural scope requires a corresponding expansion of its methodological toolkit. Traditions that have not been institutionally archived in conventional ways may require embodied methods: memory, conversation, and presence to recover. Objects that have been misread by dominant frameworks may require new conceptual vocabularies to see clearly. The papers in this volume model, between them, something of what it might look like to practise design history differently.

It is also worth noting something about voice. Several of the papers in this collection are written in the first person and written from positions of

cultural proximity to their subjects. The author of the opening essay is writing about her own mother's wardrobe; the author of the Chikankari essay conducted fieldwork in a city he knows; the author of the Kinshasa essay has spent years in conversation with sign painters whose walls he has walked past. This is a strength to be acknowledged. Standpoint, as feminist epistemologists have long argued, is not the opposite of rigour; it is one of its conditions. To know where you are standing is to know something important about what you can and cannot see.

The same principle extends to voice and writing style. The papers in this collection have been edited with a conscious decision to preserve each author's individual register. This variety is deliberate. A field that is expanding its geographical and cultural scope requires a corresponding expansion in the range of voices through which it speaks. Standardising tone in the name of consistency would risk reproducing, at the level of prose, the very hierarchies the papers themselves are working to unsettle. There is something more here, too. When scholars are writing from within traditions that have not been the primary objects of design historical inquiry, they sometimes find that the existing vocabulary does not quite fit. The conventional terms carry assumptions, about what counts as form, function, authorship, influence, that may not hold in these papers. In such moments, the introduction of new language, or the careful repurposing of existing terms, becomes an intellectual necessity. Several contributors to this volume do precisely this, coining or adapting formulations that allow them to articulate what standard design historical discourse has not yet found words for. We have treated this as a sign of the field's vitality.

An Invitation

Eleven papers, however rich, cannot do justice to the full range of design traditions and histories that have been

marginalised by canonical narratives. What these papers do, collectively, is open doors: they demonstrate that design histories are waiting to be told in the materials of everyday life, in the hands of artisans who have never been called designers, in the walls of cities that have never been the subject of a design museum exhibition, in the objects that carry the marks of journeys their makers never intended.

We invite readers to approach what follows as a set of invitations to look again at the objects around them, to ask whose design they are living inside, and to consider what a more entangled, more honest, and more inclusive history of design might make possible.

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Dan Mu



PART I

Decolonising Design Knowledge—Pedagogy and Historiography

A Curious Daughter in her Mother's Wardrobe: Experimental Pedagogies of Storytelling for Decoloniality in Visual Culture, Pallavi Chatteraj

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Pedagogical Research, Design
Culture Research

KEYWORDS

Decoloniality, Storytelling
as Design Pedagogy,
Retrospective and Standpoint
Research, Methodology of
Making, Indian Arts and Crafts,
Postcolonial India

Undergraduate programmes in design schools in India expose the future practitioner's mind to and prepare it for the foundational principles and elements of design making, thinking, and forming. However, the curricula of most of these schools have Eurocentric ideologies: an imprint of colonial institutionalisation of knowledge, resulting in entire generations of Indian designers being foreign to their own native.

This paper invites thinking about how the Indian designer can negotiate this conundrum. It explores the decoloniality of aesthetics through the methodology of memory-seeking and material culture, using storytelling frameworks as pedagogy. By picking up a designed object called a 'saree', a common unstitched fabric popularly worn by women in India, the author dives into the wardrobe of her mother and tries to understand the syntax of Indian design theories by tracing the craft, material, and visual heritages within sarees.

The paper travels back almost 2000 years, from Persia to present-day India, exploring the history of the saree and how it was/is shaped by caste, gender, race, class, and socioecological factors. Ultimately, the author sits with how design education benefits from the multi-dimensionality and pluriversality that decolonial frameworks present.

The Foundation

It has been 79 years since India's formal independence from colonial British rule and 67 years since The Indian Report (1958)¹ was drawn up. This Report was a proposal, put together at the invitation of India's first prime minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's Government, with the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation, by the illustrious Charles and Ray Eames, an American industrial designer duo. The proposal involved touring India to formulate the programme of design education and training; of how a new sovereign India would rise to the challenge of solving for growing its own local industries. The Indian Report presents the succulent irony of the colonial project. By bringing in the Eameses as the principal consultants on shaping the future narrative of India's design education, in the absence of Indian designers, the leaders of a postcolonial India betrayed a colonised country's internalised indoctrination of its own inferiority. Furthermore, the Eames' proposal, which on its own is a fabulous piece of work, betrays the universalism that the Eurocentric gaze demands from its knowledge systems and instruction.

Let us travel back to 2011. As an undergraduate student in a top-tier design school (National Institute of Fashion Technology) in an urban city in India, I learnt to form a meaning about the world through the rigour, rules, principles, and elements of design as posited by Eurocentric schools of thought. The chronology and design order of the whole world were learned with an inclination towards the modern design periods of Art Nouveau, Bauhaus, Brutalism, and more such movements from the West. These foreign-sounding terms were situated far away from my own world's culture. As I write this, it is 2026, but Indian designers continue to perpetuate a Western colonial identity that erases the contributions of Indian history to the syntax of design theories.

As I start to look around, I observe the manifestation of this continuation

in the value systems built into design pedagogy in India, including the academic library collections and the structural framework of the curricula. In my undergraduate years, I learnt the progression of the sociocultural symptomatic factors of Industrialisation, Darwinism, Marxism, Realism, etc. and their effect on European and American art. These elements were bracketed under a singular umbrella of influence of 'World Events on Art and Design'. My lived reality and Indian histories were absent, and, from this omission, I grew distant, detached and desensitised from my own surroundings. I think of the Eames' positionality of being American and the heavy influence of the Bauhaus syntax in their work, as this following excerpt from another paper describes how design education came to be institutionalised,

The emergence of modern consumerism and the proliferation of labor division in capitalist and economization processes, a more professionalized and incorporated version of making emerged in the West: design.²

Between learning the principles and elements of design, in almost binary-seeking, exacting and logical values such as Balance, Harmony, Line, and Shape, amidst others, I never found language to express and hold discourse for the embodied nature of the cosmos I had grown up in, where design is largely relational and not object-focussed, where the locale is multiple and embedded into the contextual philosophy of making, like the Indian philosophy of Vastu Shastra³ in architecture. Let us go back to this problem identified in The Indian Report; while it emphasises and champions the crafts of India, it contradicts and bifurcates the making from its context. To elaborate this with an example; Phulkari is an embroidery technique—its literal translation being flower work—practised in India and Pakistan. In the classroom, this practice would perhaps get limited to its visual register: geometric floral

¹ National Institute of Design. 'History of NID.' <https://www.nid.edu/about/history-of-nid>. Accessed 15 November 2025. Design History Society. "Crafting a National Identity in an International Market: The India Report - Blog - Design History Society," n.d. <https://www.designhistorysociety.org/blog/view/crafting-a-national-identity-in-an-international-market-the-india-report>.

² Caliskan, Koray, and Matt Wade. 'DARN (Part 1): What is strategic design? Social theory and intangible design in perspective.' *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 2022): 299–318.

³ Staff, Ad. "Experts Reveal How You Can Use the Principles of Vastu for the Home to Bring in Positive Energy." *Architectural Digest India*, April 2, 2025. <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/vastu-shastra-25-tips-make-home-radiate-positive-energy/>.

⁴ The author takes a moment to sit with the difference between ‘histories of design’ and ‘design history’. Histories of Design implies that there are fragments, as in any history, that shape or are shaped by socio-cultural, political, traditional, technological etc symptoms. Whereas Design History implies a notion of sum totality in a world that is far from learning to make space for marginalised, lesser heard and Other voices.

⁵ Ramani, Srinivasan. “Decolonising Knowledge Systems.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 30 (2011): 17–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23018000>.

Figure 1. Snippets from my undergraduate presentation on semiotics



patterns. Because by not bringing the artisan into the classroom, we fail to register the context of craft’s expressive values; as design practiced by women, often as a way to bring the young and old women in the family together (embedded intergenerational care), the layered conditions in its making such as the colours of the threads have symbolic meanings. This divisive, compounding effect, which left the artisanal communities and India’s own design practices outside the classroom, overlooks the country’s cultural ethos in the design of its things. Missing from the Report’s pages are the Indian ethos of circularity, inherent social hierarchies, and rooted material heritages, meaning entire generations of Indian designers have detached lineage from making. This Eurocentric, modernistic imposition of evolving technicality ignored India as a site that already contains its own theories, principles and praxis of design.

Undergraduate courses form the structural integrity of young minds, which is why I double down on these curricula and critique how we are failing to position these minds to learn the need to question the structure itself. To anchor this point in a global context, I expand to an undergraduate programme in one of the design colleges in America to get a sense of the history of design⁴ and design fundamentals taught. I consider Parsons School of Design in New York to see traces of how a very specific lens is used to view design history in undergraduate courses (Bachelor of Fine Arts, Product Design). By

documenting ‘design’ into existence only from the period of the 1800s, which is a hark back to the advent of Industrialisation, the curricula immediately points to Eurocentric as the epicentre of Design. The extension of this trickles down to the instructional methods in classrooms, and the echoes in the literature in library systems; systematically disseminating the internalisation of the precedence of art over craft, perspective over linearity, binary over circular, Western over Eastern, modern over indigenous.

The Itch

It is worth observing that this Eurocentrism perpetuates in postcolonial India even when the coloniser leaves, as Srinivas Ramani quotes,

The derision shown for Indian culture by the colonial masters had been “internalised by the ruled”, the colonisers created an education system that suited their interests, and importantly Indian languages lost their salience during colonial rule.

The rampant nature of colonisation increased with the entry of the East India Company and was imbued with the values of utilitarianism represented by the likes of Mill and Bentham, justifying colonialism on the need for “progress”, enforcing natives to “climb the inclined plane of history to achieve what the Europeans had already achieved.”⁵

To illustrate this point with a lived example, it makes sense to take a

detour in time and review another pressing aspect beyond my design education. I grew up mostly in New Delhi, the urban capital city of India. As I mull over my upbringing and its formative influence, I want to ponder over the word ‘urban’. This word has come to represent a space, an ideology that concretises a saddening yet interesting point of erasure in any postcolonial country. Over the years, after formal independence, such spaces (urban cities) grow into breeding grounds of fractures from a region’s identity because they skew towards anti-tradition.⁶ Urban spaces become a performative stage to chase ‘modernity’, an import of the Eurocentric coloniser’s standard of ‘development’, and never really allows what is inherently Native because of the internalised notion of its mediocrity and therefore re-imports, reinforces and re-meshes the colonial patterns of production and consumption. By acknowledging and understanding this aspect, I realise that there are already parts of my heritage unknown to me. This aspect, coupled with a Eurocentric ethos in my education, meant that by the time I was ready to graduate, my portfolio looked no different from a regurgitation of many others.

Five years passed into a career in visual design and strategy before the eureka moment finally struck me on a moody afternoon in 2021. On a whim to draw something ‘Oriental’, I sat and sketched for a couple of hours. When I looked at the sum total of the output, it came crashing down on me: My lived foundation, my culture, was othered

from me completely: I had become the foreign to my own Native.

To the confounding anxiety of this dilemma, Edward Said’s book on Orientalism offered a balm. Eurocentric studies never discuss, posit, or even quietly whisper about the dichotomy of inferiority/superiority between West and East, simply because its supremacy is assumed. This assumption is systemic and systematically made evident in its knowledge production and consequent documentation of the ‘Orient’ from the multi-centurial colonial control over regions east of their geographical position. This control manifested through official documents, literature by scientists, travellers, and authors romanticising, extrapolating, and seeing through the selective lens of what they already knew (Othering) and what they wanted to know (Extracting). The Orient was what the West understood it to be, not what it actually was: diverse lands of imperial, financial, cultural, political, and educational might that had stood the test of time. This control over knowledge meant control over what is considered to be the truth today.

Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a “fact” which, if it develops, changes; or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it.⁷

⁶ Li, Haoguang, and Songqi Han. 2025. “The Paradox of Modernity: The Creation of a Tradition of Anti-Tradition.” *Sociology Compass*: e70118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.70118>.

⁷ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979, Page 32.

Source ID	Source Title	Credits	Subgroup/Level	SOPHOMORE YEAR	F S
PLFE0041	History of Fashion: Revolution	3	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2050 Product Design Studio 1	3 -
PLAH0002	History of Modern and Contemporary Art	0	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2027 Models, Mockups and Prototypes	3 -
PLAH0001	History of Modern and Contemporary Art	3	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2030 Process Drawing and Digital Presentation	3 -
PLSD2190	History of Design: 1850-2000 Lecture	0	Parsons School of Design	PLDS 2190 History of Design: 1850-2000 Lecture	0 -
PLSD2191	History of Design: 1850-2000 Revolution	3	Parsons School of Design	PLDS 2191 History of Design: 1850-2000 Revolution	3 -
PLSD2040	History of Fashion: Iac	0	Parsons School of Design	Program Electives	3 3
PLSD2100	History of Architecture: 1851 to the Present	0	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2051 Product Design Studio 2	- 3
PLSD2101	History of Architecture: 1851 to the Present	3	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2090 Computer Aided Industrial Design	- 3
PLSD2030	History of Photography	3	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2090 Materials & Manufacturing Processes: Lecture	- 0
PLAH0006	History of Modern and Contemporary Art	3	Parsons School of Design	PUPD 2081 Materials & Manufacturing Processes: Revolution	- 3
				PLDS 2000 Intro to Design Studies: Lecture	- 0
				PLDS 2001 Intro to Design Studies: Revolution	- 3

Figure 2. Screenshots from Parsons School of Design Undergraduate Curriculum

⁸ Guy Julier; From Visual Culture to Design Culture. *Design Issues* 2006; 22 (1): 64–76.

Figure 3. “Orient”, Digital & Hand-Drawn Illustration, 2021
“Oh, let’s draw something Oriental!”, she said. Lo and behold! Out came dragons, curly waves, outlandish masks, and gold foil fillings.



My Itch Learns to Decolonise Design Culture

Alexis Boylan argues in *Visual Culture* (MIT Press),

It could be argued that humans have, in fact, for a long time wanted way too much from the visual. There are traces of this wanting on the walls of caves, in carved sculptures, in stacked stones, and in traces drawn around human hands.

We are, constitutively, a species that understands the world through sight, and visual culture has always reflected who holds the power to determine what is worth seeing. Emerging in the 1990s, visual culture is beyond the mediatory study of itself, i.e., the visual. It probes the relationship between the complexities of the anthropological nature of the eye and the meaning that it assigns to each. Visual culture, in a reductionist manner, is the subject of the eye. The eye is a mirror that is subject to the law of direct proportionality: the more you see something, the higher its validity; the less you see something, the more it is awarded obscurity or, worse, rejection.

Visuals are just one aspect of how designers, producers, and consumers interact with design in real life. In the socio-technical fabric of today, there are multiple overlapping threads that need to be studied if we are to

challenge Eurocentric education. With my training in design thinking and my lived, blooming passion for my Indian roots, my research praxis attempts to explore the sediments of design culture in depth and its entrenched impact on our collective psyches. Think of design culture as a rhizomatic structure that builds and is built by interacting components such as visuals, value systems, production processes, and cultural meanings that circulate and interrelate with each other. As Guy Julier succinctly writes,

Culture is no longer one of pure representation or narrative, where visual culture conveys messages. Instead, culture formulates, formats, channels, circulates, contains, and retrieves information. Design, therefore, is more than just the creation of visual artifacts to be used or “read.” It is also about the structuring of systems of encounter within the visual and material world.⁸

What is history is decided by knowledge and access to it. This ‘knowledge’ is decided by who (and eerily today, by *what*) is in power and thus possesses the ability to gatekeep. Through reinforcement and repetition, this knowledge then becomes absolute truth. However, who is in power when the formal, geographical definition of colonial versus coloniser no longer applies? A part of the answer lies in the historical, authoritarian reigns over *culture*. And thus, my research praxis has come to grapple with a more systems-based approach to understanding decoloniality, situating design culture as a site of reclamation.

As a researcher of design pedagogy, and to begin creating space for Indian and other lesser-heard voices, I start with the following questions: How can such Eurocentric, monolithic propagation be countered? How would decoloniality in pedagogy strive to differ from universalism and create space for multiple? My musing lies in understanding what education would look like when knowledge-seeking moves from imposition

to...supposition. Culture, by nature of multiple prevalent topological, traditional, and socioeconomic differences, cannot be argued to be universal, monolithic, and comparative; it must be viewed as a sensorial quantum, a gigantic puzzle of multiple pieces that celebrates and makes space for differences and as a medium to amplify embodied living systems. A decolonial lens is, therefore, not a rejection of what is but acceptance of living, breathing exploration of the difference that the world has to offer to us. One can equate it to an amoebic way of thinking: its pseudopodia contacting, expanding, revelling in the multiplicity of simultaneous possibilities.

The Answer Lies in Storytelling

Storytelling, as methodology, is not incidental to this inquiry; it is structurally necessary. The Eurocentric design culture grew to operate through detachment: the observer classifies, and the object is classified. Storytelling, by contrast, is constitutively relational. If the decoloniality of the eye exposes how design regimes authorise and silence knowledge, then storytelling operates

as its epistemic counter-practice, not because it is warmer or more personal, but because it relocates authority. Storytelling requires both the narrator and the viewer to be associative and implicative. Growing up in a collectivistic culture, where knowledge moves through conversation, ritual, and shared making rather than through singular authorship, I did not arrive at storytelling as a method by reading about it; it arrived in me before I had words for it, a nod to how bodies can carry knowledge and instinct. What this paper proposes, then, is that storytelling is not a softer substitute for theory but an epistemic practice rooted in collectivistic ways of knowing, as embodied and discursive pedagogy.

The way we design is affected by what we know and how we know; visuals, traditions, socioeconomic aspects, politics, mythologies, amidst other such externalising factors, are built into this giant matrix (the episteme) that humans operate in. In order to create ripples in what is so heavily integrated into our educational systems, storytelling helps create intrigue. It helps breed curiosity, a foundational need when multiple possibilities need to be

contended with, to be studied. It also goes a step beyond and asks learners to lean in through a culture of care for other’s cultures and for the pluriversal. This paper builds on an experimental and visual framework of storytelling around a material artefact from India’s design culture to create inviting interventions for the viewer to viscerally and cerebrally *care*. It is an attempt to find patterns that convey design ideologies in my lived Indian culture that, in turn, enables sensing and finding vocabulary for Indian design. The framework is framed through three questions:

1. “What does this make the viewer *feel*?” A feeling comes from a complex set of interdependent external and internal epistemologically symptomatic existences. Stories of the personal help the learner/viewer/reader’s faculties transcend logic or reason and move to a dimension of feeling.
2. “What does the viewer *do*?” At the core of commencing to grasp the deficiency of de-centred learning of one’s nativity lies a very sensorial unlearning of the centred Eurocentrism. Beyond a classroom of proscription; experimentation and interrogation must occur through the methodology of doing.
3. “How *quickly* does the viewer feel?” In today’s age of economies of attention, this prompts frameworks that seek to challenge normative classroom learning to present alternative methods of storytelling by adopting principles of democratic and palatable pedagogy.

I open this experimentation with one of the most cherished designed objects from my childhood that my favourite person, my mother, continues to wear: a *saree*. A saree is an unstitched piece of fabric, typically close to six feet in length and draped, folded, tucked, pleated, and let loose across the body in a plethora of styles by women in the Indian peninsular region. This piece of clothing recounts the stories of human hands, lives, and ecosystems; the disruptions to those

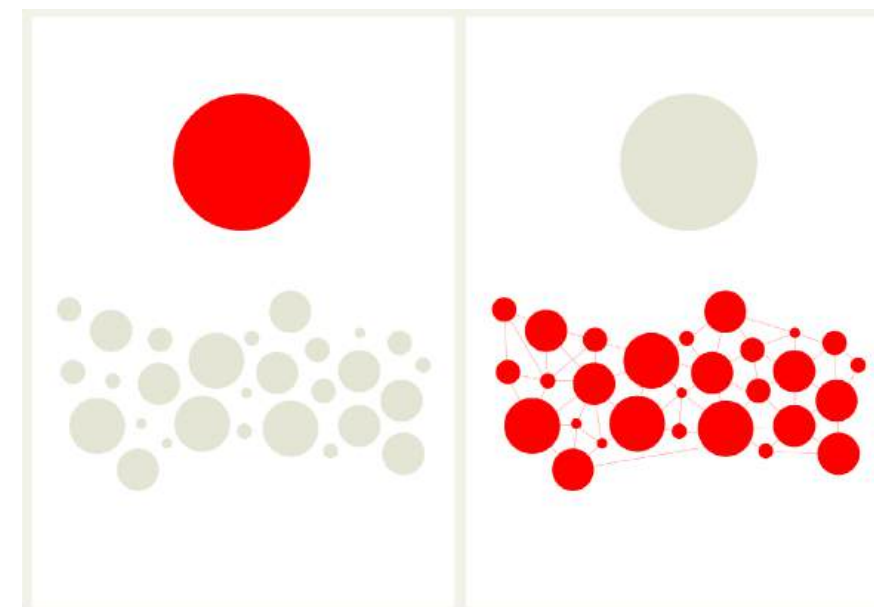


Figure 4. From Imposition to Supposition
Universalism is imagined as a giant body of knowledge that fragments in its imposition. Decoloniality is seen as bodies of instruction, rooted in cultural contexts, like a web of interconnected, ever-shifting, and ever-evolving ideologies that unite.

⁹ Molly McDonough, “Making Sense of Interoception,” *Harvard Medicine*, June 2024, <https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/making-sense-interoception>.

ecosystems; and the sweat that spills behind the veils of romanticisation of artisanal craft-making and history. One of the oldest documented forms of clothing in human history, the saree has evolved through its multi-century existence and thus contains a mesmerising feat of craft history in response to imperial acts, conquests, the humdrum of everyday life, gender inequalities, colonial strongholds, trade politics, and so much more.

I welcome you on this journey of revisiting the semantics of the indelible impression of these textile crafts on a daughter who had the immeasurable privilege of her mother passionately curating sarees, often directly from artisans themselves. Through my mother’s wardrobe, I started to find the contours of the Indian peninsular region and beyond, right at home. Building on the methodology of meaning-making from memory, this paper is an exercise in visual and reflective storytelling that dips into the moods, smells, colours, and textures of portraits of my mother in the choice of sarees she adorned through different times of the day. This process was executed as an intentional collaborative photo series, acknowledging shared histories with a stylist who grew up around sarees and therefore knew how to work and drape multiple yards of fabric and an Indian photographer who understood how light plays on, through, and against the myriad textiles of South Asia.

Memory contains multitudes of our lived realities, and exploring these, one revels in the rich culture of the material heritage around a child who grew up in India. In this particular case, the memories are of when I was a wee little kid with bangs who would curl up in her mother’s wardrobe, inhaling her scent mixed with that of mothballs and the powdery perfume that lay in the staccato rustles of the fabrics in my young hands. Today, this very wardrobe is a conduit to reclaiming, learning, and diving into the histories of the land I belong to by birth. There are rising studies

around *interoception*—a growing acknowledgement of the eight sensory systems where our bodies contain impulses—so much so that this article from *Harvard Medicine* begins with this line, “Even when the world around us seems quiet, our insides are bustling.”⁹ As we start to see that feeling precedes knowing, a designed object, even before it is analysed, theorised, or classified, is already doing educational work. It is with this premise that I go back to probing my memories around my mother’s wardrobe.

Before we dive further, I must take a moment to acknowledge the thoughts and work of the many practitioners and artisans before me I am a thinker and recipient of ideas in the larger web of heritages that was, is, and will continue to surface when we think of decoloniality in our education. The truth is shared and participative regarding adopting a decolonial mind and/or pedagogies. I urge the reader to treat this visual essay as an exploration and to explore on your own, for the definition and possibilities of our design culture are multilateral, multi-lensed, multifaceted, multi-sensorial, and undeniably simultaneous.

The saree is a veritable case study of how an object of design can form a verdant playground for flourishing difference-making by offering multiple owned ways of assembling. This assemblage, this series of permutations and combinations, is situated across the scales of macro (owing to the myriad regional and national styles) and micro (within the microcosm of, say, one region, will lie different choices directed by age, marital status, economic status, social status, religion, and personal preferences). Hosted through the pictures, we see sarees that are rich in heritage, artisanal calibre, and of heirloom value, like the textile crafts of kantha (a traditional South Asian embroidery technique that took the humble running stitch to new heights of exploration) or kanjeevaram (a type of silk saree with unique contrast borders, from South India). The saree walks us through a design timeline

much longer than one beginning in the 1800s. It tells us the journey from only hand to the demands and mechanics of industrialisation, when one observes machine-printed sarees, the imperative dialogue in the tension between the value of ‘handmade’ and the accessibility of ‘machine’.

As memory shapes the contours and origins of a set of textiles, it is when we do a rough trace on a present-day map that we begin to reveal a tapestry that weaves geographical, cultural, and historical contexts, leaving one delighted at how all of it can sit in a single wardrobe. Picking up on another researcher’s thoughts,

We understand that in order to study a “hand made object and its maker,” we must understand several important contexts: the historical time and place of the creation, the biographical context of the artist, and the form, technology, and aesthetics of the object, all of which communicate the standards of excellence held by the maker, the consumer.¹⁰

Just by picking up a few sarees from my mother’s wardrobe, we are able to travel back almost 2000 years (some textile crafts are even older), from

yesteryear Persia to present-day India. This journey situates and honours design as an act, method, knowledge, and container of narrative-driven theories that are multi-layered and multi-contextual. We learn to contextualise material through lineage and rituals; understand that visual patterns transcend aesthetics into meaning-making (e.g., in Sozni Bootidar embroidery, a motif like a Chinar leaf, tells us about a five-pointed leaf that is deeply rooted in the identity of Kashmir). As we travel through the 5 textile crafts in the framework, we find repetitive patterns of circularity and unique spatial awareness. Understanding and diving deeper into relationality of these crafts also makes the learner feel uncomfortable as threads of social (in) justice through gender, caste, class, and religion emerge and in the apparent hypocrisy: in a paper that talks about context and making; the maker, the artisan is not present in the making of this conversation.

However, what this framework proposes, is a structural bridge to mediate the gap between Indian design practices and its vocabulary. By taking 5 textile-making processes from the larger pool of textiles explored in

¹⁰ Shukla, Pravina. “Evaluating Saree: Social Tension and Aesthetic Complexity in the Textile of Modern India.” *Western Folklore* 67, no. 2/3 (2008): 163–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474912>.



Figure 5. Mornings
Waking up to sprightly yellows and such hues. Reminiscent of fresh mornings, hints of jasmine flowers in the air and a pot of tea simmering on the gas stove. Biscuits, tea, and a home filled with chatter: cotton in humid summers and opaque silks in the cold winters.

¹¹ Most books on Design History present a chronological order starting in the 1800's. Example: Wilkes, Angela, Sreshtha Bhattacharya, Alexandra Black, et al. *Design: The Definitive Visual History*. DK Publishing 2015.

¹² Cavendish replaced the Gros Michel banana in the 1950s after it was wiped out by Panama disease. Cavendish bananas are ideal for global export due to their thick skin and resistance to transport-related bruising, which makes them a convenient and resilient replacement for the commercial industry. However, this reliance on a single, genetically identical variety has created a monoculture that is now vulnerable to a new strain of Panama disease, threatening the future of the Cavendish banana itself.

Explored in the docu-series, 'Omnivore' narrated by Rene Redzepi, renowned chef and co-owner of the three-Michelin star restaurant Noma. Episode 5: Banana.

the visual essay, the framework dives into a structure that excavates nuance according to stipulated parameters. A student looking at this cannot admire Dhakai Jamdaani without also reading how British colonial policies devastated the Bengal muslin industry through raw cotton export, mechanised mills, and punitive taxation. The craft, its philosophy and its wound sit side by side because storytelling as pedagogy offers moments of relational, intentional reflexivity insofar that the culture of design is also about the physical world: the soil, the river, the tree, the animal, and sky and more. That it lies in the familial relations, when making is practised in a mother passing on her wisdom to her daughter. The designer studying these crafts is not only studying a cultural heritage; they are learning to invite complexities that counter flattening.

The traditional Eurocentric design curriculum talks about design from the 1800s,¹¹ but when you pick up a designed artefact like the saree, which is arguably 5000 years old, it subverts the longevity of design history as taught in curricula. The principles and elements of design, go beyond universality to contextuality; kantha embroidery started with scraps stitched together, threads pulled from the borders of the same worn sarees being stitched, which meant the colour palette was determined entirely by what the household already possessed whereas Kanjeevaram silks was influenced by the aesthetics and meaning of religion. Theories of design shift in response to rituals, community, symbolism, materiality, and ecology, pointing to a radically different ontology of design than Eurocentric paradigms. Let us break this difference further down by contrasting this theory to one of the more established notions of Eurocentric design logic, such as 'form follows function'. Bauhaus posits that function precedes and determines form, and that this sequence is universal. However, this paper shows that function, form, and meaning are

generated together, relationally, in response to specific ecologies, bodies, communities, and power structures. There is no sequence because there is no separation. The designed object is not a solution to a problem; it is a site where multiple simultaneous realities are held, pushing the boundaries of logic as we know it.

As traced through the framework, sarees have undergone iterations of cultural, period, and climatic progressions. This is a design that embodies resilience. Resilience is bred in the thought of the *multiple* existing simultaneously rather than advocating for a unitary at the expense of others; it stems from the communal. If we were to understand this by using an analogous example, think of the humble yellow banana we consume: it is called the Cavendish, and close to 99% of the world consumes it. However, it is soon to become extinct.¹² When we place such unitary importance on a singular aspect like species, system, profit, etc., we are automatically setting ourselves up for failure in the long run. If we had multiple variants of bananas being cultivated and studied, a single disease would not threaten to wipe out an entire staple.

Therefore, I wonder how our minds will be shaped when we study design operating from a place of resilience, and consequently, how it would impact our mindset. The spark for this mindset shift not only calls for circularity in what we learn but also *how* we learn and from *whom* we learn. This framework asks a student in a classroom to step out of the written word and become comfortable in feeling, thinking, and making connections within the tapestry of their lived realities; finding strength in the fact that we are all walking archives.

From Storytelling to Archive Building

Creating from memory and mulling over my childhood every day produces a key tenet of the beauty of India's and many Global Majority's

cultures: our art and crafts are lived through to blend or make our external surroundings. An example will help articulate this: Madhubani art, found in Bihar, India, is practised and drawn by women on the mud walls of their houses. It is an act to bring to life the nature that they see around them and to embed in them the godly forces to offer prayers to. The ritualistic nature of this visual form lies in the fact

that it is re-done every day to exalt their houses above the decay of the previous day.¹³ Only in the 1960s was this art form explored on paper.

What does this imply when it comes to unearthing collective intelligence to trace and form design histories? The answer lies in the understanding of our own selves as conduits and holders of archives. The question then concerns how to probe

¹³ *Mulk Raj Anand*, 1981. Madhubani Painting. Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

¹⁴ Songs from the Indian subcontinent written and composed by the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature.



Figure 6. Afternoons
Moody, broody greens and such hues. Reminiscent of afternoons, the smell of burning sandalwood incense, specks of red in plucked hibiscuses among her pots and prayers. Ikat, bandhani, and light kanjeevarams remind me of the smoke trails curling up from incense sticks against slanting sunrays.



Figure 7. Early Evenings
Blushing pinks, airy lilacs, blues and such hues. Reminiscent of early evenings, a bouquet of fresh flowers, tunes and hums of Rabindra Sangeet¹⁴ hint at the promise of the day winding down. Bubbly chiffons and benarasis with heavier patterns.

Craft Name	Story of Origin	Reason to Exist	Method of Propagation	Affected by	Gender Roles
Kantha	Present day Bangladesh & West Bengal in India 1000 yrs old	Utilitarian & sustainable upcycling of scraps Trickle Up Expression of life (utilitarian upcycling of scraps by women who had no access to new cloth)	Inter-generational knowledge transfer External interest Govt sanctions	Mughal Empire Portuguese colonial rule British colonial rule	Women are the primary embroiderers Men work as collectors/market intermediaries. Senior women control design memory; younger women execute
Kanjeevaram	Present day Tamil Nadu in India 2325 yrs old	Aesthetic, Religious & Class hierarchy Royal patronage Trickle Down	Inter-generational knowledge transfer Geographical Indication (GI) Tag Valued as heirlooms	British-era shifts to machine-made textiles created market pressures; however, elite patronage (temples, weddings) sustained demand Colonial policies altered raw-silk supply chains	Apprenticeship within families (father/uncle/son)
Tanchoi Benarasi	Traced from China to modern day Benaras in India 185 yrs old	Merchant patronage Trickle Down	Inter-generational knowledge transfer, male dominated family apprenticeship Revived by weavers in Benaras	Merchant networks from Mughal and earlier periods shaped stylistic forms later codified in Banarasi weaves	Weaving (complex loom work) predominantly by men), especially for shuttle/loom operation Women perform preparatory tasks (spinning, winding) and local dyeing; they may also do finishing and embroidery in household settings
Dhakai Jamdaani	Present day Dhaka in Bangladesh & West Bengal Possibly 2000 yrs old	Merchant patronage Trickle Down	Inter-generational knowledge transfer GI Tag helps in certain	Mughal-era patronage earlier had created peak refinement British colonial policies devastated the Bengal muslin industry (export of raw cotton, mechanized mills in Britain, punitive taxation)—classic example of colonial deindustrialization. This affected the craft to the point that the particular variety of cotton is now extinct	Weaving historically performed primarily by men Women involved in associated tasks: yarn preparation, household production, and in some local dyeing
Sozani Bootidar	Present day Kashmir Possibly 2000 yrs old	Royal patronage Trickle Down	Mughal Empire Afghan Empire Sikh Empire Dogra Empire British colonial rule	Mughal patronage historically boosted shawl prestige; British-era tastes changed markets but Kashmiri shawls remained valued Political instability in 20th–21st centuries, plus market competition	Some preparatory tasks by women; basic embroidery (sozni) historically practised by women in household contexts Intricate chain-stitch and "tush" or haute embroidery work, especially for high-art pieces, may historically be performed by male master artisans for courtly commissions Men take on commercial brokerage Gendered task division varies by product (shawl vs. quilt vs. garment); local studies give nuanced pictures
Notes/ Comment	Age of craft is an approximation Standpoint perspective of an urban, upper-middle class economic strata, higher caste Indian woman Trickle Up implies movement from grassroots to 'elite' Trickle Down implies movement from 'elite' to grassroots Saree selection is from standpoint of upper-caste ownership and affordance Above research done by a visual designer, not a textile researcher and therefore some observations can vary Inter-generational knowledge transfer encodes both formal and informal methods. It could be a master and student equation but it can also be mother teaching her daughter Kantha stitches informally over years and a father formally apprenticing his son into Kanjeevaram weaving as a caste-bound economic inheritance.				

Table 1. Framework

Ecology	My Standpoint (introduction to craft)	What Is Unknown (and why)
Kantha emerged in the Bengal delta, a region of extreme humidity, monsoon flooding, and seasonal scarcity The Bengal delta's ecology is also its agricultural context. Cotton cultivation in this region was dense and deeply tied to the rhythms of the river system Kantha thread was historically pulled from the borders of the same worn saris being stitched, which meant the colour palette was determined entirely by what the household already possessed. This is circularity in the most literal material sense: the object is made from itself	Inherited from my mother Personal purchases of the craft	This is a later addition to this frameowrk and adds space to prompt further meandering and rabbit hole excursions.
Inseparable from the ecology of the mulberry tree Silk production requires sericulture, the cultivation of mulberry leaves to feed silkworms, and the Deccan plateau's climate, particularly in Karnataka, created conditions well suited to mulberry cultivation The silk thread used in Kanjeevaram sarees historically travelled from these sericulture regions into Tamil Nadu, making the craft dependent on an inter-regional ecological and trade relationship The temple town of Kanchipuram itself is an ecological site. Weaving communities settled near temples not only for religious patronage but because the stone structures provided a stable, cool, humidity-controlled environment in which silk threads could be worked without breaking	Inherited from my mother Through transmission of lived stories from friends who comes from the South of India and grew up with women in their families wearing Kanjeevaram	
The temple town of Kanchipuram itself is an ecological site. Weaving communities settled near temples not only for religious patronage but because the stone structures provided a stable, cool, humidity-controlled environment in which silk threads could be worked without breaking The built and natural environment were co-constitutive of the craft's production conditions	Inherited from my mother	
Jamdaani muslin, the finest variety of which was called Woven Air, required cotton of extraordinary fineness: Phuti Karpas, a variety of cotton that grew specifically in the Meghna river delta in present-day Bangladesh The particular combination of silt-rich alluvial soil, seasonal flooding patterns, and humidity produced a cotton fibre with a fineness that could not be replicated anywhere else on earth	Inherited from my mother Given my lived reality to be from this part of India, have grown up seeing women wear this craft, both as an heirloom object and as everyday through machine reproductions	
This craft sits on the valley sits at high altitude, surrounded by the Himalayas and its ecology produced two materials central to Kashmiri textile traditions: the wool of the Changthangi goat, which yields Pashmina, and the specific flora of the valley whose forms became the vocabulary of Sozani embroidery motifs	Inherited from my mother	

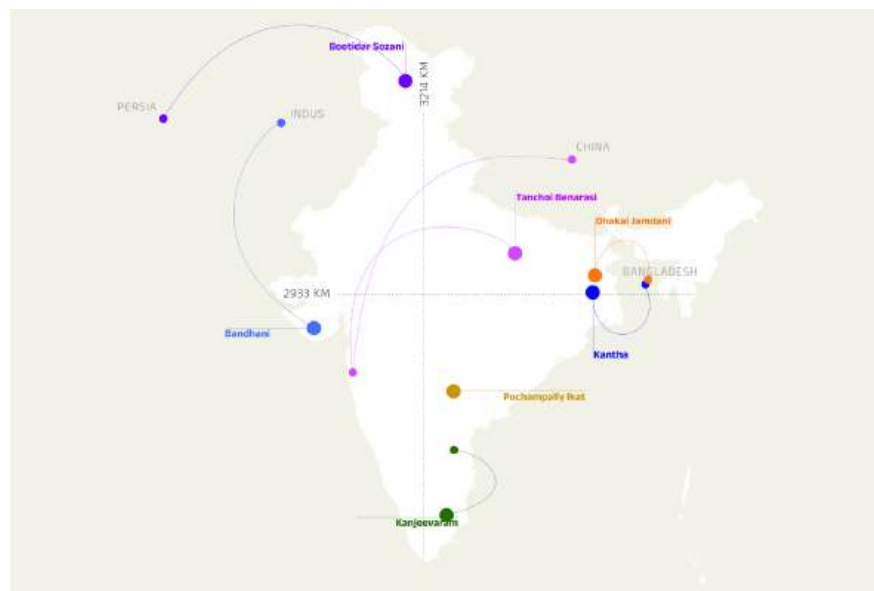
¹⁵ Kundan, meaning pure gold, is a traditional form of Indian gemstone jewellery involving a gem set with a gold foil between the stones and its mount, usually for elaborate necklaces and other jewellery.



Figure 8. Nights

Rustling deep emerald shades and hues. Reminiscent of nights, the lingering smell of mothballs as pieces of kundan jewellery¹⁵ are brought out from the depths of cupboards and glitter in the twinkling yellow of lamps. As the day comes to an end, the sarees get heavier, unapologetic in texture, patterns, and opulence.

Figure 9. Visualisation of Craft History



and excavate something for which we have not been taught a language. As we read earlier in the paper, Storytelling as pedagogy is structurally different, and the difference is most evident in 3 aspects: what students are asked to do, how their work is evaluated, and what the classroom itself becomes. In practice, a storytelling pedagogy might ask students to bring an object from their own domestic or cultural inheritance and map its making: Who made it? In what conditions? Across what distances? In response to what

power? Assessment would not evaluate historical accuracy in the conventional sense; it would seek to evaluate the depth of relational inquiry: how many simultaneous contexts a student can hold, how honestly they can sit with contradiction, how willing they are to name their own standpoint. Canonical design timelines could be disrupted by placing these objects on a shared map, so that the classroom itself becomes a living counter-archive, authored collectively and never finished.

A student who says, 'I do not know who made this, and I have begun to understand why that unknowing was produced' demonstrates a more sophisticated design-historical consciousness than one who produces a clean timeline of influences. This reorientation also redistributes authority in the classroom. The instructor is no longer the *sole* holder of knowledge. The student's lived inheritance becomes a legitimate site of inquiry. Unlike the colonial archive, which organises knowledge through taxonomy and exclusion, this classroom counter-archive organises through relation and accumulation. A Phulkari sits next to a Warli painting, which sits next to a handwoven mat from Kerala, which sits next to a brass lamp from Tamil Nadu. No single object is centred. No single lineage is made to represent the whole. The canonical design timeline, which in most curricula begins in 19th-century Europe, is disrupted not by arguing against it but by rendering it visibly insufficient. Students do not reject Western design history; they come to understand it as one thread among many that were always running and will continue to run simultaneously.

Consider what present-day archive building itself enacts: controlled thresholds that determine who may enter, cataloguing systems inherited from colonial taxonomy, temperature-regulated rooms that prioritise document preservation over human access, and classification logics that determine what is legible as evidence. The remnant colonial strain across regions has equated the idea of 'conservation' to that of 'what is worthy' and exalted it to exhibitionary practices like museums. Through the years, this process has been translated into uprooting ideas and objects from their place of conception, origin, and context. This act moves the values of design away from the ritualistic towards the intellectual; it shifts feeling into dialogue, ascribing importance by putting a bright spotlight on the object while darkening everything around it: the maker, the ecosystem, the living practice.

This logic has found a new and vastly more powerful medium in artificial intelligence (AI). What colonialism did through institutions, trade policy, and the authority of the archive, AI is now doing through the collected data of all this at a scale and velocity that no previous epistemic regime/technology has matched. This creates an intense brand of friction for the Global Majority's design cultures: that of a lack of archives. The Global Majority, constituting approximately 85% of the world's population, across indigenous communities and non-Western knowledge traditions, is catastrophically underrepresented in these datasets that are currently training our collective future. What is being encoded as knowledge, as the normal, as the legible, as the real, is roughly 15% of the world's population. AI builds on inherited biases and power imbalances and then accelerates them with unprecedented reach into every domain of knowledge production, from image generation to language, from design tools to archival search.

The particular violence of this moment is what AI does to the nature of knowledge itself. The associative, affective, relational ways of knowing that characterise many Global Majority cultures mean knowledge that travels through ritual, through the body, through oral transmission, through the made object, is not legible to systems that operate through weighted averages and pattern frequency i.e. AI. What cannot be counted cannot be learned from. What is not in the archive does not, for these systems, exist. The 85%, therefore, faces a compounding erasure: first, the colonial archive excluded them, and now the digital archive, built on the colonial archive's logic and holdings, is being used to train systems that will define what knowledge looks like for generations to come. The Global Majority must reclaim, remember, archive, and rehash its design cultures not as an act of nostalgia but as an act of epistemic survival. Reparative and differential

methods for archival practice are not supplementary to this moment; they are its most urgent design problem. This framework offers a method to recognise the novelty embedded in the every day, to treat the ritualistic and the sensorial as legitimate data, to build archives that are affective and relational. This is what it would mean to break out of hegemonic cultural doctrines and assert our multiple, simultaneous, evolving heritages before the window to do so is closed by the velocity of a system that will not wait.

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A Critical Re-Examining of the Design-Promotion System in Korea Since the 1990s, Choi Horang

KEYWORDS

Korean Design, Design-Promotion System, Design Policy, 1990s, Developmentalism, Dual Structure

This article critically examines how the design-promotion system in Korea has shifted since the 1990s from a model centered on industrial competitiveness toward one grounded in publicness and social value. Major social changes of the period, such as democratization, globalization, the 1997 financial crisis, and neoliberal restructuring, shifted how the role of design is defined, from an economy-oriented instrument to a mediator of public service innovation and the enhancement of everyday quality of life. This shift is observable in the restructuring and establishment of government-affiliated design-promotion institutions, such as the Korea Institute of Design Promotion (KIDP) and the Korea Craft & Design Foundation (KCDF), which substantively altered both the organizational structure of design promotion and its activities. While these developments may be read as reflecting global discussions on the role of design in shaping the universal conditions of human life, it is highly ironic that the new promotion system still fundamentally functions within the frameworks of nationalism and developmentalism. Drawing on the recent historical trajectory of Korea, this study argues that design promotion must move beyond the developmentalist model and assume a role oriented toward reconfiguring our way of life in the current landscape of multiple intersecting crises.

¹ John A. Walker argues that “the overriding interest of design institutions is their role as ideological battlegrounds, as the sites where different ideas about design are made explicit and struggled over,” *Design History and the History of Design* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 66–67; Clive Dilnot likewise emphasizes the importance of studying design organizations, arguing that such research expands design history into the domains of social and economic history. See Clive Dilnot, “The State of Design History, Part I: Mapping the Field,” *Design Issues* 1, no. 2 (1984): 17–19.

² Kjetil Fallan argues that “design history has much to benefit from an alignment with cultural history and that its subject matter might prove more inclusive and more manageable if conceived of as design culture,” *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 149; Guy Julier likewise underscores the importance of “design culture” in *Design Culture: Objects and Approaches*, ed. Mads Nygaard Folkmann, Niels Peter Skou, Hans-Christian Jensen, and Anders V. Munch (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

³ See Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 1972 [1937]); Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ See Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin, “A ‘Social Model’ of Design: Issues of Practice and Research,” *Design Issues* 18, no. 4 (2002): 24–30.; Tony Fry, *Design as Politics* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).; Terry Irwin, “The Emerging Transition Design Approach,” in *Design as a Catalyst for Change: DRS International Conference 2018*, 25–28 June, Limerick, Ireland, ed. Cristiano Storni, Keelin Leahy, Mary McMahon, Peter Lloyd, and Erik Bohemia (2018).; Matthew Wizinsky, *Design after Capitalism: Transforming Design Today for an Equitable Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

Introduction

This study critically examines the design-promotion system in Korea since the 1990s and its sociocultural and public roles and significance. Design promotion in Korea emerged in the 1960s alongside industrialization policies and functioned for a long time as an instrumental mechanism for industrial development and the expansion of exports. However, as Korean society underwent fundamental shifts of democratization, globalization, and neoliberalization from the 1990s onward, the expectations placed on the role of design promotion also shifted significantly. The Kim Young-sam administration’s *seggyehwa* (globalization) policy and the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) financial crisis triggered a reconfiguration of public institution governance and industrial policy, assigning new tasks to the field of design.

