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MUJI: Non-Branded Goods, A Study in National, International and Corporate Identity.

by

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Introduction.

The success of any company depends directly on its appeal to consumers, and there are many different ways of securing this. This thesis is a study of one company, Ryohin Keikaku Ltd., and the strategies it uses to define the identity of its MUJI brand. This is a Japanese retail concern with over 200 outlets in its native country and four in Great Britain, selling everything from stationary and household goods to furniture and clothing, which are all designed and manufactured by the company.

What separates this brand from the hundreds of others in the European marketplace of the 1990s is not that it is a non-brand, but that it is a non-brand with a strong brand identity. It uses the supposedly universal forms of both the Modern movement and the Japanese aesthetic tradition to form an identity which is not always what it seems. MUJI defines its identity in terms of its nationality and its national traditions, reinforced by Western design practice and theory, especially with its expansion in the 1990s into a British market. It may purport to be rejecting "label culture", and be a return to universal values, but it uses the appearance of these values as a label. It is a measure of the sophistication of the postmodern cross-referencing at play that a consumer retail outlet can use nostalgia to sell itself as both a return to craft values or to a production-led manufacturing system.

This is considered in the light of the complication added by the snobbery of "educated" and "enlightened" taste. The very existence of a brand identity based on a negation of strategies of design and identity can only come about in specific cultural circumstances. It has resulted from the overuse of design as a marketing tool in the 1980s - "designer" watches, "designer" jeans, "designer" beer. MUJI's identity can be seen as not a rejection, but a beginning of the growth of a more subtle form of label culture. The remarkable depth of the corporate identity is a result of the intimate involvement of designers in every activity of the company, as it uses design and designers to sell its goods, but as a matter of course, rather than as an added

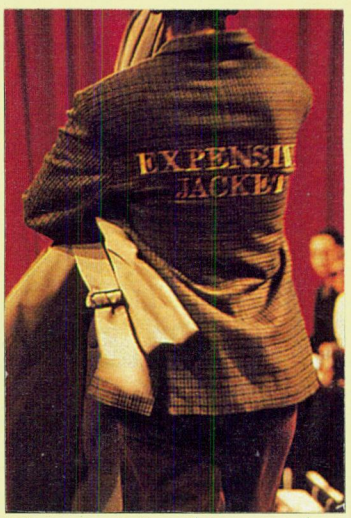

Fig. 1 - Moschino jacket (1995) satirising 1980s fashions.

value.

This thesis was researched from a range of sources, the most important of which were several visits to British MUJI shops, both in London and Glasgow. This, and the collection of promotional literature from the company, provided the basis for discussion throughout the whole thesis.

Chapter 1 is concerned with the Japanese background of the MUJI brand, and how it uses this national identity to sell itself in a foreign country. It was primarily influenced by the books Japanese Design (1987) by Penny Sparke, and Contemporary Japanese Design (1991) by Sîan Evans, which both give broad overviews of Japanese design. Penny Sparke's book deals with the evolution and achievements of each design profession, while Sian Evans is concerned with the influence of Japanese history and culture on the design of the 1980s. Stephen Calloway's book The House of Liberty: Masters of Style and Decoration (1992) details the involvement of Liberty's of London in the cult of Japan to the present day. This was supplemented by personal experience of attitudes and shopping habits while on exchange in London.

The second chapter investigates the Western influences on MUJI's design philosophy. It details its acceptance of certain postmodern theories and practices, while retaining a similarity to both Modernism and the High Tech movement. Various extracts on Modernism and postmodernism from The Post-Modern Reader (1992) edited by Charles Jencks formed the basis for their comparison with MUJI. It draws on Dorothy MacKenzie's Green Design (1991), and Colin Davies' High Tech Architecture (1988) for the sections on these topics. Articles consulted include Richard Woolf's article "Cultural Context" in Concrete Quarterly (1993), and "Shopping" by Andrew Smith from The Face magazine (1994). Both of these gave an insight into the influences behind both the MUJI brand, and the design of the British shop interiors.

Chapter 3 is concerned with corporate identity, the comprehensiveness of MUJI's identity, and the manner in which this is constructed. This chapter draws on Wally Olin's The Corporate Personality (1978), which is essential and clear reading on corporate identity and marketing strategies. Several MUJI brochures and catalogues provided the basis for discussion on the particular marketing strategies used

by the company. The 1995 Annual Report of MUJI's parent company Ryohin Keikaku Ltd. provided an insight into the attitudes, objectives and working practices of the management structure behind the brand.The MUJI Book (1988), is issued by the company themselves, but unfortunately, it is not available in Europe, and is written in Japanese with no English translation.

The fourth chapter is involved with the issues of brand identity that such a distinctive "non-brand" raises. It is also concerned with the methods with which such a brand is marketed, and how it is perceived by its intended market. Various articles on the MUJI brand in Great Britain, including "The Brand with No Name" by Janine Furness in Interior Design (1991) and "Look, No Brands" by Michael Evamy in Design magazine (1992) formed the start of a discussion on the complex effect of the MUJI brand on the consumer. Several articles by Jonathan Glancey in The Independent newspaper (1991 to 1993) were also involved in the questioning of appearances. This was also influenced by extracts from Objects and Images, published by UIAH, Helsinki (1992) and edited by Susann Vihma, which outline techniques for analysis of designed objects using product semantics, and related methods.

Chapter 1 - Nationalism and Internationalism.

This chapter analyses the influence and importance of national identity on the identity of a brand such as MUJI, operating in a world market. It shows how MUJI works within the Japanese tradition of aesthetic austerity, and how the Western mystique of the Orient forms a large element of its identity in Great Britain.

Internationalism.

In the world of design, as in the visual arts, there has been a constant tension between nationalism and internationalism, both in the work of practitioners and the writers who comment on them. What has often failed to be recognised is that nationalism and internationalism are not completely opposed, but rather interrelated. Internationalism can be better explained as the concept of that which is common and universal between nations - the human condition, while nationalism is formed by the specific way this is put into practice in each country. The idea behind a product for a certain purpose may not differ much between countries, but its realization will, because of cultural patterns of behaviour, ways of working, available technology and materials. The final product is an encoding of universally recognisable generalities, but filtered through local specifics. A product's ability to survive in international markets will depend on how deeply this specification goes. Partly due to the improvement of global communication, it rarely runs so deep that a product is totally unrecognisable outside its target market.

Despite the move of industrialised countries onto a world stage, hundreds and usually thousands of years of cultural history leave an indelible mark on the people of each country. These cultural factors will always, consciously or unconsciously, influence the products designed in a particular country. This cultural background is one of the categories of culture defined by the anthropologist Amos Rappaport - culture as a system of symbols, meanings and cognitive schemata transmitted through the cultural codes of a society. (Regents of the University of Michigan, 1986, pp. 35-7) These similarities in background will result in similarities of form and style, giving the products of a culture a national identity. This does not always happen in a

conscious way and is usually only recognisable from outside. More often than not, in design terms, a strong national identity is reinforced by the conscious decision of a group of designers to produce products in a perceived national style. This is becoming more prevalent in this digital age, because of the increasingly close contact between the developed nations of the world. Improved communications have resulted in the propulsion of what are known as the Triad nations (North America, Japan and Western Europe) onto a world stage. The inhabitants of these countries all have access to sophisticated technology, higher levels of education and much greater disposable income than in less developed countries. Their increased in knowledge about other nations and cultures also has the effect of making consumers more conscious of their own nationality, and the national identity of the goods being produced by their country. Although it is true to say that due to the spread of communication networks (telephones, television, and lately the Internet) consumer products tend to be spread globally among similar income groups rather than throughout a nation, once a level of similarity has occurred globally, regional variations will appear. This is because trying to cater for a world market with just one product inevitably produces bland boring products - a case of trying to keep everyone happy and satisfying no-one. Products with a strong national flavour are always infinitely more interesting, as the character and personality of the country of origin become transferred onto the product in question.

The Japanese Tradition of Diversity.

Japan as a country has not always been well understood by the people of the West. As well as being literally on the other side of the world, it is a country of many contradictions, where two completely different cultural traditions exist side by side. Both are hardly new phenomenon, but both still play an active part in contemporary Japanese life.