During this period, design began to extend beyond its traditional role of generating added value for products, emerging as a cultural phenomenon that shapes everyday life. Interest in the sociocultural significance and public value of design spread rapidly within the design field, accompanied by an expansion of discourse. This series of developments prompted broader changes across the entire design-promotion system, including the reformation of the institutional name and vision of the KIDP, as well as the establishment of a new design organization, the KCDF.

However, research on Korea’s design-promotion system has tended to focus primarily on the practical improvement of design policy or its industrial utility. Few studies have examined the broader influence of design on the universal conditions of human life or addressed the political and social contexts within which the design-promotion system functioned. As such, this article on design cultural history examines how design policy interacted with

the public and social spheres. The paper analyzes the design-promotion system and the activities of its affiliated institutions since the 1990s in relation to social, cultural, and political contexts, critically investigating their significance.¹ This approach is grounded in understanding the importance of a design culture, or the cultural-historical approach to design history as articulated by Kjetil Fallan and Guy Julier.² In this respect, the study is informed by traditions of critical theory, understanding design institutions and policy discourses not as neutral or purely functional systems but as historically situated formations shaped by power, ideology, and social negotiation.³

Today, we are witnessing the intensification of multiple crises, including ecological and climate crises, social inequality, and the expanding influence of advanced technologies and multinational corporations. Discussions maintaining that design must contribute to a “social turn” in human life and its format have likewise become increasingly frequent.⁴ In this context, a critical examination of design-promotion activities, which establish the administrative and institutional foundations that shape the role of design, has become an urgent task. This study seeks to contribute to redefining the public value of design and the roles it can perform as a mediator of social transformation.

Structural Shifts in Korean Society in the 1990s

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in modern Korean history, and the transformations in Korea’s design-promotion system were likewise set in motion within this broader context of social change. The key concepts that characterize Korean society during this period can broadly be boiled down to democratization, globalization, neoliberal restructuring, and a cultural turn. This section examines how these factors influenced shifts in the design-promotion system

Figure 1. The Korean financial crisis and IMF bailout (1997). Source: 97imf.kr.



and in the prevailing understandings of design.

It is commonly understood in Korean sociology that 1987 marked the beginning of the 1990s. Following the constitutional reform that led to the adoption of direct presidential elections, Korean society underwent a rapid shift from an authoritarian political order to a citizen participation-based democracy. This transition to what is often called the “87 regime” fostered an open and pluralistic atmosphere that spread beyond the political sphere into society at large. The policy-making process increasingly emphasized citizen authority, and programs encouraging public participation began to spread throughout the cultural and educational sectors.

As civic movements and networks of critical intellectuals grew more active, new critical magazines that engaged with popular culture and cultural studies began to appear.⁵ Likewise, new discursive agendas, such as “everyday culture” and “publicness,” began to be explored from the mid-1990s within the design field. By the late 1990s, these developments led to a range of exhibitions, publications, and design activism.

The Kim Young-sam administration, inaugurated in 1993, advanced a “seggyehwa” policy that

expressed a strong commitment to repositioning Korea as a competitive nation within the international community. Since this initiative presupposed the liberalization of industry as a whole, “strengthening competitiveness” across various sectors, including the public sphere, became a central policy objective.⁶

The 1997 IMF financial crisis accelerated such tendencies. The government introduced sweeping restructuring measures, prompting rounds of reorganization and consolidation across both the corporate and public sectors (Figure 1). Across the landscape of public policy, “efficiency” and “competitiveness” emerged as key priorities, and performance-management logic spread rapidly. Market-oriented notions of “public service” also gained traction within the public sector, elevating values such as “innovation” and “customer satisfaction.” Fundamentally, these developments were tied to the broader, comprehensive introduction of a neoliberal regime.⁷ The 1990s were also a period when the importance of culture rose rapidly in Korea. At the national policy level, the so-called discourse of the “culture industry” emerged, favoring quantitative growth over qualitative growth, framing culture as an industry and

⁵ 윤여일, 「1990년대 문화계간지들은 어떠한 문화관을 제시했는가 - 『문화/과학』, 『상상』, 『리뷰』, 『오늘예감』을 비교하여 -」, 『한국학연구』 제64호 (2022), 407–441쪽; 천정환, 「제10회: 1990년대(1) 인쇄매체 최후의 전성기와 새로운 문화의 시대」, 「우리가 알아야 할 대한민국 잡지의 역사」, 『네이버 프리미엄 콘텐츠』, 2023년 3월 15일, <https://contents.premium.naver.com/culturalhistory/knowledge/contents/230226142111929il> (accessed April 29, 2026)

⁶ See 신광영, 「한국의 세계화」, 『문화과학』 제47호(2006), 200–215쪽; Chang Kyung-Sup, *Developmental Liberalism in South Korea: Formation, Degeneration, and Transnationalization* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

⁷ Kwang-Yeong Shin, “Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 3 (2013): 335–353.

⁸ See 염찬희, 「1990년대 이후 한국 문화정책의 ‘문화’ 이해 변화 과정」, 『민주사회와 정책연구』 제16호 (2009), 212–241쪽; Jonghoe Yang, “Neoliberal Reform, Cultural Policy Changes, and the Transformation of Cultural Industries in South Korea,” *Asia Review* 7, no. 2 (2018): 105–133.

⁹ 김영찬, 「‘90년대’는 없다」, 『한국학논집』 제59집(2015), 7–27쪽.

¹⁰ See “Return to the Nostalgic 1990s,” *KBS World*, January 15, 2013, https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=culture&id=&board_seq=12422&page=9&board_code=trendkorea

emphasizing its value for enhancing national “soft power.”⁸ The expansion of popular culture and deepening consumerist culture further broadened public interest in the cultural elements that shape everyday sensibilities and experiences.⁹

Within these shifts, design began to be reinterpreted not as a secondary, functional component of industrial competitiveness but as a cultural practice mediating interactions between humans and the artifacts of daily life. Attention to the social and public roles of design grew, fostering new interest in urban space, the public environment, and ultimately public design. This change constituted an important starting point for the policy development and institutionalization of public design in the 2000s.

In essence, the social transformations of the 1990s in Korea prompted a rethinking of design not merely as a tool for industrial growth but as an activity that mediates public value and social needs. Democratization positioned citizens not as passive recipients of policy but as active participants, while globalization demanded that design assume roles related to international competitiveness and national branding. The neoliberal restructuring

that followed the financial crisis expanded the scope of design application under the banner of public service innovation. Meanwhile, the “cultural turn” emphasized throughout society highlighted the symbolic and experiential dimensions of design, underscoring its significance and meaning in everyday life.¹⁰

However, it is ironic that all these developments ultimately converged into state-led design-promotional initiatives. Debates on the publicness and social value of design were still appropriated as a means of advancing the state’s economic and industrial objectives. These tensions and contradictions constitute a key critical lens through which the subsequent evolution of Korea’s design-promotion system must be examined.

A Shift in the Design Field and New Agendas

Since the 1990s, the Korean design field has exhibited a different trajectory of change, one that cannot be fully explained by the growth that accompanied shifts in industrial structure; rather, it reflects a fundamental reinterpretation of the meanings and social roles of design. This chapter examines this

shift through three interconnected developments: the spread of design cultural theory, the rise of activist design practices, and the emergence of discourses on publicness.

From the mid-1990s onward, design came to be understood not merely as a technique for creating new product forms but as an activity that shapes ways of living and culturally organizes society. A central figure in this shift was the design historian Kim Min-soo (Figure 2). He defined design as “a philosophical inquiry into how things ought to exist,” proposing a perspective that views design as a mediator of cultural meaning.¹¹ This viewpoint broke away from the longstanding tendency to regard design solely as an economic instrument and contributed to the growth of critical practices that interpreted social symbols, identities, and cultural values through design.

Research on design history and design culture began to be pursued gradually within academic circles as well. The objects of design discourse expanded beyond products to encompass visual culture, everyday artifacts, and the urban environment. This expansion contributed to the formation of design criticism as a distinct professional field and strengthened a reflective, scholarly orientation within the design community. These developments were also connected to a longstanding desire, present since the introduction of modern design concepts in Korea, to establish design as a meaningful and legitimate professional practice.

This desire was accompanied by the political engagement of visual designers. Design groups such as the AGI Society (Activism of Graphic Imagination Society) emerged and carried out resistant design practices addressing political and social issues, such as the publicness of urban space.¹² This activism helped establish an identity of “social intervention through design,” providing important precedents and momentum for expanding the role of design into the public sphere.

Activist design practice begins with a critical reflection on the real world. The belief that design can improve the shape of everyday life is an inherent aspect of the character of social and political practice. This current of design activism, which often culminated in notable exhibitions and publications, also prompted institutionalized Korean design promotion to pay attention to the concept of the publicness of design.

In the early 2000s, the discourse of public design began to emerge within administrative institutions and academic fields. This attention was driven in part by issues that came to the fore, such as the design of license plates and urban space improvement projects undertaken by the Seoul Metropolitan Government.¹³ As interest expanded to the physical public domain and the more abstract public sphere, the concept of public design gradually took shape. However, once absorbed into existing institutional and academic frameworks, the notion of public design significantly narrowed to mean infrastructural maintenance and urban beautification, failing to develop into a more comprehensive discussion centered on the everyday lives of the public, safety, accessibility, and social solidarity.¹⁴

This narrowed discourse and practice of public design began to be institutionalized as part of urban beautification policies implemented by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and other local governments. Government-affiliated design-promotion agencies likewise came to adopt public design as an increasingly prominent policy agenda. In other words, design promotion, in its own way, began to recognize and internalize the publicness of design.

In this sense, the shifts that emerged in the Korean design field after the 1990s—namely the spread of design cultural theory, the rise of activist practices, and the emergence of discourses on publicness—were not merely conceptual or aesthetic developments but significant attempts

¹¹ 김민수, 『김민수의 문화 디자인』 (서울: 다우, 2002), 23쪽; 김민수, 「걸고 싶은 도시의 여백: 선유도 공원」, 『김민수의 문화 사랑방: 디자인 사랑방』 (서울: 그린비, 2009), 219쪽.

¹² AGI Society is a design collective and company founded in 1998 by Moon Jung Jang and Youngchul Kim and formally established in 2002; it has engaged with a range of political and social issues through practices such as poster production, exhibition curation, and publishing. See <http://www.agisociety.com/>

¹³ Chang-Sup Oh, “The Emergence of Public Design and Its Popularization,” *Archives of Design Research* 31, no. 2 (2018): 107–121, https://www.aodr.org/_common/do.php?a=full&b=&bidx=1047&aidx=13805

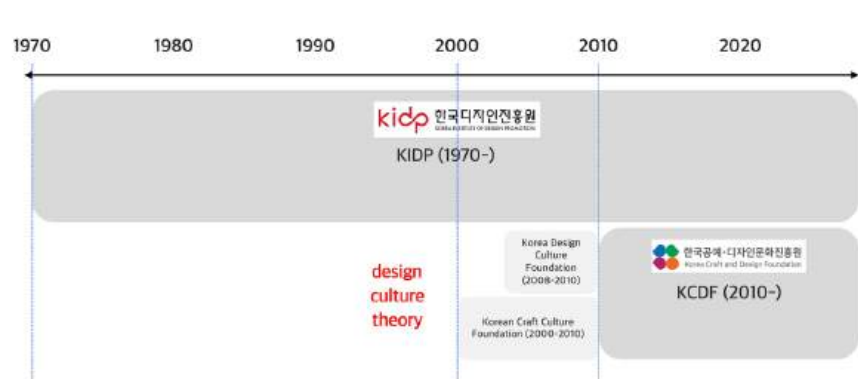
¹⁴ Chang-Sup Oh, “‘Citizens’ as Others in Public Design,” *Archives of Design Research* 26, no. 1 (February 2013): 465–481, <https://doi.org/10.15187/adr.2013.02.26.1.465>



Figure 2. Two books by Kim Min-soo that contributed to the emergence of design culture theory in Korea during the late 1990s and early 2000s: *Exploring 21st-Century Design Culture: The Dialectics of Design Cultural Symbols* (21세기디자인문화탐사: 디자인, 문화, 상징의 변증법) (Seoul: Sol, 1997); and *Cultural Design by Kim Minsoo* (김민수의 문화 디자인) (Seoul: Dau Publishers, 2002).

¹⁵ Horang Choi, “The Formation and Development of the 1960–70s Design Concept in Korea” (master’s thesis, Seoul National University, 2015), <https://s-space.snu.ac.kr/handle/10371/128960>

Figure 3. The dual structure of the Korean design-promotion system.



to reconfigure the social meaning and role of design. Yet, in the process of translating these shifts into actual design-promotion institutions, mistranslations and fissures frequently occurred. Design cultural theory and activist practice were appropriated within the state-led, institutionalized design-promotion system as strategic activities in service of national interests or the national economy. In short, these new design discourses within the design-promotion apparatus were not seen as calls for a fundamental reflection on the social responsibility of design but were reduced to policy utility or merely a hot new topic.

Ultimately, the design-promotion system in Korea during the 2000s foregrounded the rhetoric of publicness and social value, yet its institutional foundations and intentional orientations remained anchored in state-centered developmentalism and market logic. In other words, the potential contribution of design to social turn and publicness was reconfigured within—and constrained by—the prevailing systems of developmentalism and nationalism.

The Shift in the Design-promotion System and its Present: The Irony of Publicness and Nationalism

Building on the contextual developments discussed above, the design-promotion system in Korea in the 2000s was reorganized into a dual structure anchored in two main agendas: strengthening

industrial competitiveness and expanding design culture (Figure 3). This restructuring produced a bifurcated system composed of the industry-oriented KIDP and the culture-oriented KCDF. This bifurcated system may appear to be an institutional mechanism for diversifying the roles of design; however, in reality, it reinforced the ideological tensions and structural limitations surrounding design. By analyzing the structures, activities, and constraints inherent in the founding principles of the KIDP and the KCDF, this chapter critically examines why this system was unable to advance toward a new paradigm of design promotion.

Since its establishment in 1970, the KIDP has served as the central agency responsible for planning and implementing national design policy in South Korea.¹⁵ Its founding purpose and current institutional mission are defined as follows: “Through design-driven innovation, contribute to the furtherment of national competitiveness and improved quality of life.” Its vision is to elevate the Korean design industry to a global level through “design-driven innovation.” The previous name of the organization, which included terms such as “industry,” “export,” and “packaging,” was simplified to its current form in 2000 (Figure 4). Since then, the KIDP has focused on developing the workforce, supporting businesses, promoting exports, protecting design rights, and supporting innovation

in manufacturing. Although the agency has recently explored an expanded role for design at the public level, with an emphasis on service design, it largely remains oriented toward industrial promotion, market stimulation, and fostering national economic competitiveness.¹⁶

Conversely, the establishment of the KCDF was heavily influenced by the concept of design culture. From the late 1990s, the concept of design culture discussed earlier significantly influenced the establishment of the KCDF. Major design-related government institutions began to frequently use terms such as “culture” and “knowledge and information” in policy reports, and by the 2000s, the rise of “design culture” as a key concept had become increasingly evident. In particular, the Korea Design Culture Foundation—the predecessor of the KCDF—was established with the intent of expanding the functions of the Hangaram Design Museum at the Seoul Arts Center (opened in 1999 as a design-focused museum) and of understanding design as part of cultural policy.¹⁷ However, following the emergence of a new administration, the institution was soon merged with the Korea Craft Culture Foundation and reorganized into the KCDF in 2010.

Currently, the KCDF, as a public institution under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, is primarily tasked with the preservation and dissemination of craft, traditional culture, and design culture. The KCDF’s mission is stated as follows: “We believe encouraging craft, design and traditional living culture contribute to people’s cultural wellness and boost relevant industrial improvement.” In practice, the

foundation’s major initiatives include running craft exhibition spaces, supporting traditional craft, advancing contemporary reinterpretations of traditional cultural materials, such as hanbok and hanji, organizing craft competitions, and hosting public design exhibitions centered on cultural events (Figure 5).¹⁸

It may appear that this dual institutional structure was aimed at separating the industrial and cultural dimensions of design to secure professional specialization and policy efficiency within each domain. However, this scheme entrenches a binary opposition between “industry vs. culture” and “market vs. public,” functioning as a framework that limits the comprehensive and multifaceted roles required of design administration. Moreover, the activities of the two institutions do not appear to be meaningfully distinct in some regards. Both maintain the identity of state agencies and share the overarching objective of “promoting the design and craft industries.” This point illustrates that the new design-promotion system remains largely similar to its twentieth-century predecessor.

This tendency was repeated in the KIDP’s administrative programs during the 2010s. In particular, the “K-Design” vision announced by the government in 2012 ostensibly aimed to establish a Korean design identity, yet in practice it remained an extension of a top-down strategy in which “authenticity” was planned and imposed at the national level to maximize economic value.¹⁹ In other words, values that should have been autonomously developed by citizens and expert communities – based on the cultural and social foundations of

¹⁶ Korea Institute of Design Promotion (KIDP), KIDP website, accessed November 29, 2025, <https://www.kidp.or.kr/?menu=773>.

¹⁷ 한국공예·디자인문화진흥원(KCDF), 『문화적 관점의 공공디자인사업 평가지표 보고서(Public design service evaluation index report from cultural perspective)』 (2011), 19.

¹⁸ Korea Craft & Design Foundation (KCDF), KCDF website, accessed November 29, 2025, <https://www.kcdf.or.kr/main>.

¹⁹ Choi Jung-won, “K-Design: the New Design Vision for the New Korean Government,” in *ICDHS 2014 Proceedings*, 596–597.

Changes in the name of the Korean design promotion organization

1969-1970	한국수출디자인센터	Korea Export Design Center
1970-1991	한국디자인포장센터	Korea Design Packaging Center
1991-1997	한국산업디자인포장개발원	Korea Institute of Industrial Design & Packaging
1997-2001	한국산업디자인진흥원	Korea Institute of Industrial Design Promotion
2001-	한국디자인진흥원	Korea Institute of Design Promotion

Figure 4. Changes in the name of the Korea Institute of Design Promotion (KIDP).

²⁰ KIDP, accessed November 29, 2025.

²¹ Critical discussions on the “depoliticization” of politics and administration in the public sphere can be found in the following works: Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000).

Korean design—were instead defined and circulated through a state-led mechanism of planning and control. As in the developmentalist era, this approach foregrounded publicness rhetorically while prioritizing national competitiveness and economic performance, revealing a fundamental limitation of the government’s design policy.

Since 2014, the KIDP has run the Citizens’ Design Team program in collaboration with government ministries. This public service design initiative aimed to involve residents and citizens in the policy design process and to enable service designers and civil servants to jointly redesign public policies and administrative services in a “service-user-centered” manner.²⁰ Introduced under the banners of citizen participation and publicness, the program led to numerous attempts to redesign policies and services across a wide range of administrative domains in central ministries, local governments, and public institutions. For example, design thinking was incorporated into various public sectors, including welfare, public administration, safety, and cultural services, aligning the initiative with the Korean Government’s broader agendas of fostering a “communicative government” and strengthening efficiency and transparency.

Although these initiatives by the KIDP may appear to have broadened awareness of the public role of design, they can fundamentally be criticized for reducing design to a tool or merely

a method for enhancing policy efficiency. It is also important to recall that the concept of “service” is, at its core, rooted in capitalist market logic. Service design, which is predicated on efficiency, convenience, consumer satisfaction, and cost reduction, carries the implicit possibility of treating citizens as “policy consumers” and redefining public services as if they were “service products.” In this sense, public service design can function as a mechanism that legitimizes the incorporation of market logic into the public sector. The ideals that service design professes – enhancing quality of life and strengthening social rights – tend to be diminished into administrative goals of “policy customer satisfaction,” constraining design’s public potential to pursue social transformation through critical inquiry.²¹

For instance, several projects featured in the 2017 casebook of the Public Design Group (Gukmin Design Dan) adopted an approach that “patches up” public issues through design rather than investigating their root causes. Installing 3D optical speed bumps or signage was presented as “successful cases” for reducing traffic fatalities among the elderly in a regional area, instead of examining the behavioral patterns of older residents and the structural conditions of villages and roads. Likewise, approaches to issues such as regional decline and depopulation tend to rely on piecemeal solutions, such as remodeling vacant houses into guesthouses or creating village

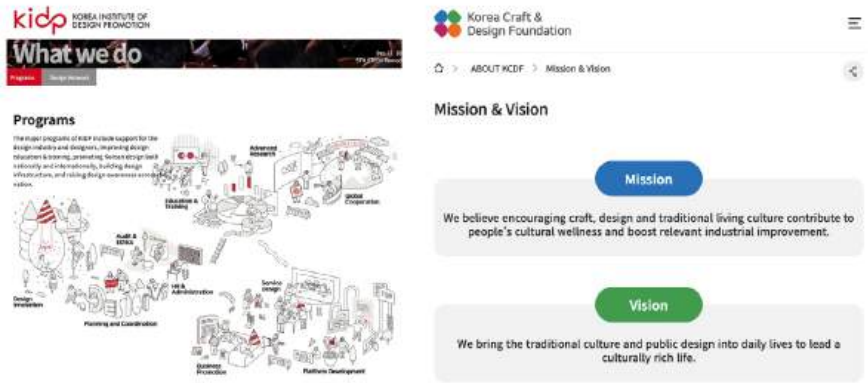


Figure 5. The mission and goals of the KIDP and the KCDF. Source: KIDP, KCDF website.

²² KCDF, accessed November 29, 2025.

Figure 6. The cover and content of the 2017 National Design Group (국민디자인단) casebook features exemplary elderly-friendly traffic safety design concepts.



museums. Despite the good intentions embedded in these efforts to apply design capabilities to the public sphere, a clear limitation lies in the tendency for such initiatives to readily lead to new construction-oriented interventions rather than sustained, deliberative problem-solving.

The KCDF identifies “promoting public design that improves the quality of life” as one of its strategic goals. In practice, however, the foundation’s public design-related activities are concentrated primarily on exhibitions, competitions, cultural events, and running exhibition venues.²² This orientation tends to reduce public design to a form of cultural product designed for consumption rather than a mode of policy intervention or community-oriented design. In other words, although the term “public design” is used, the KCDF’s actual function often remains limited to “artistic design and crafts exhibitions.” As a result, rather than expanding public design as a form of public infrastructure through the KCDF, it is more likely to be mobilized as a marketing tool for the industrialization of culture. This point implies that the key values that public design ought to embody—such as social solidarity, accessibility, and accountability—may be omitted or weakened.

Both the industry-oriented KIDP and the culture-oriented KCDF continue to foreground goals such as “enhancing competitiveness,” “promoting industry,” and “expanding into global markets” in their founding purposes and operational visions. Therefore, even when publicness or cultural value is invoked, an underlying developmentalist framework—centered on national development and economic growth—remains in place. Public design, service design, and the industrialization of craft culture are ultimately tied to national competitiveness, industrial expansion, increased exports, and market share.

These characteristics distinguish Korea’s approach from that of major design institutions in countries such as the UK, Germany, Sweden, Japan, and Australia. Organizations such as the Design Council (UK), the German Design Council, Svensk Form, the Japan Institute of Design Promotion, and the Australian Design Council are typically operated either as private-led entities or through public–private partnerships. Moreover, the aims and directions of their activities frequently invoke themes such as transition, sustainability, climate change, “making life better,” and “for the planet.” In other words, their institutional practices appear to be

grounded in a sense of public and sociocultural responsibility, wherein design is expected to play a role in driving structural transformation in society.

In comparison, the “publicness” of design promotion in Korea functions not as an autonomous ethical value but as a means of efficiently achieving national strategic objectives. Design is positioned less as a mediator of public welfare, citizen participation, sustainability, or transformative ways of living and more as an instrument for fulfilling policy objectives. This positioning has the effect of structurally and politically constraining the emancipatory potential of design—its capacity for social resistance and for strengthening civic subjectivity. Even when publicness is invoked, its implementation tends to be subsumed under bureaucratic logic within the system, ultimately reinforcing the developmentalist framework.

Conclusion

This study examined how the design-promotion system in Korea has evolved since the 1990s, from a policy structure centered on industrial competitiveness to one that increasingly acknowledges publicness and sociocultural values. However, despite these surface-level shifts, Korean design promotion has remained constrained by the deeper structures of developmentalism and nationalism.

The historical conditions of the period—democratization, *seggyehwa*, neoliberal reforms, and the IMF financial crisis—provided the backdrop for the shift in the role and concept of design from a supplementary tool for industrial efficiency toward an institutional practice mediating public service improvement and the qualitative enhancement of everyday environments. However, these changes have continued to be constructed within the prevailing logic

of nationalism and growth-oriented developmentalism.

The internal shifts within the design field, such as the rise of design cultural theory, design activism, and public design discourse, represented important efforts to fundamentally redefine the role of design within the Korean context. However, the policies that were institutionally advanced under the banner of publicness ultimately reduced these ideas to formalized and diminished versions of their original intent. The fact that service design promotes public sector innovation while still presupposing market-based service logic, or that public design programs have been reproduced on a limited scale as the KCDF’s exhibition- and event-centered activities, illustrates how narrowly state institutions have handled the concept of publicness. In short, although Korea’s design-promotion system rhetorically foregrounds publicness, its actual administrative weight remains minimal, and the system as a whole remains subordinated to capitalist discourses of productivity.

These characteristics become even more pronounced when viewed in relation to global developments. According to the 2025 Design Policy Mapping Report in Europe by BEDA, European countries actively employ design as a policy lever for competitiveness, sustainability, and public service innovation, and they discuss design alongside and within major agendas, such as the transition to a circular economy and the improvement of digital public services. This approach reflects a broader shift toward positioning design not as a discrete industry but as a mediator of social innovation.

Such a comparison prompts renewed questions about the situation in Korea. Korea continues to operate its design policies within the industrial-cultural dichotomy represented by the KIDP and the KCDF. As a result, the country has struggled to realize design’s public functions systematically and

has instead become entangled in administrative fragmentation and bureaucratic struggles for hegemony. Although Korea has conceptually and discursively emphasized publicness, it remains strongly inclined to quantify publicness within indicators of national competitiveness and industrial growth. This situation puts Korea in a tense relationship with contemporary policy environments that increasingly demand publicness and a social turn.

Of course, it is necessary to soberly acknowledge that Korea’s twentieth-century modern history—from colonial rule to military dictatorship—was closely intertwined with state-centered developmentalism. Accordingly, there is a need to review the role that design has been assigned within the structural logic of state-led developmentalism. What is required now is a policy philosophy that redefines design not as an instrument of economic efficiency but as an active agent in reconfiguring living environments and social structures amid an era marked by multiple crises. What is required now is a new paradigm for promotion that moves beyond the logic of industrial growth and centers on the lives of citizens and collective values.

Ultimately, the concerns raised by this study can be summarized as follows: For Korean design promotion to retain its social relevance in the future, it must confront the structural limitations of design policy that have long been the result of developmentalist and nationalist frameworks and reposition design as a strategic instrument for democratic practice and social transformation within the public realm. This shift aligns with contemporary demands that design promotion expand beyond industrial outcomes and evolve into a public practice capable of reconfiguring the forms of life and society.

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Salesian Didactics: A Pedagogical Model for the Training of the Italian Graphic Designer, Valentina Nitti & Monica Pastore

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Research and Critical Reflection Paper

KEYWORDS

History of Italian Graphic Design, Salesian Typographic School, Giuseppe Pellitteri, Graphic Design Education, Turin, History of Typography

This essay explores the contribution of the Salesian Typographic School to the formation of the graphic design profession in post-war Italy, a period in which the identity of the graphic designer took shape, establishing the discipline's existence and its autonomy. The article seeks to show how Giuseppe Pellitteri, as a theorist, and the vocational typography courses offered by the Salesian schools played a crucial role, first in Piedmont and later throughout Italy, in fostering a design culture that diverges from the one traditionally recounted by canonical Italian historiography. This alternative cultural and productive sphere was defined by a different kind of practitioner, the *tipo-grafico*, and by everyday communication artefacts not necessarily linked to the celebrated masters of Italian graphic design or to the visual output of major national industries.

This historical reconstruction aims to shed light on underexplored developments and to introduce new interpretive strands that challenge long-standing cultural taboos, including those concerning the relationship between graphic culture and religion.

Introduction

For some time, various scholars have highlighted how the international history of graphic design has, from the discipline's earliest days, focused on the same themes, geocultural contexts, and designers, contributing since the 1990s to the establishment of a canon that only recently has begun to be expanded through the addition of other narratives, perspectives, and questions, free from celebratory simplifications.¹ What is happening at the international level is also occurring in Italy, where certain aspects of the history of Italian graphic design that have hitherto been little investigated are now coming under scrutiny. The established field of study focuses specifically on the development and dissemination of the "Milanese style" from the post-war period onwards, a graphic production closely bound to that of major Italian industry and of industrial design; consequently, scholarly attention has predominantly been paid to the Milanese geographic and productive context, historically regarded as the epicentre of Italian design. To address the marginalised questions in the history of Italian graphic design is, in our view, to decolonise current historiography: to dismantle the canonical narrative, explore geographic and cultural contexts considered peripheral to this day, and engage with areas of practice not necessarily tied to industrial production.

Among the many questions examined only fragmentarily, that of the professional education of practitioners in graphic design remains poorly debated, confined primarily to the domain of industrial design education.²

Starting from this reflection on pedagogy, this article also examines another rather contentious issue in Italy: the role of the Catholic Church in liberal culture, particularly in the field of education, given that the presence of the Papal State in the country exerted a profound and enduring influence on the dissemination of

culture and on school formation well before national unification in 1861.³ The events examined here, therefore, refer to an educational experience born within a religious order, responsible for establishing a vocational typography course aimed at the less affluent classes: the Salesian Typographic School of Don Bosco in Turin. For geographic and cultural reasons, the school found fertile ground in the printing trade. In the first instance, the school was established in a city, Turin, where publishing and typographic culture have a centuries-long and productive history; second, it undertook to train young people in the graphic professions during a formative historical period for Italian graphic design as a discipline. Finally, the school represents a fundamental educational experience in the dissemination of typographic culture not only in Italy but also overseas, as demonstrated by the commemorative publications for the school's centenary and by the recent publication of Argentine scholar Marina Garone Gravier, who recounts the role of the Salesian educational project in Colombia.⁴

Examining the Salesian Typographic School enables us to broaden the history of Italian graphic design by reflecting pragmatically on the influence of Catholicism on the profession and to open new research perspectives for a global historiography, given the widespread presence of Salesian educational institutions throughout the world.

Finally, this article is situated within a strand of limited historical studies that reflect specifically on the intersection between religious cultures and vernacular visual cultures of the twentieth century. Remaining within the Catholic tradition, among these studies, one may cite, for instance, the work on the graphic production of Corita Kent (1918–1986),⁵ better known as Sister Mary Corita Kent, a teacher at the Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles and renowned for her mid-twentieth-century silkscreen prints that reinterpret biblical themes

¹ On the critical revision of the graphic design historical canon, see Scotford, Martha. "Is There a Canon of Graphic Design?" *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* 13 (1991): 3–5; Dalla Mura, Maddalena, & Carlo Vinti. "Grafica, storia, Italia: Estendere il campo." *Progetto grafico* 24 (2013): 9–16.

² On the Italian educational context regarding the intersections between industrial design and graphic design, see Pansera, Anty. *La formazione del designer in Italia: Una storia lunga più di secolo*. Venice: Marsilio, 2015.

³ See Marrone, Andrea. *La pedagogia cattolica nel secondo Ottocento*. Rome: Edizioni Studium, 2016.

⁴ Cf. Garone Gravier, Marina. "Noticias sobre el patrimonio tipográfico colombiano: descripción y análisis de dos muestras de letras salesianas del siglo XX." *La Tadeo DeArte* 7, no. 7 (2021): 26–55. <https://doi.org/10.21789/24223158.1715>

⁵ See Dackerman, Susan. *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

⁶ Frank Kacmarcik attended the Minnesota College of Art and Design, developing a particular interest in graphic design, especially editorial design. See: Seasoltz, Kevin. “From the Bauhaus to the House of God’s People: Frank Kacmarcik’s Contribution to Church Architecture and Art.” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 15, no. 1 (1997): 105–122; Tuzik, Robert. “Frank Kacmarcik: Artist and Designer.” In *How Firm a Foundation: Leaders of the Liturgical Movement*, edited by R. Tuzik, 327–333. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990; Kantor, Daniel. *Graphic Design and Religion: A Call for Renewal*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2007.

⁷ See Valentini, Eugenio. *1861–1961. La prima Scuola grafica salesiana Torino*. Turin: Scuola Grafica Salesiana, 1961.

⁸ Bitelli, Giovanni. “Piemonte,” in *Storia dell’editoria italiana*, vol. 1, edited by Mario Bonetti (Rome: Gazzetta del libro, 1960), 33. Original Italian: [*l’imprimere caratteri mobili sulla carta s’accompagnò all’operosità dello stampatore l’altra [...] di divulgare commercialmente ciò che si era stampato*].

⁹ L’Istitutore was the periodical of the Società d’istruzione ed educazione [Society for Instruction and Education], gathering the first Italian Risorgimento writings on pre-elementary, elementary, and secondary education systems, giving rise to new methodological values.

¹⁰ The first volumes referred to are *La storia d’Italia raccontata alla gioventù* [The History of Italy Told to Youth] (1866) and *Aritmetica e sistema metrico decimale* [Arithmetic and the Metric System] (1849), both adopted in the schools of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy for several years.

through the lens of commercial iconography. Her practice as a self-taught graphic designer emerged precisely as a response to the perceived gulf between the Catholic Church and post-war modernity in an attempt to fill a representational void in the treatment of religious themes within visual communication. A second example is the studies on Brother Frank Kacmarcik (1920–2004),⁶ a religious designer at the Abbey of St John’s at St John’s University in Minnesota, who dedicated his life to helping the Catholic Church renew itself through design in its fullest sense, from the furnishing of sacred spaces to communication materials for parish activities, and specifically Catholic liturgical books, in which he promoted a simpler, more legible style.

Turin as a Reference Point for the Pedagogical Publishing Industry

Before commencing the reconstruction of the history of the most influential Italian typographic school established by a religious order, namely the Salesian Graphic School of Turin, founded by Don Bosco in 1861,⁷ it is worth providing an overview of the Piedmontese capital’s context to better understand why this specific Italian geographic area became one of the most important reference points for the publishing and printing industry more broadly.

As historian Giovanni Bitelli writes in the chapter on Piedmontese publishing, included in the first volume of Mario Bonetti’s *Storia dell’editoria italiana* [History of Italian Publishing] (1960), it emerged when the art of typography was introduced to the region, whereby the printing of movable type on paper was accompanied by the printer’s other activity of commercially disseminating printed matter.⁸ Only at the beginning of the twentieth century did the two functions, that of the printer and that of the publisher, become distinct and separate professions, no longer combined in a

single figure, giving rise to the concept of modern publishing.

Since this article focuses on the production and dissemination of vocational educational publishing for typography in this geographic context, the historical period under examination runs primarily from the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with Italian unification, through to the following century. Within this time frame, volumes for scientific and educational purposes were produced by a handful of specific Turin-based publishing houses, some directly involved with the Salesian School.

If we retrace the history of the most significant among these publishing houses, we find Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese (UTET), founded in 1791, was the pioneer of this educational strand. Under the direction of Giuseppe Pomba from the early nineteenth century, the publisher devoted itself to the production of manuals, encyclopaedias, and scientific works to educate a broad segment of the population, in line with the positivist philosophical outlook of the era. Alongside UTET, a fundamental role in educational publishing was played by the Paravia house, above all through the work of Giorgio Paravia, who succeeded his father around 1825 and began producing a series of pedagogical periodicals, including *L’Istitutore*,⁹ founded in 1852, and groundbreaking volumes devoted entirely to new methodological theories of youth formation, including those of the priest Giovanni Bosco,¹⁰ as mentioned below. Giorgio Paravia, himself a supporter of Italian Risorgimento positivist currents, through his partnership with the bookshops of Innocenzo Vigliardi, his principal city distributor, not only reinforced the educational-cultural orientation of his publishing output but also became indirectly involved in the experience of vocational typographic training. Indeed, in 1902, the heirs of the Vigliardi family were among the founders of the Regia Scuola Tipografica e di Arti Affini

[Royal School of Typography and Allied Arts], subsequently known as the Scuola Tipografica Vigliardi-Paravia, which became a national reference point for typographic training. Throughout the twentieth century, graphic designers, typographers, and printing enthusiasts converged there to discuss technological, logistical, and historical issues in the printing sector.

To the publishing experiences of UTET and Vigliardi-Paravia, a third pillar of Turin’s scholastic and para-scholastic publishing industry was added: the Loescher publishing house of Ermanno Federico Emilio Loescher,¹¹ who arrived in Turin aware that, in the capital of the House of Savoy, a circle of enlightened entrepreneurs and printers had formed around certain publishers.¹² As a counterpart to scientific and secular publications, there existed a significant publishing output of a clerical and religious character. Among the colophons of liturgical books, devotional holy cards, and Catholic educational texts, the Don Bosco typographic workshop began to emerge in the early years of the previous century. This workshop, which in 1908 took the name of Società Editrice Internazionale (SEI), assumed in the second half of the twentieth century a prominent position in the scholastic field,¹³ helping to fill the momentary gap left in the school textbook market by the slowdown in Paravia’s activity.¹⁴

Vocational Training: The Birth of the Don Bosco Salesian Typographic School

In this Turin industrial context, in which the publishing sector plays a central role, the presence of vocational schools specialising in letterpress printing appears as a normal response to the growing demand for skilled workers. Typographic schools, which subsequently transformed into graphic arts schools, emerged within the Italian system of technical and vocational education, a segment of the Italian school structure catering to young people between the

ages of eleven and fourteen. This level of education, corresponding to the current lower secondary school, aimed to provide a general preparation accompanied by an initial introduction to the world of work, an approach based on a controversial logic that combined productive utilitarianism with education.¹⁵ Furthermore, the absence of systematic state intervention in regulating vocational education meant that, over time, a plurality of actors, including religious congregations, industrialists, philanthropic associations, and trade union bodies, stepped in to fill this gap by establishing and managing a multitude of schools and technical courses. It is therefore unsurprising that the first Italian typographic schools emerged precisely within Catholic religious institutions.¹⁶ Among these many initiatives, the work of the Salesian order assumed a role of particular importance. Founded by Giovanni Bosco in 1861, coinciding with the early years of unified Italy, the congregation launched a print shop at the Oratory of Valdocco on the outskirts of Turin to offer young people a vocational path that differed from traditional workshop apprenticeships and was capable of lifting them out of social marginalisation.

From this original base, the Salesian Typographic School expanded rapidly, giving rise to an elaborate network of schools and typographic workshops established not only across Italy—in Florence (1881), Verona (1891), Milan (1894), and Bologna (1896)—but also internationally. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were schools in numerous countries in Europe and Latin America, including Argentina (1877), Brazil (1883), Ecuador (1887), Chile (1887), Colombia (1890), Peru (1891), Mexico (1892), and Venezuela (1894). This widespread diffusion highlights two fundamental issues: first, the global relevance of the Salesian mission; and second, the role exercised by religious congregations in controlling the technical

¹¹ Ermanno Federico Loescher, nephew of the prominent German publisher Benediktus Gotthelf Teubner, trained in printing and book trade at the Muller house in Leipzig.

¹² Bitelli, op. cit.

¹³ Bottasso, Edoardo. “L’editoria,” in *Torino città viva. Da capitale a metropoli. 1880–1980. Cento anni di vita cittadina* (Turin: Centro studi piemontesi, 1980), 911.

¹⁴ On the publishing industry in nineteenth-century Turin, see Roccia, Rosanna. “L’editoria.” In *Storia di Torino*, vol. 7, *Da capitale politica a capitale industriale (1864–1915)*, edited by Umberto Levra. Turin: Einaudi, 2001.

¹⁵ Causarano, Pietro. “La formazione professionale fra relazioni industriali e regolazione pubblica. Il caso italiano dal dopoguerra agli anni ‘70.” *Annali di storia dell’educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche* 22 (2015): 233–252.

¹⁶ The first structured experience of typographic training in Italy dates to 1821, when in Brescia the priest Lodovico Pavoni established at the Pio Istituto San Barnaba a typographic workshop for young people taken in by his Congregation of the Sons of Saint Mary Immaculate, later known as the Pavonians. The institute, founded with an eminently socio-educational purpose, offered orphaned boys or those from difficult family situations a vocational path aimed at integration into the world of work. Alongside typography, by 1831 the curriculum included other specialised workshops, including chalcography, bookbinding, silversmiths, farriers, carpenters, turners, and cobblers, making it one of the earliest examples of a multipurpose institution for the technical-artisanal training of the popular classes. On vocational education and the organisations that established it, cf. Ghergo, Fulvio. *Storia della formazione professionale in Italia 1947–1977*. Vol. 1. Rome: CNOS-FAP; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2009.

¹⁷ The publishing house SEI succeeded Don Bosco’s first publishing venture, established in 1909 under the name Società Anonima per la Diffusione della Buona Stampa, with the aim of publishing specifically religious and scholastic material in support of the vocational courses run by the congregation. Initially the catalogue contained primarily textbooks for classical languages and Italian; from the first post-war period it expanded to technical-scientific instructional literature, eventually producing 1,931 titles between 1933 and 1943. Cf. Chiosso, Giorgio, ed. *Teseo: tipografi e editori scolastico-educativi dell’Ottocento*. Milan: Bibliografica, 2003.

¹⁸ Valentini, Eugenio. *1861–1961. La prima Scuola grafica salesiana Torino*. Turin: Scuola Grafica Salesiana, 1961.

¹⁹ Mazzucotelli, Antonio. *L’arte di Guttemberg, ossia la stampa: opera utile ad ogni ceto e precipuamente alla gioventù studiosa*. Turin: Tipografia dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1863, p. 23.

²⁰ Art. 7 of the first paragraph of the Salesian Rules, in Bosco, Teresio. *Prima Scuola Grafica Salesiana. Anno 125°*. Turin: Scuola Grafica Salesiana, 1986, p. 2.

²¹ Bosco, Teresio. Op. cit., p. 4.

²² Bosco, Giovanni. “Circolare ai Salesiani sulla diffusione dei buoni libri,” 19 March 1885, in Istituto Storico Salesiano, *Fonti salesiane 1: Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica* (Rome: LAS, 2014), 481–485. See also Valentini, Eugenio. *Don Bosco e l’Apostolato della Stampa* (Turin: SEI, 1957), 7–8.

²³ Warde, Beatrice. *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography* (London: The Sylvan Press, 1955).

²⁴ Bosco, Giovanni. *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù* [The Preventive System in the Education of Youth] (1877).

²⁵ José Manuel Prellezo, introductory essay, in Francesco Cerruti, *Scritti editi e inediti su Don Bosco*, Istituto Storico Salesiano – Fonti, serie seconda, 15, edited by José Manuel Prellezo (Rome: LAS, 2014).

education of youth. Alongside this educational role, the presence of an internal print shop, which in 1919 gave birth to the publishing house SEI,¹⁷ served primarily as a vehicle for the congregation’s mission: it enabled the congregation to counter what Don Bosco termed the “bad press” and to promote a publishing output consistent with the moral and evangelising objectives of the congregation, contributing to the dissemination of Christian ideology and, through sectoral instructional literature, to the promotion of a typographic culture of traditional character. The expression “bad press”¹⁸ refers not to the aesthetic qualities of the book but to content deemed potentially harmful to the faithful. Included in the classification “wicked press”¹⁹ were volumes opposed to revealed religion (theories upheld by atheists, materialists, and rationalists), those opposed to Christianity (the Quran or books of other religions), and those opposed to scripture. Article 7 of the Salesian regulations called for the “dissemination of good books among the people, using all the means that Christian charity inspires,”²⁰ orienting publications aimed at evangelisation towards accessible typographic solutions characterised by “simple style [and] popular diction,”²¹ with content exclusively concerned with the Catholic faith.

The distinction between “good press” and “bad press” thus constitutes the theological foundation of the order’s typographic and publishing activity, well beyond mere opposition to anti-clerical or morally questionable content. Don Bosco made this principle explicit in the circular of 19 March 1885, in which he defined the dissemination of good books as “one of the principal aims of the Congregation”²² and a “divine” means capable of countering secularisation. Thus, from the school’s earliest days, publishing was considered an apologetic practice that complemented preaching and oral instruction, and it was oriented towards formal transparency in

keeping with what Beatrice Warde later theorised (in the 1930s) as the “crystal goblet” ideal of “invisible typography.”²³ From a pedagogical standpoint, Don Bosco brought to the Valdocco workshop the “preventive system”²⁴ he had devised, in which, through immersion in safe environments supported by the pillars of reason, religion, and loving-kindness (*amorevolezza*), the student was discouraged from transgression. Within this framework, the young typographer was not merely a worker in training but a person to be educated in their intellectual, moral, and professional dimensions.²⁵ In this way, Salesian ideals infused the production of graphic artefacts destined for the community. By learning composition, the young typographer created objects with a real function in religious and social life, forging a link between technical action and moral significance. This approach was consistent with the logic of the “preventive system”, an educational approach that does not separate the intellectual dimension from the spiritual or the practical.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Salesian education progressively distanced itself from the pedagogical model of the artisanal workshop, adopting an increasingly systematic, didactic structure. Around 1920, the technical branch dedicated to “graphic arts” expanded and was articulated into five specific courses: (i) compositor-typographers, (ii) pressman-typographers, (iii) linotype compositors, (iv) monotype compositors, and (v) lithographic pressmen. The new training pathways shared a body of general cultural subjects, followed by workshop practicals involving the production of artefacts for the community, including missals, pamphlets, and posters, to prepare young people for entry into the world of work.

With the conclusion of the Second World War in the 1940s, the modernisation of production equipment made it necessary to reconsider the professional profile

tied to letterpress printing and graphic design, a field progressively emancipating itself from the artisanal context to take shape increasingly as a discipline endowed with technical competencies and a theoretical-cultural corpus. This professional transformation was also reflected at the didactic level, with schools being called upon to update curricula and methodologies in relation to the technological and organisational changes in the sector in parallel with the progressive consolidation of unified lower secondary schooling. The experiments launched in 1960–61,²⁶ subsequently formalised by the law of 1962, aimed to overcome the fragmentation between technical, teacher-training, and classical tracks by establishing the so-called *scuola media unica* [unified middle school], which welcomed all students between the ages of eleven and fourteen with a common curriculum that did not predetermine a child’s future. This transition marked a shift from the educational framework of childhood to that of early adolescence, favouring the circulation of the discipline among a more mature student cohort.

It is precisely in this historical interval and context that the figure of Giuseppe Pellitteri became significant. He was a lay Salesian and graphic design theorist, a leading figure in the reformulation of didactic content, in the dissemination of graphic culture, and in the promotion of the discipline itself.

Giuseppe Pellitteri and Salesian Didactics

Giuseppe Pellitteri, remembered as a “master of printing,”²⁷ the title by which graphic arts teachers were known in the Salesian context, was a figure who wholeheartedly embraced Salesian pedagogical ideals and contributed to their dissemination. Despite the significance of his contribution to the development of graphic design pedagogy in Italy and the theoretical definition of the discipline, he remains an under-investigated figure in the historiography.²⁸ Nonetheless, the research conducted to date has identified him as one of the central actors in systematising the knowledge of graphic design in the post-war period, both at the educational level and in the discipline’s theoretical development.

Born in Partinico in 1920, in the province of Palermo, Pellitteri moved to Turin at a young age, where he became part of the Salesian environment of the Don Bosco School and embraced its pedagogical perspectives and mission. Determined to pursue a career as an educator, he completed his training in 1940 at the Istituto di Magistero Professionale di San Benigno Canavese (TO), a facility dedicated to preparing teachers for vocational schools. After a brief period working in southern Italy, he returned to Piedmont to collaborate, between 1942 and 1945, on the development of the international graphic arts

²⁶ Cf. the report drawn up by the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione. *L’esperimento di scuola media unificata. Anno scolastico 1960–61*. Rome, 1961.

²⁷ The title by which teachers in the graphic arts schools were known within the Salesian context. Cf. Marinelli, Franco. “Giuseppe Pellitteri. 10 anni dopo,” *Rassegna CNOS: Problemi, esperienze, prospettive per la formazione professionale* 18, no. 2 (2002).

²⁸ The need for a systematic study of Pellitteri is also noted by Annalisa Barbara Pesando, “Cultura grafica e professione. Il contributo della Nebiolo e la Scuola diretta ai fini speciali in scienze ed arti grafiche al Politecnico di Torino,” in *Fonderia Caratteri Nebiolo 1878–1978*, edited by A. Colizzi et al., 282–303 (Milan: Lazy Dog Press, 2023).

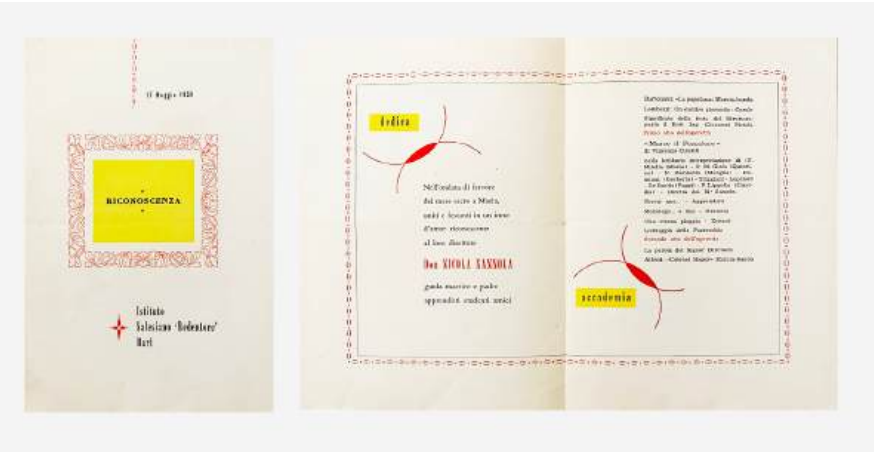


Figure 1. Commemorative religious pamphlet, designed and printed by fifth-year students of the graphic arts course at the Salesian School “Redentore” in Bari, 1959.

²⁹ Guido Stefanelli (1921–1996), originally from the province of Grosseto in Tuscany, undertook his professional training as a typographer at the Salesian schools in La Spezia. Having entered the order at the age of sixteen, he continued to devote himself to typographic activities and teaching in various Italian Salesian schools. He collaborated with Giuseppe Pellitteri on the drafting of didactic publications and on the practical exercises section of the *Tipocomposizione* manual.

³⁰ On the professional figure of the graphic designer in the interwar period, cf. Vinti, Carlo. “Design and Craft in the Definition of the Graphic Designer. The Debate in Italian Graphic Arts Magazines.” In *Design and Craft: A History of Convergences and Divergences*, 446–451, 2010.

³¹ Pellitteri, Giuseppe. *Appunti di Tipologia*. Unpublished manuscript, 1963. Biblioteca di Progresso Grafico, Politecnico di Torino.

³² Pellitteri, Giuseppe. “Il carattere tipografico oggi,” *La Biennale di Venezia* 61 (1967): 41.

³³ On theories of Italian graphic design as a discipline, developed primarily between the 1980s and 1990s, see: Anceschi, Giovanni. *Monogrammi e figure, teorie e storie della progettazione di artefatti comunicativi*. Florence: La Casa Usher, 1981; Lussu, Giovanni, ed. *Il progetto grafico*. Rome: Nis, 1989; Lussu, Giovanni. “La grafica è scrittura.” *Linea grafica*, no. 6 (1991); Lussu, Giovanni. “La grafica è scrittura: Una lezione.” In Moschini, Francesco & Trombin, Paola, eds. *Interlinea*, no. 1 (1996).

Figure 2. Religious pamphlet for the celebration of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, designed and printed by fifth-year students of the graphic arts course at the Salesian School “Redentore” in Bari, 1959.



teaching programme at the Don Bosco School, which had become an important training centre for Salesian printing masters.

Between 1945 and 1949, he lived in Rome, where he worked at the Vatican Polyglot Press. This Roman sojourn proved fundamental to the launch of his publishing activity, primarily due to his relationship with the Raggio publishing house, with which he published, together with Guido Stefanelli,²⁹ the series of volumes *Tipocomposizione* [Typesetting] (1945) and *Il Carattere* [The Typeface] (1947). These didactic texts reflect the progressive elaboration of his thinking on the transmission of typographic knowledge. Upon completing his Roman experience, Pellitteri returned to northern Italy, dividing his time between Milan and Turin and contributing to the production of theoretical reflections on graphic design.

His work was situated in a post-war Italy engaged in a vast process of material, institutional, and cultural reconstruction in an attempt to restore professional continuities and reorganise an educational system deeply marked by the ruptures of war. In this climate of renewal, initiatives aimed at disseminating graphic culture and defining the new professional figure of the graphic designer proliferated, a figure already widely debated in Italy from the early twentieth century,³⁰ giving rise to a

confrontation between two design approaches: those of the “modernists” and the “traditionalists”. The Salesian milieu aligned itself more closely with traditionalist strand insofar as it considered graphic design inseparable from the domain of printing and placed typographic art at the foundation of any graphic-visual composition. This was not an uncontested position in the Italian panorama of the time, particularly when compared with the Milanese context, which, inheriting modernist sensibilities, grounded graphic practice in dialogue with the visual arts and the tradition of the *affiche*.

In this scenario, Pellitteri formulated his own definition of the discipline, arguing that “Graphic Design” (*Grafica*) designates the science of visual expression, particularly in the domain of print.³¹ The capitalisation was deliberate; for Pellitteri, graphic design was a science in its own right, grounded not only in practical experience but also in a body of humanistic knowledge encompassing disciplines such as “philosophy, physiology, psychology, anthropology, literary criticism, and linguistics”³² His argument anticipated theoretical developments in Italian graphic design that would not emerge until the early 1980s.³³ The pioneering quality of Pellitteri’s thinking was further confirmed by the establishment of the first university-level programme in the field: the

Istituto di Scienze e Arti Grafiche [Institute of Graphic Sciences and Arts] at the Politecnico di Torino (1962), in which he served as both lecturer and promoter.

To better understand Pellitteri’s theoretical reflection, it is worth examining his pedagogical project, derived in part from his teaching experience at the Salesian School. As evident in the publication *Didattica grafica* [Graphic Design Didactics] (1958), Pellitteri articulated a conception of graphic education that transcended the purely technical-practical dimension, declaring that the activity of the *tipocompositore*,³⁴ understood as a graphic designer, should not be reduced to a set of mechanical operations but represents a complex professional field in which the practitioner is called upon to fulfil a role of coordination, both operational and design-oriented.

His educational model was constructed specifically around a triad of theoretical, graphic, and practical instruction, grounded in the idea that technical knowledge cannot subsist without a solid general culture and without adequate immersion in the graphic field. Pellitteri believed that Italian graphic design was dominated by “too much empiricism, too much improvisation”³⁵ and required targeted teaching materials capable of emancipating it in its cultural dimension.

The course comprised a collective

theoretical component alongside an individual theoretical-practical component. The former covered subjects relating to general graphic culture, from hygiene standards in the typographic workshop to printing technologies, supplemented by theory specific to the course, such as “principles of graphic aesthetics and design” and an “overview and layout of printed matter”. The latter consisted of practical exercises divided into two parts: *tipotecnica* [typo-technique] and *tipoprogettazione* [typo-design]. *Tipotecnica* refers to the workshop practicals that helped the student produce functional graphic artefacts, including the use of non-alphabetic glyphs and the composition of tables and scientific charts, that is, all the typographic conventions that do not require creative intervention. Conversely, *tipoprogettistica* [typo-designing] encompasses graphic exercises in which an awareness of the use of graphic elements is essential to the successful outcome of an artefact.

Design means the logical and psychological interpretation of texts, mastery in the distribution of masses and light, precision in drawing; it is knowledge of each type of printed matter and of each phase of graphic work, awareness of every practical requirement in the graphic field, the full deployment of all graphic resources, and respect for the two poles of aesthetics: the sense of beauty and common sense.³⁶



Figure 3. Double page from the exercise book *Tipotecnica* of the Collana Didattica Grafica series, edited by Giuseppe Pellitteri, Guido Stefanelli, and Franco Miccoli, published by ISAG – Istituto Salesiano Arti Grafiche, Turin. Dedicated to typographic composition exercises, 1950s.

³⁴ The term *tipocompositore*, like *tipoinpressore*, *litoimpressore*, and *litotrasportatori*, was a neologism coined in the mid-1950s to identify specific professional profiles useful for trade union protection and the systematisation of vocational education, as proposed by the ENIPG, Ente Nazionale per l’Istruzione Professionale Grafica. The term denotes a figure who integrates the role of typographic compositor with the modern conception of graphic designer. Cf. *Profili professionali, programmi di insegnamento, prove di esame per qualifiche e specializzazioni grafiche*. E.N.I.P.G., Rome, 1956.

³⁵ Pellitteri, Giuseppe. “La didattica nel campo grafico,” in ENIPG, Ente Nazionale per l’Istruzione Professionale Grafica (Rome: ENIPG, 1959), 15–19.

³⁶ Pellitteri, Giuseppe. “Didattica Grafica. Elementi di didattica di tipocomposizione.” *Graphicus* 4 (1958): 8–11. Original Italian: *Progettazione vuol dire interpretazione logica e psicologica dei testi, padronanza nella ripartizione di masse e luci, precisione nel disegno; essa è conoscenza di ciascun tipo di stampato e di ciascuna fase di lavoro grafico, consapevolezza di ogni esigenza pratica nel campo grafico, valorizzazione di tutte le risorse grafiche, e rispetto dei due poli dell'estetica: il senso del bello e il buon senso.*

³⁷ Pellitteri, Giuseppe. *La "Gestalttheorie" applicata alla tipologia*, paper presented at the Convegno Nazionale sui Problemi delle Scienze e delle Arti della Stampa a Livello Universitario, Istituto di Scienze e Arti Grafiche della Facoltà di Architettura del Politecnico di Torino [1965], p. 3. Archivio Storico dell'Associazione Culturale Progresso Grafico, Politecnico di Torino.

³⁸ Pellitteri, Giuseppe. "Il carattere tipografico oggi," *La Bienthat nale di Venezia*, no. 61 (March 1967): 41.

³⁹ Pellitteri, Giuseppe. "La didattica nel campo grafico," in ENIPG, Ente Nazionale per l'Istruzione Professionale Grafica (Rome: ENIPG, 1959), 17.

⁴⁰ Pellitteri, Giuseppe, Guido Stefanelli, & Franco Miccoli. *Tipocomposizione. Quaderno terzo*. Turin: Raggio, 1958.

⁴¹ Tracy, Walter. *The Typographic Scene*. London: Alden Press, 1988.

To better understand what Pellitteri meant by "sense of beauty" and "common sense", it is necessary to turn to Pellitteri's reflections published later, in the mid-1960s. In particular, "sense of beauty" refers explicitly to aesthetic judgement grounded in the Gestalt principle of Christian von Ehrenfels, according to which a form is something more than the sum of its parts. Applied to typographic composition, Pellitteri interpreted the principle as the capacity to conceive and produce the printed piece as a structure endowed with tensions and forces that determine "completeness and meaning, as opposed to dispersive atomism."³⁷

"Common sense", by contrast, expresses the normative dimension of the artefact; that is, the graphic artefact must be designed according to the real needs of the user, and therefore knowledge of the conventions and normative rules of the discipline is required for good legibility and effective communication of the message. In summary, for Pellitteri, design consists in finding a balance between awareness of the norm and the aesthetics of composition. Graphic design, in his vision, is thus configured as a visual language and as such is subject to the rules of linguistics, a discipline that evolves through "the freedom of individual creation, the norm established by tradition, [and] historical development."³⁸

Pellitteri affirmed that in the graphic field, pedagogy must provide not only information but also "the capacity to use it", since transmitting notions to those who do not yet know

how to apply them is "almost useless" from an educational standpoint.³⁹ The *tipo-compositore* was therefore required to exercise independent judgement rather than act as a mere executor of instructions.

To this end, the course *Abbozzo e disegno dei caratteri* [Sketching and Drawing of Typefaces] acquired a significant role in graphic designers' education regarding the acquisition of functional competencies necessary for the realisation of a sound project. The lessons were not aimed at forming a type designer but at training the designer to produce realistic rough layouts. A well-executed rough layout "will present itself as a facsimile of the printed piece and facilitates the work of all those who will have to realise it in practice"⁴⁰ and provide a clear vision of what the finished work will be, underscoring the designer's capacity to make autonomous choices.

If we consider today the distinction proposed by Walter Tracy⁴¹ between typographer and graphic designer and compare it with the figure of the *tipocompositore*, a structural difference emerges that concerns not only competencies but the very way in which each figure conceives the design process. According to Tracy, typography is not a field founded on experimentation: it is not a field in which "solutions are sought" through progressive attempts, because the fundamental elements of the project, the text and any images, are already determined by the client. The typographer's task, therefore, consists in deciding how to order and combine these elements through calibrated

Figure 6. Interior of the informational pamphlet *Due concorsi nazionali grafici*, produced by ENIPG—Ente Nazionale per l'Istruzione Professionale Grafica. The piece contains photographs of students from Italian graphic arts schools, 1958.



choices of typefaces, spacing, inks, and substrates, operating within a set of consolidated conventions to render the content in the clearest, most legible, and most functional form possible.

In stating this, Tracy highlights the distance between the logic of typography and that of graphic design: the graphic designer does not merely organise pre-existing elements but frequently produces images directly, develops original lettering, and explores formally and expressively novel solutions, working in an experimental mode shaped by the authorial dynamics of the visual arts. From this perspective, graphic design incorporates a margin of individual expressiveness that is structurally foreign to traditional typographic practice.

If we adopt this interpretive framework, it is particularly significant to observe how Salesian-influenced graphic education, grounded in the centrality of typographic art, aligns far more closely with the model of the typographer delineated by Tracy than with that of the contemporary graphic designer. Therefore, Salesian didactics, especially those elaborated by Pellitteri, foregrounded, from the post-war period onwards, cultural competence, methodological control, and mastery of creative impulse in the service of formal correctness. This vision led to the conception of the

figure of the *tipo-grafico*, in contrast to that of the *artista grafico* [graphic artist], which more strongly characterises the advertising and commercial landscape of Italian graphic design during those years. A clear definition of a comparable figure, known as the *grafico compositore* [compositor-designer], was offered by Albe Steiner, who in 1968 stated:

The intervention of the *grafico compositore* is not limited solely to the book sector or to the poster of pure script, as I have said, but concerns the entire sector of packaging, paper engineering, film or television lettering, etc. All sectors in which there exists a letter, a printed or projectable character: that is where the compositor arrives, so that at a certain point there is a very faint frontier, barely a diagram, between the graphic executor or designer and the *grafico compositore*.⁴²

Consequently, the *tipo-grafico*, trained in the professional school system, both secular and religious, was characterised by a strong sensitivity towards the letter and typography. This sensibility rarely suited the large communication studios of Milan or the advertising offices of major Italian companies; instead, it animated the vernacular landscape of small print shops, local businesses, and publishing offices.

Conclusion

What emerges most clearly from the studies on the didactic pathways of graphic design in the Salesian schools of the post-war period is the formation of a range of diverse professional figures, among which the *tipo-grafico* stands out. This figure may be considered an emblematic professional for several reasons: First and foremost, they represent a counterpoint to the graphic designer, who most characterises the Italian design scenario of the economic boom, the figure upon which many national and international historiographical narratives are founded. These narratives promote

⁴² Steiner, Albe. "Introduzione a un corso per compositori" (lecture at the Umanitaria in Milan, 1968 course), in *Il mestiere di grafico*. Turin: Einaudi, 1978, p. 31. Original Italian: *l'intervento del grafico compositore non riguarda solamente il settore del libro oppure quello del manifesto di sole scritte [...] ma riguarda tutto il settore dell'imballaggio, della cartotecnica, del letterismo cinematografico o televisivo, ecc. Tutti i settori dove esiste una lettera, un carattere stampato o che possa essere proiettato, là arriva il compositore, di modo che ad un certo punto c'è una debolissima frontiera, appena un diagramma tra il grafico esecutore o progettista e il grafico compositore.*

⁴³ On Made in Italy graphic design, see: Fallan, Kjetil, & Lees-Maffei, Grace, eds. *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013; Piazza, Mario. *La grafica del Made in Italy*. Milan: Aiap Edizioni, 2012; Vinti, Carlo. *Gli anni dello stile industriale*. Venice: Marsilio, 2007.



Figure 4–5. Double pages from the volume *Tipocomposizione. Sillabario di architettura grafica, panorama degli stampati n. 3*, edited by Giuseppe Pellitteri, Guido Stefanelli, and Franco Miccoli, published by Raggio Editore, Rome. The pages illustrate typographic roughs and sketches.

⁴³ On Made in Italy graphic design, see: Fallan, Kjetil, & Lees-Maffei, Grace, eds. *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013; Piazza, Mario. *La grafica del Made in Italy*. Milan: Aiap Edizioni, 2012; Vinti, Carlo. *Gli anni dello stile industriale*. Venice: Marsilio, 2007.

a concept of graphic design closely bound to industrial design, better known as Made in Italy graphic design.⁴³ Second, the *tipo-grafico* operated as a professional primarily in productive contexts considered minor or peripheral, which are little investigated to this day, such as large industrial print shops, editorial departments, or small, local typographic workshops. These contexts gave rise to a production of everyday, vernacular communicative artefacts: business cards, printed forms, brochures for local businesses, and materials for civic associations.

This vernacular work dimension of the *tipo-grafico*, often overlooked by more structured and celebrated studies on graphic design, constitutes a fundamental component of the Italian graphic landscape of the twentieth century. This work documents an everyday, widespread graphic culture, one rooted in community needs and typographic practice rather than expressive experimentation, and in doing so brings to light stories and contexts that mainstream histories of graphic design have largely overlooked. It is precisely in this context that Salesian education exerted its most significant influence, not by building visual avant-gardes but by training a large cohort of professionals who contributed to the ordinary communication of Italian cities and inland areas.

This paper has helped to illustrate the role assumed by the Salesian schools and to redefine, based on these events, the parameters of the history of Italian graphic design, understood no longer exclusively as an authorial or experimental domain but as one component of a broader system of design production.

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PART II

Objects in Transit—Material Culture and Cross-Cultural Exchange

Namban Art: Mobile Material Culture and Global Connections of Japan in Early Modernity (16th–17th Centuries), Ricardo H. A. Makino

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Cultural Cosmologies and Sacred Knowledge in Global Design Histories

KEYWORDS

Namban Art, Jesuit, Japan, Global Art History, Material Culture, Early Modernity

Namban art (Namban bijutsu, 南蛮美術), traditionally framed as a hybrid artistic phenomenon, is reconsidered here as a material and epistemic system within design history. This article argues that objects such as lacquerware and folding screens function as active mediators of transregional knowledge production across Asia, Europe, and the Ibero-American world. Drawing on material culture analysis and object-based methodologies, this paper demonstrates how processes of adaptation, translation, and technical reinterpretation reshaped artistic vocabularies and uses. By repositioning these material goods, the study advances a framework for understanding Early Modern exchanges as design-driven processes rather than purely artistic or commercial ones. Cross-cultural interactions between Japan and the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were shaped by the activities of the Societas Iesu. Jesuit missions incorporated indigenous knowledge, adapting techniques and artistic sensibilities to local materials and contexts. These processes contributed to the emergence of a cross-cultural lacquer tradition inspired by Japanese black lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay techniques.

Intercontinental Pathways of Material Culture and Cross-Cultural Design

The expansion of Iberian maritime networks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, unlike those in the Atlantic Ocean, encountered commercial systems that were already structured and highly active. These networks were formed by numerous mercantile communities characterized by cosmopolitanism and openness to contact with seafaring peoples of diverse origins. This environment was defined by the intense circulation of people, objects, ideas, and information. Within these networks, objects such as folding screens and lacquerware operated not as passive commodities but as active agents in the transmission and transformation of visual, technical, and spatial knowledge.

Rather than treating context as background, this study foregrounds objects as analytical agents. Folding screens, for example, structured spatial environments while simultaneously carrying visual narratives across cultural boundaries (Fig.1). Lacquerware similarly embodied technical knowledge tied to material processes, making it particularly responsive to reinterpretation in new environments. These objects did not simply move across space; they were transformed through use, adaptation, and local production.

The communication systems of European territories intertwined with the dense and diverse contacts forged by the coastline-based seafaring societies dispersed across this vast region, far too complex and extensive for passive administration. Initially, Asia became an exclusive arena for Portuguese navigation thanks to its

exploratory momentum, except for the Philippines (from 1565), an Asian territory where the Spanish Crown had established its presence.

Among the essential documents for understanding the global connections established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the five volumes of the *Relação Anual das Coisas que fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas missões do Japão, China, Cataio, Tidore, Ternate, Ambóino, Malaca, Pegu, Bengala, Bisnaga, Maduré, Costa da Pescaria, Manar, Ceilão, Travancor, Malabar, Sodomala, Goa, Salcete, Lahor, Diu, Etiópia a Alta ou Preste João, Monomotapa, Angola, Guiné, Serra Leoa, Cabo Verde, Brasil nos anos de 1600 a 1609*, written by the Jesuit priest Fernão Guerreiro (1550–1617), who was responsible for compiling the missions letters in Évora and Lisbon, as well as the accounts of the conversion processes



Figure 1. World Map of Japan, sixteenth/seventeenth century. Pair of six-panel folding screens with polychrome and gold leaf on paper. Nanba Matsutaro Collection, Nishinomiya, Japan. Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

¹ Charles R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549–1650*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). João Paulo Oliveira e Costa, *O Cristianismo no Japão e o Episcopado de D. Luís Cerqueira* (Lisbon: Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1998). Alexandra Curvelo, *Nuvens douradas e paisagens habitadas* (Lisbon: Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2007).

² The term Namban and its meanings: The Portuguese Empire's voyages through Indochina in the 16th century led to the Portuguese using the term “Cochinchina.” This region was also called “Nam Phan” (or “Nam Phô,” 南蠻, in some local scripts; the ideogram 蠻 is equivalent to the simplified 蛮) due to its location in south-central Vietnam (越南). Considering the names of this territory—located south of China—it is possible that the term Namban (南蛮) arose through a process of linguistic contamination and, therefore, that ideograms translating as “Southern Barbarians” were attributed to it. Thus, Nambanjin / Namban-jin (南蛮人, “Southern Barbarian Person”), a term used to designate people linked to Iberian voyages in South and Southeast Asia.

and the expansion of Christianity in those regions, drawn from the letters written by the missionaries stationed there. The very title conveys the wide range of experiences and relationships formed across the maritime world and highlights the intrinsic role of the emerging Counter-Reformation spirit within the Catholic empires.

The progressive movement of maritime activities between Asia, Europe, and the Americas increased in volume and global scale, linking the Iberian countries to Japan through voyages that lasted nearly two years. Thus, the sixteenth century generated a set of material conditions whose religious alignment—shaped by the Counter-Reformation initiatives within social and political spheres—favored the expansion of activities by the Crown, merchants, and missionaries, who traveled between East and West. Over time, the number of European actors involved in Asian commerce grew at both large and medium scales. In the four decades following 1570, this process was accompanied by the emergence of several European maritime networks that rivaled the State of India: the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC), the British East India Company (London Trading into East Indies), and the French East India Company (*Compagnie française des Indes orientales*).

Japan became a privileged territory for implementing trade and missionary policies. Under the Portuguese Royal Patronage system and its monopoly over missions in Japan and China until 1565—the farthest point of navigation from Lisbon—a spiritual flexibility emerged that adapted to local customs, enabling the conversion of regional powers through an inseparable relationship between faith and mercantile interests.¹

The artistic production that resulted from these interactions, primarily between Japanese and Iberian agents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is known as **Namban art**² (Namban Bijutsu/

Nanban Bijutsu, 南蛮美術), is the direct outcome of political, economic, and spiritual exchanges. These interactions produced a hybrid material and artistic culture, reflecting processes of assimilation and mutual fertilization, especially visible in folding screens and in the technical and artistic convergence of Asian lacquer work with European furniture types, which inspired the development of new varnish techniques and consolidated the worldwide taste for Asian lacquer. Some of these reproductions were developed in Europe, achieving different results with different raw material sources, as well as new procedures to achieve the lustrous appearance within exotic motifs (Indian, Persian, Chinese, and Japanese motifs introduced in an eclectic manner). The most well-known European lacquers developed in this context were Holandese lacquer; Italian lacquer (*lacca povera*, or *contrafatta*); varnish Martin—a generic name to describe the French “charão” (Orient lacquer); and the English process named *japanning*, a method described in *A Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing* by John Stalker and George Parker, edited in England, 1688 (Sousa, 2010).

Regardless of the symmetrical processes of adaptation operating within missionary, mercantile, and colonial structures, the lacquerware techniques were also reinterpreted in the Iberian America territories, with local materials and a new hybrid production adapting autochthonous traditions, such as in the varnishing technique of objects like *cuia* (an Amazonian bow made from the fruits of the tree *Crescentia cujete*).

In the territories of Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, the varnish *barniz de pasto*, a pre-Columbian technique, was used. In Mexican artistic centers, such as Michoacán, Guerrero, and Chiapas, there was a direct adaptation from Japanese lacquer (*maki-e* technique, black lacquer with gold powder), denoted as *maque*. In Brazil was the *cuias acharoadas*, a black varnish still produced by indigenous people

Figure 2. Portable shrine with Christian iconography (seigan), Momoyama period (1573–1603). Lacquered wood with *maki-e* decoration (gold, silver, and mother-of-pearl), incorporating a European representation of the Holy Family. Kyūshū National Museum, Japan. Source: ColBase (National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan). Licensed under the Government of Japan Standard Terms of Use (compatible with Creative Commons Attribution 4.0).



in Monte Alegre, in the Brazilian Amazon. There are descriptions of their production as written by the Jesuit Anselm Eckart, who worked at Maranhão and Grão-Pará missions between 1753 and 1757. He compared the oriental varnish (“charão da China”) and the black varnish in *cuias* produced for local consumption and export demands, decorated according to European taste with Asian and arabesque motifs (Martins, 2021).

Despite the brief duration of the Jesuit Mission in Japan across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its material culture and its circulation make it possible to study the mission as a key link for understanding historical connections, relationships, and complex interactions through the written documentation and a material culture survey. The investigation relies not only on written sources but also on the object itself as evidence of cultural dynamics and transformations. The disruptive European presence in Japan, combined with commercial activity and the introduction of Christianity, consolidated the development of relations with

the West and contributed to the emergence and production of the mutual exchange material and artistic culture of Namban art (Fig.1).

This phenomenon reflects the cross-cultural exchanges between Japan and the West through their influences and reinterpretations, shaped by local materials, techniques, and sensibilities. Despite the Tokugawa shogunate's isolationist (*sakoku*, 鎖国) policy beginning in 1613—which banned Christianity and, in 1639, severed commercial relations with the Iberian empires—the surviving material culture, such as lacquerware and folding screens, preserves in its forms and ornamentation the evidence of multicultural influences and visual information of the religious adaptations of the Jesuit mission in Japan.

Introduction of New Visual Artistic Vocabularies and Material Uses: Accommodatio as a Systematized Modus Operandi of the Jesuit Mission in Japan

The presence of the *Societas Iesu* in Japan must be understood through

a dual lens: on the one hand, the agenda of the European Counter-Reformation, which used art as visual catechesis; on the other hand, the specificities of Japanese society during the Sengoku period (戦国時代, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), marked by political fragmentation, religious plurality, and a strong Buddhist monastic tradition (Bailey, 2015; Curvelo, 2007). The Jesuit principle of *accommodatio* is interpreted here as a structured design strategy. This principle enabled the adaptation of forms, materials, and visual vocabularies to local contexts, producing artifacts that recombined European and Japanese traditions within asymmetrical cultural frameworks. Rather than passive assimilation, *accommodatio* functioned as an active process of translation and design negotiation.

The systematization of Jesuit missions in Asia, particularly in East Asia, resulted from the establishment of Macau's harbor—*Povoação do Nome de Deus do Porto de Macao na China*—as a strategic point for trade with neighboring island territories. Japan became the final destination in a chain of commercial exchanges arriving from the West via the biennial *Nau do Trato*, whose departures aligned seasonally with the monsoons and the Canton Fair between January and June. The route began in Goa, from where goods were transported for exchange in Malacca, Macau, and finally Japan (Boxer, 1989; Curvelo, 2007, p. 117; Oliveira, 2003; Subrahmanyam, 2012).

In August 1549, Francis Xavier, one of the founders of the *Societas Iesu* (1540), initiated the Japanese Jesuit Mission, directly linked to trade routes departing from Malacca toward the maritime pathway through Formosa (Taiwan) and Satsuma (薩摩). He landed in the southern Japanese archipelago, in Kyūshū (九州), in the province of Kagoshima (鹿児島). Soon, the first centers of religious activity were established in Sakai (堺市), Hirado (平戸), and Funai (府内藩), locations where Portuguese

³ Recently, on September 17, 2018, an original copy of the *Vocabulário da Língua de Iapam*, 1603, was found in the National Library of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was discovered by Professor Dr. Eliza Atsuko Tashiro Perez, a professor and researcher in the Postgraduate Program in Japanese Language, Literature and Culture at the University of São Paulo, and Professor Jun Shirai, from Shinshu University. This volume of the Vocabulary of the Japanese Language is a rarity, being the fourth known copy and the first in the Americas – among the four copies, there is another one that was found in the Santo Domingo Convent in Manila, Philippines (considered lost, but with a photocopy in the collection of Sophia University, Tokyo).

merchants also forged alliances with local governments. Yokoseura (横瀬浦; 1562) stands out as the site where Nagasaki (長崎) would be founded in 1580, after its administration was donated to the Society of Jesus—becoming the main seaport and a commercial and religious base in Japan (Carneiro, 2013; Curvelo, 2007; Loh, 2012).

Before the Japan Mission, essential experiences took place in other bases of the *Estado da Índia*. Important trials were conducted in the Moluccas between 1536 and 1539; in Cranganor, near Cochin, between 1539 and 1540; and in Goa, a major center of the Portuguese Overseas Empire, where the Jesuits established educational institutions, including a seminary entrusted to them in 1543. Goa's favorable cultural setting enabled the creation of parish schools and the College of São Paulo, which followed a European educational model for students from various Asian regions and housed a printing press dedicated to evangelization in the capital of the *Estado da Índia*. In 1556, a press³ with Roman and Japanese type was transported to the Japan Mission to support the dissemination of knowledge and Christian teaching, providing distinct and complex contours to the European presence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Asia (Curvelo, 2007, p. 372).

The Jesuit accommodation in China and Japan resulted from the guidelines set by Alessandro Valignano—visitor of the Japan missions—and from the practices implemented by Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri in China, reflecting strategies, assimilation, and mutual cultural fertilization. A significant example of how these principles influenced everything from missionary behavior to the architectural form of Jesuit churches in Japan appears in Valignano's *Il Cerimoniale per i Missionari del Giappone and Advertimentos e Avisos acerca dos Costumes e Cantangues de Jappão* (1539–1606). According to European sources, the churches had interiors modeled

after the Roman style, with European-type floor plans, but they included a Japanese tatami room for the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*, 茶の湯), clearly acknowledging the civilizational value of this aspect of Japanese culture (Bailey, 2001; Carneiro, 2013; Curvelo, 2007; Diniz, 2007; Valignano, 1946). Therefore, adopting hybrid architectural solutions for locals' needs meant introducing new interpretations about the design spaces and material uses, including the perspective uses in pictorial supports.

External measures of cultural adaptation before Alessandro Valignano codified the Mission Ceremonial in Japan were not uniform because of the rigidity of some missionaries, such as Francisco Cabral (1528–1609), the Portuguese superior of the Japan Mission before Valignano's arrival. Cabral and others, including João Rodrigues, belonged to a European tradition that viewed non-Europeans as perpetual neophytes. Thus, Cabral's measures maintained alignment with European tradition and a more colonial approach. Jesuit accommodation in Japan was therefore not a consensual measure, either locally or internationally, culminating in the well-known “Chinese Rites Controversy.”

In Japan, this strategy extended beyond theology into material production (Fig.2). Churches, furnishings, and devotional objects incorporated local construction techniques and spatial practices while maintaining European symbolic structures. Folding screens depicting encounters between Europeans and Japanese populations illustrate how visual systems were recalibrated to accommodate both audiences and purposes (Fig.6). These artifacts reveal a deliberate process of design mediation rather than spontaneous hybridity.

The Society of Jesus also maintained its own commercial structure, centered on the Diocese of Macau, whose procurator managed business operations and annually sent goods for sale, as well as materials

needed by the Japan Mission during its formation. In Japan, the procurator oversaw commercial affairs, a role that exposed the Jesuits to criticism from Spanish mendicant orders in Manila—territorially protected by the Spanish *Padroado*. According to primary sources from the *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu* (ARSI), there are records of captains and merchants from Macau attesting to the active participation of Dominican and Franciscan orders in the *Nau do Trato*, revealing still more gaps in the presence and actions of foreign agents operating across Asia (Curvelo, 2007; Sánchez Fuertes, 2020).

Among Jesuit regulations is the *Extract of the Obediences of the Visitors prepared for the Priests of the Residences and other parts of Japan* by Father Francisco Passio, visitor of the Japan Province in 1612. The document instructs missionaries not to interfere with properties beyond those of the Church, inside or outside Japan, under holy obedience. It also orders that fathers, brothers, Europeans, and Japanese, including superiors, rectors, and the provincial procurator, must not sell, manage, or purchase anything in Japan, nor commission goods without explicit permission from the provincial, nor send to Macau silver belonging to Japanese or Portuguese individuals (Couceiro, 1994; Curvelo, 2007 apud Biblioteca da Ajuda, 1931). This document enables us to estimate the production of Jesuit religious

objects crafted by commissioned Japanese artisans within a structured system of material production and exchange (Fig. 2).

From the seventeenth century onward, Macau played an important role in adapting missionary architecture and rhetoric to meet the needs of the Society of Jesus in spreading the Gospel in China and Japan. During the Counter-Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545–63) incorporated iconography into religious art, emphasizing constructive and decorative solutions integrated into spaces of evangelization—where the artistic object served not as an object of worship but as a means to elevate thought toward the message it represented, fulfilling a didactic function aligned with internal discipline and theology (Couceiro, 1994; Santos, 2013).

Hybrid design: Intercultural Influence, Exchange, and Confluence

Among the leading figures active in the Japan Mission were Alessandro Valignano (1539–1609), an Italian Jesuit visitor responsible for the missions of the Society of Jesus in India and later in Japan and China between 1573 and 1606. Valignano arrived in Japan in 1579. He was primarily responsible for organizing the Jesuit and missionary adaptation strategy, which generated immediate and highly positive results

regarding the establishment of the “Seminary of Painters” in Japanese territory. Along with the reforms undertaken by Gneccchi-Soldo and Francesco Pasio, this effort culminated in the ideas and actions of Alessandro Valignano, who followed a Christian Italian humanism marked by the *il modo soave*, open to local cultural experimentation.

In this regard, it is worth emphasizing the role of Giovanni Niccolò (1560–1626) in implementing the Jesuit teaching method and artistic training. This method was applied within the territory of the Japanese Mission, making use of iconographies and prints initially from Europe, Goa, Macau, and later from the Philippines. Artistic practice—already tested in seminaries in Indian territories—served as a persuasive means of conducting evangelical work through programmatic practice. The result was the creation of a hybrid material culture that not only conveyed theological content but also revealed the Jesuit policy of adaptation. Thus, the Seminary of Painters, founded in 1583, represents the synthesis of this proposal and a complement to humanistic education, from which a significant portion of surviving Namban art was likely produced (Bailey, 2001, pp. 58–72; Diniz, 2007, p. 76; Kotani, 2015).

Drawing on iconographic elements and artistic—visual repertoires—including Chinese characters and symbolic elements foreign to the guidelines of post-Council of Trent religious art—these hybrid artistic expressions benefited from the *accommodatio*, an innovative principle for the missions' *modus operandi*, distinct from those used simultaneously in Africa and the Americas. In all activities across the four parts of the world, local knowledge and sociopolitical realities were not disregarded, but the evangelization of non-Christians operated within normative precepts of spiritual and military conquest, mediated by the hierarchy of Catholic religious orders.



Figure 3. Kanō Sōshū. Fan from the late 16th century, depicting a Christian temple (南蛮社 / 南蛮寺) in Kyoto, probably the “Church of the Assumption of Our Lady.” Location: Kobe City Museum, Japan. Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Jesuit epistles, along with the books written by missionaries, reveal the intriguing cultural experience of Christian communities in Japan during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the interaction of cultural spheres. Their churches were often indistinguishable from the urban fabric, except for the presence of the cross on the exterior and, sometimes, paintings over the temple entrance, following Japanese architectural and construction principles. There were also notable examples of churches built in the European manner, with bells and even clocks that indicated the sun's course using Roman and Japanese characters (Curvelo, 2007, pp. 162–164).

Objects are approached as “document-objects,” revealing layers of production, circulation, and reinterpretation. Material culture demonstrates how Asian visual systems were reformulated in colonial settings, incorporating local materials and techniques while retaining recognizable formal structures. Their scale, portability, and spatial function meant they could operate simultaneously as furniture and visual media.

Among Francisco Xavier's ambitions, the construction of a church in the capital, Miyako (present-day Kyoto, 京都市), only began in early 1574 and was completed in 1576 through the joint work of Organtino Gneccchi-Soldo and the guidance of the Japanese Christian D. Dario Takayama. Namban-ji (南蛮社), the Namban temple (Fig. 3), bore a name similar to Shinto shrines, but it was also referred to as Namban-dera (南蛮寺)—a suffix common to Buddhist temples, generally called *Otera* (お寺). It is one of the churches for which information exists about its built spaces and its commitment to hybrid architectural features between Europe and Japan.

The Christian religious architectural landscapes disseminated in engravings included in the work dedicated to Pope Gregory XIII (Figs. 4 and 5)—*Compendio delle heroiche* et

Figure 4. CIAPI, Antonio, *Compendio delle heroiche et gloriose attioni, et santa vita di Papa Greg. XIII*, from Macao, Rome: 1591, pp. 38–39. National Central Library of Florence. Licensed under Creative Commons 4.0



Figure 5. CIAPI, Antonio, *Compendio delle heroiche et gloriose attioni, et santa vita di Papa Greg. XIII*, from Macao, Rome: 1591, pp. 40–41. National Central Library of Florence. Licensed under Creative Commons 4.0



gloriose attioni, et santa vita di Papa Greg. XIII (from Macao, Rome, 1591)—reveal a reality different from that experienced by those in Japan and from the information transmitted through the global correspondence network of the Society of Jesus. These landscapes also differ from the pictorial representation in various Namban screens, whose urban landscapes were delineated with local techniques and sensitivity, establishing connections between European and Eastern elements through technical and visual references distinct from Western norms.

In the Namban screens (Fig. 6), which are essential sources alongside written documents, the direct association with the Jesuit order is evident through religious figures and their distinct clothing and presentation, differentiating them from other religious orders in Japan. One can also observe internal characterizations of religious spaces, including scenes of celebration and, at times, the reproduction of Christian iconographies within Japanese-style representations.

By contrast, the Christian religious architectural landscapes disseminated

in engravings in Marco Antonio Ciappi's work dedicated to Pope Gregory XIII—*Compendio delle heroiche et gloriose attioni, et santa vita di Papa Greg. XIII* (produced in Macao and published in Rome in 1591)—include one engraving depicting the Seminary of Arima (*Seminário nella Città d'Arima, nel Giappone*). Through a careful analysis of the visual corpus of Namban art, it was possible to identify a reproduction of this iconography in the metal corner-fitting of a well-known screen titled *Emperor and Kings on Horseback* (泰西王侯騎馬図屏風; Figs. 7 and 8), on display at the Kobe City Museum (Kobe Shiritsu Hakubutsukan, 神戸市立博物館).

Within the plurality of relationships marked by cosmopolitanism in Japan during the Early Modern period (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), material culture emerges as a concrete dimension of social relations, playing an active role in affirming the identities of multiple agents and signaling the circulation of objects, ideas, and practices. In this context,

the objects born from this encounter of civilizations are essential for analyzing the knowledge embedded in their creation, use, and meaning as products of deep interaction between ideas and objects, design and material execution.

Lacquerware provides further evidence of material adaptation. Techniques associated with Asian lacquer traditions were reinterpreted using locally available resources, generating new surface effects and material identities. In the Americas, practices such as *barniz de pasto* and other varnishing techniques demonstrate how indigenous knowledge systems contributed to these transformations. These processes produced objects that cannot be reduced to imitation; they represent new design solutions emerging from cross-cultural interaction.

The corpus of lacquered furniture in Namban art, including typologies and techniques, has a broadly transregional character in

Asia as the product of civilizational coexistence. This confluence was integrated into local traditions of object production, with multiple influences and the persistence of Japanese motifs—heraldic symbols (*mon*, 家紋), orthogonal geometries, serrated patterns, stylized vegetation, and seasonal and floral motifs—which also influenced artistic production in the Americas, such as viceregal *enconchados*, American varnishes, and containers with Asian motifs produced in the Portuguese Amazon, compared with “charão da China”/“Chinese lacquer.”

The corpus of arts resulting from foreign experience in Asia is, for the most part, portable and of small dimensions, indicating the mobility of Iberian presence in many parts of Asia, or at least its transitory and transportable nature. Even in material and construction terms, these objects attest not only to accommodation but also to cultural rapprochement between European civilizations and diverse Asian peoples, since the predominance of local raw materials was combined with the expertise of local carpenters and artisans (Bailey, 2001; Curvelo, 2007, p. 95).

Thus, aligned with a European presence in political, commercial, and religious contexts, the incorporation of European elements gradually took shape, facilitated by the adoption of existing pictorial models and symbolic grammar, resulting in a wide variety of artistic movements and expressions that integrated Iberian religious and commercial presence in Japan. Trade routes such as the Carreira da Índia and the Manila Galleon are understood as systems of design transmission. Through these routes, Asian objects were not simply transported but transformed, generating new typologies and uses in Ibero-American contexts. The folding screen, for instance, evolved into forms such as the *biombo de cama*, adapting the original's function to domestic interiors in colonial societies.

The most recent studies addressing this Iberian–Japanese



Figure 6. Pair of Namban folding screens. Paper-covered wooden frame, six panels; gold leaf; mineral pigments; silk; lacquer and metal. Dimensions: each screen: height 154.5 cm, length 363.2 cm. Production: Japan, late 16th century. Kanō school, attributed to Kanō Naizen (1570–1616). Current location: Kobe City Museum Collection. Provenance: Nara Uemura Kosaku, Ikenaga Tomo, 1951. Kobe City Museum, Japan. Licensed under Creative Commons 4.0

connection have highlighted the methodological and historiographical challenges surrounding Namban art: the difficulty of classifying Japanese export art because of its commercial circulation and the existence of records that fail to distinguish Asian productions, generically labeling them as coming from the “Indies” or “China.” These issues are explored in Baena Zapatero’s (2012) studies on the routes of screens to Asia and New Spain, and in the documentation of Namban furniture inventories by Curvelo (2007) and Serrão (2013), though often with origins attributed to India–Portugal.

This study adopted a design history approach grounded in material culture analysis, archival research, and visual interpretation. It combined global art history with object-based inquiry, emphasizing the role of artifacts in shaping historical knowledge. Rather than privileging stylistic classification, this approach situated objects within processes of making, circulation, and use (Baena Zapatero, 2012; Curvelo, 2007; Kawamura, 2018; Matos, 2015; Ocaña, 2017).

Primary sources included archival documents, inventories, and visual representations, alongside surviving objects in museum collections. These materials were analyzed comparatively to identify patterns of transformation across regions. This methodology aligns with recent shifts in design history toward material and epistemic analysis, in which objects are understood as active participants in historical processes.

These transformations demonstrate that circulation was not a linear process. Objects were reinterpreted at each stage, shaped by local materials, technical knowledge, and cultural expectations. As a result, design cannot be understood solely through origin; it must be analyzed through processes of movement, adaptation, and use.

Namban art demonstrates that Early Modern global exchange was not only a matter of circulation but also

a process of design transformation. By foregrounding objects as agents of mediation, this study repositions material culture at the center of global design history. Folding screens and lacquerware reveal how knowledge was produced through material practices, in which adaptation and reinterpretation generated new forms and meanings.

Namban art should therefore be repositioned within design history as central to understanding Early Modern global networks. This approach contributes to a broader methodological shift toward object-based epistemic analysis, emphasizing design as a key driver of historical change.



Figure 7. Emperor and Kings on Horseback, sixteenth/seventeenth century. Detail of a metal corner-fitting depicting an engraved scene derived from Antonio Ciappi, *Compendio delle heroiche et gloriose attioni, et santa vita di Papa Gregorio XIII* (Rome, 1591). Enlarged from a four-panel Namban byōbu (folding screen), polychrome and gold leaf on paper, 168.0 × 226.4 cm. Kobe City Museum, Kobe, Japan. Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).