The first tradition in Japanese culture is that of chaotic diversity, and rampant colour. For the two hundred years before its opening to the West, Japan was a completely closed society, with all attention directed inwards. The country was internally at peace and most of the energies usually expended in war were channelled

Fig. 2 - Edo period *uyiko-e* woodblock print - "Spectators at the race course at Takada" by Hokusai (1804).

into culture and the arts. The Edo period was one of great innovation and experimentation in the cultural life of the nation, with the evolution of new art forms such as the *kabuki* theatre, and woodblock prints. The costumes of the *kabuki* theatre were full of riotous colour and spectacle, and its actors set the sartorial standards for generations of fashionable Japanese, as did the costumes of famous courtesans, which were spread throughout the country by the travelling merchant class. *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints began as portraits of particularly fashionable ladies and gentlemen, occupying the same niche taken up by fashion magazines in modern times, but soon developed into an art form of their own, noted for their energy and exuberance (see Fig. 2). The constant cycle of festivals and public rituals of Japan's three major religions entertained and distracted the public, as they still do today,

allowing towns and cities to be constantly decked out in festive decorations of one sort or another. Even when there are no celebrations going on, Japan's cities and towns are renowned for their architectural diversity. Tokyo is hard to equal for the sheer numbers of buildings of different styles and materials and colours jumbled up into one big postmodern melange (see Fig. 3). New-found economic prosperity coupled with exorbitant property prices means that the average Japanese consumer has a high disposable income, to spend on a succession of consumer durables, clothes and accessories, which in turn creates a constant stream of *shinhatsubai* (new product) with a high rate of obsolescence. This devotion to fashionable name-brand goods is a twentieth century outlet for the love of diversity and gaudiness. Young Japanese consumers have taken label culture to their hearts, with one's social standing (or coolness) being judged from the brands you are seen to be endorsing.

Fig. 3 - The neon lights of the Ginza district of Tokyo at night.

The Japanese Aesthetic Tradition.

In contrast to this ongoing carnival, is the opposite and complementary tradition within Japanese culture. The evolution of the tradition of austerity and simplicity has many influences, the integral one being the role of Buddhism in the country's spiritual life. One of its main tenets, especially in Zen Buddhism, is the suppression of earthly desires through a life with only the basic necessities, spent in hard work and prayer, undistracted by worldly concerns. This was the ethos of the *samurai* warrior class, and through their encouragement of these values, the concept of *shibui* (astringency of taste) became a widely accepted part of Japanese life. This

Fig. 4 - Handmade Japanese red lacquer bowl.

lack of ostentation found its expression in the concept of *wabi* (truth to materials), where object should reveal the nature and beauty of their materials, as well as how they were made and are to be used. It is only if these aesthetic criteria are fulfilled that an object can be called *kirei*, a word that is usually translated as "beautiful", but also means appropriate, understated, and neat. These values are usually described using traditional forms and objects as examples (see Fig. 4).

These concepts also have their basis within the hermetically sealed world of pre-Meiji Japan, where the set of laws known as the Sumptuary Edicts rigidly set out not only the social rankings, but severely limited the colours, materials and amounts of decoration that each class could use (Evans, 1991, p. 34). Because of these restrictions, the quality of material and workmanship became the only way of telling desirable goods from the non-desirable. Being continually enforced and reinforced over the Edo period, this left a deep appreciation for quality upon the collective psyche of the Japanese people.

But to any visitor to Japan, it is apparent that sliding *shoji* screens and lacquer tea bowls are in rather short supply these days. Few Japanese live in traditional houses, or wear kimonos to work, but just because the old outward forms are disappearing, does not mean that the essential principles are too. These ideas of *shibui* and *wabi* and the overall Japanese aesthetic are being expressed through new media and products (see Fig. 4). Designers and architects such as Tadao Ando continue to within a tradtional vocabulary of form and colour, but do so using the newest materials and technology. The media may be different, but objects produced in modern-day Japan share many of the same concerns as their predecessors:

> ... not only the objective choice of form and shaping of an item, but also this item's subjective qualities of appearance and implication, their practical ambiguity, and what we might almost term their spiritual tension.
> (Dietz & Mönninger, 1990, p. 11)