Figure 8. Emperor and Kings on Horseback (detail), sixteenth/seventeenth century. Detail of a metal corner-fitting depicting an engraved scene derived from Antonio Ciappi, *Compendio delle heroiche et gloriose attioni, et santa vita di Papa Gregorio XIII* (Rome, 1591). Enlarged from a four-panel Namban byōbu (folding screen), polychrome and gold leaf on paper, 168.0 × 226.4 cm. Kobe City Museum, Kobe, Japan. Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

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‘Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan’: What is the role that Canton enamelled porcelain (Guangcai) played in the Hong Kong trading environment in the 1950s-60s?, Wing Tak (Vivian) Pang

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Chinoiserie and Canton
Enamelled Porcelain

KEYWORDS

Spoon, Cold War, Hong
Kong, Embargo, Chinoiserie,
Guangcai, Canton Enamelled
Porcelain

This essay focuses on the Canton enamelled porcelain (Guangcai) spoon in the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum. The spoon was identified as part of the continuing history of Chinese export porcelain, as well as being a rare example in Britain, as they were exported mainly to the US, particularly due to the US trade embargo on China during the Cold War. The underside marks of the spoon, including “Y.T. Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan”, provide a material entry point into these geopolitical pressures, revealing how questions of origin, manufacture, and value were negotiated through labelling practices. Guangcai continued to be relevant in the twentieth century despite no longer enjoying the same level of consumption as it did in the eighteenth century. The spoon is a highly idealised object representing chinoiserie from eighteenth-century Britain to twentieth-century America. The spoon links China, America, and Britain through the intersecting histories of trade regulation, museum collecting, and elite taste.

By adopting a material culture approach, this paper analyses Guangcai not as a passive commodity but as an object embedded within complex geopolitical and cultural systems. Drawing on thing theory, the paper further reframes Guangcai as a ‘thing’ that reveals the otherwise obscured conditions of its making, including fragmented authorship, distributed labour, and shifting notions of origin.

The case study of the Guangcai spoon explores how Guangcai production in the Cold War complicated national design narratives, and its reception in Western markets reflects layered forms of nostalgia and chinoiserie.

By foregrounding the intersection of materiality, trade networks, and aesthetic reception, this paper argues that Guangcai challenges conventional, nation-based frameworks in design history, highlighting a model of transnational and relational design shaped by geopolitical forces.

¹ Victoria & Albert Museum, Registered File, Acquisition Proposal, 2

1 Introduction

Upon entering the V&A Museum, make your way to the fourth floor. There, in Room 137, the Curtain Foundation Gallery, a glass cabinet stretches towards the ceiling. On the second shelf, there is a fairly unassuming object: a spoon (Figure 1). Opening the archive¹ of this spoon reveals it is painted enamel on porcelain. The spoon dates from the 1950s–60s. Its porcelain body was made in Japan, while the enamel decoration was applied at Yuet Tung China Works, Hong Kong. The V&A acquired and catalogued it as part of the ‘Japan’ collection; however, the object’s production is better understood as transnational, with Hong Kong as the principal centre of decoration and identity-making.

From the 1950s to the 1960s, during the Cold War period, and because of the Korean War, the US Government applied an embargo on Hong Kong to prevent China from obtaining ‘strategic materials’ or ‘strategic resources’ through the territory. No products from China or even raw materials could be traded with the US. Therefore, when applying for the Certificate of Origin, Yuet Tung China Works changed to importing porcelain bodies from Japan, and the stamp on the spoon changed as well.

The V&A’s acquisition file provides the rationale for collecting this spoon. In the ‘Significance to the collection’ section, curator Luk Yu Ping records that she bought it from Yuet Tung China Works on 18 October 2016 during a study trip, and she explains its relevance to the continuation of Guangcai in the 20th century:

The V&A does not have any examples of Yuet Tung China Works porcelain or painted enamels on porcelain from Hong Kong. These examples help to tell the story of the continuation of Guangcai in the 20th century after production in mainland China was badly affected by the Sino-Japanese War and subsequent instability. Although the painted porcelain industry was suspended in Hong Kong during the

Japanese Occupation in 1941 to 1945, it was able to recover and resume production, eventually replacing Guangzhou as the centre of Guangcai production. Wares were exported to Europe, United States and Southeast Asia.

This archive demonstrates the importance of filling the gap in the history of Chinese export porcelain, which was complicated by the Cold War. It also reveals the importance of Hong Kong becoming a global strategic production site. We can even interpret that this was a pivotal moment for the V&A to take a strong cultural interest in Hong Kong as a British territory and political ally, as the museum had no independent section and classification for Hong Kong until then.

1.1 Research Objectives

The acquisition information prompted the research question to investigate the role of this particular Guangcai spoon, which was ‘Decorated in Hong Kong’ and ‘Made in Japan’ in the 1950s–60s. The paper examines Guangcai in relation to Cold War trade networks, positioning it within the broader context of Chinese export porcelain. The research addresses a gap in scholarship in which Guangcai has often been subsumed under the broader category of Chinese export porcelain rather than analysed as a distinct and evolving practice across the eighteenth century to the present. In addition, the essay considers the social meanings and aesthetic reception of such wares in Western society in the twentieth century, an area that remains comparatively understudied.

Methodologically, this study adopts a material culture approach, analysing Guangcai not merely as a traded commodity but as an object embedded within geopolitical, economic, and cultural systems. Informed by Bill Brown’s *thing theory*,² the paper further considers how Guangcai operates as a ‘thing’ that reveals the fragmented conditions of its production and circulation.

Figure 1. Spoon, Yuet Tung China Works, Hong Kong, 1950–1960. Source: V&A Museum, Accession number: FE.5-2017 (<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1377000/spoon/>)



In doing so, the paper argues that Guangcai functioned as a designed cultural mediator shaped by Cold War constraints, in which authorship, origin, and aesthetic identity became distributed and unstable. The label ‘Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan’ exemplifies this fragmentation, challenging conventional nation-based narratives in design history. At the same time, the paper suggests that Guangcai became a vehicle for layered forms of nostalgia among twentieth-century American consumers, reflecting both an imagined Chinese aesthetic and a deeper, self-directed longing for stability in a period of geopolitical uncertainty.

1.2 Clarification of Terminology

The spoon is decorated in the Guangcai style. Multiple terms exist to describe this category of porcelain, each emphasising a different aspect: ‘Canton enamelled porcelain’ highlights the coloured enamels; ‘Chinese export porcelain’ foregrounds its role in international trade; ‘Canton famille rose porcelain’ focuses on the overglaze palette; while ‘Guangcai’ is the Chinese term commonly used today.

The word *Guangcai* is interchangeable with Guangzhou caihui ci 廣州彩繪瓷 (Canton painted porcelain) and Guangzhou zhijin caici 廣州織金彩瓷 (Canton woven-gold enamelled porcelain), the latter referencing its characteristic application of golden glaze. In contemporary scholarship and Chinese-language writing, *Guangcai* has become the prevailing term for porcelain decorated in Canton during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This essay follows that convention and uses *Guangcai* interchangeably with Canton enamelled porcelain.

1.3 Guangcai Historical Background

Guangcai has a history of about 300 years and is famous for its fine brushwork, extensive themes and rich colours. Guangzhou was an important foreign trade port during the Qing dynasty, and Guangcai was one of the most popular export commodities. Initially, merchants ordered porcelain products directly from Jingdezhen. Later, to reduce transport costs, they purchased white porcelain bodies from Jingdezhen and employed local painters to draw the designs according to customers’ orders. In 1757, the Qing

² Bill Brown, ‘*Thing Theory*’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001).

³ Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage, <https://www.hkicdb.gov.hk/en/item.html?92c2da29-ba8c-442b-83ec-148f6c2f2464>

⁴ Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre, *Regular Display*, Sam Tung Uk Museum, Hong Kong.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “【紫荆專稿】從『廣彩』到『港彩』的四代傳承路,” *Bauhinia Magazine*, 3 June 2024, https://bau.com.hk/article/2024-06/03/content_1247220913931603968.html

⁷ *Hai shang ci lu: Yue Gang Ao wen wu da zhan = Maritime Porcelain Road 海上瓷路：粵港澳文物大展: Relics from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao Museums* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing House 嶺南美術出版社, 2012), 17.

⁸ Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre, *Regular Display*, Sam Tung Uk Museum, Hong Kong.

⁹ Zhao Guoyuan 趙國垣, Zhao Guoyuan Guangcai lungao 《趙國垣廣彩論稿》 (Guangzhou: Linnan Meishu Chubanshe 嶺南美術出版社, 2008), 186.

Government ruled that Guangdong should be the only export trade port, and it remained so until the Treaty of Nanjing on 29 August 1842. In the late Qing dynasty, Guangcai established its style, not only with specific patterns but also with richer colours and picture compositions. However, due to the turbulent political situation in the early twentieth century, Cantonese manufacturers and painters moved to Hong Kong to continue operating their Guangcai businesses.

Guangcai was recently added to the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong, Traditional Craftsmanship, no.5.55. The details can be found on the Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage database.³

2 Materiality

The spoon is made of porcelain and decorated with Canton enamelled decoration, categorised as overglaze porcelain (釉上彩), in which coloured paintings are added onto a glazed white porcelain body for further refining to make the brightness of the colour long-lasting.⁴ The spoon is five and a quarter inches long and was probably used for serving rather than eating.

2.1 Yuet Tung China Works and the Export Porcelain Industry in Hong Kong

According to the information provided by the V&A archive, the spoon was produced by a porcelain factory called Yuet Tung China Works, the first and last remaining porcelain factory operating in Hong Kong.

In 1928, Yuet Tung China Works started their porcelain business, and today, their painted porcelain tableware targets some high-end restaurants and hotels in Hong Kong to serve their guests, presenting a feast of visual art. Customised painted porcelain is ordered by private companies and organisations as souvenirs for their clients.⁵

The enamel porcelain industry was large in Hong Kong in the mid-

twentieth century. According to a magazine interview,⁶ the director, Mr Tso, recalled that the factory had approximately 300 employees and that worker accommodation was built around the site, including a dormitory. He further noted that, after marriage, workers often established informal dwellings using timber and corrugated iron adjacent to the dormitory (Figure 3).

2.2 Guangcai-Making Technique

Guangcai uses a white porcelain body. Porcelain is usually fired at temperatures of around 1200°C or above.⁷ The glaze is made by grinding metal oxide colourants. The porcelain body is then fired in an electric kiln at approximately 780–820°C. After firing, the paste-like pigments transform into a glossy, glass-like finish that covers the outlined design, making it durable and long-lasting.

2.3 Guangcai Painting Tools and Craft Process Step by Step

When visiting the Sam Tung Uk Museum, there is a room that introduces Guangcai and displays 11 hand tools⁸ for its production.

In addition, my research identified seven stages⁹ in the Guangcai



Figure 2. Spoon, Yuet Tung China Works, Hong Kong, 1950–1960. Source: V&A Museum, Accession number: FE.5-2017 (<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1377000/spoon/>)

production process. Before the formal painting begins, artisans sketch the design in an iron-oxide red pigment to establish the outlines on the porcelain body, a step known as da side (打箍). The red outlining helps separate different sections of the design.

The traditional Chinese aesthetic principle of balancing ‘solid’ and ‘void’ must be achieved, and proportions should be appropriate. The arrangement follows a bottom-to-top linear progression, showcasing an elegant, ornate, and orderly presentation.¹⁰

The centre of the spoon mainly portrays a rose pattern. Rose flowers in Cantonese porcelain are similar to the translucent and vibrant style of Western watercolour painting, a technique known in the industry as Tat hua tou (撻花頭) – using Chinese brush techniques to paint Western-style roses, with distinct layers of colour and a balanced interplay of light and shadow. The other technique is called Moguhua (沒骨法), which is an especially expressive method that lies between freehand and meticulous brushwork. It can present both tangible and intangible colour blocks and textures, with highly spontaneous traces, making the artwork livelier. This subtle and reserved technique causes the outlines of objects to appear

as if they are both present and elusive.¹¹

2.4 Guangcai Colour¹²

Chinese enamel porcelain originated from five-colour ware, which employed a range of overglaze enamel colours. Over time, the colours evolved into thicker, more vivid hues and subcategories such as famille rose and enamel colours. The pigments used in Guangdong-painted porcelain are derived from minerals, with skilled artisans grinding the raw materials into powder to create colours.

2.5 The Pattern on the Spoon

There are many descriptions of Canton enamelled porcelain motifs, such as Rose Medallion, Famille Rose, Rose Canton, and Canton Rose. British and US writers have repeatedly used these terms interchangeably to describe the porcelain that prevailed in the nineteenth century.

Although similar in wording, ‘Rose Canton’ and ‘Canton Rose’ differ in meaning. In the middle of the spoon is a rose pattern, which is common in this type of Guangcai. The design combines an early seventeenth-century pattern with commonly used Western patterns by foreign merchants, which incorporated

¹⁰ Lam, *The Golden Age of Canton Porcelain*, 40.

¹¹ Ibid, 66.

¹² Ibid, 38.

¹³ Ibid, 19.



Figure 3. Yuet Tung China Works in Tai Wo Ping, taken in 1958. Source: SUN Museum, Legend of Hong Kong Ware: Yuet Tung China Works

¹⁴ Lam, *The Golden Age of Canton Porcelain*, 20.

¹⁵ Bill Brown, *Thing Theory*.

¹⁶ *Ming Pao* 明報, Supplement, 17 November 2024.

¹⁷ Chen Xin 陳昕 and Guo Zhikun 郭志坤, *Xianggang Quan Jilu* 香港全記錄, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House 上海人民出版社, 1997), 286–87.

¹⁸ Wang Yonghua 王永華, “Boyiyu Zhuoheng: Xianggang Jinyun Lishi de Jiedu 博奕與制衡：香港禁運歷史的解讀,” *Ershiyi Shiji* 《二十一世紀》 Online Edition, no. 51 (30 June 2006), <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/media/online/0601066.pdf>.

¹⁹ Sir Alexander Grantham, *Via Port: From Hong Kong to Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1965), 165.

²⁰ Shiji shanbian: Shijiu shiji yilai de Sheng Gang Ao Guangcai 世紀嬗變——十九世紀以來的省港澳廣彩(Guangzhou: Guangdong Folk Art Museum, 2008).

²¹ Hong Kong. Department of Commerce and Industry, *Annual Departmental Report, 1952–1953* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1953).

Cantonese landscapes in a kind of chinoiserie decorative design.¹³ One reason for designing this Canton Rose pattern is described in the book by Lam Duen Shan Ming.¹⁴ Porcelain ‘Canton Rose’ were prefabrications but differed through customisation. During seasons without custom orders, the workshops could still sustain production, making it a business strategy. Hence, many Guangcai in that period were produced with the Canton Rose pattern as a kind of mass production.

The persistence of Guangcai motifs, despite shifts in time and place, suggests more than continuity in visual tradition. Rather than indicating stability alone, this repetition points to a system in which certain aesthetic forms were maintained in response to external expectations and constraints. From a material perspective, the consistency of these patterns reflects not only craft practice but also the conditions that enabled their sustained reproduction across different contexts. According to thing theory,¹⁵ this repetition reveals underlying structures that extend beyond the object itself. Understanding these conditions requires situating Guangcai within its wider historical context, particularly the geopolitical shifts of the Cold War period.

3 Cold War Embargo in Hong Kong

On the bottom of the spoon is a label that reads, ‘Y.T. Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan’.

‘Decorated in Hong Kong’ means the overglaze colouring was applied in Hong Kong, and ‘Made in Japan’ means the porcelain body was purchased from Nagoya, Honshu, Japan.¹⁶

The bottom mark on the spoon challenges the conventional idea of a singular national origin in design, suggesting that design authorship in the Cold War was fragmented and transnational. Rather than representing a coherent origin, Guangcai emerged as a transnational

product shaped by shifting political and economic constraints.

Post World War II, after imperial colonial power faded, US–Soviet competition began. Between 1950 and 1953, a war broke out between North and South Korea. The Soviets and the US provided military support to North and South Korea, respectively. Following the civil war in China, the new government, the People’s Republic of China, stood with the Soviets as they supported communism.

In 1951, the US imposed an embargo on China, requiring products imported into the US to be marked as not containing raw materials from China. This embargo lasted until 1972, when the US president visited China, leading to the normalisation of relations and the lifting of the embargo.

Hong Kong was a British territory during this period, but after the outbreak of the Korean War, the US embargo also impacted Hong Kong’s re-export trade and its status as a transshipment port,¹⁷ cutting off Hong Kong’s economic life.

Statistical data show that, in 1952, Hong Kong’s exports of locally produced goods reached 667 million Hong Kong dollars, accounting for only 23% of the total export value, indicating that its status as a transshipment port was beginning to falter. The embargo dealt significant blows to various sectors in Hong Kong, including construction, real estate, weaving, transport, hardware, warehousing, banking, rubber, and trading houses,¹⁸ indicating the seriousness of the US embargo.¹⁹

To solve the export problem, the US Government and the Hong Kong Colonial Government reached an agreement that businesses needed to obtain a Certificate of Origin, which was a permit issued by the Commerce and Industry Department for all imports and exports.

Initially, it was not that easy to apply for the certificate.²⁰ In 1953, only eight types of products could be exported under the certificate, and porcelain

Figure 4. Coffee cup from Ah Chow Factory. Image taken by the author.



was not included.²¹ In March 1954, however, the list expanded to 49 types of products, which included Japanese porcelain decorated in Hong Kong.²² The fee for the Certificate of Origin was HK\$25,²³ and approximately 12,000 of these certificates were issued each month.²⁴

Therefore, porcelain decorated at Yuet Tung China Works for the US market had to carry a label ‘Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan’. This practice was not unique to Yuet Tung China Works. A.C.F. Ah Chow also stamped the same wording on its wares (Figure 4).

This situation suggests that design in the Cold War cannot be understood through stable categories of origin or style but must instead be read as the outcome of ongoing negotiations between geopolitical forces, regulatory frameworks, and market expectations.

As a result, in the mid-twentieth century, Hong Kong went from a trading port to a production industry. According to the report titled

EXTRACT from ‘THE HARDWARE TRADE JOURNAL’ of 30 January 1959:²⁵ ‘The position of British manufacturers is quite clear, we have lost to Hong Kong export markets that in 1951–52 were worth over £2.5 million.’

3.1 The Spoon as a Cultural Signifier

Following the report in 1970, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulated that lead release in ceramic ware intended for food use could not exceed seven parts per million. This ruling affected the Hong Kong porcelain trade, since Guangcai dinnerware was mainly exported to the US. Hong Kong exporters had to undergo complicated procedures and pay expensive fees to obtain certification that their products complied with the FDA’s standard.²⁶

Such measures did not merely affect material composition but also influenced the circulation and

²² Federal Register 1954a, 386; Federal Register 1954b, 1188; Hong Kong Department of Commerce and Industry 1954, 10–12; 1958a, 179–83.

²³ Commerce Hong Kong Industry Finance Directory 1958, 88.

²⁴ HONG KONG LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL 331 OFFICIAL REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS Meeting of 5th September, 1956.

²⁵ EXTRACT from “THE HARDWARE TRADE JOURNAL” - 30 January 1959. HONG KONG STATEMENT, The National Archives, Kew.

²⁶ SUN Museum, Legend of Hong Kong Ware: Yuet Tung China Works

²⁷ Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and critical ornament in eighteenth-century Britain*, 80.

²⁸ Ibid, 62.

²⁹ Robert A. Leath, “*After the Chinese Taste*”: *Chinese Export Porcelain and chinoiserie Design in Eighteenth Century Charleston, Historical Archaeology*, 1999, Vol. 33, No. 3, *Charleston in the Context of Trans-Atlantic Culture* (1999), 59.

³⁰ Ibid, 49.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 50.

³³ Ibid, 58.

³⁴ GAO, Yang, ‘*Canton Enameled Porcelain for the East Coast of the United States of America, from 1780s to 1900s*.’

reception of Guangcai in Western markets. The spoon became an art piece for appreciation, as with historical chinoiseries, similar to how decoration and functionality were inspired by ideas from eighteenth-century Europe, and the cultural signifier of the spoon became more important.

The following section explains Guangcai as a cultural signifier through patterns of consumption and explores how it acquired renewed significance within the Cold War context.

4 Consumption Shifting from the UK to the US

Building on the Cold War trade restrictions discussed earlier, the following questions are considered: To what extent was the US market indispensable for Hong Kong? Could Hong Kong shift its main trade partner to the UK, given that it was a UK colonial territory, and simply ignore the embargo? To answer these questions, this section explores chinoiserie in the US in the twentieth century as a key factor for creating a new market for Canton enamel porcelains.

4.1 The US Emulated British Eighteenth-Century Chinoiserie

Before discussing America, we must first examine how chinoiserie emerged in the UK.

4.1.1 Starting from the UK

In the eighteenth century, Britain’s non-aristocratic merchants used Chinese-taste objects to affirm their identity and showcase their refined sensibilities. Oriental objects and styles suited the aspirations of Britain’s merchant class, symbolising both commercial wealth and participation in polite culture.²⁷ Eighteenth-century Britain was a highly materialistic culture, in which fascination with consumer goods and material possessions became closely tied to social status and identity.

The proper acquisition, display, and use of commodities had a complex range of moral meanings that had real implications for one’s social life.²⁸

China’s image in the eighteenth century was that of an invincible trading power. In eighteenth-century Britain, objects acquired through imperial trade were frequently used as indicators of taste and politeness.

4.1.2 Shifting to the US Market

During the eighteenth century, individuals in the US often regarded themselves as an extension of Britain, and this perception profoundly shaped their cultural and aesthetic values. The influence of British chinoiserie, a trend emblematic of refinement and sophistication, significantly impacted US elites,²⁹ who emulated this British vogue, particularly in their pursuit of taste and social distinction.³⁰

In Charleston, South Carolina, the elites considered themselves a stylish ‘suburb’ of London, so much so that South Carolina governor John Drayton wrote that they ‘sought in every possible way to emulate the life of London society’ and ‘were too much enamoured of British customs, manners and education to imagine that elsewhere anything of advantage could be obtained.’³¹

Chinese export porcelain was one of the most common ceramics in the Charleston area, constituting as much as 24% of the overall ceramic assemblage at many archaeological sites.³² Charleston’s eighteenth-century aristocrats exemplify what we today might call ‘trickle down’ decorative arts, the process of colonials emulating the fashion trends that start at the top of society in their mother country.³³

In 1784, American merchants were able to import porcelain directly from China instead of through the British and Dutch East India Companies.³⁴ In 1785, the *Empress of China* became the first American ship to arrive in Canton. Before the American Revolution (1765–1783), Canton

enamelled porcelain, as well as other kinds of Chinese export porcelain, were expensive and luxurious for Anglo-Americans, since before direct shipping British law had declared that all Chinese commodities destined for the colonies should be carried by British ships.

As a result of the emulated culture and direct shipping, the number of Chinese export porcelains in the American market increased significantly.³⁵ In the 1830s, Americans became the predominant consumers of Chinese export porcelain.³⁶

4.2 The Vogue Revival in the US and the UK in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, xenophobic European, North American, and Australian responses to fears over Chinese immigration led to the rhetoric of the ‘Yellow Peril’.³⁷ In fact, after the mid-nineteenth century and the wars fought over the right of the Western powers to trade in China, China’s standing in the West slipped from a seemingly invincible trading power to a society in decline with a vanquished, semi-colonial status.³⁸

Although China’s image no longer carried the same sense of dominance and inscrutability, this did not deter US collectors from acquiring Canton enamel porcelain in the twentieth century.

Chinese design was seen as a stylistic legacy of the eighteenth century, so twentieth-century chinoiserie was greatly reminiscent of the supposed grace and elegance of British eighteenth-century aristocratic living.³⁹

However, in the twentieth century, Britain faced a wave of decolonisation, losing one colony after another. This loss made the British nostalgic for the era of imperial dominance. America in the eighteenth century emulated the home interiors of the British; however, British and US taste regarding Chinese collectables had diverged significantly by the twentieth century.

The British favoured antiques

associated with China’s imperial heritage, such as blue-and-white porcelain, Song dynasty jade, and Ming and Qing dynasty relics. In contrast, the Cold War era brought a transformative shift for the US, from isolationism to internationalism, sparking a revival of interest in eighteenth-century chinoiserie objects.

Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 explore how the shifting global roles of Britain and the US led to cultural changes, culminating in the importance of Hong Kong’s embargoed Canton enamel porcelain exports to the US market during the Cold War. The following question is addressed: Why was the US market indispensable for Hong Kong?

4.2.1 British Nostalgia in Chinoiseries

Twentieth-century collector and connoisseur culture in Britain differed from that in the US. In some of Britain’s great porcelain exhibitions, such as the International Exhibition of Chinese Art, 28 November 1935 to 7 March 1936⁴⁰ and the Oriental Ceramic Society in Britain, Guangcai was not a primary focus. British taste tended to privilege blue-and-white wares and objects framed through an ‘imperial’ narrative. Even Liberty’s Oriental Department promoted Chinese porcelain by emphasising ‘imperial’ associations rather than enamels such as Guangcai.⁴¹

The Chinese porcelains that Liberty sold evoked late-seventeenth and early eighteenth-century British fascination with Chinese ceramics – a fascination apparently uncomplicated by issues of empire, so that the vases, plates, bowls, and figurines available in reproduction could be seen as a nostalgia for more ‘innocent’ past British relationships with the exotic.⁴² Examining the preferences of 12 British collectors in the twentieth century, such as Sir Peter Moores (1932–2016), Sir Joseph Hotung (1930–2021), and Brian McElney OBE, reveals a preference for antiques

³⁵ GAO, Yang, ‘*Canton Enameled Porcelain for the East Coast of the United States of America, from 1780s to 1900s*.’

³⁶ Howard and Ayers, *China for the West*, 485.

³⁷ Sarah Cheang, *What’s in a Chinese Room? 20th Century Chinoiserie, Modernity and Femininity*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ International Exhibition of Chinese Art, 28 November 1935 to 7 March 1936, catalogue, Royal Academy of Art.

⁴¹ Liberty’s Catalogue of Chinese porcelain. Liberty & Co., Bric a Brac (Liberty, c. 1983). With kind permission of Liberty ple and City of Westminster Archives Centre.

⁴² Sarah Cheang, *Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store, Journal of Design History*, Spring, 2007, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 2007), 1–16.

⁴³ Sarah Cheang, *Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store*, *Journal of Design History*, Spring, 2007, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 2007), 1-16.

⁴⁴ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.

associated with historical narratives and imperial figures, particularly Chinese emperors. Therefore, I speculate that the British tended to seek Oriental objects associated with their own past imperialism.

Before the twentieth century, British chinoiseries maintained pre-colonial relationships with China, viewed as a more romantic, less troubling world.

An interesting double nostalgia can also be associated with the selling of Chinese things in twentieth-century Britain: nostalgia for the eighteenth-century European Chinamania and nostalgia for the old China of mandarins and pagodas that seemed to be fast receding before an inexorable tide of Westernisation.⁴³

Therefore, purchasing Oriental products in the twentieth century was a form of nostalgia for British collectors, with the types of objects sought being related to imperial China.

4.2.2 America Nostalgia
in Chinoiseries

In America, the golden age of Guangcai was from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. People still purchased and collected Guangcai in the twentieth century as its exotic associations became intertwined with nostalgic ideas about the past. Guangcai functioned as a material prompt for feelings of loss, but what specifically was imagined as being lost, and for whom?

After World War II, the Cold War made the US expand its military presence in Asia to counter the communist forces led by the Soviet Union. In addition to deploying troops in various Asian regions, the US strengthened its economic control by pouring billions of dollars into foreign aid, exporting American goods, importing Asia's raw materials, and encouraging private corporate expansion.⁴⁴ Asian regions that had been Westernised due to colonialism experienced yet more cultural erosion as their traditions faded once

again under the influence of the US economy and its cultural exports. This contributed to a sense of cultural loss among American collectors and consumers.

This intense fear of loss fuelled an almost obsessive public discourse that centred on securing the allegiance of decolonising nations and binding them to the US. Tension between the desire to integrate Asia and the fear of losing Asia permeated American thinking in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁵

Another trigger point was the Korean War, and the US's involvement accelerated the development of a nationwide sense of nostalgia.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Washington rushed in thousands of troops to contain what it saw as a Soviet-backed invasion of South Korea. In subsequent years, the US dispatched military advisers to and launched nation-building projects in South Vietnam, exploded atomic bombs on the Bikini atoll, and sent the Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan from Chinese attack. The US constructed a network of military bases in the Philippines, Okinawa, and South Korea, and a web of political treaties allied the US with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaya, and Pakistan.⁴⁶ As military forces entered these Asian regions, the number of Westernised areas in Asia has gradually increased.

Cold War-era US underwent a rapid transformation, shifting from isolationism to internationalism within roughly a decade. How did Americans who had grown up under the isolationist era adapt to such a sudden and drastic change? The US believed that its citizens needed to be educated with an international perspective.

Francis Wilcox, a mid-level US State Department official, delivered a speech to an audience of educators in Philadelphia that recast the problem of foreign resistance to US expansion into an issue of domestic pedagogy.

The US public needed to be schooled in internationalism: it

needed to be persuaded to accept the nation's sustained engagement in world affairs, its participation in international organisations, and its long-range cooperation with other governments.⁴⁷

Wilcox impressed upon his listeners that the US–Soviet competition over developing nations was creating an educational crisis among Americans, most of whom had been educated in what he called the pre-Pearl Harbour 'isolationist era' and thus did not fully comprehend the importance of these new nations. He urged his audience of educators to help train the next generation of Americans for their 'new role' of world leadership by teaching them about countries such as Indonesia, whose strategic location and vast natural resources made it valuable to both the Soviets and the US.⁴⁸

However, not every American felt comfortable with this new role, which created a sense of psychological discomfort and pressure.

Echoing Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, Schlesinger argued that industrial modernisation had destroyed traditional social orders based on organic communities and personal ties and replaced them with fragmented social orders, characterised by 'frustration', 'isolation', and 'anxiety', in which individual responsibility had become overwhelming and freedom a 'burden'.⁴⁹

It is undeniable that the US expansion in Asia established its position as a global leader. However, this also brought about profound societal and cultural transformations. As a result, the twentieth century witnessed a revival trend that sought to rekindle the chinoiserie of eighteenth-century America. This period evoked nostalgia for a simpler, more peaceful world, in which the relationship with China and Asia was merely transactional—centred on buying and selling. For the American elite, it was simply enough to emulate the refined tastes of British aristocracy.

4.3 The Cold War Embargo
Became a Booster of
Guangcai Consumption

During the Cold War, the US's global role shifted, fostering a wave of nostalgia among its domestic population. Section 3.1 noted that during the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, the US could trade directly with China, coinciding with the peak of Canton porcelain production. Canton porcelain was more often exported to the US than to Europe. By the twentieth century, Americans were nostalgic for eighteenth-century America, so they sought Chinese-made goods that symbolised that era, and Canton porcelain became a prime example.

In this context, Guangcai was not just a collection of elegant tableware and decorations but a representation of the lifestyle of the eighteenth-century American elite. As mentioned in Section 4.2.1, the concept of 'double nostalgia' in chinoiserie described Britain's twentieth-century yearning for both exoticism and eighteenth-century Britain itself. By comparison, the US nostalgia might be described as 'triple nostalgia', adding a layer of sentimentality for its own eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trade relations with China. Guangcai also functioned as a means of connecting consumers to an imagined past, evoking nostalgia for periods perceived as more stable, ordered, or refined through its collection. In this context, Guangcai offered a form of respite from modern change. The porcelain's recurring decorative motifs and visual continuity suggested a world imagined as enduring and culturally coherent, even if such stability was itself constructed through consumer desire.

More important is that when something is about to be lost, attachment to it can intensify. This dynamic resonates with the 'scarcity principle' in consumer research, in which limited availability tends to increase perceived value and urgency. Similarly, when the embargo was

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory,' Critical Inquiry, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001).

implemented on Hong Kong, it not only cut off the remaining porcelain trading channels but also reshaped the effective economy around Chinese-style porcelain, helping to amplify nostalgic sentiment among collectors.

Cold War trade restrictions intensified this dynamic, reinforcing Guangcai's role as both a material object and a nostalgic commodity. In terms of aesthetic reception, the design authorship in this context extends beyond makers to include systems of trade, geopolitical constraints, and consumer taste, all of which shape the final design outcome.

Following 'thing theory',⁵⁰ the spoon transitions from an 'object' to a 'thing' when its functional meaning recedes, and its material presence signifies elements beyond usage. In this context, the spoon becomes a carrier of layered cultural projections. The design is reinterpreted not through utility but through the spoon's capacity to mediate memory, identity, and emotional experience.

5 Conclusion

This essay focused on the Canton enamelled porcelain (Guangcai) spoon in the V&A collection, interpreting it as part of the continuing history of Chinese export porcelain and represents a rare example in Britain, as this spoon type was exported mainly to the US, particularly following the US trade embargo on China during the Cold War.

Through the fragmentation of production across multiple sites, Guangcai challenged stable notions of authorship, origin, and national identity. The label 'Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan' encapsulates a transnational form of design in which making, finishing, and circulation were distributed across political and economic boundaries. During the Cold War, Hong Kong enabled Guangcai export production to continue when established systems were disrupted.

Although Guangcai no longer commanded the levels of demand

it enjoyed in the eighteenth century, it retained a distinctive twentieth-century afterlife by changing its circuits of production, trade, and collecting. In the US, these wares acquired renewed value through nostalgia, elite taste, and evolving forms of chinoiserie, offering consumers a sense of continuity amid geopolitical uncertainty.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest Guangcai should not be understood solely as a product of trade but as a 'thing' that reveals the conditions of its own making and circulation. Through production fragmentation, transnational movement, and aesthetic reception, the spoon exposes the instability of authorship, origin, and meaning in Cold War design. This view challenges conventional design history frameworks that rely on fixed national categories and indicates a more distributed and relational understanding of design as shaped by geopolitical forces.

In this sense, the Guangcai spoon not only preserves the intertwined histories of China, Hong Kong, Britain, and the US but also illustrates how objects can move from utility to historical witness, from chinoiserie to nostalgia, and from object to thing.

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Dismembered Forms: The Japanese Grotesque in Christopher Dresser’s Linthorpe Pottery Earthenware, Alice Ji-Won Kim

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Nineteenth-Century Industrial Design / Decolonising Nineteenth-Century Design Reform.

KEYWORDS

Christopher Dresser, Linthorpe Art Pottery, Japan, Japonisme, Grotesque, 1870s

Christopher Dresser’s (1834–1904) engagement with Japanese visual culture through his Linthorpe Art Pottery designs (1878–1890) is overdue for reinterpretation. This study focuses on two closely related ceramic objects: a figural ashtray (British Museum) and a sake bottle (private collection), both depicting East Asian male heads, likely referencing the Buddhist monk-poet Saigyō. These objects uniquely share the same colour gradients. While Dresser is typically associated with elegant, minimalist forms that reflect Victorian ideals of refined *Japonisme*, this study addresses a neglected dimension of his practice: his engagement with Japanese grotesque traditions rooted in Buddhist and folkloric imagery.

This research draws on previously unpublished archival material, specifically a collection of 145 painted ceramic motifs accompanying a manuscript by J.S. Waite at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum, acquired from Mary Dresser in 1905. In addition to Dresser’s travel notebooks and institutional records, the paper situates these designs within visual traditions such as the *kusōzu* (corporeal decomposition) tradition, *setsurwa* narratives, and *yōkai* iconography. Through close visual and material analysis, the study shows how Dresser translated these themes into ambiguous, tactile forms that invite ritualised interaction and sensory discomfort.

The paper further argues that Victorian audiences, lacking a shared symbolic framework, misread or distorted these spiritual *grotesqueries*, flattening their Japanese specificity and, in later reproductions, exaggerating the grotesque through racialised or Westernised features. By reframing these objects through the lens of Japanese spiritual aesthetics, the paper contributes to a more inclusive and critically attuned design historiography—one that recognises hybridity, spiritual translation, and the layered ambiguities embedded in nineteenth-century cross-cultural design.

¹ Bonhams, “Julius Hummel.”

² Bing and Koch. *Artistic America*, 3.

³ Ono, “Japonisme.”

⁴ Durant, *Christopher Dresser*, 33–34.

⁵ Watanabe, *High Victorian*, 15–19.

⁶ Traphagan, *Japanese Demon*.

⁷ Ashmore, Sonia. “Liberty’s Orient”

⁸ Hunt, “Documentation,” 641.

⁹ Jones, “England and Japan,” 150.

Introduction

Christopher Dresser (1834–1904) was a prominent British industrial designer and theorist of the nineteenth century. A graduate of the Government School of Design and one of the first Europeans to lecture on design in Japan, Dresser developed a philosophy grounded in stylised nature, geometric abstraction, and functional clarity, positioning himself against the revivalist, over-ornamented aesthetics of his Victorian contemporaries.¹ He was also among the earliest designers of the Aesthetic Movement to incorporate Orientalist elements, and his innovations helped shape the period’s appetite for exotic ornament.² Significantly, he was among the first Western designers to travel to Japan, spending four months there from 1876 to 1877, a journey that cemented his status as a key conduit of *Japonisme*.³ His encounter with Japanese art and material culture left a lasting impact on his practice, spanning ceramics, metalwork, textiles, and furniture, and this is most fully evident in his designs for Linthorpe Art Pottery, where he served as art superintendent from 1879 to 1882.⁴

In prevailing scholarship, Dresser’s Japanese-influenced works are typically aligned with the rationalisation of ornament and stylised exoticism comfortably suited to Victorian tastes for the decorative and elegant.⁵ However, this essay proposes that Dresser’s engagement with Japanese aesthetics may have extended beyond these familiar tropes by considering the possibility that he was also exposed to the country’s longstanding grotesque traditions, which encompassed religious, anatomical, and supernatural visual forms concerned with decay, dismemberment, and spiritual transformation. Particular attention is paid to his work at Linthorpe Art Pottery, where objects such as the Linthorpe Ashtray (Fig.1) and the Sake Bottle (Fig.2) feature the head of an East Asian male. Drawing on *setsurwa* tales, *kusōzu* handscrolls, and

yōkai folklore, the analysis reads these vessels as engagements with bodily fragmentation, impermanence, and the uncanny.⁶ Rather than asserting direct appropriation, this essay argues that Dresser may have absorbed aspects of this imagery—either through travel or through institutional and private collections—and translated it into a material language that remains deliberately ambiguous and interpretively open. His *Japonisme*, in this light, reveals a more layered and complex engagement than the prevailing narrative of elegance and restraint allows.

Through close visual and material analysis, the essay unfolds in three parts: first, by contextualising the grotesque within Japanese art and British *Japonisme* and outlining Dresser’s potential encounters with such material; second, by analysing key Linthorpe examples; and third, by examining their reception and historiographic legacy. In doing so, the paper complicates established readings of Japonisme, positioning Dresser not merely as a transmitter of elegance but as a designer who engaged—however discreetly—with visual systems of Japanese grotesque.

Dresser’s Exposure to Japonisme and the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Japonisme in nineteenth-century Britain was both an aesthetic and commercial phenomenon, shaping visual culture across architecture, the decorative arts, and print media.⁷ Fuelled by new trade routes and diplomatic missions following the 1854 Convention of Kanagawa, Japanese art entered British collections in unprecedented volume.⁸ The Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace and, more substantively, the International Exhibition of 1862 gave the broad public a taste of Japanese delights for the first time.⁹ Characterised by asymmetry, simplicity, and the stylisation of natural forms, Japanese aesthetics offered a refined counterpoint to

Victorian eclecticism—though, as this article argues, the visual culture imported and absorbed under the banner of *Japonisme* was rather more varied than its decorative reputation has suggested. Dresser occupies a central place in this historical narrative. Trained initially in botany before turning to the decorative arts, he worked across media while publishing a series of treatises that advocated for ornament grounded in utility, clarity, and cultural breadth and engaging with a wide range of aesthetic traditions—some more unsettling than others.¹⁰ Over the course of his career, his writing reveals a sustained interest in Japanese art, shaped not only by imported objects but also by firsthand experience. In 1876–77, Dresser travelled to Japan as a government-endorsed emissary, officially invited by the Meiji Government. His tour was unusually extensive and privileged; travelling approximately 1,700 miles across Japan, he visited temples, imperial collections, and artisanal centres across Kyoto, Nara, and Tokyo, gaining access to sites typically closed to Western travellers.¹¹ Specifically, Dresser visited sixty-eight potteries and hundreds of the finest temples and shrines around the country, including the crowd of temples atop Mount Koya-zan.¹² He commissioned about a thousand photographs and engaged the best ornamentist in Kyoto to make coloured drawings of temple decoration. As a guest of the nation, he was “permitted to enter sacred edifices (some of which had never before been trodden by European feet)”, receiving orders from the emperor himself that he “should have permitted every facility for seeing what [he] wished.”¹³ However, it is also interesting to note that Dresser’s engagement with Japanese material culture predates his journey to Japan by over a decade. As early as 1862, he had encountered Sir Rutherford Alcock’s comprehensive collection at the International Exhibition, from which he made drawings and purchases.¹⁴ He had also studied the smaller collection acquired

by Henry Cole for the museum at Marlborough House. By the time he embarked for Japan, Dresser later told the emperor, he had been “an earnest student of Oriental art for nearly thirty years.”¹⁵ Among the sites Dresser visited, several placed him in proximity to Japanese visual traditions concerned with death, decay, and spiritual transformation. This does not establish that he viewed specific *kusōzu* scrolls or grotesque Buddhist objects; rather, it situates him within environments where such visual traditions were materially present. For example, when Dresser visited Japan, the Tokyo Imperial Museum already held extensive collections of anatomical and religious artefacts, while the temples of Nara and Kyoto functioned as repositories for Buddhist *kusōzu* scrolls, votive sculptures, and ritual objects associated with impermanence and bodily decay.¹⁶ These traditions were not peripheral curiosities but active components of Japan’s religious aesthetics—underscoring the likelihood that Dresser encountered them,¹⁷ and there is even evidence of him experiencing various dimensions of these traditions. While there is no direct record of Dresser viewing specific grotesque artefacts, the itinerary outlined in his letters and publications places him in regions where such material was prominently held.¹⁸ Dresser’s longstanding relationships with British institutions such as the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A Museum) and the British Museum—both of which housed imported Japanese grotesque materials—further support the inference that he was familiar with these visual traditions.¹⁹ He also collected Japanese prints with characteristic seriousness, suggesting an engagement with a wider spectrum of Japanese visual culture than the commercially fashionable surface of British *Japonisme* registered.²⁰

The grotesque was not marginal in Japanese visual culture but integral to a broad religious and moral-aesthetic system. To name just a few, *kusōzu* scrolls staged the decomposition

¹⁰ Dresser, *Principles of Decorative*.

¹¹ Durant, *Christopher Dresser*, 28.

¹² Dresser. *Japan: Its Architecture*, vi.

¹³ Dresser.

¹⁴ Durant, *Christopher Dresser*, 28.

¹⁵ Dresser. *Japan: Its Architecture*, vi.

¹⁶ Foxwell, *Making Modern*, 90–95.

¹⁷ Dresser, *Japan*.

¹⁸ Dresser, *Japan*.

¹⁹ Durant. *Christopher Dresser*.

²⁰ Victoria and Albert Museum, “Notes.”

²¹ Dresser, *Principles of Decorative*, 25–29.

²² Durant, Christopher Dresser, 28.

²³ Durant.

Figure 1. Designed by Christopher Dresser and manufactured by Factory of Linthorpe Art Pottery, *Ashtray*, 1879–80 (designed) and 1879–89 (made between). Earthenware, red body, in the form of a spread-eagled male figure, the head unglazed, the body covered with a streaked yellow, green and rust glaze (18 cm). British Museum, London: OA10711 Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_OA-10711.



of a body across nine canonical stages as a Buddhist meditation on impermanence; *setsurwa* tales used corporeal horror as a vehicle for moral instruction; *yōkai* iconography populated the visible world with shapeshifting spirits drawn from folkloric and Buddhist cosmology. While Dresser may not have written about them directly, these traditions and *ukiyo-e* prints formed part of the broader visual culture to which he may have been exposed during his travels. They should therefore be treated not as proven sources or inspirations for his ceramics but as interpretive frameworks through which to understand the grotesque imagery circulating in nineteenth-century Japan. These traditions encompassed staged bodily decomposition, supernatural transformation, and moral didacticism through horror. Although largely absent from Victorian interpretations of *Japonisme*, they would have offered Dresser an alternative set of formal and conceptual tools rooted in ambiguity, spiritual estrangement, and impermanence.

Yet the question remains: Would Dresser have recognised and absorbed

such imagery? Evidence has suggested he was unusually predisposed to do so. In *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873), published three years before he departed for Japan, Dresser devotes attention to “Eastern Grotesques” and “Humour In Ornament,” demonstrating a sustained intellectual engagement with the comedic, the strange, and the macabre in non-Western decorative traditions.²¹ This pre-existing interest is crucial; Dresser did not arrive in Japan as a passive observer, absorbing only what aligned with Victorian tastes for refinement. Rather, he travelled with eyes already attuned to the aesthetic possibilities of the grotesque. A designer who had written on such themes could hardly have overlooked Japan’s rich traditions of supernatural imagery, bodily distortion, and darkly humorous ornament when confronted with them firsthand.

Dresser’s broader aesthetic philosophy further supports the likelihood of deliberate grotesque engagement. His writings reveal attention not only to beauty but also to its opposites. In *Principles of Decorative Design*, he urges readers to perceive “the difference between the beautiful and the ugly, the graceful and the deformed, the refined and the coarse”—categories that suggest an aesthetic framework capacious enough to accommodate the grotesque.²² His approach to ornament was anthropological as much as aesthetic: an obituary in *The Builder* (1904) recalls that Dresser “never tired of discussion on art and the habits of the nations of the East, trying to trace their histories by their ornamental forms as a philologist does by their language.”²³ This interpretive method—reading ornament as cultural text rather than mere decoration—suggests that Dresser would have been attuned to the symbolic meanings embedded in Japanese grotesque traditions, not merely their formal novelty.

In Japan: *Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures* (1882), Dresser’s published account of the journey,

he offers a rare glimpse into these grotesque traditions.²⁴ He describes a vase featuring a skeleton holding a bamboo rod with a bird on the end, behind which sits an almond tree—a symbol of youth and longevity. The skeleton, symbolising death, uses the rod to capture the bird, satirising the human wish for long life. Dresser’s skeletal figures, though often read as playful, may thus carry more serious symbolic weight. That such grotesque artefacts are rarely acknowledged in Dresser’s published writings likely reflects the filters of Victorian design discourse, which often reframed foreign cultures through palatable, moralised lenses—particularly when addressing a middle-class readership.²⁵ This gap—between what Dresser saw, what he collected, and what he chose to publish—offers a critical point of re-evaluation. It reveals not only the constraints of Victorian taste but also the selective ways in which *Japonisme* has been archived and aestheticised in design history.