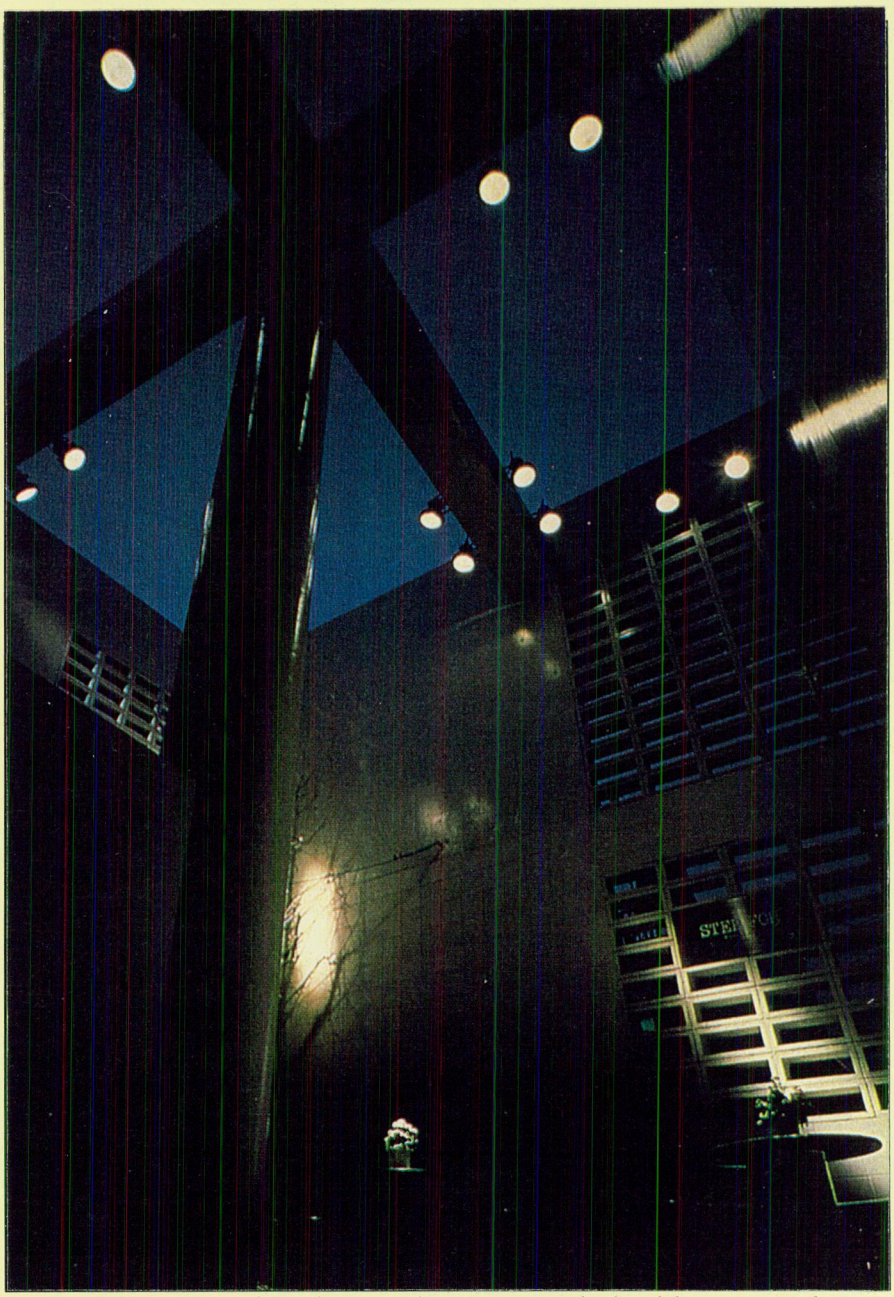

Fig. 5 - Interior of Tadao Ando's "Festival" building in Tokyo.

MUJI in Japan.