This possibility is further supported by the contents of Dresser’s personal collection. After his death, 145 Japanese paintings formerly in his possession were sold by his daughter, Mary Dresser, many of which were accompanied by a manuscript on Japanese ceramics written by J.S. Waite.²⁶ Although the manuscript remains only partially catalogued, its descriptive breadth suggests that Dresser was not merely acquiring fashionable stock but engaging thoughtfully with a range of visual languages—possibly including grotesque traditions. The paintings include sketches of Japanese ceramics, some incorporating traces of Dresser’s own design imagination, alongside depictions of wooden figures, presumably Buddhist, and supernatural folklore, notably a scene showing a figure with a sake vessel (Fig. 4). By situating Dresser within this expanded field of visual encounters, it becomes possible to challenge the binary between beauty and horror often assumed in discussions of *Japonisme*. While his Linthorpe designs

are not accompanied by textual declarations of grotesque intent, they speak visually to an aesthetic logic shaped by religious decay, anatomical transformation, and supernatural iconography.²⁷

Materialising the Grotesque: Linthorpe Ceramics and Ritualised Bodily Form

Dresser’s engagement with grotesque aesthetics is most evident in the ceramics he designed for Linthorpe Art Pottery. Established in 1879 in Middlesbrough, in collaboration with industrialist John Harrison, Linthorpe began as a philanthropic effort to revitalise local industry but quickly became a site of formal innovation.²⁸ Known for its experimental glazes,



Figure 2. Designed by Christopher Dresser and manufactured by Linthorpe Art Pottery, *Sake Bottle*, c. 1880. Earthenware (17cm). Private Collection. Source: Lyon & Turnbull. “Decorative Arts: Design since 1860, 23 October 2019, 11:BST, Edinburgh.” Available at: <https://www.lyonandturnbull.com/auctions/decorative-arts-design-since-1860-577/lot/140>.

²⁴ Dresser. *Japan: Its Architecture*, 274.

²⁵ Trodd, Barlow, and Amigoni. “Introduction,” 1–20.

²⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum, “Notes.”

²⁷ Walgate, and Payne. “Christopher Dresser”

²⁸ Durant, *Christopher Dresser*.

²⁹ Rudoe, *Decorative Arts*, 96.

³⁰ British Museum, Painting.”

³¹ Lyon & Turnbull. “Decorative Arts,” lot. 140.

sculptural ambition, and technical range, Linthorpe allowed Dresser unusual creative autonomy. As art superintendent, he designed over 200 forms, many of which diverged radically from the decorative elegance associated with *Japonisme*. Within this experimental context, a set of figural vessels emerged—marked by anatomical distortion, symbolic ambiguity, and ritualised use.

One of the most arresting examples is the Linthorpe Ashtray, now housed in the British Museum (Fig.1). The object comprises a distorted torso glazed in deep reds and ochres, with a smooth, unglazed terracotta head fixed above. The ashtray exemplifies what became known as the “Linthorpe glaze”—a palette of olive, red, yellow, and brown in varying shades, often smooth, mottled, or streaked with accidental patterns.²⁹ The body swells and twists, its cavity open and uncontainable, while the head smiles in ambiguous calm. This contrast creates an unsettling duality. Although a version of the ashtray was also produced in silver, it is the Linthorpe ceramic that most fully embodies grotesque principles. The metallic version, by virtue of its uniform surface and conventional material, maintains a decorative detachment. In contrast, the ceramic’s visceral palette and jarring disjunction between head and body intensify its bodily strangeness.



Figure 3. Gen Ki, *Painting, handscroll*, 1778. Paint on paper (27.5 x 1125.7 cm). British Museum, London: 1881,1210,0,2366. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1881-1210-0-2366?selectedImageId=1613572964.

The image of an Oriental head with an open body evokes Buddhist statuary associated with martyrdom or impermanence. Although the head remains serene, it is disembodied—suspended in a transitional state between icon and ornament, sculpture and container. While no exact precedent exists in Japanese design, the figuration recalls the visual logic of *kusōzu* scrolls, particularly *The Body of a Courtesan in Nine Stages of Decomposition* (Fig.5), which depicts the gradual breakdown of the body into formless matter.³⁰ Like these scrolls, the ashtray visualises a transition between life and dissolution—between personhood and putrefaction.

A closely related object is the Linthorpe Sake Bottle (Fig.2), which appeared at Lyon & Turnbull’s Edinburgh sale room in 2019.³¹ It shares the ashtray’s formal language—an unglazed terracotta head atop a deep-glazed body—and similarly renders the grotesque in figural but ambiguous terms. A monk’s head, eyes closed, and posture bowed, emerges from a vessel that is part bottle, part effigy. Unlike Linthorpe’s more conventional sake bottles, this version introduces a fully imagined figural form similar to one of his drawings (Fig.4). The slight disconnection between the head, hands, and body recalls the spectral logic of Edo-period ghost paintings (Fig.3), in which the body is fluid, translucent, or only

Figure 4. Detail of: Christopher Dresser, *Painting*, ca.1877. Painting on paper (dimensions unknown). Victoria and Albert Museum, London: D.533-1905. Source: photograph by author.



partially rendered.

That Dresser designed a sake bottle is unsurprising. His engagement with sake extended beyond aesthetic curiosity to active commercial investment. In *Japan: Its Architecture, Art and Art Manufactures*, Dresser advocates the reduction of import duties on “saki”. He identified a market for sake among American consumers with a taste for “volatile liquors”, noting its potential appeal to Western markets. A contemporary account observed, “... Dr. Dresser, struck by this fact, has entered into contracts for the export of the Japanese saki, intending to send it to Tiffany Store in New York City, to try its sale. Tiffany Store has already advertised that it has received Japanese saki from Dr. Dresser, whose sharpness and judgement in commercial affairs cannot be too highly admired.”³² This entrepreneurial dimension of his *Japonisme* was further consolidated in 1879, the same year he assumed the role of art superintendent at Linthorpe, when he entered into partnership with Charles Holme of Bradford to establish Dresser & Holme. The firm specialised in importing Japanese and Oriental wares, operating from premises in Farringdon Road; its opening was attended by Sir Rutherford and Lady Alcock, along with members of the Japanese legation.³³ This commercial

entanglement suggests that Dresser understood sake not merely as an exotic beverage but as a cultural object embedded in ritual, trade, and material practice. The Linthorpe earthenware, then, emerges from this deeper engagement—a vessel designed by someone who had handled, imported, and commercially promoted the very liquid it was meant to contain.

The head used in both the ashtray and the sake bottle is a direct copy of a Japanese stoneware figure of the monk-poet Saigyō contemplating Mount Fuji, which is held in the British Museum’s Japanese collection (Fig.7). This precise source was first identified in the keeper of the object Rudoe’s essay “Christopher Dresser and his Sources” (2004), which notes that the figure came from the A.W. Franks’ collection—an influential connoisseur and close acquaintance of Dresser.³⁴ This connection not only anchors the figural reference in a specific object but also highlights Dresser’s engagement with Japanese collections held in British institutions.

Other works attributed to Dresser support this grotesque impulse. The so-called Fox-Face Vase, produced at Linthorpe, features subtle ridges and pointed features that suggest a snout and ears, possibly read as lightly alluding to the *kitsune*—a shapeshifting fox spirit in Japanese folklore. The vase’s hybrid features remain unresolved, reinforcing a spectral ambiguity. Similar slippages between figuration and excess define the Ault Pottery Tongue Vase, whose exaggerated rim evokes a protruding tongue or bodily extrusion, recalling, though not necessarily directly citing, the *yōkai akaname*—a demon associated with filth and contamination. A comparable supernatural presence appears on the Dragon Vase, on which a coiled beast interrupts the vessel’s surface like a votive guardian, more intrusive than decorative. Together, these examples suggest that Dresser’s post-Japan designs absorbed—rather than directly replicated—grotesque figuration through the material

³² Dresser, *Japan: Its Architecture*, 220.

³³ Durant, *Christopher Dresser*, 28.

³⁴ Rudoe, “Christopher Dresser.”

³⁵ Faulkner, *Japanese Studio*, 122–25.

³⁶ Chung, “Collective Aesthetic.”

Figure 5. Detail of: Kobayashi Eitaku, *Body of a Courtesan in Nine Stages of Decomposition*, 1870s. Ink and colour on silk (25.5 x 501.5 cm). British Museum, London: 2008,3033.1. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2008-3033-1?selectedImageId=603868001.



language of British studio ceramics.³⁵ “These readings remain interpretive, since no textual evidence links Dresser to these specific yōkai motifs.”

What unites these grotesque forms is not only their departure from classical *Japonisme* but also their invitation to engage. The Linthorpe Ashtray and Sake Bottle, in particular, acquire their full conceptual charge through functionality. The ashtray requires users to extinguish cigarettes in the centre of a human-like body—a performative gesture that replicates burning, scarring, or ritual sacrifice. Its scorched glaze reinforces the illusion of bodily harm. The grotesque here is not decorative; it is enacted. The sake bottle also gains meaning through use. As liquid is poured or consumed from the vessel, the user engages in a quasi-ritual act: consuming from within a human form. The head, positioned as if emerging from a liquid interior, invites symbolic readings of ingestion and internalisation. In both cases, the user does not merely observe but activates the object—confronting the grotesque through touch, gesture, and bodily intimacy. Dresser’s grotesque-inflected *Japonisme* thus moves beyond visual citation into a realm of tactile, participatory discomfort. These objects stage their meanings not through surface motifs but through material ritual. They demand to be touched, held, and used—thereby enacting the very discomfort they represent, echoing Dresser’s ideals about the truthful form and function of his wares.³⁶

A qualification to this framework warrants brief acknowledgement. Victorian Britain was scarcely without grotesque traditions of its own: the carved gargoyles of Gothic Revival churches, the marginalia of medieval manuscripts, and the broader pictorial repertoire of caricature and the macabre all offered domestic models of bodily distortion and monstrous humour. The possibility that Dresser’s vessels draw, at least in part, on this British grotesque idiom cannot therefore be dismissed. Yet the specific configuration of the Linthorpe objects resists a wholly domestic reading. The head appears as a discrete iconographic presence rather than an integrated ornamental hybrid, while the ritualised choreography of use—extinguishing ash into a human-like body or decanting sake from a figure-crowned vessel—gives the grotesque a tactile and performative charge. It is precisely this combination of Japanese figural reference, bodily fragmentation, and functional intimacy that makes the objects difficult to contain within familiar British categories alone.

Victorian Reception of Grotesque Aesthetics

If Dresser’s grotesque-inflected ceramics for Linthorpe suggest a deliberate engagement with themes of decay, fragmentation, and ritual, these dimensions were largely overlooked in their Victorian reception. Linthorpe wares were admired for their technical

innovation and exotic appeal, but little attention was paid to their symbolic or figural complexity. Objects such as the monk-headed sake bottle and the distorted ashtray were typically regarded as eccentric novelties—curiosities to amuse or to provoke—rather than as serious expressions of spiritual or cross-cultural thought. This superficial reading led to misinterpretations that neutralised or recoded the grotesque.

A notable example lies in the reception of the Linthorpe Ashtray. Rather than being recognised as a meditation on bodily impermanence or Buddhist ritual—particularly through its sculpted monk’s head—its distorted form was occasionally linked to the figure of Charles Peace, a notorious murderer executed in 1879—the same year Linthorpe Pottery was founded.³⁷ Peace’s case was widely sensationalised in the press, becoming a lens through which the ashtray’s bodily distortion was interpreted in terms familiar to British audiences: local, criminal, and titillating. In effect, this reframing domesticated the grotesque, displacing its religious undertones in favour of popular sensationalism. Such displacement also appears in the Victorian illustrated volume *Fiji and the Fijians* (1858). The volume’s plate *Priests’ Bowls* shows what closely resembles a Linthorpe Ashtray suspended from the background wall, its monk-like head hung like an effigy, while indigenous kava and oil dishes are arrayed ritualistically in the foreground.³⁸ Though likely an artistic coincidence or misunderstanding, the object is cast as a token of ritual strangeness, subsumed into a colonial visual taxonomy of the uncanny that, in some light, flattens the distinctions between two non-Western cultures’ religious traditions. The illustration, therefore, is a rare visual record of how nineteenth-century viewers handled grotesque material that fell outside European reference: by assimilating it into a generalised category of the primitive sacred. That such a fate could befall an object designed by

one of Britain’s most theoretically articulate designers and produced in a Middlesbrough pottery indicates how thoroughly the Japanese specificity of these works was effaced in their public circulation.

Victorian Britain was not unfamiliar with grotesque imagery, but such themes were largely contained within culturally sanctioned traditions. The Egyptian Revival incorporated motifs of death and mummification; the Gothic Revival welcomed gargoyles, hybrids, and the monstrous into architecture and literature.³⁹ These Western forms were admissible because they were embedded in familiar theological, architectural, and literary traditions. By contrast, grotesque figures rooted in Buddhist cosmology or *yōkai* folklore lacked a shared symbolic register and were often rendered illegible within the framework of *Japonisme*. Dresser’s position as a British designer embedded in both Victorian and Japanese aesthetic systems allowed him to engage with this ambiguity — integrating the grotesque in a way that remained materially present even if critically unacknowledged.

This process of erasure extended into reproduction and legacy. After Linthorpe Pottery closed in 1889, several designs were adapted by Burmantofts Pottery in Leeds.⁴⁰ Among these was the ashtray, which was reproduced with notable changes: the glaze palette was strengthened, and the facial features were rendered more Caucasian. With its turquoise-blue colouring and red eyes, this later version leans more decisively towards a demonic or monstrous register, departing from the more human ambiguity of the original Linthorpe version. The grotesque was therefore not eliminated but recontextualised — made more legible within British expectations of caricature and decorative eccentricity. In this later form, the object’s spiritual ambiguity was softened, but its strangeness was retained as a marketable effect—something more

³⁷ Hanrahan, *Victorian Master Criminal*

³⁸ Williams, *Fiji*, 60.

³⁹ Reed, “Victorian Culture,” 319–321.

⁴⁰ Garlick, Church, and Anders. *Burmantofts Pottery*.

⁴¹Dresser, “Eastern Art,” 211.

palatable to middle-class consumers. These modifications were not merely stylistic; they reflect a broader cultural impulse to aestheticise and contain the grotesque within the acceptable bounds of Victorian taste. Later historiography reinforced this erasure. Dresser was canonised as a precursor to modernism, celebrated for his abstraction, formal clarity, and industrial foresight. In the hands of scholars such as the German-British historian Nikolaus Pevsner and the twenty-first-century art historian Widar Halén, both of whom helped restore Dresser to a prominent position within design history, he was situated largely within a narrative of European modernism. Consequently, the stranger and more ambiguous aspects of his oeuvre were suppressed or omitted. The grotesque, which cannot easily be reconciled with linear progress or machine rationality, was excluded from Dresser’s retrospective framing. The *Japonisme*, too, was reimagined primarily in terms of elegance and refinement—leaving little space for its more ambivalent or macabre expressions. In addition, the loss or dispersal of Dresser’s own collection—the ceramic motif watercolour paintings bequeathed by Mary Dresser, the J.S. Waite manuscript that accompanied them, the photographs and drawings commissioned during the tour—gave the historiographic erasure could’ve given a material counterpart; thus, the collection through which Dresser’s wider Japanese engagement could most fully be reconstructed was scattered before it could be studied as a whole.

The survival of Dresser’s grotesque ceramics in museum collections, however, tells a more recalcitrant story. Their persistent discomfort, ambiguous symbolism, and tactile provocation refuse full assimilation into the decorative canon. Victorian audiences may have ignored or misattributed their sources, and later histories reframed them within formalist or industrial contexts, but their material presence resists such



Figure 6. Unknown maker in Tanaba, Japan. Figure. 19th century. Made of stoneware with celadon glaze and iron oxide and white slip decoration. (14.48 cm). British Museum, London: Franks.1838 Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_Franks-1838.

simplifications. The ashtray remains a body opened for use; the sake bottle remains a vessel that doubles as an effigy. If the grotesque was unwelcome in nineteenth-century *Japonisme*, it nonetheless found form—and function—through Dresser’s ceramic imagination. The work of design history is, in part, to learn to read what its earlier categories made unreadable.

Conclusion

This essay has reconsidered Christopher Dresser’s engagement with Japanese visual culture by foregrounding the overlooked role of the grotesque in his design vocabulary. Moving beyond conventional accounts of *Japonisme* as decorative refinement, the paper argued that Dresser’s exposure to Buddhist, folkloric, and anatomical traditions—whether directly in Japan or through institutional and private collections—may have informed a more ambiguous and materially embodied visual language. Two Linthorpe monk-headed ceramics in particular—the ashtray and sake bottle—suggest a conceptual engagement with impermanence, bodily fragmentation, and ritual estrangement. Distinct in function but united in form, these items translate the grotesque into a tactile idiom of use: extinguishing a flame or pouring

from a vessel becomes a ritualised act of dissolution and ingestion.

The grotesque constituted an active strand of Japanese visual culture that has often been excluded from Western accounts of *Japonisme*. Dresser’s Linthorpe output challenges this selective framing. While these objects were rarely acknowledged in contemporary commentary—and were sometimes retrofitted with sanitised narratives—they complicate the image of Dresser as a designer solely invested in utility, symmetry, and surface elegance. His ceramics reveal an aesthetic logic that was at once spiritual, experimental, and cross-cultural. As Dresser himself wrote, “We must not be copyists or merely servile imitators... but what we produce must reveal our knowledge of the ornament of past ages.”⁴¹ His works are not acts of imitation but materially thoughtful responses to cultural encounter—responses that resist fixed meaning and demand interpretive openness.

Reassessing these designs encourages a more expansive reading of *Japonisme*—one that admits not only the elegant but the abject, not only influence but transformation. It also invites a reconsideration of how design history archives, forgets, or repurposes visual meaning. These objects do not offer fixed readings but invite further questions about how the grotesque moves across cultures—and how it becomes materially encoded in design.

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Rails of Resistance: The Railroad as a Political Artifact in Colombia’s Banana Zone (1880–1930), Maria Paula Armenta Garzón

ARTICLE CATEGORY
Research Article, Historical Study

KEYWORDS
Railroad, Neutral Design, United Fruit Company, Modernity, Resistance, Artifacts

How do seemingly neutral designs—often celebrated as great promises of modernity—continue to conceal violence and inequality today? This article examines, through a historical lens, how the railroad as an industrial machine shaped social and political dynamics in Colombia between 1880 and 1930, becoming a political artifact that accelerated the economy, benefited foreign elites, and excluded the working class under the narrative of modernity. These unequal tensions ultimately culminated in violent events, most notably the 1928 Banana Massacre. The arrival of industrialization in Colombia at the turn of the twentieth century has frequently been described as “the beginning of a new era,” and the railroad played a central role in this transformation. It functioned as a political artifact: a machine that, under the rhetoric of progress, reorganized social and economic relations while deepening colonial and semi-feudal structures among industrialists, growers, and traditional landowners—leaving workers in precarious conditions under the control of foreign companies. More than a means of transportation, the railroad became the invisible artifact of a system that turned bananas into gold and human beings into replaceable parts.

¹ Carlos Rico-Bonilla, "Historia de la Contabilidad Financiera en Colombia: el caso del Ferrocarril de la Sabana, 1880–1915," *Cuadernos de Contabilidad* 17, no. 43 (enero–junio 2016): 29.

Figure 1. Jesús María Giraldo Duque, *Map of the Republic of Colombia (former New Granada)*, 1897. Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Banco de la República, Colombia.



The Project of Modernity: The Railroad and an Economy of Speed

This article examines the railroad not merely as a transportation system but as a political artifact that reconfigured social and economic relations in Colombia's Banana Zone between 1880 and 1930. While historical accounts have often described the arrival of the railroad as a symbol of progress and modernization, this study argues that its implementation was deeply entangled with structures of coloniality, foreign economic interests, and hierarchical labor regimes. By situating the railroad within broader debates on the non-neutrality of artifacts, this study illuminates how technologies can shape forms of life, reinforce inequities, and participate in the production of violence in contexts marked by uneven modernity.

Modernity brought with it not only the creation of artifacts and objects that transformed how things were done but also the introduction of new political and social relations. The ideas of modernity and industrialization arrived in Colombia in the 1870s, when the liberal government promoted

the notion that the railroad was the system that "could lift the country out of its precarious economic condition."¹ Under this premise, several railway projects were launched to stimulate the economy by creating more efficient and faster trade routes.

Colombia is traversed by three mountain ranges that run almost entirely from south to north across the nation. These three mountain chains form the valleys that contain the country's two main rivers: the Cauca and the Magdalena. Before the arrival of the railways, travelers relied on the paths or trochas created by indigenous peoples, which had also been used by the Spanish during their conquest.

These construction efforts revealed the enormous difficulties of building rail infrastructure in equatorial territories characterized by hot, humid climates and rugged geographies, which complicated labor conditions that contrasted sharply with those in Europe and the United States, where railway expansion unfolded in temperate climates, with lower incidences of tropical diseases and with preexisting infrastructure that facilitated construction.

In Colombia, building just 75 kilometers of track took five years,

during which approximately 12,000 people lost their lives due to construction hazards and diseases such as malaria, cholera, and yellow fever. The railroad arrived in a country shaped by artisanal practices, agriculture, and traditional forms of production that depended heavily on manual labor, low mechanization, and scarce transportation and communication infrastructure.³

The industrialization process introduced new relationships between machine and human, profoundly transforming labor relations still traversed by colonial structures inherited from the Spanish order. Industrialized countries supported many railway companies on the continent due to an interest in expanding markets and facilitating the movement of goods, so they could be direct exporters.

The railroad generated a new relationship between people and movement: *kinetic subjectivities*,⁴ meaning the acquisition of a new velocity. As contemporary observers noted, "It was necessary to produce a new type of subject detached from his traditional 'fixation' on pre-industrial

practices or mental habits, for now everything had to move, circulate, and be displaced."⁵ This new speed transformed modes of being-in-the-world. The establishment of modernity required dismantling and delegitimizing the imaginary world of a traditional society unfamiliar with more complex modes of production, a society further constrained by a geography that distanced and limited the national economy.

This conception of the railroad arrived in a fragmented and unequal manner across the territory. Nevertheless, in the places where the railway lines were successfully built, commerce experienced accelerated growth. National agricultural products increased their sales, and foreign companies became interested in investing, introducing machinery to modernize agricultural industries and facilitate the export of fruits, vegetables, and raw materials to Europe and the United States. This new economic model required transforming the rudimentary rhythms of manual labor to bridge the distance separating the country from modernity.



Figure 2. Steam shovel at work, Las Delicias, Colombia, circa 1920s. United Fruit Company Photograph Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School. Image ID 4085568.

*This image is today among the few documents that make visible the violent transformations of a landscape where the activities of the banana industry took place.*²

² Liliana Gómez, "Residuos del archivo y el conflicto de las bananeras en Colombia: figuraciones de violencia y contra-memoria en la literatura y la fotografía," *Iberoamericana* 19, no. 72 (noviembre de 2019): 85.

³ Marco Palacios, *Entre la legitimidad y la violencia: Colombia 1875–1994* (Bogotá: Norma, 2003).

⁴ Santiago Castro-Gómez, *Tejidos oníricos: movilidad, capitalismo y biopolítica en Bogotá (1910–1930)* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2009).

⁵ Castro-Gómez, *Tejidos oníricos*, 61.

⁶ Castro-Gómez, *Tejidos oníricos*, 71.

⁷ Fernando Botero and Álvaro Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola en la zona bananera de Santa Marta*, Revista Ideología y Sociedad, Cuadernos Colombianos 11, tomo III (segundo trimestre de 1977), 314.

⁸ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola*, 314

⁹ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola*. 145

By 1910, **988 kilometers of railroad tracks** had been built in Colombia, with a transportation capacity of more than **two million passengers per year**. The construction of railways increased substantially during the years following World War I, when the country enjoyed a fiscal surplus and a significant rise in exports.⁶

The Magdalena: A Land of Possibilities

During the period of railway industrialization, the Magdalena region was characterized by the commercialization of products such as tobacco and cacao. What would later become known as the Banana Zone “was nothing more than a mountainous region of impenetrable forests”;⁷ it encompassed the cities of Ciénaga and Fundación, located between the Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

In Ciénaga, there were “a few cattle ranches and small farms devoted to subsistence crops. Their production, primarily for household consumption, allowed for small surpluses that were carried on muleback to Santa Marta to be exchanged for consumer goods and work tools.”⁸



Figure 3. Manuel Ponce de León and Manuel María Paz, *Carta corográfica del Estado del Magdalena*, 1864. Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Banco de la República, Colombia.

With the abolition of slavery, significant changes took place in what is now the Banana Zone. According to Botero and Guzmán, the large estates tied to export crops that depended on enslaved labor underwent dramatic impoverishment. The *Compendio de Historia del Departamento del Magdalena desde 1525 hasta 1895* notes,

The liberation of the enslaved produced an economic revolution. From that redemption dates the decline of several wealthy estates, a decline that ultimately ended in total ruin. Wealthy landowners believed that without enslaved labor, and having to replace it with free labor that demanded wages, certain industries—particularly agriculture—should no longer exist.⁹

In this region, affluent landowners abandoned their properties, leaving behind vast tracts of vacant land that became a problem for the Government of the Sovereign State of Magdalena. In response, prominent merchants in Santa Marta recognized the economic potential of these lands to attract foreign capital. These territories became **lands without resistance**. With the country’s economic and legislative liberalization, more than **18,000 hectares** of vacant land, stretching from the Sierra Nevada to the banks of the Magdalena River, were granted to foreign investors. The first foreign company to establish itself was the *Compagnie Immobilière et Agricole de Colombie*, which came to own nearly **20,000 hectares**, specializing in the production of tobacco and cacao for export to France.

The arrival of foreign companies also attracted people from other regions seeking investment and labor opportunities, who supported inspection tasks that facilitated translation between foreigners and natives, as shown in the photograph. These migrations led to small-scale investments in tobacco and cacao, products characteristic of the Magdalena. As a result, there was special interest in “speeding up

Figure 4. District superintendent and overseer inspecting fruit, Colombia Division, circa 1920s. United Fruit Company Photograph Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School. Image ID 4083993.



transportation and trade between the Magdalena River and the cities of Ciénaga and Santa Marta... and in building a railroad that would link Santa Marta to the river’s right bank, thus enabling commerce with the country’s interior.”¹⁰

Despite the clear interest, the construction of a railroad required a large investment that depended on government involvement. The first efforts began in 1846, and after a long process, a contract was signed in **1881** with Roberto A. Joy and Manuel J. de Mier to begin the railway project in the Magdalena region.

Ciénaga at the time was the ideal location for undertaking major enterprises, thanks to its easy access to export routes—there was a small dock called Guafe—but its roads were deplorable. As a result, many fertile lands visible to the eye remained uncultivated... such was the case of the virgin lands of Río Frío, La Bota, Manantial, Guacamayal, Sevilla, Orihueca.¹¹

According to Botero and Guzmán, the construction of the railroad reflected the economic and social transformations occurring in Ciénaga,

prioritizing investments aimed at maximizing exports. The railway lines not only connected plantations to ports but also materialized new social classes among entrepreneurs and laborers. These communication channels, particularly the railway networks, created what Castro-Gómez calls a “**second nature**,”¹² designed to form a community of producers: the idealized nation envisioned by nineteenth-century intellectuals and high-ranking officials, who introduced the artifacts meant to propel modernization. This process required specialized knowledge from engineering and economics experts, sidelining the “first nature” that had been abandoned and had become a problem for the nation.

Engineers would create the network of transportation routes that, like veins and nerves, would unite all regions to form a single ‘national organism’; economists would create the conditions for the rationalization of labor, so that merchandise and money would become the blood flowing through those veins.¹³

Here, I highlight a central tension: on the one hand, the arrival of industry

¹⁰ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola*. 317

¹¹ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola*. 318

¹² Castro-Gómez, *Tejidos oníricos*. 67

¹³ Castro-Gómez, *Tejidos oníricos*. 68.

¹⁴ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola* 325

¹⁵ Stacey May y Galo Plaza, *La empresa estadounidense en el extranjero: caso de estudio, La United Fruit Co. en América Latina* (Ciudad de México: National Planning Association, 1958), 10.

¹⁶ “The railroad’s main source of income came from transporting bananas for export (66.1%) as well as passenger fares (19.7%),” Botero and Guzmán, *La violencia en la Zona Bananera*, 1977.

Figure 5. Loading bananas onto train, circa 1920s. United Fruit Company Photograph Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School. Image ID 4084816.



benefited a foreign entrepreneurial elite; on the other, it deepened the divide with those who lacked the economic means to access these new systems. Railway technology, instead of transforming social organization and peasant labor structures, served to fulfill the goals and ideals of an upper class that reaffirmed discourses of modernity and benefited from the speed of exportation. “When national fruit growers began to understand [that] the high level of technical development required for the production, export, and sale of bananas [was] possible only for large companies with well-established transportation and distribution systems,”¹⁴ they abandoned the idea of establishing their own commercial routes and became the working class employed by large foreign companies, including the **United Fruit Company (UFC)**.

In what would become the Banana Zone of the Magdalena, the railroad was fundamental to the large-scale cultivation of bananas. The fruit required transportation fast enough to prevent spoilage; it needed to reach the loading docks in a very short time after leaving the plantations.

The UFC understood this point very well and managed to document

through photographs how modernity had arrived in a territory unfamiliar with the machinery or technology needed to mass-produce a product as promising as bananas.

The construction of railroad lines was an integral and indispensable part of the development of banana crops in regions that previously lacked terrestrial transportation. The United Fruit Company was interested in building railroads for the transport of bananas, and these lines logically had to follow the shortest route from the port or main line to the banana plantation. These railroads were of utmost importance for the countries of Tropical America, as they carved paths through unexplored lands and made possible their transformation into productive banana-growing regions.¹⁵

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, **four major stations** were built in Santa Marta, Ciénaga, Gaira, and Riofrío.¹⁶ Santa Marta had storage depots and machine-maintenance workshops, as well as a telegraph line installed parallel to the railway, which facilitated communication between the cities and the Banana Zone. During this period, a growing working class emerged that used the railroad to

NUMERO DE PASAJES VENDIDOS DURANTE EL SEMESTRE ABRIL - SEPT. 1898						
Clase de pasaje	Sta. Marta	Gaira	Papare	Ciénaga	Riofrío	Sevilla
Primera Clase	1.005	1.323	—	1.018	125	—
Segunda Clase	3.749	1.597	76	8.367	5.465	799
Gobierno	414	75	—	290	3	—
Mozos de finca	—	—	—	24.273	20.021	1.693
TOTALES	5.168	2.995	76	33.948	25.614	2.492

Figure 6. Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola en la zona bananera de Santa Marta*, 1977, p. 332, table citing Ricardo Santamaría Hurtado. Diario Oficial No. 11394 (January 1901).

commute to the banana plantations, as occurred in other colonized countries where the railway transformed modes of being-in-the-world. As Mukhopadhyay argues in the case of colonial India, railways revealed “the crucial role of users in shaping social outcomes of technology,”¹⁷ demonstrating how the needs and aspirations of different social groups mediated their introduction and impact. Records show that the sale of tickets to *mozos de finca*—company laborers—far exceeded that of other social categories.

At that time, **four classes of tickets** were sold:

- *First class* and *second class* for government employees or people who could afford them,
- and the *pasaje mozos de finca* for company laborers.

By 1897 and 1898, many laborers living in the banana towns of Ciénaga, Riofrío, and Sevilla traveled to work on the plantations using the railroad; they represented **71%** of all passengers.

The United Fruit Company: Monopoly and Control

The civil wars (1895–1900 and 1901) further deepened the inequality between foreign entrepreneurs and the wage-earning class, composed largely of migrants seeking new opportunities. Although these conflicts were national in scope, in the Magdalena region, they were marked by the dispossession of land and the eviction of small landowners and settlers by foreign companies. The

monopolization strategy of the UFC had clear objectives:

The strategic control of railroad construction in the hands of the banana company (first Land, and later United) was intimately linked to the need to create the conditions that would allow large-scale banana production.¹⁸

That the UFC acquired vast extensions of vacant land through both legal and illegal means, combined with its control over the construction and operation of the railroad, created conditions that fueled dissatisfaction among peasants who had been farming the land without legal protection. As a result, the company faced countless legal cases concerning the status of the land, and it always pursued its main objective: **to legally justify each purchase**.

For small landowners and settlers, this approach represented a double disadvantage: not only were they dispossessed of their land, but they also had to pay for police services to protect their interests and property.

The UFC eventually controlled **water, land transportation, maritime transportation, communications, land titling, and labor contracting**. As banana production expanded, irrigation channels and artificial waterways increasingly altered the natural flow of water. The railroad became so essential that plantations were designed around the railway line. By **1930**, the UFC owned **59,500** hectares.

¹⁷ Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, “Rethinking Technology Transfer in a Colonial Milieu: Railways and Shifting Meanings of Travel in Late Colonial India,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 52, nos. 4–5 (2024): 689.

¹⁸ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola*. 337

¹⁹ Rodríguez, Silvio. “La Maza.” *Unicornio*. Areito, 1982.

²⁰ Botero y Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola en la zona bananera de Santa Marta*, 364, citing Archivo de la Gobernación de Santa Marta.

‘Que Cosa Fuera la Maza sin Cantera’¹⁹ The Banana Massacre

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the first strikes led by workers and peasants emerged in opposition to conservatism and to Yankee companies. In 1911, the first workers’ strike occurred in Honda, Tolima, led by Christian socialists who opposed the Yankees. It ended in the killing of around **40 guards and 60 soldiers**. A critical stance toward foreign companies was one of the key tenets of socialism, which openly incorporated class struggle, criticism of capitalism, and resistance to multinational alliances into its political programs and public discourse.

In January 1918... the first strike in our department erupted in Santa Marta, organized by the employees and workers of the railroad and the UFC. The strike spread to Ciénaga and the Banana Zone, paralyzing railway traffic and the transport of fruit. The situation became so serious that the government had to declare a state of public disorder... The strike lasted nearly two weeks but did not result in any deaths.²⁰

By 1920, **31 strikes** had been recorded; between **1924 and 1927**, the number rose to **233**. In response to this unrest, on **30 October 1928**, the conservative government enacted the **Ley Heroica** (“Heroic Law”) with the purpose of punishing publications, writings, and posters that supported workers’ demands. Its goal was to preserve social order, defend institutions, and “save the proletariat from the ruin that awaited them if they continued to spread communist and socialist ideas.” This law intensified the tensions already growing in the Banana Zone, where workers publicly presented their **eight demands** to the UFC:

1. **Collective accident insurance** for all workers (Law 37 of 1921 and Law 32 of 1922)
2. **Compensation for workplace accidents** (Law 57 of 1915)
3. **Sanitary housing** and **one weekly**

- day of rest** (Law 46 of 1918, Law 15 of 1925, Law 76 of 1926)
4. A **50% wage increase** for low-income workers
 5. **Elimination of company stores (tiendas de raya)** and credit notes that forced workers to buy only from employer-approved shops
 6. **Weekly payment of wages** instead of biweekly payments
 7. **Direct contracts with the company**, without intermediaries or subcontractors
 8. **Adequate hospitals and sanitation systems** in worker camps

The company paid workers partly in cash and partly in vouchers that could be used to purchase basic goods at UFC commissaries, where prices were kept deliberately lower than national market prices as a strategy to artificially cheapen labor costs. Paying partially in vouchers rather than money functioned as a coercive measure, forcing workers to buy exclusively from company commissaries under the clever pretext that it “benefited the worker.” This system removed the workers’ freedom to receive full wages in pesos and restricted their ability to purchase goods outside the company’s stores. After the company refused to negotiate labor conditions, and following several strikes, the events of **5 and 6 December 1928** unfolded:

...and so it was that on the night of the 5th leading into the 6th, as a mass of strikers and sympathizers from the city of Ciénaga had gathered in peaceful protest against official aggression, the troops stationed there set up machine guns, lined up riflemen, and, following the order of the somber assassin General Cortés Vargas, opened fire on the crowd until the square was covered with corpses...

In the first official reports—to the rest of the country—eight dead and twenty wounded were declared. But in Ciénaga, and soon throughout the region, it was known that the dead could have been as many as **800**. As for the wounded, no approximate figure was ever known, as most were executed on site, and some were

buried in mass graves or thrown into the sea while still alive, among piles of corpses.²¹

During this same period, **Jorge Eliécer Gaitán**, who was then emerging as a political leader, wrote his law thesis at the National University, seeking to demystify and challenge the rhetorical arguments used in a media campaign against socialism. He argued that before pursuing a social revolution, it was essential to solve the problem of land rent, meaning the taxes paid for the use of land as a result of wealth monopolies. On this point, Gaitán wrote, “Land rent is what one pays for a monopoly arising from the reduction of land to individual property.”

Through this logic, a single person could amass enormous capital from monopolizing land, as well as other means of communication and transportation, such as the railroad, that increased that wealth. A 1938 editorial from *El Liberal* expressed this point clearly:

...the only thing that is forcibly evident is that there exists a powerful company that owns all the vital mechanisms of the banana industry—credit, land, water, the railroad, the docks, maritime transport, fruit selection, international markets. It has been established among us for many years, and yet nothing ties it to our land, for in all that time it has built only temporary camps, cheap and fleeting installations, following the classic logic of intensive extraction of natural conditions.²²

The Railroad As a Political Artifact

The events described above reveal that design is not neutral; it is political and produces relations of power. The railroad, as an artifact and a meaning-producing machine, succeeded, according to Castro-Gómez, in transforming use value into exchange value, in the sense that railway construction allowed products to become commodities circulating across the world:

This means that what matters is no longer the qualities of objects, but their capacity to become abstract quantities susceptible to economic calculation.²³

According to Margolin,²⁴ the historian’s contribution to imagining the future lies in understanding how different social activities relate to one another. Regarding what we today call “design,” this means beginning to identify those “objects, activities, and material and immaterial services created by humans, as well as complex systems or environments that constitute the domain of the artificial.” Therefore, design cannot be conceived without its social dimension, which is an integral part of the relational ontology of artifacts. In this case, the railroad acted as a catalyst for social, political, and economic relations, controlled by a multinational corporation that promoted its construction and expansion under economic and mercantile interests to the detriment of the working class, which remained excluded from these economic arrangements and thus disproportionately affected by the resulting inequalities. This dynamic resonates with Escobar’s²⁵ notion of ontological design: every design decision participates in the *making of worlds*, determining which bodies are valued, which territories are exploited, and which communities are excluded. As Escobar argues, most design has historically served capitalist and modernizing ends, a logic clearly at work in the UFC’s railway network, which reorganized territory, labor, and nature in service of extraction rather than communal life. Understood in this way, the railroad in Colombia’s Banana Zone was not merely an infrastructure of transportation but a design of power that materially inscribed colonial hierarchies into the landscape itself.

As Margolin, citing Braudel, argues, material goods are components of “a complex order shaped by the assumptions, tendencies, and unconscious pressures of economies, societies, and civilizations.”

²¹ Botero and Guzmán, *El enclave agrícola*, 365.

²² Editorial.” *El Liberal*, August 29, 1938.

²³ Castro-Gómez, *Tejidos oníricos*. 69.

²⁴ Victor Margolin, “Design in History,” *Design Issues* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2009)

²⁵ Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

²⁶ Langdon Winner, *Do Artifacts Have Politics? in The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 125.

In other words, artifacts are part of everyday life and relate to broader economic and social forces under the banner of modernity. Beyond meeting economic expectations for banana production, the trains also served as sites for disseminating political demands for improved labor conditions. After the massacre, the train wagons transported the bodies of dead strikers to be thrown into the sea.

For Langdon Winner,²⁶ some artifacts not only “have political effects” but are **inherently political technologies**: systems that “require the creation and maintenance of a particular set of social conditions” in order to function. The railroad in the Banana Zone of the Magdalena, controlled by the UFC, is a clear example of this: it could operate only under a regime of strict labor hierarchy, territorial surveillance, and intensive exploitation of the workforce.

This interpretation resonates with Friedrich Engels’s claim that certain modern technical systems, such as the railroad, can only develop through **authoritarian relations** that ensure the coordination, discipline, and subordination of the labor force required to sustain the productive rhythms imposed by industrialization. Seeing things this way requires recognizing that artifacts are not neutral: their social effects both reveal and deepen class divisions, structural inequalities, and hierarchies that become materially entrenched in technical infrastructures. Thus, the railroad introduced a mode of being-in-the-world that reveals

- which bodies were valued,
- which territories were exploited and expropriated,
- which promises remained unfulfilled,
- and the geographical constraints that prevented their fulfillment.

Over time, railroads failed to consolidate themselves as a transportation system in Colombia. Today, the abandoned rails stand as a reflection of an industry that did not

prosper and, given the particularities of the territory, was replaced by other forms of transportation that, in turn, produced different modes of being. Understanding the railroad as a political artifact invites a broader reconsideration of the role of design in shaping social inequality. By foregrounding the relational ontology of artifacts, this article argued that modern narratives and objects must be analyzed not only as functional but also as agents in the reproduction of power.

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PART III

Living Traditions — Craft, Identity, and Contested Modernity

From Craft to Commodity – Informal Labour and State-Market Interventions in Lucknow’s Chikankari Industry, Aishwarya Jamkhedkar

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Research Paper

KEYWORDS

Chikankari, Material Culture, Multi-Layered, Local Agency, Nation-State, Commodify.

Chikankari is a medieval royal embroidery art from Lucknow, India. It constitutes one of the city’s largest informal industries, generating employment across both urban and rural contexts. This paper situates Chikankari within material culture discourse to examine its contemporary position. The research approaches embroidered textiles as socially embedded objects rather than mere commodities. The paper aims to move beyond the historicised and siloed narratives of this craft to foreground the multi-layered socio-economic structure of the Chikan industry, and it further interrogates questions of local agency among its stakeholders, with a particular focus on women artisans.

The study is situated within the contemporary urban context of Lucknow—a Tier-2 city in North India. Recognising that craft practices are rooted in geography and local knowledge systems, the paper adopts a mixed methodology, combining stakeholder interviews with urban mapping of the production networks. The research analyses socio-economic interdependencies that sustain this industry, revealing the dynamics of informal labour, spatial distribution and gendered participation. The paper further examines the role of the nation-state in framing and sustaining notions of craft authenticity, and it engages critically with global forces such as consumer fashion and digitisation that continue to commodify this Early Modern practice.

Introduction

Lucknow – *The City of Nawabs* is an intersection of ‘historical and cultural trajectories,’ the economic sphere and the political culture are the cornerstones of the city, both forming and being formed by its inhabitants.¹ Lucknow not only comprises the historical imagery of the ‘Nawabi’ (royal) era but also of the socio-economic interdependence between two communities: Hindus and Muslims. Chikankari, an embroidery tradition with roots in the medieval period, remains one of the few craft practices historically associated with courtly patronage that continues into the present. The paper situates this art form within the broader debates on material culture, which foreground the ‘actual relationship between people and goods’² over the physicality of objects. Drawing on ethnographic observations conducted during the study, the physical and material form of Chikankari contributes to a distinct social language, generating shared meanings and practices within the region.

The research probes the relationship between Chikankari and the urban context of Lucknow, while interrogating the individual and institutional forms of knowledge that sustain the craft. It further examines how contemporary market systems produce different meanings and ‘regimes of value’³ for the same object. The paper argues that Chikankari’s transformation reflects a shift from a patronage-based craft to a neoliberal labour regime shaped by intermediaries and global consumption, a transition that is unevenly layered and gendered.

Scholarship on Chikankari has largely focused on the historicity of the craft, its design evolution and the spatial concentration of artisan clusters.⁴ Researchers have also documented the growing role of national and state institutions, along with intermediary organisations, in supporting the industry at the grassroots level.⁵ However, this paper

reflects upon the multi-layered and multi-centred nature of the Chikan craft by examining the intersection between craft, informal labour, institutional networks and market circulation. The study additionally compiles and analyses government policies and recognised public and private institutions established to support this industry and critically examines the persistent gaps between policy formation and implementation. The final section of the paper investigates the contemporary transformations of the craft, its shifting value in the global market and how fashion designers still find ways to reinvent the style to cater to new audiences and patrons.

Material Culture and Lucknow —A City of Trading Craft

Academics such as David Miller have emphasised that material culture cannot be understood solely through the form or production of the object. He focused on the ‘place of an artefact within the process of mass consumption.’⁶ Building on this perspective, the present research moves beyond viewing the material artefact as a fixed entity to examine how its meanings are continually reconstituted across different contexts and over time.

Similarly, Arjun Appadurai’s work emphasises the social life of objects, highlighting the ‘conditions under which these economic objects circulate’ within ‘specific cultural and historical milieus.’⁷ Rather than treating commodities as static economic units, he argues that they are complex social forms whose meanings are shaped through exchange, knowledge and social relations. He states that the creation of value is a politically mediated process, both at an individual and institutional level. This view extends and critiques Karl Marx’s theory on commodity fetishism by shifting attention from production to circulation and social relations.⁸

Appadurai’s position aligns with Igor Kopytoff’s concept of the

¹ Tereza Kuldova, “Networks That Make a Difference: The Production of Social Cohesion in Lucknow, North India” (master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2009), 7.

² Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 4.

³ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4.

⁴ Sudipta Dev, “Art and Crafts: Lucknow’s Living Tradition,” in *Lucknow, Then and Now*, ed. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones and Ravi Kapoor (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003); P. Arya and Sadhana S., *Diagnostic Study: Artisan—The Chikan Embroidery Cluster, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh* (2001), accessed via Scribd, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/165163305/Diagnostic-Study-Report-Lucknow-Chikan-Cluster>; Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, *Embroidering Lives: Women’s Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

⁵ Timothy J. Scrase, “Precarious Production: Globalisation and Artisan Labour in the Third World” (2003), accessed 2026, <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/16987767.pdf>; IIM Lucknow, *Export Potential of Handicraft Products from Uttar Pradesh* (2006); Asad Ullah, *Exploratory Study of Conditions of Chikan, Aari, and Zardozi Artisans in Lucknow* (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2014).

⁶ Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*.

⁷ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 4.

⁸ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, and Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*.

⁹ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 4, quoting Laila Tyabji, "Threads of Identity," Seminar, no. 575 (July 2007): 33, https://www.indiaseminar.com/2007/575/575_laila_tyabji.htm.

¹¹ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 27, citing John Irwin and P. R. Hall, *Indian Embroideries*, vol. 1 of *Historic Textiles of India at the Calico Museum* (Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles, 1973); and Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, *Embroidering Lives: Women's Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

'cultural biography of objects' wherein commodities move in and out of different regimes of value and acquire social, ritual and emotional significance beyond their market value.⁹ This framework informs the present research, which examines the evolution, production and circulation of Chikankari as a practice deeply embedded within the community rather than an externally defined commodity. Chikankari is not merely a craft practice; its contemporary presence in Lucknow reveals the complex interplay between informal labour, local knowledge systems and shifting regimes of value.

Understanding these layered meanings also requires situating the craft within the historical and urban development of Lucknow, where systems of patronage, migration and cultural production have shaped the emergence and circulation of Chikankari. The Nawabs ruled the princely state of Awadh with Faizabad as their capital. During the reign of the fourth Nawab Asaf-Ud-Daula, the capital shifted from Faizabad to Lucknow in 1775. It was during the

reign of the last Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah (1848–56), that the city reached new heights of glory and grandeur. Various forms of art and craft flourished in this multi-ethnic city, one of them being Chikankari (see Fig.1).

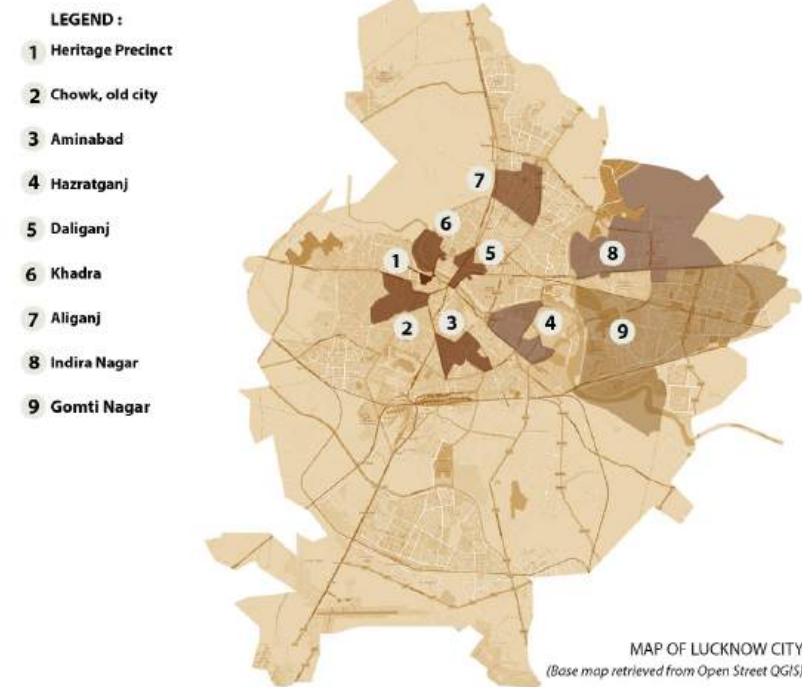
Many mythologies surround the origin of this craft. Some say its origin is in Persia, believing that it was brought to India as a part of the 'cultural baggage of the Persian nobles'.¹⁰ Some believe it originated in Bengal, renowned for its textile tradition, where 'male artisans came to work under the patronage of the Nawabs of Lucknow' ¹¹ (see Fig.2).

Lucknowis (local people of Lucknow) hold the perception that the craft was established in the Indian subcontinent under the patronage of Noor Jahan, the wife of Mughal emperor Jehangir. With the disappearance of Nawabi patronage and the advent of the colonial era, the craft faced a period of decline but was soon revived. The word 'Chikankari' has also been subject to multiple interpretations by various authors and scholars. Some say it is a Bengali word for 'fine', whereas some



Figure 1. Stitching Chikankari Embroidery, Lucknow, 2017. Photograph by author.

Figure 2. Map of Lucknow, Mumbai, 2022. Illustration by author with GIS base map.



say it is a Persian word for 'bold relief'. Some texts also refer to it as 'a blind', a connection drawn to *purdah*.

One of the most important trade routes of the pre-independence era was the Gomti River. Today, it is the city's most undervalued asset. In the mid-19th century, the Gomti River was used as a trade route between Lucknow and Kolkata. Imported luxuries sailed up to the court. Travellers also used this river route. During the British era, the route was used for exporting goods to British and European markets. Given Lucknow's historic development along the Gomti River, it may be inferred that the river supported the movement of people, goods and courtly culture that contributed to the growth and dissemination of Chikankari within the region.

For centuries, Lucknow has been known for its various art forms. It is the emblem of cultural identity in modern India. With the majority of artisans of craft being Muslims and the majority of traders being Hindus, there is a certain economic interdependence across communities in the city. A 400-year-old¹² craft

like Chikankari sustains itself by adapting to the changing structure and aspirations of society. Chikankari embroidery employs both Hindu and Islamic motifs, which are also found on the walls of Imambaras and other historical monuments (see Fig.3).

The relation of an object to society thus helps in setting the framework for imagining the nation-state. It becomes necessary to examine cities and the nation at large through the lens of material culture, as it plays a significant role in the urban cultural process. In the modern industrialised world, we often confuse 'local' with 'localised'. At times, objects become localised as markers of regional identity while remaining detached from the social and material conditions of their production, thereby reshaping notions of authenticity.

Networks of Production: Artisans, Intermediaries and Gendered Labour

The Chikankari industry is informal in nature due to its stakeholders being widespread across the city. Production is highly fragmented, requiring

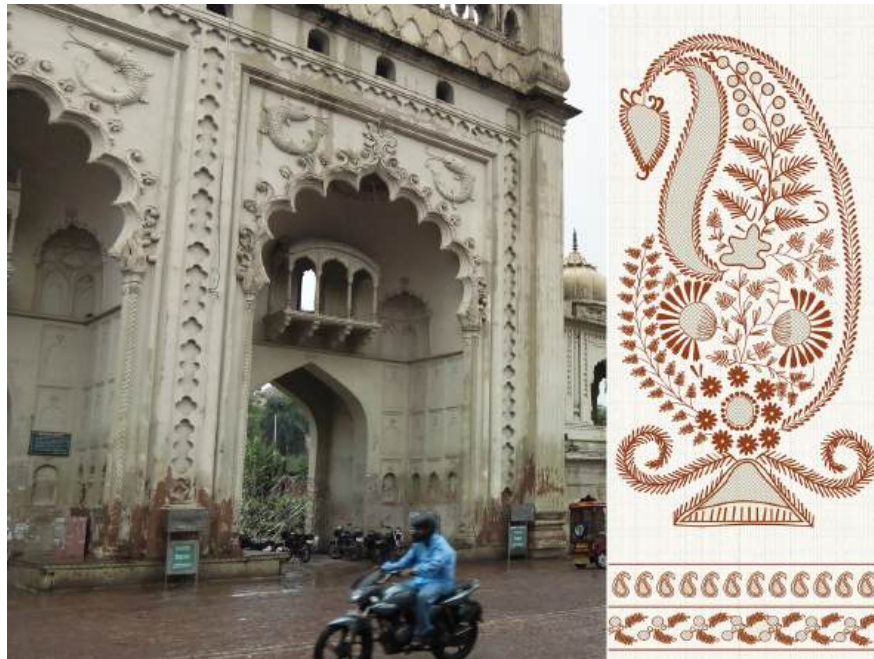
¹² Pankaj Arya and Shilp Sadhana, *Diagnostic Study, Artisan: The Chikan Embroidery Cluster, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh* (2001), 1.

¹³ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 39.

¹⁴ Interview by author with Chikankari entrepreneur, Lucknow, July 2017.

¹⁵ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 34, quoting Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, *Embroidering Lives: Women's Work and Skill in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), xxiii.

Figure 3. Chikankari Design Motifs, Lucknow, 2017. Photograph and Illustration by author.



multiple specialised artisans across different stages of manufacture. The industry largely lacks a centralised institutional structure regulating labour relations or artisan welfare. One of the defining features of the industry is its informal division of labour. This informality is not incidental but structurally reproduced because it lowers costs and preserves flexibility for traders and retailers.

The Chikankari production is a 'multi-staged production process'¹³ (see Fig.4). The cloth is imported from places like Surat, Ahmedabad and Mumbai¹⁴, but some is locally available. While muslin was historically preferred, lighter cotton fabrics are now more commonly used owing to their lower cost.

The production process begins with the master cutter, who cuts the fabric into garments such as *kurtas* and *salwar-kameez*. The fabric is then stitched by the *darzee* (tailor) before being sent for block-printing. Skilled artisans locally referred to as *chappais* prepare and transfer the printed motifs onto the fabric, either through established design patterns or according to specific instructions. The printed cloth is subsequently passed on to embroidery artisans for *jaali* work, many of whom are also

trained in *zardozi* embroidery. The incorporation of *zardozi* alongside Chikankari often increases the market value of the finished garment.

Following embroidery, the garments are sent for washing and ironing at the *dhobi ghat* along the banks of the Gomti River, after which the finished products are returned to retail shops and commercial outlets. The entire production network is mediated through contractors and middlemen who facilitate the movement of goods between manufacturers, traders and artisans.

A large section of the Chikankari industry, including artisans and traders, have no formal relationship. The industry functions from the 'homes of secluded embroiderers upon whose labour a vast hand-powered industry is founded'.¹⁵ Production remains highly decentralised, with artisans dispersed across the city and its peripheral settlements. Chikankari, as an industry, is not restricted to the markets and commercial hubs; it extends to the houses of the artisans as a place of production.

Alongside these spatial and institutional networks, the industry also operates through informal patron-client relationships that mediate access to labour and

markets. Chikankari is largely an informal industry where the trader-as-patron is the most common link between artisans and the market. The relationship established between a patron and an artisan, although not legally bound, is based on 'strong elements of inequality'.¹⁶ Due to there being no wage contracts, Chikankari artisans, primarily women, tend to be exploited by contractors and middlemen.

The gendered structure of labour within the Chikankari industry reflects broader patterns identified in feminist political economy, where women's participation in informal work is often both essential and structurally undervalued. As Naila Kabeer argues, participation in informal labour, particularly that of women, does not necessarily translate into economic autonomy or institutional visibility. In such contexts, women's labour remains largely fragmented, limiting access to skills accumulation, assets and formal recognition. At the same time, Kabeer also points towards collective efforts that attempt to organise home-based workers who fall outside conventional definitions of formal labour.¹⁷

The dispersed nature of labour within the Chikankari industry is closely tied to the spatial geography of Lucknow, where production, trade and institutional activities remain

distributed across different parts of the city. For example, the Chowk market in the old city of Lucknow functions as one of the principal economic centres of the Chikankari industry. The local manufacturers of Chowk resell their Chikankari clothes to high-end retailers, who subsequently trade with export companies. The area also accommodates several *chappai* artisans and smaller Chikankari centres, many of which are collectively operated by women engaged in stitching and embroidery work.

While *Chowk* functions as a production and trading hub, *Hazratganj* represents the institutional and administrative presence associated with the industry including the Lucknow Municipal Corporation and Uttar Pradesh Export Corporation (UPEC). In collaboration with organisations such as the Network of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (NEED), the municipal corporation organises seminars and events for traders associated with the Chikankari industry and skill development programmes for women artisans.

The unequal and informal labour relations became particularly evident during field interviews conducted with women artisans and entrepreneurs associated with the industry. While surveying in 2017, I encountered a woman entrepreneur working alongside four to five women artisans. They used their house as a production centre for Chikankari. As an educated entrepreneur with established contacts with traders, *karigars*, *chappais* and middlemen, she played an important mediating role within the production network by facilitating the movement of embroidered goods across different stages of manufacture and trade.

Another manufacturer, which owns 'Lucknow Chikankari Factory' (see Fig.5) in Lohia Park near the Chowk area, gets the stitching work done in his village in Malava, outside Lucknow. There are approximately 1000 girls who work for this manufacturing centre.¹⁸ The owner has a record of all the artisans who

¹⁶ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 60.

¹⁷ Naila Kabeer, "Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice: Critical Pathways of Social Change," *Pathways of Women's Empowerment Working Paper* (2008), London School of Economics Research Online, <https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/53077/>.

¹⁸ Interview by author with Chikankari entrepreneur, Lucknow, July 2017.

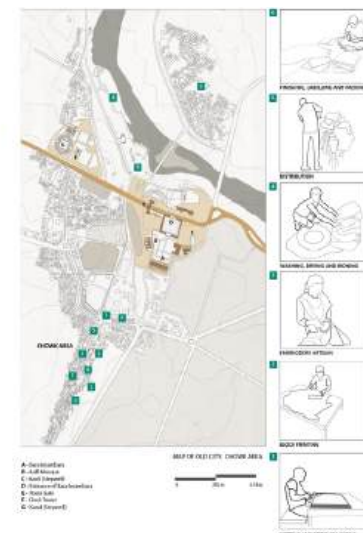


Figure 4. Network of Artisans in the Chikan Industry, Mumbai, 2022. Drawing by author.

¹⁹ Interview by author with Chikankari entrepreneur, Lucknow, July 2017.

²⁰ Bina Agarwal, “Labouring for Livelihoods: Gender, Productivity and Collectivity,” *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63, no. 1 (2020): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00211-y>.

(page 111)

²¹ Kritika Singh, *A Study of Chikan Industry: Exploration on Value Chain and Skill Analysis* (Master’s thesis, Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai, 2015), 69, citing Lucknow Chikan: A Report, U.P. Export Corporation.

²² Jyotindra Jain, *Crafts of India: Handmade in India* (New Delhi: Council of Handicraft Development Corporations, 2005), 18.

²³ Uttar Pradesh Directorate of Industries, “Uttar Pradesh Export Corporation (UPEC),” accessed November 30, 2025, <http://updi.in/>.

²⁴ Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, “Design and Technical Development Scheme,” accessed November 30, 2025, <http://handicrafts.nic.in/pdf/Scheme.pdf>.

²⁵ Singh, *A Study of Chikan Industry*, 72.

²⁶ Uttar Pradesh Trade Promotion Authority (UPTPA), “About Us,” accessed November 30, 2025, <http://updi.in/>.

²⁷ Export Promotion Bureau, Government of Uttar Pradesh, “About Us,” accessed 2026, <https://epbupindia.in/>.

²⁸ National Centre for Design & Product Development (NCDPD), “About Us,” accessed 2026, <http://www.ncdpd.in>.

²⁹ Government of India, Ministry of Textiles, Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), *Scheme Document for Handicraft Development Programmes (includes Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana)* (New Delhi: DC Handicrafts), accessed 2026, <https://handicrafts.nic.in/pdf/Scheme.pdf>.

³⁰ Uttar Pradesh Institute of Design and Research (UPIDR), “About Us,” accessed 2026, <https://upid.ac.in/about-us/>.

work for him. He claims that these are young Muslim girls who work to support their families with additional income and ‘pass their time’ engaging in embroidery work from home. Each woman is paid per piece. It is a ‘trust-based contract’ between the patron and the artisan. The owner claims only 80% of garments are returned after stitching, while the remaining pieces are either rejected due to poor quality workmanship or reported as damaged during the production process.¹⁹

These cases differ significantly in terms of the patron’s position within the production hierarchy and their relationship with artisans. These social relations are continually formed and reconfigured through everyday negotiations between workers, contractors, traders and patrons. The interaction between these diverse actors plays a significant role in shaping the organisational structure and functioning of the Chikankari industry. This fragmented structure produces asymmetrical relations of power within the production network, where artisans bear the risks of irregular work and low bargaining power, while intermediaries and traders retain greater control over pricing and market access.

This situation aligns with Bina Agarwal’s argument that labour systems are not merely economic structures but are sustained through networks of social interdependence, cooperation and institutional mediation.²⁰ She focuses on structural inequalities within decentralised

and gendered labour systems. Her emphasis on collective organisation is particularly relevant, as it highlights both the possibilities and limitations of intermediary institutions, which are further explored in the following sections.

Government Schemes and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Promoting Chikankari

The Government of India (GoI), through the Ministry of Textiles, formulates policies aimed at promoting the handicrafts sector while protecting the livelihoods of local artisans. In the case of Chikankari, the progression of policies mirrors a broader shift in India’s developmental narrative – from welfare state support to the globalisation of cultural production. Along with the GoI, the State Government of Uttar Pradesh has also implemented policies to protect and promote this heritage craft (see Fig.6). A detailed summary of both central and state government interventions and their stated aims is presented in Table 1.

Analysis

The above tabulated government schemes were formulated in response to concerns surrounding artisans and traders, including unequal bargaining power, fluctuating market demands and increasing competition between local craft production and global

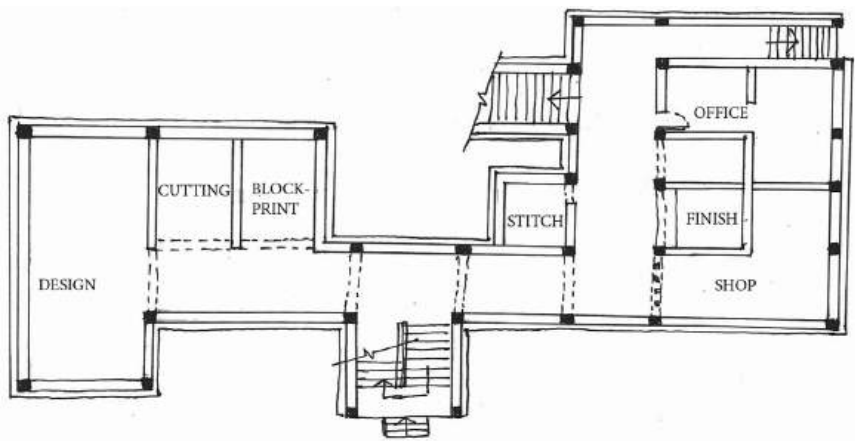


Figure 5. Typical Plan of a Chikan Factory, Mumbai, 2022. Drawing by author.

Table 1. Central and State Government Schemes and Policies Supporting Chikankari and Traditional Crafts (Post-Independence India)

Year	Initiative/Scheme	Policy Aim
Post-1947	Government Chikan Embroidery Scheme launched by the Uttar Pradesh State Government	Set up to revitalise the craft and improve workmanship, provide regular employment to the artisans, provide fair wages and expand markets for Chikan products. ²¹
1952	All India Handicrafts Board (AIHB)	Set up to promote handicrafts; pivotal in documentation and support for crafts like Chikankari. ²²
1966	Uttar Pradesh Export Corporation (UPEC)	In 1976, the UPEC introduced a scheme under which over 2000 workers participated where designing, cutting, tailoring and printing were done after acquiring raw materials from traders. ²³
1974	Design Development Programme	Introduced by DC Handicrafts to aid artisan innovation; benefited embroidery clusters. ²⁴
1976	District Industries Centre (DIC) launched by the Uttar Pradesh State Government	The main aim is to recommend organisations for various exhibitions, bank financing and National/State awards for master craftsmen. ²⁵
1994	Uttar Pradesh Trade Promotion Authorities (UPTPA)	Responsible for organising exhibitions, setting up pavilions and marketing the products manufactured within the State. They also participate in many international exhibitions. ²⁶
1999	Export Promotion Bureau launched by the Uttar Pradesh State Government National Centre for Design and Product Development (NCDPC) by the GoI	Design policies and monitor the export growth of manufactured goods. ²⁷ To research, develop designs and promote them effectively, creating a brand, developing a sustainable economic network with various stakeholders like designers, traders and policy-makers. ²⁸
2000	Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana (AHVY)	Focused on cluster development through educational and entrepreneurial training. ²⁹
2003	Uttar Pradesh Institute of Design (UPID)	Focused on research and development, market competitiveness and design awareness within the craft sector. ³⁰
2008	Geographical Indication (GI) Tag for Chikankari	Lucknow Chikankari is registered under the GI Act to protect regional authenticity. ³¹
2010	Marketing & e-Commerce Platforms (e.g., India Handmade)	Support for artisan e-commerce, Chikankari groups onboarded by NGOs and state bodies. ³²
2015	Skill India / PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana)	Skilling schemes with modules for hand embroidery and textile arts, including Chikankari. ³³
2020	One District One Product (ODOP)	Chikankari declared an ODOP for Lucknow, boosting funding, visibility, and export potential. ³⁴
2023	Crafts Villages under DC Handicrafts	Pilot initiatives to develop infrastructure for craft clusters; Lucknow Chikankari shortlisted. ³⁵
2023	PM Vishwakarma Yojana	Provides financial, technical and skill-development assistance to artisans through training, incentives and collateral-free credit support. ³⁶

³¹ Government of India, Ministry of Textiles, Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), *Geographical Indications of Handicrafts: GI Book (Lucknow Chikankari entry)* (New Delhi, 2017), https://handicrafts.nic.in/CmsUpload/12222017102212GI%20BOOK%20FINAL%202-5-17_resized.pdf.

³² Government of India, Ministry of Textiles, Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), “Marketing Support and E-Commerce Initiatives for Handicrafts (including India Handmade portal),” accessed 2026, <https://handicrafts.nic.in>.

³³ National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), “Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) Overview,” accessed 2026, <https://nsdcindia.org/pmkvy-overview>.

³⁴ Government of Uttar Pradesh, ODOP, “Lucknow – Chikankari and Zari Zardozi,” accessed 2026, <http://odopup.in/en/article/lucknow>.

³⁵ Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, *AHVY Cluster Sanctioned Projects 2016–17 (including Uttar Pradesh embroidery clusters such as Chikankari/Zari crafts)*, accessed 2026, https://handicrafts.nic.in/pdf/2016_17/Fresh_project_sanctioned_CR_2016_17.pdf.

³⁶ Ministry of MSME, Government of India, *PM Vishwakarma Scheme – Support for Traditional Craft Clusters (including embroidery-based livelihoods such as Chikankari in Uttar Pradesh)*, accessed 2026, <https://pmvishwakarma.gov.in/>.

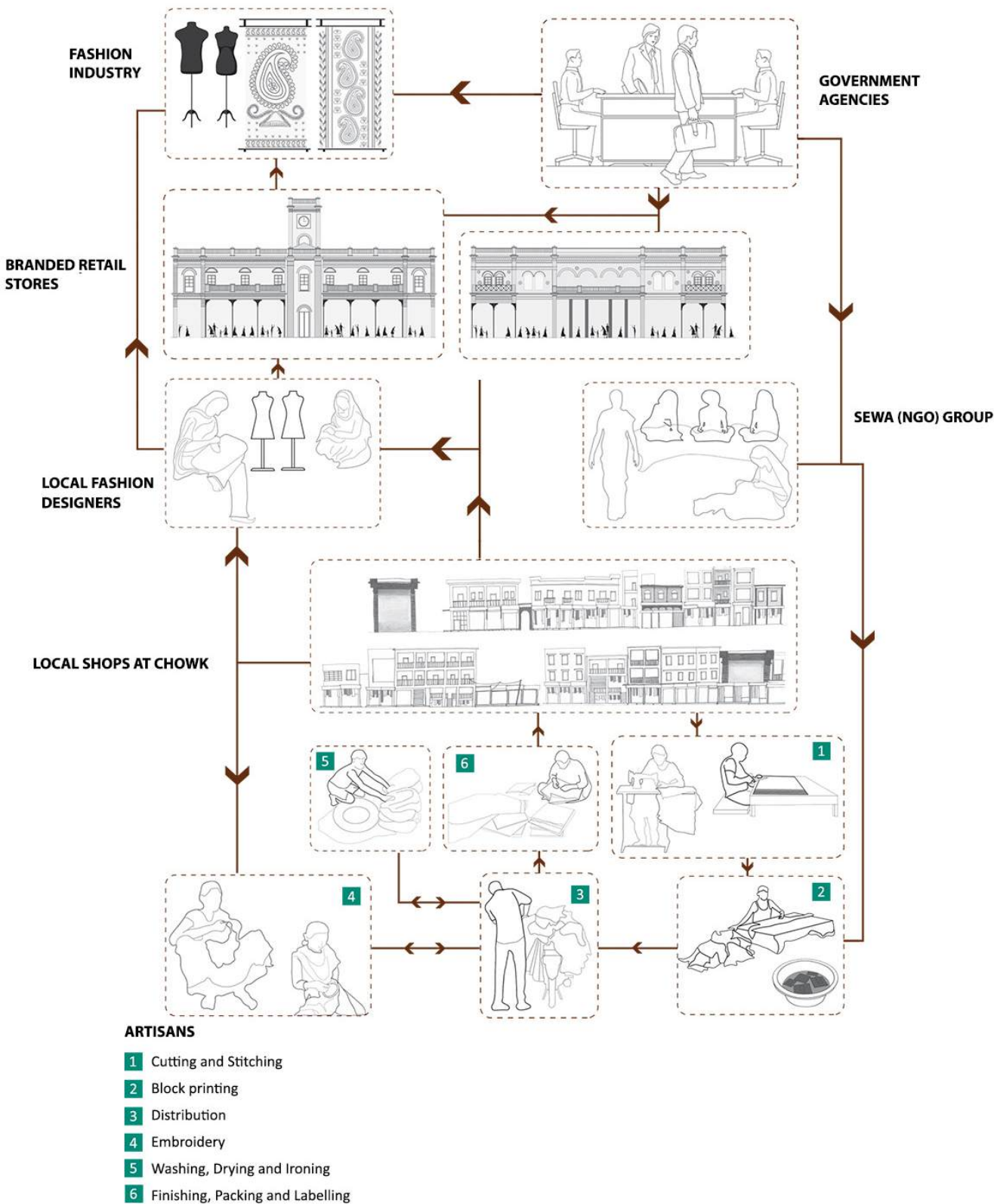


Figure 6. Stakeholder Hierarchy in the Chikan Industry, Mumbai, 2022. Drawing by author.

markets. Both governmental and non-governmental interventions have largely focused on improving market integration and institutional visibility for artisans. However, due to the limited scope of many such programmes, the broader structural inequalities embedded within the industry often remain unaddressed.

Since the 1950s, the GoI has taken measures to promote Chikan craft, though with shifting and often fragmented institutional priorities. Early post-independence policies largely focused on a bottom-up developmental approach aimed at supporting grassroots artisans through cottage industry schemes and village-based production networks. During this period, programmes such as the Chikan Embroidery Scheme and the UPEC attempted to strengthen local production systems, though they were eventually suspended due to insufficient funding and administrative limitations.

Following economic liberalisation in 1991, the Chikankari industry became increasingly integrated into global markets. Consequently, policy approaches during the 1990s shifted towards export promotion, branding, and market competitiveness, marking a broader transition from state-led welfare approaches to market-oriented models. Scholars such as Ashoke Chatterjee have observed that post-liberalisation shifts in India's craft sector have increasingly repositioned crafts not merely as cultural practices requiring preservation, but as economic resources circulating within global consumption networks.³⁷

With the turn of the twenty-first century, efforts were increasingly directed towards institutionalising the craft sector. Policies emphasised formalising the economic framework of Chikan craft despite the decentralised nature of the production system. Intermediary organisation such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) emerged as an important local agency facilitating artisan training, collective organisation and market access.

As discussed, Agarwal emphasises the importance of collective structures within labour systems, distinguishing between workers operating as 'atomised individuals' within unequal labour markets and workers organised through collective forms of participation and support.³⁸ Alongside self-help groups and NGOs, local design institutions were established to professionalise the craft sector and provide institutional support for artisans. Although these actors have contributed to skill development and market access, their impact remains limited in restructuring the broader informal value chain. Intermediary dependence and unequal distribution of value, therefore, continue to persist despite these interventions.

In 2008, Lucknow Chikankari received a Geographical Indication (GI) tag aimed at protecting local knowledge systems and preventing the circulation of cheaper imitations in the market.

The branding of craft through terms such as 'ethnic', 'authentic' and 'traditional' simultaneously generates a sense of exclusivity and market distinction, reflecting broader debates surrounding commodification and consumption, as discussed by Appadurai.³⁹ His emphasis on the shifting 'social life of objects'⁴⁰ is particularly relevant here, as Chikankari occupies a hybrid position wherein its meanings and values shift across local, institutional and global contexts. Despite increased state-led visibility and commercial market access, the circulation of Chikankari product remains mediated through layered networks of traders, contractors and retailers, shaping how value is produced and distributed. Within this framework, commodification is not a linear shift from craft to market object but a process in which meanings, prices and hierarchies are continually renegotiated as the craft circulates through different regimes of value. Such institutional mechanisms played an important role in promoting Chikankari beyond its status as a

³⁷ Ashoke Chatterjee, "Can Our Future Be Handmade?," *Journal of Heritage Management*, accessed 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455929616636447>.

³⁸ Agarwal, "Labouring for Livelihoods: Gender, Productivity and Collectivity," 22.

³⁹ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 44.

⁴⁰ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

⁴¹ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 96.

⁴² SEWA Lucknow, "Background" and "Projects," accessed November 30, 2025, <https://www.sewalucknow.org/background.php> and <https://www.sewalucknow.org/projects.php>.

Figure 7. Artisans of the Chikan Industry, Lucknow, 2017. Photograph by author.



regional 'cultural artefact'⁴¹ and repositioning it within national and global markets.

Despite these interventions, the structural inequalities produced through informal labour relations and fragmented production networks remain largely unresolved. Recent initiatives such as Skill India, One District One Product (ODOP), Crafts Villages and PM Vishwakarma were introduced with the intention of transforming embroidery from supplementary domestic labour into a more visible artisanal enterprise. Nevertheless, a significant gap continues to exist between the value generated through production and the economic returns received by artisans themselves. While greater access to markets has challenged certain commercial monopolies, the benefits of commodification remain unevenly distributed (see Fig.7).

Today, the growing international demand for Indian handicrafts exists alongside increasing competition from machine-made goods and large-scale commercial production. Although the sector continues to generate employment for economically marginalised communities and contributes significantly to the national economy, market-oriented development models alone remain insufficient. Artisanal labour systems continue to be shaped by deeply embedded social and economic inequalities.

Non-Governmental Organisations Supporting the Chikan Craft:

Several NGOs have played an important mediating role between artisans, markets and state institutions within the Chikankari industry.

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA):

Established in Lucknow in 1984 by Runa Banerjee and Sehba Hussain, SEWA emerged as one of the most significant organisations working with Chikankari artisans. Beginning with a union of 31 women, SEWA aimed to strengthen the socio-economic position of women artisans through training programmes, capacity building, self-help groups and collective bargaining initiatives. The organisation also worked towards improving wage conditions and expanding women's participation within local markets.⁴²

SEWA centres across Lucknow function not merely as retail outlets, but as integrated production spaces where multiple stages of Chikankari manufacture—including designing, cutting, tailoring, block-printing and embroidery—are carried out collectively. By creating direct market linkages and encouraging women-led entrepreneurship, SEWA has played a significant role in increasing the institutional visibility of women artisans within an otherwise decentralised industry.

Other organisations, such as Lucknow Mahila SEWA Trust (LMST)⁴³ and Uttar Pradesh Mahila

Kalyan Nigam⁴⁴ have similarly focused on labour rights, women's welfare, sustainable development and community advocacy. In parallel, institutions including the Craft Council of Uttar Pradesh⁴⁵ and the Network of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (NEED)⁴⁶ facilitate artisan training in entrepreneurship, finance and business development while organising exhibitions and trade networks that mediate relationships between artisans and larger markets.

The Contemporary Fashion Industry and the Future of Chikan Craft

Chikankari continues to maintain its appeal across generations and has consequently been reproduced 'with a blend of traditionalism and the experience of urban modernity in India'.⁴⁷ Fashion and cinema have played a significant role in popularising the craft beyond regional markets by introducing wider audiences to its aesthetic and material qualities. Since the 1980s, Indian fashion designers and Hindi cinema have increasingly incorporated Chikankari embroidery into contemporary clothing practices, enhancing its national and international visibility.⁴⁸

Historically associated with white embroidery on fine muslin, Chikankari gradually adapted to changing consumer demands through the use of fabrics such as chiffon, georgette, silk, linen and lightweight cotton in a wider range of colours and patterns. Its application now extends beyond garments to items such as handkerchiefs, bedsheets and printed kurtis. Out of 32 known stitches, only six remain in common use today, namely *jaali*, *hatkati*, *shadow*, *murri*, *phanda* and *tepchi*.⁴⁹ These transformations have repositioned Chikankari from a regionally embedded craft tradition to a more flexible and market-oriented commodity circulating across multiple consumer contexts (see Fig.8).

Despite Chikankari's continued hand production, variations between individual pieces remain common and reflect differences in skill, training, and labour conditions. However, machine-made imitations and industrial embroidery products are often preferred due to their speed and lower production costs, placing pressure on artisanal livelihoods.⁵⁰

Since 2017, the digital market for handicrafts has expanded significantly,



Figure 8. Local Chikan market, Lucknow, 2017. Photograph by author.

⁴³ Lucknow Mahila Sewa Trust, accessed November 30, 2025, <http://www.lmstindia.org/>.

⁴⁴ Uttar Pradesh Mahila Kalyan Nigam, Government of Uttar Pradesh, accessed 2026, <https://mahilakalyan.up.nic.in/>.

⁴⁵ Crafts Council of Uttar Pradesh, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://ngolist.trustngo.net/crafts-council-of-u-p/>.

⁴⁶ Network of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (NEED), accessed November 30, 2025, <https://empowerweb.org/global-reach/past-grantees/network-of-entrepreneurship-and-economic-development-need/>.

⁴⁷ Kuldova, "Networks That Make a Difference," 96.

⁴⁸ Neelam Yadav and Shabnam Chhabra, "Evolution of Chikankari Industry: From Traditional to Contemporary Fashion," *International Journal of Home Science* 10, no. 1 (2024): 301, <https://doi.org/10.22271/23957476.2024.v10.ild.1586>.

⁴⁹ Sudipta Dev, "Art and Crafts: Lucknow's Living Tradition," in *Lucknow, Then and Now*, ed. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones and Ravi Kapoor (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003).

⁵⁰ "Lucknow Chikan Craft Threatened by Chinese Variant: ASSOCHAM," *The Times of India*, January 17, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lucknow-chikan-craft-threatened-by-chinese-variant-assochem/articleshow/50558443.cms>.

⁵¹British Council, *Reimagining the Craft Economy Post COVID-19*, accessed 2026, <https://www.britishcouncil.in/programmes/arts/crafts/reimagining-craft-economy-post-covid-19>.

⁵²National Commission for Women, *SRIJANA: Socio-Economic Status of Trained and Untrained Handicraft Women Artisans* (New Delhi: National Commission for Women, 2025), accessed 2026, <https://cdn.ncw.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/SRIJANA-Socio-economicStatusofTrainedandUnTrainedHandicraftWomenArtisans.pdf>.

particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵¹ Chikankari production has increasingly adapted to digital marketing, product diversification and wider consumer markets beyond garments. This change has enabled artisans and traders to engage with new technologies, markets and modes of circulation. However, despite several institutions, NGOs and training programmes having attempted to support artisan communities through workshops, skill development and market access initiatives, their impact on structural inequalities within the industry remains limited.

The industry today continues to negotiate between heritage preservation, informal labour, fashion consumption and global capitalism. The increase in digitisation and e-commerce is likely to further transform the industry by expanding market access while simultaneously intensifying pressures towards standardisation and commercial scalability.

Conclusion

The history of Chikankari reflects the broader social, political and economic transformations of Lucknow across the Nawabi period, colonial rule and post-independence India. While the craft continues to function as an important cultural and economic practice, its contemporary existence is shaped by shifting regimes of value.

This research demonstrated that Chikankari is not simply a decorative craft tradition but a socially embedded production system shaped by intersecting networks of labour, institutions, markets and state policy. These dynamics reflect the repositioning of the craft within contemporary regimes of commodification and informal labour. Contemporary reports continue to highlight issues surrounding unequal wages, dependence on intermediaries and limited direct market access for women artisans. Many continue to receive only a small share of the final market value of Chikankari products.⁵²

At the same time, the transformation of Chikankari through fashion, digital commerce and global markets reveals how traditional crafts continually negotiate between cultural continuity and economic adaptation. The future of Chikankari, therefore, depends not only on preserving its heritage value, but also on creating more equitable systems of production, recognition and economic participation for the artisans who sustain the craft.

The case of Chikankari highlights how 'heritage crafts' are actively produced within contemporary global economies rather than preserved outside them. What appears as cultural continuity is in fact continuously reworked through informal labour systems, market intermediaries and shifting consumer demands. In this sense, Chikankari becomes a lens through which to understand how tradition is not fixed but constantly reconstituted through economic and social processes that are unevenly experienced across actors within the same production network.

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Glossary

Nawabs: Royals of Awadh in a North Indian region

Nawabi: royalty

Imambara: Court/House of Imam, is often used as a congregational hall

Lucknowis: local people of Lucknow

Purdah: a blind, a cloth covering a woman’s face

Angrakha: royal robe for a man

Salwar-kameez: upper and lower garments of a woman

Darzee: tailor

Chappais: block-printer

Dhobi ghat: washing area, sometimes on the banks of a river/ waterbody

Karigars: skilled artisan

List of Abbreviations

AHVV: Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojna

DC(H): Development Commissioner (Handicrafts)

GI: Geographical Indication

GoI: Government of India

LMST: Lucknow Mahila SEWA Trust

NCDPC: National Centre for Design and Product Development

NEED: Network of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development

NID: National Institute of Design

SEWA: Self-Employed Women’s Association

SHGs: Self-Help Groups

UPEC: Uttar Pradesh Export Corporation

UPID: Uttar Pradesh Institute of Design

UPTPA: Uttar Pradesh Trade Promotion Authorities

“Tradition Meets Modernity”: A Conversation with Kelvin Peng, Peter Grace & Yiran Li

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Interview

KEYWORDS

Furniture Design, Neo-Chinese Design, Finland, China, Contemporary Design, Scandinavian Modernism

This article is an interview, including a written introduction and conclusion, between Peter Grace and Chinese furniture and interior designer and amateur design historian Wenhui “Kelvin” Peng, with Yiran Li acting as interpreter. The interview explores Peng’s career in design and his interest in creating a style of furniture and interior design that is both modern and distinctly Chinese in character. The conversation covers his early career in service and graphic design and his travels and cross-cultural collaborations in Japan, Scandinavia, and other locations, as well as their influence on his work. The interview discusses his syncretic design philosophy, which combines modern materials and methods with a Chinese style informed by historical study. Peng offers his thoughts on “neo-Chinese design” and how his work both takes from and departs from its characterization. He comments on some of his designs and speaks about how his design philosophy is demonstrated in the formal qualities of his designs. Finally, he explores how the economic transition of China from its opening to international markets in the 1970s and 1980s has impacted the current landscape of design.

Introduction

Wenhui “Kelvin” Peng is a Beijing-based furniture and interior designer specializing in what he describes as “modern-traditional fusion” Chinese furniture design. Peng was trained in industrial design during the 1980s and 1990s, when China was emerging on the global stage, and he dedicated himself to brand identity design. His passion for Chinese design history and furniture led him to leave his 16-year-old graphic design firm and establish Chuanxi Studio, a furniture research workshop, in 2012. He designs custom furniture and interiors for high-end markets in Beijing and beyond. He has collaborated with designers across Asia and Europe, including Japanese designer Masayuki Kurokawa, Finnish furniture designer Yrjö Kukkapuro, and Danish textile company Kvadrat. He has also served as a visiting scholar in Finland and conducted academic research in China and Japan.

Peng’s design philosophy stems from his deep interest in developing furniture that embodies a contemporary sensibility and adheres to rational design principles while reflecting Chinese aesthetics. As an enthusiast studying China’s millennia-old history of wooden furniture and architecture, Peng observes that much of today’s market revival of dynastic styles either replicates earlier pieces (such as Qing, Ming, or Song dynasty furniture) very literally or produces commodities lacking historical respect and longevity. This observation led him to coin the slogan “Tradition Meets Modernity” to describe his studio’s work.

In early 2025, I met Peng while he was visiting family outside Minneapolis, Minnesota. By luck, I ended up as his personal driver. After visiting local art and design institutions, I took Peng to the studio of Thomas “Tom” Oliphant, instructor in furniture design at the University of Minnesota. From the first meeting, their exchange was electric. Peng, Oliphant, interior designer Lynn Barnhouse, Yiran Li, and I engaged

in multiple meetings, including a dinner, a tea ceremony, and hours of conversations. We explored design in America and China, industrial and economic imperialism, the interplay between Eastern and Western design cultures and processes, and Peng’s practice of developing a distinctive style that is both modern and in line with traditional Chinese furniture: a true heir to the norms of Chinese aesthetics through centuries of transformation and continuity. The following interview revisits and expands upon those exchanges, with the assistance of Yiran Li as interpreter and co-interviewer.

Interview

PG Hello, Kelvin. Thank you for agreeing to share your work and ideas with us today. To start, I would like to ask about your experience coming up in the design world of China as the country opened to Western economic interests. As I remember from our first conversations, your work and methods were heavily influenced by Western notions of design and design methodology. Tell us about your early career in China. How did that early influence of Western design convention influence your practice and ideas about design?

KP During the 1980s and beyond, China underwent a significant cultural transformation. During that period, I went to Shanghai to study product design. While in school, I learned that Chinese art academies had introduced industrial design programs starting in the 1980s. These programs originated from the Western world: art, the Bauhaus, and China’s traditional arts and crafts. My professors leaned more toward the Bauhaus approach. Bauhaus design emphasizes functionality—it’s the fusion of design and art. I wouldn’t use the term “colonization” because it implies coercion, but at that time, China was a developing nation in a state of catching up. Economic development started in coastal cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, and

Shenzhen before spreading inland. Developed nations in Europe and America had long integrated the Bauhaus philosophy with local design traditions successfully. This concept seemed to reach China during the 1930s and 1940s, but it wasn’t until the 1980s that it truly became widespread in design academies. Through this process, modern design was introduced to China.

YL He [KP] mentioned a term, (返本开新) “fan ben kai xin”, meaning to revisit the most authentic state of things and rethink them. Just as a tree has roots and leaves—you see the shape formed by the leaves but not the roots—yet it is precisely the roots that determine the tree’s form. Thus, he felt the Bauhaus philosophy brought him back to the roots of design, re-examining the functionality of objects. Their designs didn’t delve deeply into culture; they focused more on production, returning to the original industrialized European design philosophy.

KP Years later, I realized our principal heavily incorporated aesthetic knowledge when teaching us literary theory. We read much by the two masters of modern Chinese aesthetics: Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua. They blended ancient Chinese philosophy with Western philosophy and integrated it into their writing style. Later, I recognized that much of what the principal taught in class originated from Zong Baihua’s writings on aesthetics, namely his book *Aesthetic Walk*. When I read these works as an adult, I absorbed profound aesthetic sensibilities from traditional Chinese culture. Thus, whenever I encounter traditional Chinese art, I feel a deep resonance.

Armed with this educational background, I began working in Beijing in the mid-1990s. At that time, China lacked an independent profession for product design. Factories in southern China largely didn’t require design, as they primarily fulfilled overseas manufacturing contracts. China’s product design market was

still immature. Consequently, as a recent graduate, I couldn’t enter the product design field. Instead, several classmates, friends, and I started our careers in graphic design. Most of the companies I worked with were American IT firms based in Silicon Valley, including Starbucks, one of the first multinationals to establish a presence in Beijing. We provided solutions for product visual identity design, publishing, and printing. After 16 years of development, my design firm employed over 20 staff members.

My impression of Beijing at the time was that of a highly international metropolis. I recall in 2011, I traveled to Minnesota in the United States to visit my mother and my sister’s family. I remember thinking, “Why is public transportation in Minneapolis so inconvenient?” The city felt distinctly local. Then I went to New York, where I felt like I was back in Beijing—it was incredibly convenient, and everything was saturated with cultural and artistic vibes. That’s when I realized Beijing had become a truly international metropolis in terms of culture and art. At that time, perhaps only Beijing and Shanghai in China had achieved this level. In Beijing, I had both foreign and domestic friends. As a culturally significant metropolis, it fostered extensive cultural and demographic integration.

Following China’s reform and opening-up, Beijing also became a hub for traditional antique furniture. Wooden pieces from the Ming and Qing dynasties, worn and weathered, arrived from all corners of the country. This led to the emergence of numerous small workshops specializing in antique furniture restoration. As demand grew both domestically and internationally, these workshops and storefronts expanded significantly. I was fortunate to witness antique furniture from all regions in Beijing’s markets during that era. From 1998 to 2017, I continuously engaged with these pieces, traversing one antique furniture market after another. I

admired diverse traditional styles and craftsmanship, each embodying cultural symbols and genetic codes. The cultural heritage they carried, though varying in form across eras, remained interconnected—mutually intertwined and inseparable.

In 2000, some dealers began experimenting with creating modern-style Chinese furniture, attempting to carry forward the tradition of Chinese furniture culture. Their works contained traces of fusion between tradition and modernism. These subtle traces, like scattered stones or breadcrumbs, demonstrated the potential for further development along this path. Such endeavors would have been virtually impossible during the Cultural Revolution era. I sought to explore this potential for myself.

PG Thanks, Kelvin. Can you tell me about the emergence of your current design practice and how it relates to “neo-Chinese design”? I see this term referring to Chinese design that mixes traditional motifs with modern tastes. I feel that this describes some of the goals of your work, but I also know you are critical of the way that some designers combine these tastes as not being derived from history or having depth. How does your work relate to this phenomenon?

KP I am familiar with the term “neo-Chinese design.” By 2012, I felt that China’s furniture sector had no examples of form belonging to the contemporary Chinese context. History and reality were completely disconnected. Furniture sold in the market was either antique pieces, replicas, or copies from foreign cultures. Having studied design history and theory, I believed this situation was unsuitable for a country like China, with its own distinct culture and history. China should have furniture that belongs to its present. It should connect with history but also be presented in a modern and contemporary way. It should align with the aesthetics, lifestyle, and spirit of the current moment.

By 2011, I felt compelled to

realign my design direction, hoping to address these issues. I set aside my graphic design work, rented a courtyard house on the outskirts of Beijing, built a woodworking studio, and began researching traditional furniture and revisiting Western modern design. Why did I choose this different path instead of sitting in an office combining traditional formal symbols with modern functional needs? Because I believe that approach lacks historical roots, has no genuine connection to history, and fails to reflect the authentic present. The objective should be to project people’s understanding of regional life, culture, art, and time onto objects, thereby achieving transformation. This transformation is gradual, not instantaneous.

Around 2015, during my third year of practicing contemporary Chinese furniture design, the term “neo-Chinese design” emerged. I’ve always seen the neo-Chinese design as a product of commercial society addressing rapid consumption needs—designed for quick sales or mass production. This differs from my work, which engages with history, culture, and modernity. Many designers creating neo-Chinese styles lack understanding of history, craft production/manufacturing, or the conceptual definitions of modernity. They simply sit at computers crafting these “new” designs, which are highly one-sided and incomplete. Therefore, I don’t believe it will endure historically and will likely fade away soon. That’s my perspective on “neo-Chinese-style design” and its relationship to my own work.

PG Let’s discuss the influence of Scandinavian modernism on your work.

YL Did that influence your design work? What did you learn from it? I think it offers more inspiration for the development of your practice of fusion. Did you find inspiration in that regard?