Started by a group of Japanese designers in the early 1980s, the MUJI line of goods was intended from the start to be a return to the simplicity and basics of the aesthetic tradition. The Japanese identity of the company is eagerly espoused, and is actively used as a tool to promote their goods. It proclaims itself to be part of the aesthetic tradition in Japanese cultural life, being from the start a reaction against the rampant confusion of the label-obsessed Japanese marketplace. Though Ikko Tanaka is generally known as the patriarch of Japanese graphic design, Takashi Sugimoto is a leading light of interior architecture, and the Head of Fashion, Masaru Amano, left Issey Miyake to work for Ryohin Keikaku, it deliberately does not make "designer" statements.

> ... a result of the new move to return to simplicity in one's daily life
> ... in direct contrast to the usual drive to swamp consumers with goods expensively designed and over-packaged.
> (MUJI, 1993, pp. 2-3)

Fig. 6 - MUJI's range of tableware in beige porcelain and cream sprinkled stoneware.

It has set out to fulfil this ideal in three different ways, by using high quality raw materials, streamlining manufacturing processes, and simplifying the packaging of finished products.

The tableware range shows this reduction to essentials very clearly. Two series are sold in the British shops, one of beige porcelain and the other of cream stoneware (see Fig. 6). The forms are strictly minimal, with great attention paid to the function, producing two ranges that are compact, unobtrusive and easily stackable. This reduction to essentials is intended to let the quality of the materials and production become the focus of attention, an idea that has been popular in Japan for centuries. They are purely the natural colour of the china, and the sprinkle pattern on the stoneware is as a result of metallic inclusions in the original clay. The muted colours and lack of glazed patterns give absolutely no concessions to humour or ornament. They are not meant to be loud, but to embody the ancient virtues of *wabi* (truth to materials) and *kirei*, which means more than just beautiful, but beauty in an understated way. Even the types of products included in the range follow the principle, only including the basic cups, saucers and teapots, as well as plates and dishes in a minimum of sizes.

The Western Cult of Japan.

The guiding principles of the MUJI range - producing solid, dependable products with no frills or fuss - have made it hugely successful in Japan, with over 200 shops currently operating. It is generally regarded by young Japanese consumers as a sensible type of shop for the necessities in life - "the Japanese shop here as if this was Marks & Spencer for no-nonsense socks, tights and underpants". (Glancey, 1992, p. 38)

Since its expansion into the European market with the opening of four shops in Britain in the 1990s, MUJI's image has necessarily undergone a change. The principles of simplicity and quality are still present, and as heavily promoted as ever, but they have become overlaid with the cultural identity of its native country. It is not just seen as simple quality products, but as *Japanese* simple quality products, adding a whole new layer of associations to the company's identity. It is (consciously

Fig. 7 - Japanese kimono sold at Liberty's in the late 19th century, and worn by their shop assistants.

or not) associated in the mind of the customer with austerity, contemplation, Zen Buddhism and all the other idealised images of Japan that exist in Europe.

The shopper in a MUJI store in central London may not realise it, but they are part of a tradition that is as alive and well today as it was a hundred years ago. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the industrialisation of European society has existed. Not all those in the visual and literary arts reacted with futile attempts to turn back the clock to pre-industrial times - some began to look to far away places for inspiration. The lifting of the Japanese ban on contact with foreigners resulted in a stream of goods onto British markets the like of which had never been seen before. This provided an exotic counter-current to the masses of often shoddily made goods being produced by native manufacturers, as they struggled with new production methods. The freshly imported wood-cuts, kimonos and lacquer dishes had a huge influence on contemporary art and design, especially the "aesthetic" movement. This mainly consisted of the intelligentsia of London - the artists, writers, poets and their followers, who saw in Japanese goods a more refined way of living, unadulterated by the excesses of capitalism. It soon spread among those with "refined" taste, and it wasn't long before the fashionable ladies of Knightsbridge and Mayfair were dressing in kimonos and holding tea-parties in rooms draped in Oriental fabrics. The role played by the London department store of Liberty's cannot be underestimated, being the main importer of Japanese goods into England at the time (see Fig. 7). They have continued their strong involvement in Oriental goods to this day, the huge Tudor Revival store on Greater Marlborough Street overflowing with high quality goods imported from all over Asia.