KP Scandinavia has definitely influenced and inspired me. It doesn’t

suit me to design a piece first and then seek a factory to produce it. Instead, I took a more radical path: establishing my own woodworking workshop and recruiting skilled carpenters. The workshop includes living quarters and a communal kitchen. Together, we research and create.

As a designer educated in modern design principles, I deeply cherish traditional Chinese design while actively seeking to broaden my horizons beyond any single style. I've enjoyed multiple opportunities to collaborate with international designers. One such collaboration was with the renowned Japanese designer Masayuki Kurokawa. This partnership began during my early research into traditional Chinese furniture craftsmanship and techniques, spanning three years of frequent exchanges. It laid the groundwork for future cross-cultural partnerships, such as those in Scandinavia. In Japan, he showed me his approach to thinking, which is both Eastern and international, rooted in the context of international modernism.

And of course, China. There, I also participated in another profoundly influential endeavor: a study salon founded by a Peking University scholar. After they invited me, I followed this group from 2017 to 2024. There were about 100 members representing various professions in Beijing. Each session featured a speaker from a university in China, sharing knowledge and insights from their specific field. Most were individuals well-versed in both Eastern and Western cultures. The knowledge they discussed spanned from Western to Eastern, modern to historical, and cultural to artistic. For me, as a designer, this formed a fundamental understanding of an artist's inner logic. It provided an excellent framework for thinking and observation, helping me better comprehend history, Western philosophy, and Western culture. This might be the most influential experience for me, directly impacting less visible aspects of my design,

whereas the influence of the Nordic region is more immediately evident.

PG Yes, that makes sense.

KP Having another direction for learning is crucial. For me, that was Scandinavia, specifically Finland. I happened to read a book called *The Chair as an Example of Chinesism in Modern Furniture Design* by Chinese design historian Fang Hai. This book had a significant impact in Scandinavia. I believe it's the first book to place traditional Chinese furniture within a global framework, and I've gained many useful and insightful perspectives from it. One key takeaway is that Chinese furniture culture holds a distinct place in world history. You'll find exquisite furniture and rich furniture cultures across many nations. Yet Chinese furniture stands as one of the most uniquely vibrant branches in the world, representing the longest continuous chain of design in history.

Ultimately, Fang Hai and I became good friends. At the time, he was a doctoral student at Aalto University. Due to this book's influence in Finland, he maintained close connections with many leading Finnish designers. So, when I traveled to Finland with him, I met several designers who are among Finland's most significant figures. I carefully observed these designers and their work, while also taking in the atmosphere of the country. We also visited Sweden, where Fang Hai had many friends, including renowned local designers. Also, Denmark. As my furniture design practice was still in its early stages, I visited furniture store after furniture store for research. I believe the most valuable lesson I learned came from visiting these countries' old antique furniture stores—some as vast as giant warehouses. There, I encountered countless styles no longer seen on the market today. It was precisely through witnessing this endless variety of furniture that I began to discern the trajectory of Nordic modernist furniture's formation.

Although Scandinavians strove

to avoid the Bauhaus path, they were inevitably influenced by it. Yet they also developed their own distinctiveness, rooted more deeply in local traditions. Denmark has Danish modernism, Sweden has Swedish modernism, and Finland has Finnish modernism. Their modernist styles differ distinctly. They share similarities with Bauhaus yet diverge significantly. They embody rational thinking while drawing from a rich folk woodworking tradition. Consequently, they follow more natural principles. They adhere to more traditional woodworking patterns. They blend these traditional techniques with modern functionality and new material technologies. This is what I observed during my travels through the Nordic region. I also read extensively, accumulating a wealth of knowledge about Nordic design and its practitioners. However, when I read these books, my understanding is grounded in lived experience. I have been to those places and engaged with their people. This is fundamentally different from reading a book about a place you've never visited.

Bauhaus-style furniture appears stark and austere—so cold and rigid. Nordic modernism, however, is a gentle modernism. Its characteristics are perfectly balanced, laying the groundwork for further evolution. Within its design culture, this gentle modernism—or perhaps gentle postmodernism—remains present today. I recall a Danish designer—whose name escapes me now—I encountered in a book on Danish furniture design history. He told his students, “We must not only inherit Denmark's 300-year woodworking tradition but also make other nations' woodworking traditions our own.” Their practice also bridges tradition and modernity. Traditions passed down through generations have been successfully modernized. I see this and feel my own path validated. These examples are like stones on the road, marking the way and helping me see further ahead.

When I traveled to Finland, I encountered numerous individuals

Figure 1. Front view of the Lihue Cabinet (六合柜) designed by Kelvin Peng. Image courtesy of Chuanxi Studio.



from various design fields. I would like to thank all the designers and everyone involved in their work. One particularly influential experience was collaborating with several former members of the Finnish Industrial Design Association. These included Harri Kalliomäki, head of furniture at the Lahti Institute of Design, and Hannu Kahonen, the former president of the association. We also worked together on several furniture projects. I often communicated with Harri individually. I shared my furniture design practice with him. He offered support and explained how Finnish modernism had evolved. This was immensely helpful. He also clarified the distinction between ornamentation and structure in furniture design.

He told me that in Finland, chair legs are inserted directly into the chair's surface. During those two days working with him, I didn't engage in any form of ornamental design. The prototype I was building had structure but no ornamentation. He told me that Danes create a curve between

the chair legs and the floor, while Finns insert the legs directly into the chair body without any curve. That's Finland. That's Denmark. I found it simple. Suddenly, I understood what was ornamentation, what wasn't, and what was pure structure. It was a very small detail, but it changed my practice immensely.

Everyone has their own way of doing things. The Scandinavians showed me a way of working that is both modern and rooted in tradition. I don't see that in the Bauhaus style. Bauhaus only gives you a fixed formula.

Even years later, a buyer from Hermès visited my studio. When he saw what we were doing, he was genuinely delighted. He suggested I explore other European design traditions beyond Bauhaus and Scandinavian modernism. So, I began reading Italian theater works. I studied American furniture design. I researched British and French furniture design.

At that point, I realized I couldn't be satisfied with just a single piece

of furniture. I needed a grand scene with a connection between objects. I contemplated how to assemble these objects into a furniture collection. Furniture can create a specific atmosphere within an interior space. I began studying spatial design and interior design. Even before, while working on furniture design, I was constantly learning about spatial design, interior design, and architectural design. From nothing to something, then to furniture, then to interior spaces.

PG It is clear that you make considerable effort building these scenes you mention to ensure your furniture complements each other. Could you provide an example of how your own work blends traditional and modern elements, or combines them in ways you find novel? I'd appreciate some images illustrating this with one (or more) pieces of furniture.

KP I've sent you representative images of our furniture, including chairs, tables, and cabinetry. Overall, while rooted in China's traditional design culture and craftsmanship, my designs adopt simpler structures and forms. They balance practicality with ornamentation. The cabinets feature modular designs that can be disassembled into separate components and reassembled in various styles (see Figures 1 and 2).

The combination of fabric and wood in the screens can also be freely customized through the wooden structural design, offering a richer range of usage experiences.

The tables utilize traditional mortise-and-tenon joints, a structure that can be disassembled to form a flat configuration, facilitating transportation and storage (see Figures 3 and 4).

PG Lastly, do you consider your work to be decolonial in any sense? I certainly see it that way, given your interest in creating an entirely new contemporary Chinese style of furniture influenced by all these new technologies and processes. Interestingly, your furniture seems

to strongly embody that cultural character even while you express such pride and excitement about the various foreign influences you've introduced. I'm very curious what this means to you. What are your thoughts on this concept?

YL Kelvin mentioned that the environment he grew up in wasn't colonial. The environment we grew up in wasn't one of colonial culture. It was a paternalistic environment that had returned to China's own cultural state. If we broadly define colonization, maybe it applies, but our experience was not coercive. Colonization should have elements of compulsion.

PG Yes, I mean from that economic perspective. In the post-World War II era of the 20th century, mainland China wasn't directly colonized by foreign powers. But, as I understand it, after China opened its economy to the world in the 1980s, the economic forces unleashed by global market integration led to a certain degree of Westernization that unfolded on foreign powers' terms. From a design standpoint, China held little agency in this process until later gaining greater market control. This is fascinating because Kelvin spoke of creating a new lineage of Chinese furniture. I wonder if such a vision could have materialized during that early phase of economic opening. At that time, China was manufacturing goods for the entire world yet lacked sufficient domestic market demand to support its own design production. As Kelvin recalled from his early career, designers mostly resided in Europe or elsewhere, sending their designs to China while the actual designers weren't present. That's where I see the colonial dynamic at play, and I believe Kelvin and his team do work that seeks to reclaim that autonomy.

KP Yes, the cultural and economic impact is immense. For instance, China has undoubtedly been "colonized" by the U.S. economy. The foreign exchange China earned as the world's factory was directed by the U.S. to purchase its Treasury bonds.

However, I think the term "colonization" is a bit too absolute.

To respond to this, we need to reconnect with our traditional culture. We must transform the finest insights, knowledge, and experience from Western design into our own lived experience, forging a new China suited to this era. Then, you have to let go of certain things. What gets discarded might be precisely what Peter referred to as the decolonized elements.

In 1996, while in Beijing, I visited an extraordinary exhibition themed "Awakening". To this day, it's one of the most remarkable exhibitions I've ever seen. The exhibition showcased the collision between French culture and the Jiangnan culture of China within the French Concession in Shanghai around 1920. The fusion of these two cultures in interior design, architecture, advertising, product, and packaging design gave birth to new visual and formal expressions. There were beds, tables, lamps, matchboxes, calendars, and more. I was profoundly struck at the time, realizing that new

forms could emerge from the collision of different cultures. The visual imagery of Shanghai's local culture blended with the imported French aesthetic, forging a new decorative style and language. This was a style born within a colonial context, yet it created a new aesthetic—a state transcending the simple imposition of colonial powers. Without stimulation and influence from foreign cultures, a culture does not advance but stagnates. It is precisely this cultural hybridity that enables culture to develop and endure. I believe such combinations will bring entirely new vitality and dynamism.

Returning to the concept of "decolonization," I'd rather say we're seeking a place that belongs to China. The spirit embodied in this place, its cultural heritage, has persisted from the past to the present. That was my original thought.

The sudden economic reforms and opening-up policies of the 1980s brought overwhelming external commercial influences, leading to blind imitation of Western design



Figure 2. Front view of the Lihue Cabinet (六合柜) designed by Kelvin Peng. Image courtesy of Chuanxi Studio.

Figure 3. Angled view of the Square Table (方几) designed by Kelvin Peng. Image courtesy of Chuanxi Studio.



Figure 4. Front view of the Square Table (方几) designed by Kelvin Peng. Image courtesy of Chuanxi Studio.



without integrating any Chinese cultural essence—it was all mere copying. Of course, instead, we can now apply modern Western design methods to transform traditional objects by integrating the spirit of Chinese culture. We can distill the core elements of tradition and build upon them. Perhaps this is the concept of colonization and decolonization Peter was referring to, though I still don't fully agree. For a while, China has boasted designers across a myriad of fields, each with distinct professional trajectories. Some, like myself, actively engage in practice rooted in tradition. This pursuit stems from my personal devotion to Chinese heritage, though I equally embrace modernist design methodologies and philosophies from the West. They flow through my veins as deeply as my mother culture.

Conclusions

The interview illustrates the influences and objectives of the work of Kelvin Peng. It profiles a designer who matured in his practice as his country ascended to the status of global superpower. The conversation

reveals an interdisciplinary designer who started in graphic and brand design before a mid-career pivot to furniture and eventually interior architecture, with history and philosophy as significant aspects of his design practice.

Peng's practice in many ways epitomizes the neo-Chinese design movement while also interrogating and critiquing it. Cultural researcher Rujia Jiang defines neo-Chinese design as "a design paradigm integrating traditional Oriental aesthetics with modern design language".¹ Peng expresses an interest in developing contemporary Chinese design worthy of succeeding earlier conventions of furniture throughout each dynasty of China's history, rather than ill-informed fads that only hold up in the current moment. Peng's characterization of neo-Chinese design as a consumerist fad is totalizing and may reflect an opinion crystalized in the earliest days of such design rather than one reflective of its current form. In a systemic analysis of neo-Chinese product design,

¹ Rujia Jiang, "Contemporary Presentation of Oriental Aesthetics: Cultural Genes and Design Methodology of Neo-Chinese Style Product Design," *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025): 34.

²Rujia Jiang, “Contemporary Presentation of Oriental Aesthetics: Cultural Genes and Design Methodology of Neo-Chinese Style Product Design,” *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025): 34.

Jiang posits a model of neo-Chinese design that identifies “cultural genes” defining the practice, including “vitality and spirit,” “blank space,” and “symmetry and balance.”² While this approach effectively isolates different phenomena that define neo-Chinese design, it risks divorcing them from their respective historical context and philosophical roots in the process. Peng’s indictment of neo-Chinese design as a superficial movement is indeed justified when its products are simple distillations and combinations of various Chinese cultural and formal elements reproduced and combined with contemporary styles without attention to historical context.

In the same article, Jiang claims that the future of neo-Chinese design lies in the deepening of its cultural significance, including “philosophical thoughts,” to avoid “the homogenization and superficiality of design.” Peng’s criticism of neo-Chinese design is similar, and his practice presents a realized example of the improvements that Jiang envisions. Peng’s knowledge of Chinese furniture history and aesthetic theory fulfills Jiang’s demand for “philosophical thoughts” and ensures that objects are authentically grounded in a variety of sub-cultures and historical periods, combating superficiality.

For Peng, studying and evoking history and ideas beyond China is integral to this practice. He recounts reading and discussing Western design history, participating in reading groups and academic exchanges with scholars and designers from China and Japan, and learning history and style from Scandinavian masters while prototyping together. Peng also criticizes neo-Chinese design for not understanding the history of modernism and seeing it as an ahistorical formal language to be exploited. In contrast, Peng became familiar with modernism, first by studying the history of the Bauhaus and then its later development in Scandinavia.

Peng’s practice centers exploration

of the ways that other cultures have effectively fused their craft traditions with modernist design to effectively preserve tradition while keeping styles and construction fresh. Specifically, Peng’s inspiration for integrating contemporary design technologies and motifs with Chinese culture and production techniques comes in part from Scandinavia, where craft traditions and modernist conventions coalesced to produce Scandinavian modernism during the early to mid-20th century. In an analysis of Nordic and Chinese home design, scholar Qian Fang notes that both Nordic and Chinese home designs use natural materials like wood and stone to evoke a connection with the natural world. Fang also notes that both cultures use muted earth-tone colors with natural accents. While the virtual medium of the interview made it difficult to gather more in-depth explanations of Peng’s specific works, the pieces he featured deploy wood in a way that shows solid, muted colors with minimal ornamentation, in line with the similarities that Fang asserts between Chinese and Nordic interior design. Indeed, Peng’s work might be better described as “Chinese Modernism” rather than “neo-Chinese design.”

I asked about the relationship between Peng’s work and decolonization with the assumption that China was still experiencing colonization during the 20th century. Peng instead claimed that he grew up in a China defined not by foreign influence but by a strong domestic cultural presence. His sentiment coexists with the reality that although mainland China was not colonized after the end of World War II, the British retained control over Hong Kong until 1997, and Portugal retained control over Macau until 1999. Nevertheless, Peng felt that “the term ‘colonization’ [was] a bit too absolute” and did not reflect his experience, even as he acknowledged that the U.S. and Europe had exerted various forms of influence over China and disrupted domestic markets with foreign-designed goods and taste

during his lifetime. This part of the conversation seemed to be lost in translation at times, and there were disagreements about the definitions of colonization and decoloniality and broader historical narratives. Peng and I cut much of the back-and-forth for simplicity’s sake, but the question deserves to be revisited in the future.

One of the earliest mentions of foreign influence by Peng concerned Beijing during the late 2000s and early 2010s. In this instance, the presence of foreigners was not oppressive; it enhanced Peng’s experience and created a cosmopolitan city that felt both international and Chinese. He also referred to the example of the Jiangnan and French material culture of the French Concession in Shanghai as an example of stimulating design emerging from colonization. Peng proposes a way of design that turns colonization into a crucible, acknowledging where colonial influence destroys or diminishes domestic markets and traditions, but using the collision of Western and traditional methods and motifs to catalyze the development of a stronger domestic culture. For Peng, tradition can suffocate under oppressive influence, but it can just as easily burn out without sufficient cross-pollination. Peng’s approach searches for a balance between these two extremes while prioritizing the creation of objects that feel authentic enough to stand the test of time.

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PART IV

Typography, Writing, and Visual Sovereignty

Typographic Promotion as a Cross-Cultural Mediation Channel: Reading Type Specimens through the Case of the Nebiolo Type Foundry, Ludovica Polo

ARTICLE CATEGORY

Research paper/Method reflections

KEYWORDS

Type Specimens, Ephemera, Mediation of Typography, Nebiolo, Digital Archives, Design History Methodology

This paper examines type specimens—promotional artefacts produced by type foundries—made between the 1950s and 1970s as privileged sites for analysing the mediation of typography across the production, distribution, and consumption of these artefacts. Moving beyond object-centred design history, the paper investigates how specimens functioned as hybrid devices: commercial ephemera, technical guides, and pedagogical tools. The case study focuses on the Italian Nebiolo Type Foundry and draws on a corpus of promotional materials compiled in a digital database from Italian and international archival collections. By combining quantitative observations from the database with a close reading of three exemplary specimens—*Estro*, *Recta*, and *Metropol*—the paper proposes an analytical framework for examining type specimens as relational artefacts. Methodologically, the article argues for the historiographical value of such materials, showing how these artefacts—long marginal to canonical narratives and only recently subject to systematic archival preservation—constitute essential evidence for writing design history beyond the national frame.

Introduction

Despite the flourishing of typography studies in recent decades, the historiography of the field remains largely centred on typefaces as final products, while comparatively little attention has been paid to the complex design, commercial, and production processes that enabled their creation and circulation. To address these processes and the relationships that sustain them, it is useful to turn to less-examined sources that enable us to access the dynamics of typographic practice in a more situated way. This paper, therefore, examines the promotional artefacts produced by type foundries—particularly type specimens—as privileged documentary traces of the commercial, technical, and social arrangements through which typefaces were designed, marketed, and employed.

However, research devoted to typographic ephemera and the promotion of type remains relatively limited, with only a few specific contributions. Among these, it is worth mentioning the analysis of Dutch specimens preserved at the University of Amsterdam by John A. Lane and Mathieu Lommen¹ and Catherine Dixon's *Showing Type*,² which reminds us that type specimens can reveal valuable insights into the internal transformations of the type foundry's own practice. The most comprehensive reference to date is also very recent: *Type Specimens: A Visual History of Typesetting and Printing* by the American scholar Dori Griffin,³ which traces a series of case studies across centuries and illustrates how these materials conveyed national tastes, noting, for instance, that 'Italian and French specimens [...] tended to be more decorative than their American, British, and Dutch counterparts'.⁴

The fact that these materials have received little attention is also closely connected to the issue of their preservation, which has often been arbitrary within collections, archives, and libraries. Except for a few earlier

examples—most notably the St Bride Library in London—the first institutions specifically dedicated to safeguarding typographic ephemera are relatively recent. Among these, the Letterform Archive in San Francisco stands out internationally, while in Italy, the leading example is the Tipoteca Italiana in Cornuda.

This paper contributes to the discussion of the marginal position that type specimens occupy within canonical design histories and argues for their interpretation as both artefacts of visual communication and valuable historical documents. The research seeks, on the one hand, to clarify the cultural significance of typographic ephemera as mediation channels, especially regarding their transnational circulation, and on the other hand, to propose a methodological approach for reading and analysing type specimens through the case of the Italian Nebiolo Type Foundry. Central to this approach is the construction of a digital archive on the Notion platform, understood not only as a tool for cataloguing the corpus but also as a methodological device for comparing artefacts, tracing relations, and reactivating archival records.

Theoretical Framework: Typographic Ephemera as Mediating Artefacts

Following recent developments in design historiography, this study responds to the call to move beyond the design and production stages of artefacts and to focus instead on processes of mediation—observing those channels through which design circulates, is interpreted, and acquires meaning.⁵ Typographic specimens—together with other brochures and promotional materials—can thus be regarded as mediating devices: designed objects that connect producers (in this case, type foundries) and users (mainly printers and, later, some graphic designers) while bridging the fields of typography and graphic design. Although these

¹ John A. Lane e Mathieu Lommen, *Dutch typefounders' specimens: from the Library of the KVB and other collections in the Amsterdam University Library with histories of the firms represented* = *Letterproeven van Nederlandse gieterijen uit de Bibliotheek van de KVB en andere verzamelingen in de Universiteitsbibliotheek Amsterdam met geschiedenissen van de firma's* (De Buitenkant, 1998).

² Catherine Dixon, «Showing Type», in *TypeBookOne* (Jeremy Tankard Typography, 2004).

³ Dori Griffin, *Type specimens: a visual history of typesetting and printing* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022).

⁴ Ibid., ch. 3.

⁵ G. Lees-Maffei, 'The Production-Consumption-Mediation Paradigm', *Journal of Design History* 22, no. 4 (2009): 351–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epp031>.

⁶ G. Lees-Maffei, ‘The Production-Consumption-Mediation Paradigm’, *Journal of Design History* 22, no. 4 (2009): 351–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epp031>.

⁷ Gianni Parlacino, interview by Ludovica Polo, 7 July 2025; Michele Galluzzo, ‘Maria Grazia Schenone e l’Ufficio Pubblicità’ in *Fonderia Caratteri Nebiolo, 1878–1978: Nuovi studi critici. Atti del convegno internazionale, Torino, 16–17 settembre 2021* (Milan, 2023), 236–51.

⁸ Fallan, Kjetil. *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Berg, 2010).

⁹ Johanna Drucker, ‘Who’s Afraid of Visual Culture?’, *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1999): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0043249.1999.10791964>.

¹⁰ Renato De Fusco, *Storia Del Design*, 4. ed., Grandi Opere (Laterza, 2004). The “quadrifoglio” is described by De Fusco as an ‘artificio storiografico’ (‘historiographical construct’, translated by the author).

¹¹ Enrico Bona, ‘Del Progettista Grafico’, *Campo Grafico: Rivista Di Estetica e Di Tecnica Grafica* 7, no. 1 (1939): 3–5.

¹² Ibid., 4, translated by the author from ‘vita propria, esclusiva e integrale.’

two fields have often been treated as distinct and self-contained domains, at several historical moments—particularly from the post-war period onwards—they can be considered closely intertwined.

Far from being merely commercial tools, these materials reveal a hybrid nature—simultaneously technical, promotional, educational, and aesthetically engaging. They can be read as visual essays on typography: instruments through which foundries demonstrated their technological expertise and aesthetic sensibility by showcasing and celebrating their own creations. Their study, therefore, contributes to understanding how typography was communicated, taught, and valued within specific contexts.

Rather than treating promotional materials solely as finished graphic products, this research adopts a process-orientated methodology aimed at reconstructing the networks and practices that shaped them. The analytical framework takes as its starting point Grace Lees-Maffei’s production–consumption–mediation (PCM) paradigm,⁶ which broadens the scope of design history to include not only production and use but also the systems of mediation—commercial, communicative, and cultural – that condition how design is experienced and understood, often through the design itself.

From this perspective, type specimens emerge as communicative artefacts that were themselves designed and produced in response to market dynamics. In the case of Nebiolo, production was internalised: design was handled by the *Studio Artistico* until the mid-1960s, after which responsibility passed to the *Ufficio Pubblicità*,⁷ and printing was carried out by the foundry’s in-house press.

This approach aligns with broader historiographical trends that challenge the ‘heroic’ model of design history inherited from art history, advocating instead for more inclusive frameworks that encompass technology,

manufacturing, marketing, and reception.⁸ As Johanna Drucker observes, ‘graphic design is as much the result of historical, economic, and social forces as of aesthetic choices.’⁹

This framework also resonates with Renato De Fusco’s *quadrifoglio*,¹⁰ which is a model for analysing design through four interconnected moments: project, production, sale, and consumption. In this context, De Fusco’s *quadrifoglio* and Lees-Maffei’s PCM paradigm are not employed as prescriptive models but as conceptual prompts for reflecting on artefacts as relational objects shaped by interactions between designers, producers, distributors, and users.

In this light, typographic promotional materials emerge not only as intermediaries between foundry and clients but also as interfaces between typography and graphic design—two intertwined yet historically distinct spheres. Particularly between the 1950s and the 1970s, one can observe an increasing integration between these disciplines, in some cases converging into a single professional profile. Printers often remained responsible not only for typesetting but also for the layout and visual conception of the page. This was not an entirely new issue: as Enrico Bona argued in the pages of *Campo Grafico*,¹¹ by the late 1930s, typography was already struggling to live a ‘life of its own, exclusive and integral’;¹² as it had become increasingly intertwined with other technical and artistic professions. Bona therefore advocated the emergence of a new profession, that of the *graphic designer*, to clarify and reorganise this confusion of roles.

Adopting this mediation-centred framework allows Nebiolo’s activity to be recontextualised within the broader network of typographic exchange. Between the early 1950s and the late 1970s—a period corresponding to Nebiolo’s intense promotional production, when formats and promotional strategies diversified through *house organs*, bulletins, collective specimens in poster form, and numerous

contributions to trade magazines—the graphic communication of type foundries underwent a profound transformation.

This period also coincides with the institutionalisation of graphic design as a profession and the rise of transnational circuits of exchange—through trade fairs,¹³ exhibitions,¹⁴ conferences,¹⁵ distributors, and professional associations, which shaped a shared visual and technical vocabulary across Europe. As Anna Calvera¹⁶ argued, a plurality of histories is needed to account for the ‘polycentric network’ of exchanges and mutual influences between dominant centres and supposedly passive peripheries. A more nuanced understanding of design history therefore depends on the ability to read local and global narratives together, rather than as distinct or hierarchical scales.¹⁷ Typographic ephemera, however, with their multilingual layouts, distribution stamps, and visual borrowings¹⁸—reveal how ideas travelled between local and global contexts, challenging the boundaries of national design narratives.

Type specimens, if considered more than commercial tools used to promote one or more typefaces produced by a foundry, also emerge as cultural and educational artefacts. Especially in the case of Nebiolo, they not only provided guidelines for the use of type but also offered anecdotes and information concerning the history of writing, functioning as concise primers on typography and graphic design.

To complement this methodological framework, a digital database was developed as a tool for organising, comparing, and interpreting the materials under study. Activating archival holdings transforms them from passive records into sources that can be queried and compared. This approach also prompts reflection on the cataloguing methods appropriate to such distinctive artefacts, which do not conform to the criteria of

either art history or publishing, and on the kinds of information, whether visual, material, commercial, or relational, that may emerge from their systematic observation.

Building the Dataset from Archival Research

To support and structure the research process, the materials were organised in a digital database developed on the Notion platform. This process brought together items collected from multiple national, international, and online archives, enabling them to be catalogued, compared, and cross-referenced. At the heart of the system lies the database of typographic promotional artefacts—including type specimens, catalogues, trade fair brochures, and other ephemera related to the promotion of typefaces (Fig.1). Each record is described through a set of structured fields, including the following:

- type of object (catalogues or catalogue inserts, ephemera, trade fair brochures, promotional posters, specimens, etc.)
- year of production (known, reconstructed, or approximate)
- producing foundry and country of origin
- language(s) used
- type of binding (e.g., folded sheet, ring binder, saddle stitch)
- number of colours used (1, 2, 3+)
- closed dimensions
- archive(s) of provenance¹⁹
- when indicated, distributors and/or graphic designers involved
- presence/absence of application examples and descriptive texts
- technologies involved (traditional, mechanical, phototypesetting)
- textual notes and photographic documentation

A recurring challenge in the cataloguing process concerned dating. Many catalogues and specimens were designed as living documents, updated over time through detachable sheets or supplements, complicating the attribution of a single publication

¹³ In these years, we may recall, for example, GEC in Italy, Ipex in the UK, Salon TPG in France, and DRUPA in Germany.

¹⁴ In 1965, Nebiolo took part in the exhibition *5° centenario dell’introduzione dell’arte tipografica in Italia* at the Castello del Valentino in Turin, contributing in particular to a section of the exhibition devoted to the European typefaces, curated by Franco Camera, the foundry’s director, and Aldo Novarese. Later, in 1969, again at the Castello del Valentino, it participated in the *Mostra nazionale di grafica pubblicitaria*, presenting the design process of the typeface Forma.

¹⁵ Nebiolo, especially through the figure of Aldo Novarese, had a particularly strong presence at the *Rencontres internationales de Lure* (Lurs-en-Provence) and therefore featured frequently in the associated promotional publications.

¹⁶ Anna Calvera, ‘Local, Regional, National, Global and Feedback: Several Issues To Be Faced With Constructing Regional Narratives’, *Journal of Design History* 18, no. 4 (2005): 371–83, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epi054>.

¹⁷ Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei, ‘Real Imagined Communities: National Narratives and the Globalization of Design History’, *Design Issues* 32, no. 1 (2016): 5–18, https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00360.

¹⁸ Tanya George, ‘How Type Travelled Across Nations and Foundries’, Letterform Archive, 2022, <https://letterformarchive.org/news/how-type-travelled-across-foundries/>.

¹⁹ In some cases, the same artefact was consulted in different archives, and the copies may not be identical (for instance, where references to distributors were added after printing).

²⁰ Lane and Lommen, *Dutch typefounders' specimens*.

²¹ The research focuses primarily on the promotion of metal typefaces, but in some cases – especially from the mid-1960s onwards – some of these were also available for phototypesetting.

²² Among these are the already mentioned Letterform Archive, as well as materials available on the Internet Archive or on other platforms such as Letter Library. In addition, some libraries are digitising parts of their collections, although often only the cover of the artefact is made available.

²³ As noted above, the archive is conceived as a dynamic tool subject to ongoing updates; therefore, the data presented here refer to its status as of November 2025.

date. Moreover, they were rarely conceived as materials to be archived or preserved.²⁰ In such cases, approximate dating was established by cross-referencing internal indicators and external sources.

Using a flexible platform such as Notion enables both the orderly preservation and the exploration of data. One can, for example, filter all *specimens* produced by a *specific foundry*, sort materials by *country* or *production technology*,²¹ or observe the languages used in promotional materials. Regarding distribution, it is also possible to determine whether a specific identified distributor was responsible for selling typefaces produced by different foundries. At the same time, the database makes it possible to observe the most recurrent formats, or to assess the percentage of specimens that included a descriptive text about the promoted typeface. These functionalities transform the database into an active research tool capable of revealing hidden constellations of data and design trajectories that would otherwise remain fragmented or invisible.

The archive currently allows for a limited, though useful, form of analysis. In the future, however, it could be expanded by incorporating additional data—such as colours, type classification, and comparative details concerning the grid, layout, and structure of the artefact. This expansion would allow richer information to be extracted from the digitally organised corpus

while providing the possibility of comparison with other corpora, even through the use of artificial intelligence.

Moreover, although there are still relatively few digitised archives dedicated to type specimens,²² their wider dissemination and standardisation would enable broader comparative analyses and a closer comparison of identical artefacts that, despite sharing the same printed form, preserve different traces, annotations, and contextual information. Among the 660 items currently catalogued, although the database remains a work in progress and serves exclusively as an internal tool for ongoing doctoral research,²³ approximately 160 records concern Nebiolo.

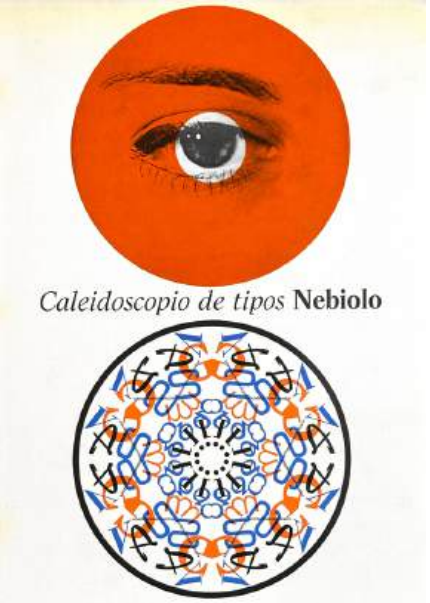
From Data to Context:
Introducing the Nebiolo
Case Study

This section focuses on the case of the Nebiolo Type Foundry, a major actor in the Italian and European typographic landscape of the twentieth century. The decision to concentrate on this foundry was motivated not only by its historical importance and international reach but also by the availability of a substantial corpus of primary sources. Unlike smaller Italian foundries, such as the Fonderia Tipografica Cooperativa, Fonderia Tipografica Meridionale, Fonderia Pavese, or Fonderia Caratteri Lubrano, Nebiolo benefits from a comparatively extensive

Nome completo	Fonderia	Anno	Lingua	Formato	Distributore
Messico	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Tipografia n. 3	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Completamente caratteri	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Ortina	Stempel	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Alphabetica	Fonderia de Cor...	1958-59	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Thomas-schrift	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
GEC 1958	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Faschdruck	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Agata, A. Nebiolo series	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Fonderia Tipografica Cooperativa - Co	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Nebiolo Typefaces	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Reinholdungen	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Quattrocento caratteri	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...
Blaurothe Gessens Schrift (B. Gessens)	Fonderia de Cor...	1958	italiano	Foto 24...	Tipoteca...

Figure 1. Excerpt from the Notion database created by the author.

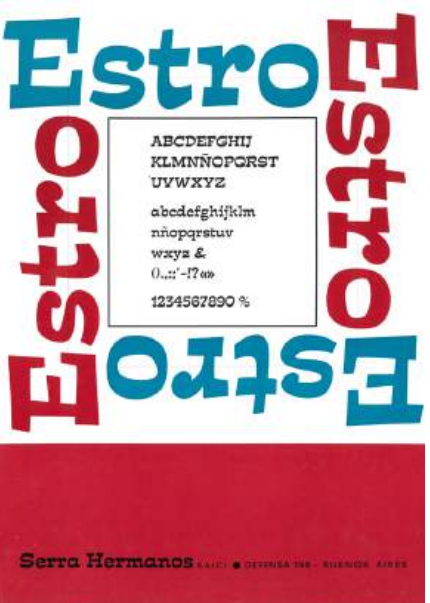
Figure 2. *Caleidoscopio de tipos Nebiolo*, type specimen for the Spanish-language market. Courtesy Nebiolo Collection, Centro Storico Fiat, Turin.



documentary heritage, which facilitates historical reconstruction. In addition to significant holdings in Italy—particularly within the Nebiolo Collection at the Centro Storico Fiat in Turin and the Aldo Novarese Collection at the Tipoteca Italiana in Cornuda—Nebiolo materials are also preserved in several foreign institutions and archives, including the Letterform Archive of San Francisco, the Klingspor Museum of Offenbach, the Imprenta Municipal of Madrid, the St Bride Library of London, the Allard Pierson collections of the University of Amsterdam, and the Bibliothèque Forney of Paris, among many others.

The presence of Nebiolo artefacts across these international archives—some of which have been partially digitised—has in several cases revealed tangible traces of their circulation. Language is the first of these markers: some specimens were specifically printed in multilingual editions or in particular languages, such as English or Spanish (Fig.2). Additionally, distribution stamps, overprints, or adhesive labels make it possible to identify the distributors who imported specific specimens into various countries, allowing the tracing not only of the circulation of typefaces but

Figure 3. Specimen for the Estro typeface featuring the Argentinian distributor Serra Hermanos. Courtesy Tipoteca Italiana, Cornuda.



also of the cultural messages and application proposals embedded in the specimens.

The Turin foundry relied not only on a network of so-called ‘viaggiatori’,²⁴ who promoted typefaces and machinery throughout the Italian regions, but also, like other large firms of the period, it was embedded in a global network of agents. The foundry’s products were imported into the United States by Amsterdam Continental Types, into the United Kingdom by Soldans,²⁵ into Spain by Sociedad Linotype Española,²⁶ into the Netherlands by Van Randwijk Grafische machinehandel, in West Germany by Waldmann & Pfitzner, and so on. Nebiolo also developed a distribution network in South America: for several years, it was represented in Argentina by Serra Hermanos²⁷ (Fig.3), and for a period, it also had branches in Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia.

Reading Type Specimens

Building on the preceding discussion, this section proposes an analytical framework for approaching and reading type specimens. As Lane and Lommen²⁸ remind us, the study of these artefacts is valuable not only for historians but also for practitioners, as knowing what to

²⁴ Travellers, translated by the author.

²⁵ For further information on this company, see: Bob Richardson, ‘The Story of Soldans’, *Small Printer* 53, no. 5 (2017): 100–105, The British Printing Society.

²⁶ It should be noted that the situation had previously been different: as suggested by a letter included in a *Caratteri Cairoli* specimen from the early 1930s, consulted at the Disseny Hub of Barcelona, the Italian foundry had around nine sales agents operating in the main Spanish cities at the time.

²⁷ Serra Hermanos also represented other European type foundries in Argentina, including the German Bauer, as evidenced by a catalogue held in the Fons tipogràfic Bauer–Neufville at the Universitat de Barcelona.

²⁸ Lane and Lommen, *Dutch typefounders' specimens*.

²⁹ To further explore the relationship between the designer and the Marseille-based type foundry, see: Sandra Chamaret et al., *Roger Excoffon et la Fonderie Olive*, Bibliothèque typographique 3 (Ypsilon éd, 2010).

³⁰ For a detailed history of the foundry, see: Mathieu Lommen, ‘A History of Lettergieterij “Amsterdam” Voorheen N. Tetterode (Type foundry Amsterdam) 1851-1988’, *Quaerendo* 26, no. 2 (1996): 111–43, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006996X00089>.

³¹ By *specimen*, we refer to booklets or pamphlets of various formats—generally inexpensive—that specifically promote a single typeface or a few type families. The other materials recorded are mainly catalogues, but also generic promotional ephemera promoting the foundry’s services.

³² These records concerning foreign-language specimens would probably increase if more materials from foreign archives were consulted.

³³ Alessandro Colizzi, ‘The Final Act at Nebiolo: The Quest for a “Universal” Typeface. Forma.’, CAST, 2018, <https://articles.c-a-s-t.com/forma-dattilo-modulo-nebiolos-last-efforts-to-produce-a-universal-typefac-aa965dc0bb9f>.

³⁴ Translated by the author from specimen PC.989 (1967) for the typeface Eurostile.

look for makes it easier to activate these sources, integrating them not only into historical narratives but also into contemporary design practice.

Although the visual richness of such artefacts was not exclusive to the Turin-based foundry, similar approaches can be found, for instance, in the promotional materials of the French Fonderie Olive under Roger Excoffon,²⁹ the German Bauersche Gießerei, and the Dutch Lettergieterij Amsterdam³⁰—such typefaces were often also promoted through much more neutral artefacts, such as catalogue inserts displaying only words and phrases in various point sizes, with minimal accompanying elements.

Within a corpus of roughly 160 Nebiolo promotional ephemera examined, 122 can be classified as type specimens,³¹ and almost all date from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s. Across this subset, the linguistic dimension was one of the key aspects examined. Among these specimens, the descriptive texts are mostly in Italian (100), indicating the persistence of a privileged dialogue with the domestic typographic market. In 75 cases, Italian coexists with one or more other languages, especially in the application examples, in the placeholder phrases used to display the typefaces, and in some cases, in small descriptive sentences. There are also some monolingual examples in foreign languages³² (22): English (14), French (5), Spanish (2), and German (1). These cases often correspond to a specific target market—most notably the Anglophone or South American markets, where the foundry was particularly active—or signal specific channels of international distribution, as in the case of the booklets marked *A Nebiolo [type] series*, aimed at the clients of Amsterdam Continental in the United States. From this perspective, language choice does not appear to have been a mere editorial adaptation but a multilayered commercial strategy: specimens in Italian sustain the construction of an ‘internal’ typographic market and culture,

whereas foreign monolingual and multilingual specimens function as tools for positioning the foundry in other national contexts.

Beyond language, another recurring feature that emerges from the corpus is the choice of format and binding. There is a clear prevalence of folded leaflets (71) and stapled booklets (34) over other solutions—for instance, folders containing sets of separate ephemera (11), a strategy widely used by other foundries in the same period. This bias towards compact, cheap formats—most often A4 size—may reflect an intention to produce economical and easily distributable materials, in some cases clearly designed for transnational circulation, especially in connection with particularly successful typefaces, such as Eurostile and Estro.

Equally significant is the issue of graphic authorship attribution. Among the 68 specimens in which the author(s) is/are explicitly stated, 61 credit Aldo Novarese—most often as the sole designer, indicated using the formula ‘bozzetto grafico di Aldo Novarese’. A few exceptions include typefaces such as *Forma* and *Dattilo*, developed in collaboration with the Milanese group of designers,³³ as well as a couple of 1970s specimens signed by Luciano Agosto and Gianni Parlacino. Furthermore, the accompanying texts often function as genuine metadiscourse on the typefaces they promote: notions such as expressiveness (or rationality), contemporaneity, versatility, and their status as tools for designers recur as key arguments in defining Nebiolo’s type production. In many cases, specimens do not merely show applications but explicitly discuss the relevance of the typeface for the graphic designer, who is called upon to choose ‘not only on the basis of legibility’³⁴ but also in terms of its aesthetic value and its suitability to the appropriate context of use.

Alongside the quantitative observations enabled by the analysis of the entire corpus within the database, this study defines a preliminary analytical

framework, exemplified here through the close examination of three Nebiolo specimens. The specimens for the typefaces Estro, Recta, and Metropol, selected as a representative sample, serve to identify a typical configuration of these promotional materials and of the different components—visual, linguistic, and discursive—that structure them.

As a first example, we consider the 1961 specimen PC.868 for Estro,³⁵ whose tagline, which can be translated as ‘the typeface of the smile’,³⁶ appears on the cover alongside the image of a smiling marble statue. The specimen adopts a horizontal format—perhaps intended to make it more visually distinctive—which was unusual for the foundry. Some of the copies consulted also contain references to the distributors.³⁷ In this case, the accompanying text states that a good typeface, such as Estro, should ‘support the work of the designer and facilitate the work of the typesetter’ and ‘engage the reader’.³⁸ The use of pink and light blue may be read as visually reinforcing Estro’s playful ‘pop’ sensibility.

On the following pages, this typeface—described as having an ‘imaginative flair’ that fully lives up to its name, *Estro*—is shown through phrases in different languages, and its versatility is

demonstrated in the creation of monograms and logotypes (Fig.4), advertisements,³⁹ and headings, as well as in combination with other typefaces from the foundry. The specimen thus appears to have been addressed primarily to typographers, offering them a source of inspiration for everyday compositional practice.

Specimen PC.913 for the typeface Recta⁴⁰ is dated 1963, although the typeface itself predates this, having been originally designed under the direction of Alessandro Butti’s *Studio Artistico*.⁴¹ The cover shows a hand pushing an elastic ‘O’, displayed in three different variants corresponding to the compressed, condensed, and regular versions,⁴² each in a different colour.⁴³ This graphic choice immediately draws attention to the range of widths and weights available within Recta, reflecting a practice that had become increasingly common among type foundries in those years: designing typefaces as extended families made up of multiple variants, rather than as single, isolated designs. On the inside pages, some of these variants are presented through words and phrases in various languages, followed by a series of application examples. These examples demonstrate the versatility of the typeface

³⁵ The copies consulted were sourced from Tipoteca Italiana, the Letterform Archive (in digitised form), and the Nebiolo Collection at the Centro Storico Fiat.

³⁶ Translated by the author from “Il carattere del sorriso”.

³⁷ The digitised version held by the Letterform Archive, for instance, bears the sticker of the Dutch distributor Van Randwijk; in addition, there exists a similar vertical version of this specimen (PC. 877, also dated 1961) entirely in French: ‘Estro le caractère du sourire.’

³⁸ Translated by the author.

³⁹ Among these was a design application for a promotional flyer for the Rencontres de Lure.

⁴⁰ The copies consulted come from Tipoteca Italiana, the Letterform Archive (in digitised form), and the Centro di documentazione sul progetto grafico AIAP in Milan. In the latter case, the presence of this specimen within the archive of a graphic designer—Claudia Morgagni—suggests that these materials were also used, or at least kept, by graphic designers themselves.

⁴¹ Colizzi, Alessandro, and Riccardo Olocco. “Novarese and Butti, a Story to Be (Re)Written”. CAST, 21 February 2017. <https://articles.c-a-s-t.com/novarese-and-butti-a-story-to-be-re-written-37ab38ac64c6>.

⁴² Also in this case, the version held at the Letterform Archive bears the sticker of the Dutch distributor Van Randwijk.

⁴³ In this version, yellow, brick red, and light blue, whereas in the version of the specimen for Nebitype matrices the colours appear much more vivid.

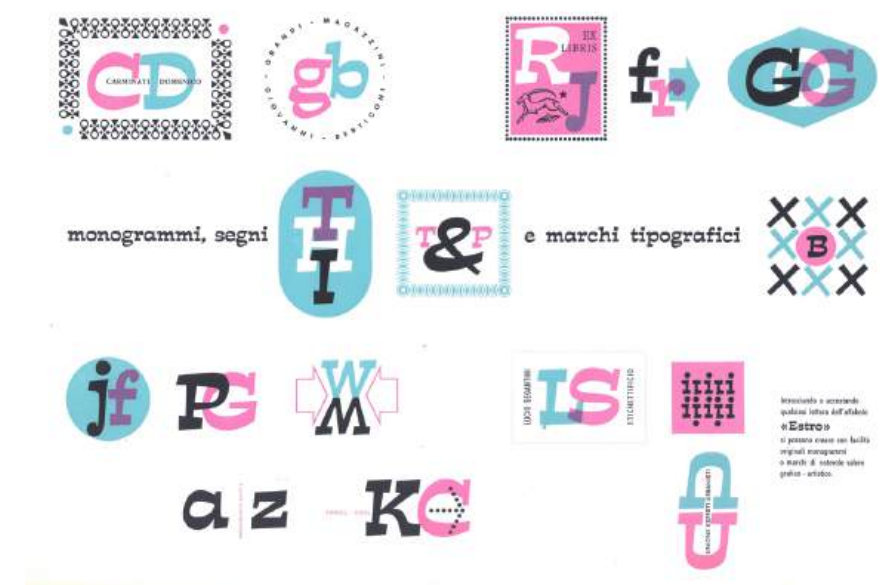


Figure 4. Page from the Estro PC.868 specimen showing examples of the typeface used to create monograms. Courtesy Tipoteca Italiana, Cornuda.

⁴⁴ A typeface designed by Adrian Frutiger and produced by the French foundry Deberny & Peignot, both in metal and for phototypesetting on the Lumitype-Photon system, from 1957 onwards.