It should come as no surprise then, that when Ryohin Keikaku Ltd. (the Japanese parent company for the MUJI brand name) wished to expand into Britain, its partner in the venture should be none other than Liberty's of London. Together they formed Mujirushi Ryohin Europe, opening the first MUJI shop in 1991 in the shadow of Liberty's flagship store in Greater Marlborough Street (see Fig. 8). This gave it a link from the outset with its century old tradition of quality goods from the East. While much of the success of the MUJI line in Britain can be attributed to the same things that made it successful in Japan, the fascination with all things Oriental also plays a significant part. The company is aware of this and uses it as a powerful

Fig. 8 - Front facade of MUJI's Greater Marlborough Street shop.

Fig. 9 - Double page spread from MUJI brochure 1993, promoting their Japanese identity.

marketing tool, enthusiastically embracing its Japanese-ness in its choice of products, combining soy sauce and rice crackers with cans of cola, and futon sofa beds with MDF chest of drawers'. Their promotional literature has a strong Japanese slant (see Figs. 9 and 10), emphasising the idea of MUJI being part of the archetypal Japanese lifestyle - "the former flexible life-style practised almost as an art by the Japanese". (MUJI, 1993, p. 7)

This is clearly a modern continuation of the cult of Japan, a young, clean, unfussy version that attracts the cool, the chic and the design-conscious - much the same type of people who shopped in the original Liberty's a hundred years ago. MUJI shops are few, small and exclusive, and seem to be populated by those involved with the visual arts, and those who would like to be. It is also notable that a lot of the customers seem to spend more time wandering around and being seen to admire the goods than actually buying anything, though some do have the excuse of researching newspaper articles:

> In the space of a lunch hour in the Covent Garden shop I saw five people buy the same white shirt. One was a designer-suited woman in her thirties. One was a rather scruffy-looking student who had been hanging around the stationary counter for hours. Another was a grey-haired man in baggy cords with "ageing architect" stamped all over him, while the remaining two were a young couple in jeans, their his'n'hers shirts nestling alongside the seaweedy snacks and brown card storage boxes in their wire basket.
> (Thompson, 1992, p. 20)

Fig. 10 - *Furoshiki* wrapping cloth presented to customers on the opening of MUJI's first overseas shop.

Chapter 2 - MUJI's Design Philosophy.

This chapter is concerned with the influence of Western design movements on MUJI's design philosophy. It considers how a company with apparently strong inclinations towards Modernism and High Tech can combine this with its native philosophy. It examnies how it puts its ideals into practice in a postmodern way, integrating its ideals with environmentalism and post-Fordist production methods.

A Modern Design Philosophy?

Modernism in design is not easy to define, and early Modernism even harder, beginning as it did with widely separated groups of European designers, architects and artists forming similar ideologies, seeing design using the new industrial technology to improve man's environment. It was only after the Second World War that theory began to be put into practice, but most early work was eclipsed by the "International Style", which became perceived as the only face of Modernism. Although early Modernism was not a homogenous movement, the different ideologies were all concerned with truth as an aesthetic value, and its achievement through functionalism and the abstraction of form. The espousal of progress and technology were essentially a moral stance, intended to form objects and buildings that would make the world a better place to live in.

The MUJI design philosophy is clearly set out in their promotional literature, and shows obvious similarities to certain principles of the early Modern movement.

1. Simple and effective design with no unnecessary decoration.
2. Quality raw materials selected and used only for appropriate products.
3. Thorough manufacturing processes employed to produce high quality products at reasonable prices.

(MUJI, 1995, p. 8)

MUJI resembles the early Modern movement in its idealism, its commitment to simplicity and clarity and its search for "appropriate" solutions to age-old problems. This results in a superficial similarity evident in the minimalism and stark functionality of many of the products, but despite this, the MUJI brand remains a child of the late twentieth century. It cannot ignore advances made in the last fifty

years and does not try to, but instead attempts to put some of those principles into practice in a way appropriate for its time. The difference between it and many of the entities that made up the Modern movement is that MUJI is part of a consumption, rather than production, orientated system. In giving customers what they want, as any retail company must do to survive, rather than fulfilling a perceived need (despite its propaganda to the contrary), it shows a fundamental difference in attitude and ways of working. Its products may have superficial similarities to Modern ones, but they have come about through circumstances that are similar in some respects, but vastly different in others.

The Influence of High Tech.

Although postmodernism is by definition that which comes after Modernism, and is a rejection of the need for one united style or ideology, it does not mean that all the achievements of Modernism have been discarded. The movement after Modernism that MUJI most resembles is what became known in the late seventies as High Tech. This began as a resurrection of many of the ideals of the Modern Movement, put into practice using sophisticated late twentieth century technology. It shows similarities to MUJI's philosophy, as they both attempt to interpret some Modern ideals for later times. It is not surprising that the stylistic dependence of High Tech on industrial goods with unfinished surfaces, shows up in much of the MUJI range, and in its shops. All the utensils are made from stainless steel and aluminium (see Fig. 11), and the extensive range of kitchen storage canisters is made of tin. This tendency is most obvious in the series of clocks, as all of them, whether alarm, wall or desk clock, are made from aluminium (see Fig. 12). It is not surprising that they would best show the influence of High Tech, being the most technologically advanced items in the entire MUJI range.

Fig. 11 - Page from MUJI brochure 1993, with range of steel and aluminium kitchen utensils.

The desk clock especially shows the influence of the High Tech style, as it is made of a sheet of corrugated aluminium, bent at the bottom to form a stand (see Fig. 12). It conforms to Modern principles of minimalism and functionalism, with white dots to represent the hours, black strips of appropriate widths for hands, and a form that is a direct result of the production processes employed. The rectangular shape especially favoured in High Tech design, is here emphasised by the dense vertical corrugations of the aluminium, also a favourite material of designers in this style.

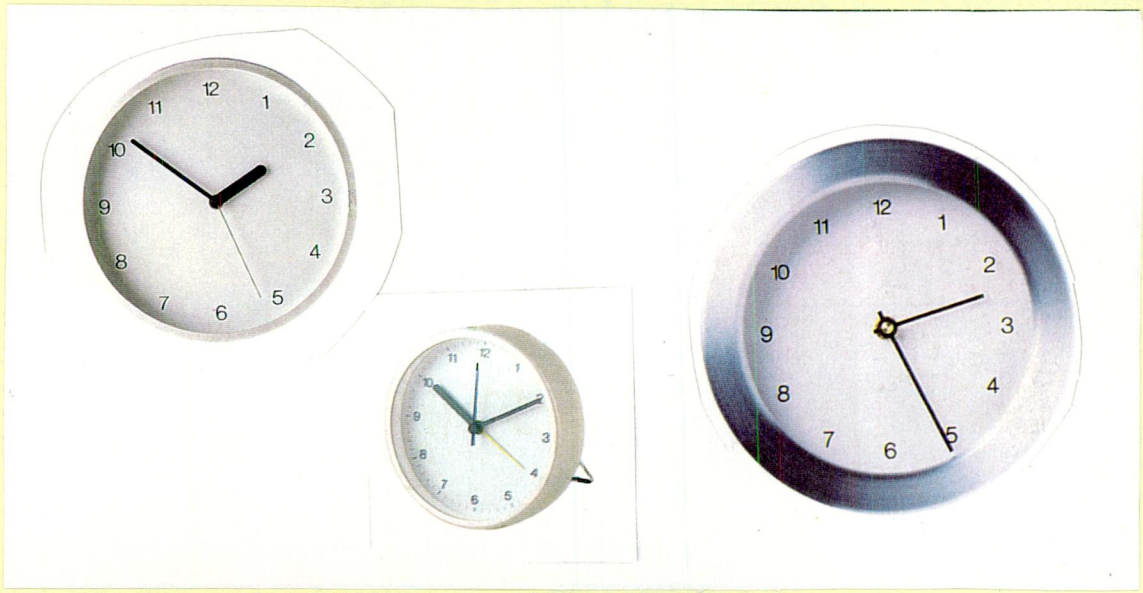

Fig. 12 - Range of MUJI aluminium alarm and wall clocks, 1995.