⁴⁵ Both appear to have been distributed in the first semester of 1968, probably as a set, since they are often found together. The copies consulted come from Tipoteca Italiana, the Nebiolo Collection at the Centro Storico Fiat, the Centro di documentazione sul progetto grafico AIAP, and the author's personal collection.

⁴⁶ The number of postcards varies depending on the copy consulted: some copies include one postcard, while others include two.

Figure 5. Double-page spread from the Recta PC.913 specimen: on the left an application example, on the right a page of historical-theoretical overview. Courtesy Tipoteca Italiana, Cornuda.



in many contexts, both for text composition and advertising layouts, reinforcing the idea of universality and neutrality as ideal qualities for a contemporary typeface. An accompanying explanatory text traces the history of the emergence of sans serif typefaces, referring to Vincent Figgins and William Thorowgood, and subsequently linking this account to specific details on the design of Recta (Fig.5), which is specifically presented as a solution for graphic designers. On the back cover is a summary table that helps to visualise the entire type family (Fig.6), which can be seen as an Italian counterpart to Univers.⁴⁴

Turning to the third case study, the 1968 specimens PC.1046 and PC.1045 for *Metropol*⁴⁵ (Fig.7) differ markedly from the previous examples, reflecting Nebiolo's mid-1960s shift towards more diversified promotional formats and media. The first piece (PC.1046) takes the form of a tall three-panel fold-out leaflet whose vertical format is consistent with the display logic of the typeface itself; the cover depicts a city skyline, reinforcing both the verticality of the letterforms and the name of the typeface, employing blue and orange in combination with black, a palette that resonates with the high-

contrast visual language adopted by many Italian graphic designers of the period. Inside, the panels combine descriptive text, a display of sample phrases set in different sizes, and a series of composition examples. The leaflet also serves as a container for a small set of ephemera: postcards⁴⁶ for ordering the typeface, with the range of available bodies printed on the reverse, and a folding vertical poster (PC.1045). The latter is printed on both sides, with one side showing the typeface in lower and uppercase, and the other combining two application layouts (a newspaper page and a poster-like graphic) with a textual panel presenting *Metropol* alongside other Nebiolo typefaces (*Eurostile*, *Magister*, *Recta*, *Egizio* and *Bodoni*).

The main descriptive section reiterates the typeface's features and fields of application through a sequence of short promotional statements that encapsulate Nebiolo's positioning of *Metropol* within its catalogue:

Metropol: a name that reflects the dynamic life of our time.
Metropol: a design that expresses the contemporary stylistic ideal.

Metropol: a powerful decorative tool for creating advertising motifs.

Metropol: a practical typeface at the service of the printing art.

⁴⁷ Translated by the author.

Metropol: a new series that combines perfectly with other typefaces.⁴⁷

Taken together, these three examples outline a recurring set of components: a cover that translates a conceptual or formal trait of the typeface into a graphic image and tagline; a display section presenting alphabets and technical information; a discursive, in-depth section; and one or more application sections, sometimes extended into additional ephemera.

Table 1 systematises these components through the tripartite lens of production, mediation, and consumption, showing how each

part of the specimen can be read in relation to these interconnected phases.

Breaking down the specimen into its constituent elements does not reduce it to a set of isolated features; rather, it helps to reconstruct the different moments in the lives of these artefacts and to situate Nebiolo's promotional practice within a broader network of actors, markets, and uses.

Conclusions

Close examination of the examples drawn from the database made it possible to identify a recurring set of components that, taken

Figure 6. Back cover of the Recta PC.913 specimen. Courtesy Tipoteca Italiana, Cornuda.



Figure 7. Components of the Metropol PC.1045 and PC.106 specimens. Author's personal collection.

	Production (Nebiolo Foundry)	Mediation (Distributors)	Consumption (Final users)
Cover	Graphic design; tagline	Stamps, overprints, references to distributors	First visual recognition of the typeface/foundry
Glyph set pages/ sample texts	Alphabets displayed; technical information	Multilingual versions; notes for the domestic/foreign market	Practical guidelines for composition
Texts	Information on the design, historical references	Sales support; when present, partial translations (IT/EN/ES/FR)	Professional training; educational content
Application examples	Design of mock-ups and idealised layouts	Visual support for sales	Layout inspiration: models for everyday jobs
Back cover	References to the foundry and designer(s); additional promotions	Distributor(s) references and addresses	Useful references: overview of the typeface(s)

Table 1

⁴⁸ The character set was generally never presented in its entirety, so as to prevent the typeface from being copied from the specimen.

together, outline a preliminary model for understanding the internal structure of type specimens, as exemplified by those produced by Nebiolo. This matrix highlighted five main constituent elements:

(1) A cover page, featuring a graphic treatment that evokes a defining visual or conceptual characteristic of the typeface, frequently accompanied by a brief tagline and, in many cases, by the indication of the ‘semester’ to which that issue of *Propaganda Nebiolo* belongs.

(2) One or more pages displaying the glyph set,⁴⁸ sometimes together with sample texts, in which the typeface is shown in various body sizes, often indicating the minimum sales unit of foundry type (*polizza*) and its possible availability for mechanical composition systems (e.g. Nebitype).

(3) A descriptive page outlining the typeface’s key features and design concept, often supported by historical and theoretical references, to promote and educate, as well as explaining its intended uses.

(4) One or more application pages and/or accompanying ephemera, presenting idealised use-cases that demonstrate the typeface in context and function as compositional guidelines for printers and graphic designers.

(5) A back cover, which often combines additional graphic content with technical and bibliographic information (identification code of the specimen, share capital of the company, place of printing, model of the printing machine, and at times, details of the graphic designer responsible for the specimen).

Read through the lens of mediation, these elements reveal type specimens as complex interfaces rather than neutral printed ephemera. Language choices—oscillating between Italian, multilingual, and monolingual foreign editions

—shed light on the coexistence of an ‘internal’ typographic commerce and an explicit drive towards international markets. Formats and bindings, orientated towards economical yet adaptable solutions, testify to the need to balance production costs and wide circulation. Finally, authorship credits and discursive texts expose the foundry’s attempt to address printers and designers not only as clients but also as partners in defining the role of typography within modern visual communication.

From a methodological standpoint, this paper argued for the value of treating typographic promotional materials as key artefacts for the study of the history of typography and the history of graphic design, bringing these two fields together within a shared analytical frame. The paper further suggested that access to such materials should be expanded, both through more systematic descriptive practices—since these artefacts often fall outside conventional bibliographic and cataloguing frameworks – and through increased digitisation of holdings in major international collections, to enable scholars and practitioners to identify recurring patterns and connections across materials and archives.

Within this perspective, the developed framework—combining production, mediation, and consumption with the use of a digital archiving system—supports a shift from object-centred narratives towards a more process-orientated approach. Although conceived as an internal research tool, the database enables systematic cataloguing and dynamic querying across structured fields, suggesting how similar systems might be used to interrogate sources in design history. Future developments—including the cross-referencing of this with other databases, whether related to artefacts or to commercial data—potentially supported by artificial intelligence tools, may help to assess more fully the impact of these typefaces during the period under consideration.

The Nebiolo case study was necessarily partial: it focused on a single foundry, within a relatively limited timeframe, and on a subset of its promotional outputs. In this context, given the volume of material included in the database, the case study served to begin reflecting on a type of artefact by no means exclusive to the Italian foundry; however, it also points to broader questions that call for further comparative analysis with other international foundries to highlight the diversity of typographic promotion strategies and visual models they adopted. Likewise, the integration of additional sources—trade magazines, fair catalogues, supplier publications,⁴⁹ professional correspondence, oral histories—would enable the reception of these materials by printers and designers to be more fully reconstructed.

More broadly, recognising type ephemera as cross-cultural mediation devices may help to enrich and reframe canonical narratives that privilege finished typefaces and iconic designs. By foregrounding the often overlooked artefacts that made typefaces visible, persuasive, and usable, this approach seeks to contribute to a more polycentric history of typography and graphic design—one that acknowledges not only the role of designers and foundries but also that of distributors, intermediaries, and users in shaping the visual culture of print in the second half of the twentieth century.

⁴⁹ These publications can serve as useful auxiliary sources, as in the case of the Italians *FOGec (Dizionario delle Forniture Grafiche editoriali e Cartotecnica)* published by L’Ufficio Moderno in Milan and *Annuario grafico*, published by Associazione nazionale italiana industrie grafiche cartotecnica e trasformatrici. Both included annual listings of suppliers of different kinds of graphic materials, including typefaces. Resources of this kind can help date lesser-known companies and often provide useful indications about the distributors involved.

Sign writing in Kinshasa: A practice negotiating coloniality through typographic mark making, Elsa Westreicher

KEYWORDS

Sign Writing, Sign Painting, Kinshasa, Typography, Peinture Populaire, Coloniality

Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been described as a city constituted by “verbal architectures”, built constantly and continuously by the narrative practices of its 17 million inhabitants (De Boeck 2006; also Yoka 1999). This polyphonic world-making, with its deep roots and transmodern contemporaneity, finds a visual parallel in the work of sign painters and lettering artists who reinvent typographic forms with their gestures on the city’s walls. These fast-paced creations nevertheless carry a long history that connects complex colonial realities with equally complex precolonial and postcolonial ones. Following Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s call to “rewind” history in order to unlearn imperialism and allow for potential histories to emerge, this paper outlines aspects of the deep history of Congolese writing and painting practices and brings these findings into conversation with more contemporary typographic creations in Kinshasa’s public space, concentrating on one specific case study: sign-written billboards created for the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman documented on several photographs from 1974. The paper reads the sign writing on these billboards as entangled with colonial and postcolonial power structures. At the same time, it opens up perspectives for analysing sign writing beyond the colonial-modern paradigm by tracing trajectories that predate the colonial encounter.

Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been described as a city constituted by “verbal architectures”, built and reinvented continuously by the narrative practices of its 17 million inhabitants (Filip De Boeck 2006; Lye M. Yoka 1999). This polyphonic world-making, with its deep roots and transmodern contemporaneity, finds a visual parallel in the work of sign painters and lettering artists who reinvent typographic forms through their gestures on the city’s walls and buildings. Remaining visible for barely three to five years due to weather-related erosion, these fast-paced creations nevertheless carry a long history that connects complex colonial realities with equally complex precolonial and postcolonial realities.

The inquiry on which this paper is based (Westreicher 2025) attempted to follow Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s call to “rewind” history in order to unlearn imperialism and allow for potential histories to emerge. It therefore took up the challenge of closely reading specific examples of writing, painting, and sign painting practices spanning from the period preceding the arrival of Portuguese ships on the shores of the Kongo Kingdom in the fifteenth century to the present day. That analysis traced the historical entanglements embedded in them through archival materials, literature, conversations with contemporary sign writers in Kinshasa, and the examination of photographic documentation of signs in the city.

The scope of this present paper does not permit a journey of similar extent, nor can it cover all aspects involved in sign writing and its local specificities. An in-depth analysis of materials and tools and their influence on letterforms had to be shortened¹ in favour of an account of the historical context and its influence on the emergence and use of particular letterforms. After summarising some important historical aspects that allow narratives beyond the colonial/modern paradigm² to emerge, the research concentrates on

one particular sign writing example from the 1970s. The photographic documentation of billboards painted for the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in 1974 serves as a lens through which the layered political dynamics at play in the letterforms can be given contours. The billboards are read from a design historical perspective, concentrating on the typographic references present in them and the postcolonial dialogue that they perform in that context.

Typographic practices in the D. R. Congo have not yet been the focus of a published design historical analysis, nor has the smaller field of typographic aspects³ in sign painting practices, i.e., sign writing.⁴

The closest area of study directly related to sign writing which keeps producing an extensive body of research is concerned with a distinct painting tradition that emerged among Congolese sign painters, known as *Peinture Populaire*. Anthropological, art historical, and historical research that began in the 1970s and analysed this practice’s social significance as a historical reference and performative stance opened the doors for increasing interest from art institutions and collectors beyond the local market from the late 1980s onwards.⁶

The curatorial work and research of Bambi Ceuppens and Sammy Baloji (eds. 2016) reopened a line of inquiry that recognises and foregrounds the deep history of visual practices and semiotic traditions embedded in *Peinture Populaire*. Building on paths previously outlined by V. Y. Mudimbe (1992a, b) and Bogumil Jewsiewicki (1991a) among others, Ceuppens and Baloji brought together several important insights: that precolonial semiotic systems are closely linked to mathematics, that walls and facades have long functioned as media of communication, and that narrative inscription on objects predates Belgian colonisation. Taken together, these aspects and the deeper historical perspective they enable are relevant

¹ Through an increasing interest in sign painting in the last decade, a few publications appeared on this craft in the European and American context (f.i. Faythe et al. 2013;

Meyer 2020). They complete older ones, which mainly served as manuals for apprentices. Local specificities in Kinshasa were outlined in my Master thesis *Schriftmalerei in Kinshasa. Schichten und Spuren einer Praxis* (2025), written at Burg Giebichenstein Kunsthochschule Halle.

Even though a detailed examination of material elements and their specific histories in the D. R. Congo—such as paint, brushes, and the substrates of the signs, as well as labour conditions—are equally crucial elements to be considered for a nuanced, multilayered understanding of the practice’s entanglements, they require an extensive analysis in order to avoid reducing material histories solely to a colonial framework. Such an extensive analysis cannot be undertaken here. Therefore only one aspect is addressed in detail, i.e. the ambiguous history of the Latin alphabet in the D. R. Congo. The primary focus of this paper remains on the letterforms and the way they have been documented on historical photographs.

For a short summary on the way brush strokes influence lettering forms and how lettering styles are locally described, refer to footnote 19.

² The colonial/modern paradigm refers to the idea that modernity is inseparable from colonialism, i.e. that the rise of the modern world system (from the 15th century onward) was constituted through European colonial expansion, and continues to be structured by its enduring power relations. On coloniality/modernity see: Aníbal Quijano 2009(1989), 2000; Walter D. Mignolo 2011, 2012(2000); Walter D. Mignolo & Catherine E. Walsh 2018.

³ Following Catherine Dixon’s (2018) perspective, lettering practices—of which sign writing is a part—ought to be distinguished from typography and type design as their means of production and historical emergence differ. The word typography is used once printing with movable type became a common practice in Europe from the 15th century onwards (a similar technology had been in use in China from the early 11th century) (Ruay McLean 1996; Hans P. Willberg 1994). Lettering on the other hand is not based on mechanically or digitally reproduced types, but on hand drawn letterforms, that may follow established lettering styles, but are uniquely produced for each design task. Sign writing can thus be said to be a subcategory of lettering, that is characterised by the context of its application and therefore a set of appropriate tools. Sign writing is geared to a display of lettering in the public sphere, either on signs, walls or banners. Generally speaking, this context of application demands larger letterforms, produced by brushes or paint rollers. See: Verena Gerlach et al. 2013; Fritz Grögel 2013; Mike Meyer 2020.

⁴ Efforts to amplify visual histories connected to the D. R. Congo are multifaceted, some have a direct link to design histories beyond a concentration on architecture (f.i. Sammy Baloji et al. 2023; Sarah Van Beurden 2015; Sara De Bondt 2022; Joseph G. Ibongo 2009, 2020; Debora L. Silverman 2011, 2012, 2013), yet so far none have attempted a historical perspective on letterforms or typography, with the exception of Sarah De Bondt (2022), who highlighted some aspects from the vantage point of Belgian graphic design.

⁵ Among the best known early research and perspectives are Johannes Fabian’s discussions with Tshibumba Kanda Matulu 1973–74 (Fabian 1996), Johannes Fabian’s and Ilona Szombati-Fabian’s analysis from 1976, Tshikala Kayembe Biaya’s poignant perspectives (1988, 1990), the first exhibition of *Peinture Populaire* in Kinshasa in 1978 and subsequent ongoing discussions of the genre described by Célestin Ne Mwine Badibanga (2003), and Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s extensive body of work (1986, 1988, 1991a–b, 1992, 1993, 1999a–b, 2003).

⁶ With this shift, the practice of *Peinture Populaire* was inscribed into narratives of contemporary art (f.i. *Les Magiciens de la Terre* at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989; *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* at the Museum for African Art and New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1991; *Kin Moto Na Bruxelles* exhibited at Hôtel de Ville and Musée Royale de l’Afrique Centrale, Brussels, 2003; *Beauté Congo / Congo Kitoko 1926–2015* at Fondation Cartier, Paris, 2015–2016). The canvas became a marker of difference with regard to previous forms of artistic expression in the Congo outside the art academy (Académie des Beaux-Arts de Kinshasa, founded in 1943).

⁷ A literal translation would be painting for advertisement.

⁸ Sign painter’s workshops in Kinshasa are not necessarily fixed or even material spaces, as the rent for commercial spaces are mostly beyond their financial possibilities. Work materials and utensils are often kept at home or provided by the client. Thus, the workshop and learning space for apprentices materialises where the sign writing takes place, “sur le tas”, i.e. on the job.

It was mainly those sign painters that had a practice as *peintres populaires*, as for instance Chéri Benga, that had enough revenue to keep a separate and fixed work place. His workshop was one of the last to persist on one of Kinshasa’s high streets in the Matonge neighbourhood, on Avenue Victoire. In a conversation held in 2024 he confirmed that it existed until 2021.

Joseph Ibongo describes the workshop types that existed previously with some detail in *Peinture populaire et mémoire de Kinshasa* (2020:104–7).

⁹ For instance the Carmelite Diego del Santissimo Sacramento in 1583 (see Geoffrey Heimlich 2017a:10f & 15), or the Capuchin Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo in 1671 (see John K. Thornton 2020:26).

¹⁰ For instance James H. Tuckey (1818) and Adolf Bastian (1859).

¹¹ This cosmology has been described in detail by Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau (1969, 1994, 2001) as well as Wyatt MacGaffey (1986, 2016).

¹² Conversations were held and recorded with: Chéri Benga, Armando Taty Bayeye, Ducafel, Patrick Sango, Fabien Kabule, Glody Mvutu, Binga Makiese & Jason Binga, Gloire Bangani, Arsel Decor, Martiel Mukalay Ngoy, Tysman Faya.

not only to *Peinture Populaire* but also to the typographic dimensions of sign painting on which this paper focuses. Joseph Ibongo (2009, 2020) reconnected *Peinture Populaire* to the realm of contemporary commercial art and sign painting by reintroducing the term Peinture Publicitaire⁷ into the discussion, relinking the practice to the sign painter’s workshop.⁸ Reestablishing this connection opens the way to a design historical perspective that hopefully enriches and certainly dialogues with the art historical, curatorial, anthropological, and non-academic ones.

Writing practices in the D. R. Congo did not begin with the introduction of the Latin alphabet in the 15th century on the Atlantic coast through the Portuguese, nor with the use of the Arab script in the 19th century in eastern regions (Xavier Luffin 2017). Numerous accounts by Portuguese and Italian missionaries,⁹ followed by later researchers,¹⁰ attest to the presence of a system of symbols locally reproduced and understood. Through the research of Grey Gundaker (1998), Robert Farris Thompson (1983, 2002), and Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz (2009, 2013), we understand that traces of these sign systems can be found in Afro-diasporic communities in the Americas and the Caribbean. This repertoire of signs questions Eurocentric notions of what writing is (Martínez-Ruiz 2013; Ali Yambula Mbanzila 2018).

My own observations (unpublished) about stone carvings close to the village of Mbiongo in the Congo Central province confirm but also deepen the claims by Martínez-Ruiz (2009, 2013), Mbanzila (2018), and Thompson (1981, 1983, 2002) that the Kongo’s cosmological understanding¹¹ is communicated through this repertoire of symbols and signs. This writing system expands from individual bodies to the landscape and all the way to celestial cycles. It is meant to talk simultaneously to the individual and their existence through time and to

the community as a larger, collective, time-traversing entity. It enacts the link between what is imagined as the visible-material realm and the invisible-immaterial one. Both are understood and represented as interconnected.

While this insight into Kongo writing systems and the epistemologies that they are an expression of is interesting in its own right, the intention of this paper leads us to a narrower question of whether evidence can be found that this understanding of writing has informed sign writing practices in Kinshasa in the 20th and 21st centuries. What ruptures, shifts, and continuities, if any, can be traced from the fifteenth century onward, and how have they shaped the history of sign writing in Kinshasa? Even though these questions cannot be answered fully, describing some specific perspectives and historical trajectories may allow us to read this practice as one that cannot be reduced to colonial/modern influences alone.

De Boeck’s (2016: 65f) observation that Kinshasa is understood by its population as being part of two interacting worlds corresponds to the cosmological understandings outlined above: one world is understood as pertaining to the realm of the material-visible and the other to the realm of the immaterial-invisible. Both are held not only to mirror each other but also to interact.

Despite this approach necessitating further enquiries, conversations from 2024 with sign painters practicing in Kinshasa today¹² revealed that such links are active in the way they understand their work, expressed in phrases such as “when one paints, it comes from the spirit” (Fabien Kabule) or “the vision turns into reality on the wall” (Ducafel). Sign painting thus seems to be thought of—among many other things—as a mediating activity in which it is not only the client’s wishes and economic competitiveness that determine the form but also a link to the immaterial realm of imaginations as a surfacing of transformed and

transformative pasts in the present. In Johannes Fabian’s conversations with the painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, recorded in the 1970s (Fabian 1996) in Lubumbashi, a similar understanding of painting as thinking and acting in the world is expressed. Paintings become narratives and agents that can redress the present.

Walking through the streets of Kinshasa and its hand-lettered walls is therefore not only an experience of small businesses communicating their presence but also of an intricate web of individual gestures that carry meanings as such. The signs are created through bodies moving in a particular way, which are simultaneously individual and collective. These signs can be read as an extension of an embodied archive. The gestures that produce the writing reference and reinvent knowledge passed down through master–apprentice-like relationships,¹³ but also point to what mark-making means in the epistemological framing, which the above-mentioned cosmology sets up. The letters making the signs are the visible results of invisible threads that connect several generations of painters with each other, as well as with the place in which they act. The visual-material manifestations of this embodied archive link visible and invisible worlds and can thus be said to counteract epistemicides (Boaventura de Sousa Santos 2014[2016]). However, at the same time, they are entangled with the colonial/modern logics that result in these epistemicides and which are thus just as present in them. The Latin alphabet, as the most ubiquitous script in Kinshasa’s streets today,¹⁴ is one of the elements in the practice that carries this ambiguity.

The Latin alphabet was introduced to the D. R. Congo by the Portuguese, who arrived at the mouth of the Congo River in 1482. The alphabet was soon adopted in the then-Kongo Kingdom as a means of external and internal communication. This alphabet was accompanied by the adoption of Christianity by the Kongo elites and population, which

set in motion a complex process of syncretisation (Cécile Fromont 2018; Thornton 2013, 2020). Several archived letters between Kongo dignitaries and the Portuguese king attest to the Latin alphabet being used and that Portuguese and Latin were spoken in the kingdom.¹⁵ Additionally, Inge Brinkman and Koen Bostoen (2018) have given us an account of book cultures in the Kongo Kingdom through which we can quite safely assume that the reading and writing of the Latin script was more widely adopted by the population than understanding it as an elitist practice suggests. The Latin script is thus connected to the beginnings of global capitalism and the establishment of the transatlantic trafficking routes of enslaved Africans in which the Kongo Kingdom was entangled from its very beginnings (Fromont 2018; Randles 1968 [2002]; Thornton 2020). With the decline of the kingdom in the 18th century, the use of the Latin alphabet seems to have diminished. It is, nevertheless, necessary to explore the continuities of its use, as the accounts of missionaries, researchers, military men, and traders in the 19th century who propagated the racist and supremacist rhetoric of a population in need of “civilisation” can hardly be trusted in this regard. The “scramble for Africa” and subsequent rule by Leopold II of Belgium and the Belgian state spread the Latin alphabet across a much larger territory than the one the Portuguese and Italian missionaries had been active in.

Throughout all but the last years of Belgian colonisation, educational facilities were run by missionaries and operated in ways congruent with systems of forced labour. These were extremely murderous, especially in the first thirty years of the colonial enterprise (Sanderson 2020). Mission schools were mainly limited to sustaining Belgian self-interests, i.e., responding to the need for skilled labourers (Briffaerts 2009; Depaepe 2017; Yates 1978). The presence of the Latin alphabet in the D. R. Congo needs to be read in terms of this

¹⁸ Ibongo (2009; 2020) describes these formalised, yet not state-regulated master-apprentice relationships. Apprentices paid the master a fixed price for the knowledge that they received and often lived in their households. Today economic difficulties have led to less formalised arrangements between masters and apprentices. Teaching their skills to a younger generation is nevertheless seen as an important component of being a sign writer. “Avoir des enfants”, i.e. having children, is an expression frequently used in this context.

Valentin Y. Mudimbe (1994:68f) allows us to perceive the far longer trajectory of master-apprentice relationships in the Congo, that also hints at an understanding and craft that cannot be reduced to European models: “In effect, in each cultural enclave, the worked objects unveil, spontaneously, in their form and symbolism, means, skills, gestures, and rituals passed down to the apprentice by a master. A chronology retraces the origin of a worked object and often, even the slightest modification produced by an artist testifies to a history. The concept of apprentice is a delicate one [...] One does not simply decide to become an art worker [...] my ancestors, the Songye, fearing the possibility of losing a bulk of knowledge through endemic diseases, war, or natural catastrophes, instead of establishing familial genealogies and thus counting on individuals for the preservation of ancient memories, specialised entire villages: one in the esoteric knowledge of the group, another in carving, a third in something else, and so on.” (ibid.)

¹⁶ See for instance photographs that Herbert Lang took in Rungu as part of the American Museum Congo Expedition 1909–1915 (Lang 1909–15).

¹⁷ See Van Beurden [2015] for a discussion of the topos of authenticity related to cultural politics in the Congo, including a discussion of the term's use during colonisation. For a discussion of Mobutu's politics see: D'Bokongo Ekanga Botombele 1975:44–68, Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem 1998a, 1998b:706–727, Van Beurden 2015:107–114, David Van Reybrouck 2010[2012]:417–420, Bob W. White 2006.

ambiguous co-existence of self-determined adoption in the Kongo Kingdom and the many forms of colonial violence that followed.

Early photographs from the beginning of Belgian colonisation show the Latin script not only on buildings of the colonial administration but also as part of wall decorations on private houses.¹⁶ This fact may point to a continuity in the practice of decorating the walls of buildings that Adolf Bastian described in today's Congo Central province in the 1860s. Jewsiewicki (1991a) speculated on the continuities between abstract and figurative decorations in areas that were involved in violent conquest, trade and/or research relationships with Europeans, as well as their relevance for *Peinture Populaire*, which can be extended to sign painting more broadly.

With the emergence of Kinshasa/Léopoldville as Congo's economic and political capital at the beginning of the 20th century, sign writing started to proliferate to adorn businesses, clubs, hotels, and administration buildings in the *white* part of the expanding and segregated city. The only known written account of painted shops and businesses in the *Cités Indigènes* (quarters to which the Black population was confined) is in Roger de Chateaux's travel journal of the Congo (Chalux 1925). In his racist description of the *Cités*, he mentions decorated facades that indicate small shops selling essential everyday goods (ibid:122).

The earliest mention of a sign painter teaching his trade to a younger generation in Kinshasa is in the biography of the painter Nyembo Mukwavi Lukundula (*1927) in Nzunguba-Ibio's doctoral thesis (1994:87f). This painter refined his skills with “grand” peintre Joseph [the great painter Joseph] in 1944. The latter died in 1946, so one can presume that he had practised the trade of sign painting much earlier, potentially in the 1920s.

No record has been found that

would prove the existence of state-regulated apprenticeships in sign writing and painting, either before or after the Congo's independence. Photographs from the 1950s allow us to witness the effects of the slowly loosening grip of the colonial state on the population, which started owning and running businesses beyond small shops. These were, of course, also in need of sign writing and painting.

The hopeful and tumultuous years after independence (30 June 1960) ended with the US-American and Belgian-backed assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Emery Lumumba (1925–1961) and the 30-year rule of President Mobutu Sese Seko (1930–1997). The latter is known, among many other things, for his political credo “recours à l'authenticité”, which redesigned the country in the 1970s under the banner of a return to “authentic” Congolese culture.¹⁷ Broadly speaking, “recours à l'authenticité” was an ideology inspired by the *Négritude* movement and Pan-Africanism. The idea propagated the supposedly true and shared roots of the diverse groups within the Congolese—or rather, Zaïrean—territory to create a national identity based on cultural uniqueness. This identity was also aimed, though often superficially and with backfiring consequences for the economic realm, at opposing the hegemonic Euro-American formulations of modernity. By reactivating what were conceived of as static, supposedly unchanging Congolese principles, both national pride and a Zaïrean form of modernity were to be made possible (Van Reybrouck 2010[2012]:410f, 417–422).

It was in this period that we find the example of sign writing on billboards for the occasion of the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in 1974, famous as the “Rumble in the Jungle”. Mobutism, with its policy of authenticity and Zaïrianisation, can be said to culminate in this legendary boxing match (Malaquais 2008, 2009; Van Reybrouck 2010[2012]:411f,

Figure 1. Sign writers working on billboards on the occasion of the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, Kinshasa. 1974. Photographer: Unknown. Agence France-Presse via Getty Images. Identification number Agence France-Presse: 000_1U270P. Identification number Getty Images: 1222796741.



426–429). The fight was globally marketed, anticipated, and broadcast. It brought Mobutu and his state into the international spotlight—as he had intended and been working towards. Infrastructure was modernised, and a music festival was organised featuring James Brown, B.B. King, Miriam Makeba, and many more. Mobutu used both the local collective memory (e.g. in relation to the Stade du 20 Mai)¹⁸ and international symbolism (around Muhammad Ali and his political activism, as well as Pan-Africanism) to promote Zaïre and himself. The global significance of this sporting event cannot be underestimated. The original slogan, “From Slavery to Championship”, serves as a striking reminder of how transatlantic politics¹⁹ were intertwined with this mass-media sporting event. The “Rumble” was not just leveraged within Cold War politics but may also be read in relation to an increasing US wariness of the non-aligned movement. Despite there certainly being profound, pan-African interests within the populations and possibly the athletes and their teams, the “Rumble” also needs to be read as politically motivated and highly performative.

Along the main roads from the airport to downtown Kinshasa, large

billboards were erected, carrying Mobutist propaganda slogans in French and English. For example:

Parce qu'il entend réhabiliter [sic!] l'homme noir où qu'il se trouve, le Mobutisme déborde les frontières du zaïre [sic!] / Because Mobutism wants [?] to rehabilitate Blacks Wherever [sic!] they are, it extends beyond the borders of Zaïre (Fig. 1)

Some photographs of these billboards have survived. Prof. Lema Kusa, who was involved in the production of the billboards, though not in the conceptual design work, explains that they were strategically placed to divert the attention of international visitors from less representative parts of the city. Unfortunately, the sign writers themselves, as well as those who may have provided them with design directions, have not been identified. Therefore, the research concentrates on the information that the photographs provide.

Upon close examination of the lettering in several photographs,²⁰ a general uniformity is noticeable, though differences appear in the details. The uniformity arises from the format and basic visual choices, especially the minimalist design. On a monochromatic background, a sentence is painted in the top half

¹⁸ The stadium is associated both with the anti-colonial uprisings of 1959 that led to independence and with the rumour that a mass execution ordered by Mobutu took place there that is meant to be part of his rise to power (Malaquais 2009:14–21).

¹⁹ “Transatlantic” is here reappropriated from its more common use referring to the relationship between Europe and the U.S.A.. It is used here to allude to the connections between the African continent and the U.S.A., characterised by the trafficking of enslaved Africans, but also, specifically in regards to the Congo, whose strategic importance during the Second World War as well as the ensuing Cold War, should not be neglected.

²⁰ See Agence France-Presse (1974a–c), Leiffer (1974a–b), and Fig. 1.

in a sans-serif, neutral, low-contrast typeface; the same sentence is repeated below in English. There are no differences in font size or emphasis, except that names are capitalised, resulting in a uniform colour and a consistent appearance. The design emphasises the words and the act of reading. It evokes associations with political or artistic manifestos and Swiss typography, which had influenced the visual design of another major sporting event two years earlier, the 1972 Munich Olympics, designed by Otl Aicher and his team (Holt n.d.).

The only recurring decorative element is a border framing the text and emphasising the lettering. This border links the billboards to highway signs. The sans-serif typeface also strengthens the impression that a visual dialogue with standardised signage design is taking place. It is interesting to note that the Vienna Convention on Road Traffic had taken place a few years earlier, in 1968, advocating for a more internationally uniform agreement for road signs, and that the Republic of Zaïre signed the convention in 1977. It is certainly plausible that Mobutu wanted to present the Republic of Zaïre as a modern and respectable state on par with other nations and the former colonial powers—as well as himself as a responsible, self-assured head of state—through such associations.

With their resemblance to highway signs and their clear political messages, these signs literally pointed the way in an ideological sense, addressing not only the local population but also international visitors, for whom a translation in English was provided. Thus, an internationalist visual language was adopted, but cultural specificity and pride were communicated through the wording.

However, to concentrate only on those aspects that create a sense of uniformity and give weight to Mobutu's political aims would not fully capture the nuanced undertones and complexity that are revealed if one pays attention to differences and details.

There appear to have been two main types of these billboards: one with a rounded frame and dark typography on a light background (only black-and-white photographs exist, so it is unclear if and how they were coloured), and another with a rectangular frame and yellow type on a green background. The prominence of green strongly suggests a reference to the national flag, which comprises a green field bearing a yellow disc, with an arm holding a red flame. Introduced in 1971 as part of Mobutu's broader programme of state reconfiguration, the flag employs pan-African colours. The conspicuous use of these colours on the billboards, as well as in posters and other promotional materials for the boxing match, simultaneously evokes pan-African ideals and state authority.

The billboard types also differ regarding lettering styles. The first style (Fig. 1, left sign) seems to aim for a print-like appearance and closely resembles the bold condensed cut of Akzidenz-Grotesk (H. Berthold AG, ca. 1898), noticeable in the small “a” and its steep bowl. This modelling after Akzidenz-Grotesk is plausible, and it can be backed up by the fact that this typeface was used in printed materials produced for the same occasion. The small “t”, with its angled terminal, differs from Akzidenz-Grotesk and resembles Univers (Adrian Frutiger for Deberny & Peignot 1957) or earlier grotesques, such as Breite Grotesk (J. G. Schelter & Giesecke 1890), Venus (Wagner & Schmidt 1907), or Erbar-Grotesk (Jakob Erbar for Ludwig & Meyer 1922), as well as the standard American highway-sign typeface (US Department of Commerce / Bureau of Public Roads 1966).

A very distinctive “y” stands out on the billboards. We will return later to this “y”, with its centred descender—rather rare for lower case letters—and curved arms. The fact that it is consistently painted in this shape may point to a conscious choice. Other irregularities, such as slightly changing “w” shapes, uneven spacing, and width variations, likely result from the

billboards being hand-painted rather than deliberate design choices.

In longer slogans (see the sign on the right, Fig. 1), the letterforms are rounder and wider, similar to the second type (rectangular frame, light type on dark background).²¹ Here, readability and visibility take precedence over uniformity, and the resemblance to Akzidenz-Grotesk is lost. In these examples, the lettering more closely resembles Neuzeit-Grotesk (Wilhelm Pichler for D. Stempel AG 1928), which, interestingly, was added to the DIN 30640 standard in 1970 for signage and documents (Paul McNeil 2017:241; Ferdinand Ulrich 2014; Tony Seddon 2016:156). It may therefore also be part of a visual dialogue with standardisation procedures during that period. The long ascenders and descenders reflect early geometric fonts from the 1920s and their revivals (see Ulrich [2014] for a detailed description).

One particularly notable sign departs from typographic mimicry altogether, using a single-stroke style that better suits brushwork. This faster, more fluid approach—known today in Kinshasa as “main levée” (freehand)²²—does not require pre-drawn outlines. The letters here have a wavy quality, and the message is more personal, expressing the collective voice of the citizens:

Merci Citoyen Président Mobutu,
parce que grâce à ce combat de
boxe, Kinshasa deviendra pour un
moment la capitale du monde entier /
Thank you Citizen President Mobutu,
thanks to this boxing match Kinshasa
will be for a while the centre of
attention for the entire world. (Agence
France-Presse 1974c)

Looking at these billboards, we may ask ourselves why the decision was made to resort to sign writing when the aim was mainly to create letterforms that converse with type design. Large-scale printed posters existed at the time, and Mobutu invested in much more expensive gear to host the sports event. Therefore, the decision might not have been a question of

production possibilities or costs. One explanation could be time pressure. This claim could be supported by mistakes being left uncorrected (e.g., the missing word “world”; see Agence France-Presse 1974a). However, this would only be plausible if putting up the billboards was a rather spontaneous idea, which is unlikely, considering that the fight was postponed due to an injury George Foreman suffered during training, giving all parties involved more time (Malaquais 2009:42). It is also possible that hand-painted signs were considered more durable, as paper might deteriorate quickly in the local weather conditions, or simply using sign writing was a conscious stylistic choice meant to blend Euro-American aesthetics with local sensitivities and skills.

The painted letters referenced known typefaces but were not exact copies. The sign writers created their own letterforms within a given framework. Even though it may not be possible to have a clear answer about why the choice of sign writing was made, perhaps a combination of several of the above mentioned factors led to this outcome. The fact that sign writing was chosen as the appropriate medium, meant that the billboards, despite clear guidelines that pushed for uniformity, became a record of each sign painter's individuality.

The painters' creations reflect a layered interplay of collective and individual action, of global design trends and local practice, of machine and manual labour, and finally, of political repression and creative freedom. As much as Mobutu wanted a uniform state, he never fully controlled it—perhaps because social concepts that value individual expression and agency as part of collective life conflicted with such control and because, in some sense, the politics of “authenticity” themselves were contradictory in this regard.

As an extension of this idea, it is worth revisiting the peculiar “y” in the lettering, which may signify more than just a nod to experimental

²¹ Examples can be seen by referring to a series of images published by Agence France-Presse (1974b–c) and some Neil Leifer took during the “Rumble” (Leifer 1974a).

²² Between 2021 and 2024 I documented a vast amount of sign writings in several boroughs of Kinshasa photographically, together with artists Elie Mbansing, Etienne Musau, and Nada Tshibwabwa. While trying to find stylistic constants as well as understanding variations, I clustered these photographs according to several criteria. Long conversations with several sign writers (Chéri Benga, Armando Taty Bayeye, Ducape, Patrick Sango, Fabien Kabule, Glody Mvutu, Binga Makiese & Jason Binga, Gloire Bangani, Arsel Decor, Martiel Mukalay Ngoy, Tysman Faya) added an understanding of how they name and classify styles themselves. The above mentioned “main levée”, i.e. freehand, is one term commonly used next to “écriture normalisée”, which could be translated as norm based lettering styles, yet refers locally to any lettering style without serifs and little decoration. “Écriture de fantaisie” was used by painter Glody Mvutu to designate heavily decorated lettering styles, yet no other artist I interviewed used this expression. Generally speaking, three main types of stylistic constants can be observed: single stroke or double stroke lettering (main levée), in which only minimal or no previous sketching on the surface is necessary, as the brush and its width largely determine the form (whether the result is then termed “écriture normalisée” depends on whether serifs are added or not); or lettering that requires pre-drawn contours that get filled in through several strokes. For a more detailed description see my Master thesis *Schriftmalerei in Kinshasa. Schichten und Spuren einer Praxis* (Westreicher 2025).

1970s typography and its 1920s forerunners. Perhaps what we see here is the abstraction of a gestural language that is part of the semiotic repertoire described by Thompson (2002) and Martínez-Ruiz (2009) and that converses with the cosmological understandings outlined above. This gestural sign repertoire can also be found in wooden sculptures, public monuments (f.i. President Kasavubu's statue on his former grave), rupestrian art, and the embodied archives of people's gestures. If this is the case, the "y" would be congruent with the representation of a human figure stretching their arms out to the sides, performing the "Yangalala" gesture described by Thompson (2002:71) and Martínez-Ruiz (2009:7f) as symbolising joy and ecstasy—a reference that would have been particularly fitting for the festive occasion and would simultaneously activate Mobutu Sese Seko's politics of "recours à l'authenticité" through a visual marker. While speculative, this interpretation cannot be entirely dismissed, as the repetition of the peculiar "y"-shape points to a deliberate and conscious design decision on the billboards. As Mobutu encouraged the reinvention of endogenous visual practices to make the state of Zaïre simultaneously modern and "authentically" Zaïrian, this choice might have been an ingenious design decision meant to achieve exactly that.

The observation of this small detail, paired with an understanding of writing systems in the Congo beyond the Latin alphabet, can direct us to more insights into continuities in sign writing practices and in observing epistemic survival in practices that are too easily labelled as solely emerging from colonial paradigms.

This specific "y"-shape appears in Kinshasa's streets even today (see Fig. 2). That a direct, conscious link exists with the billboards of 1974 in this particular example or that a similar hint to a joyful gesture is intended through this "y"-shape is improbable, given that the context largely differs.



Figure 2. Sign advertising a Cyber Café in the commune of Lemba in the Mont Amba District of Kinshasa, Kinshasa. 2024. Photographers: Étienne Musau and Elsa Westreicher.

Historical, photographic references play almost no role in the sign writers' decisions to draw letters in a certain way unless a larger conceptualising phase preceded the realisation of the work. This is rarely the case, however, according to conversations with several practitioners. The forms chosen are a question of personal preference, the client's wishes, encounters with other sign painters and their styles, and contemporary references in daily life. None of the archival images I showed the sign writers during our conversations were previously known to them, yet there certainly is a less direct continuity of craft and style traditions handed down through generations, described above as an embodied archive, which plays an important role in the kinds of letterforms seen in the streets today.

The sign writer Patrick Sango expressed the indirect, maybe sometimes unconscious web of references between sign writers and their works as follows in our conversation from 2024: "God created people to resemble one another. This uncle looks like that other uncle. With sign writing, it's the same thing." He reinforced once more the image of generational ties among sign writers in the 17-million-strong capital of the D. R. Congo, as well as

a spiritual dimension through the invocation of "God". An interpretation that would reduce this spiritual dimension to Christian imaginaries alone would probably fall short of the realities invoked here and the particular religious syncretism that is characteristic of the D. R. Congo, with its epistemological ties to the above-mentioned cosmology.

Sign writing in Kinshasa is a practice with numerous layers and traces. These examples from 1974, despite being read in conversation with a longer history of writing and painting in public and semi-public spaces in the D. R. Congo, can only provide a small insight into the practice. The hope, therefore, is that this small glimpse into a vast and complex realm might encourage others to study, question, and reflect on the many absences within design histories, the biases that shape our engagement with colonial and postcolonial archives, and our own entangled positions as researchers.

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Dan Mu
Deepika Srivastava
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Designer

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Publisher

The Design History Society

Type

Libre Baskerville
Karla

Printer

Mixam

First published in 2026

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-0668828-1-6

Printed and bound in the UK

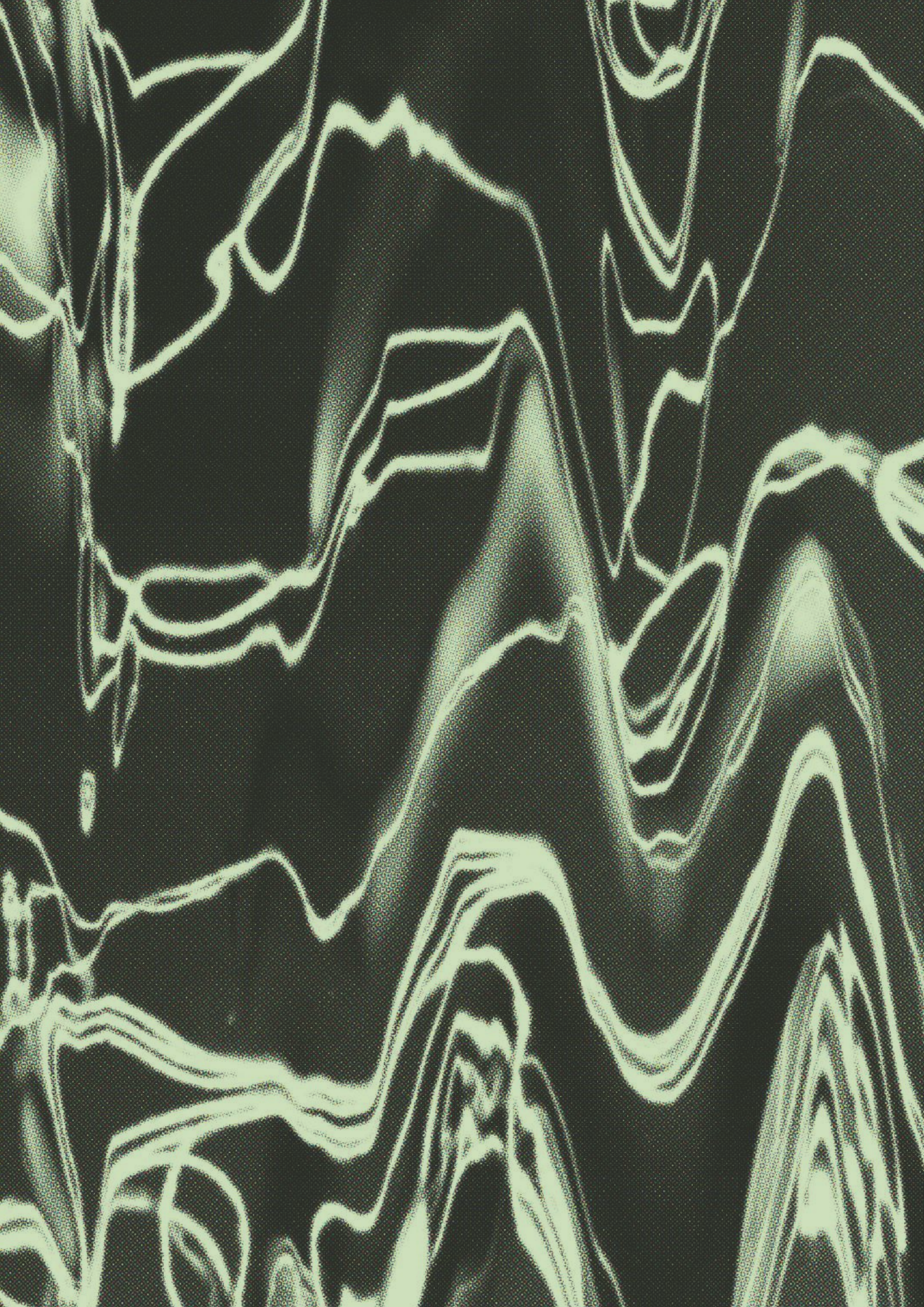
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The Design History Society
ISBN 978-1-0668828-1-6