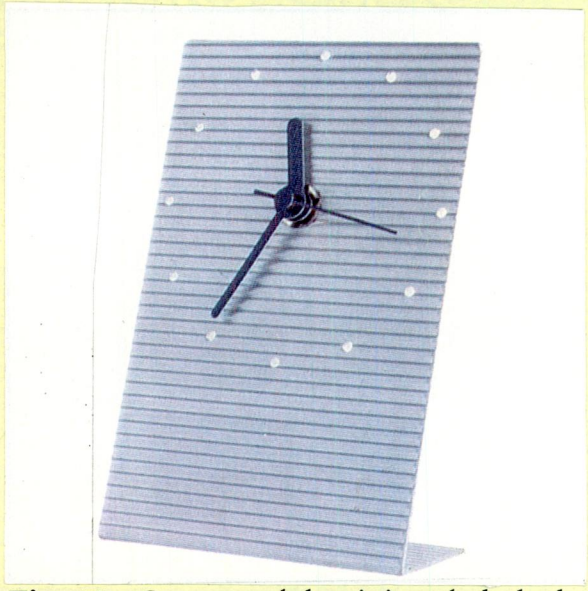

Fig. 13 - Corrugated aluminium desk clock, 1995.

Modernism and National Identity.

That a brand that relies so heavily on its national identity for promotion can be associated with a movement which utterly rejected nationalism may seem to be a contradiction in terms. But when the country and the national tradition in question is Japan, then the contradiction can be resolved to a degree. The aesthetic tradition in Japan that had such a formative influence on the MUJI brand also had a huge impact on the thinkers of the early Modern Movement. The difference between them is that while the aesthetic tradition was concerned with creating simplicity in surroundings, it was balanced by the other Japanese tradition, that of brightness, colour and diversity. The Modern Movement, on the other hand, believed in absolutes - that one perfect, ideal design existed for each type of object, only to be found through geometric abstraction, a dogmatism alien to Japanese culture.

MUJI products are examples of the view that there are underlying similarities in the urban human condition (the rejection of label culture), but that it is put into practice in different ways in different environments. Their emphasis on Japanese-ness comes from the keen awareness in the company of their own national identity. When the time came to expand into the European market, particular products were picked for the British market. The difference in market from urban Tokyo to urban London was recognised, and the range altered accordingly, which would never happen if MUJI held a completely Modern perspective. This view has resulted recently in a range of new goods, mainly bags, designed specifically for the British market (see Fig. 14). This shift to accessories from basic household goods is a sign of the different market for MUJI goods in Britain - the perception of MUJI UK as a cult shop. The bags can be seen more as fashion items, as they as designed using materials such as basketball PVC, tent tarpaulin and nylon mesh, while the simple designs still adhere to MUJI's principles of well-made goods with no unnecessary decoration.

Fig. 14 - Range of new bags shown in MUJI catalogue, 1995.

Environmental Concerns.

The pared-down aesthetic of MUJI goods may come from a desire for simplicity and quality, but it also reflects recent concerns for the environment. Increased awareness of issues such as global warming, deforestation and the greenhouse effect has meant a change in attitude in the consumer of the 1990s. The rise of the "green consumer" has created a demand for environmentally friendly goods, which use less raw material, can be recycled, or are designed for prolonged re-use.

The idea of using the least amount of raw material possible in a product fits in nicely with MUJI's minimalist philosophy. As we have seen before, each product has been designed with simplicity and effectiveness in mind, and current feelings about waste of resources mean that MUJI has an added appeal for the conscientious shopper. This image of honesty and concern is also demonstrated in the lack of packaging on the goods on display (see Fig. 15). Though originating from the desire not to distract the customer from the goods themselves with expensive, flashy packaging, it drastically cuts down on the amounts of paper, cardboard, and plastic used to package goods for sale. Where packaging is used, it is purely for reasons of hygiene, and the product is almost always completely visible through a minimum amount of clear sheet plastic (see Fig.16). It is preferable that green issues should be incorporated into the fundamental philosophy of a company, rather than added on afterwards as an extra marketing ploy. To quote Ewan Douglas, a previous MUJI UK Director of Operations, "It's good now to give the impression that you've not wasted too many of the world's resources". (Smith, 1994, p. 63)

The tried and tested way of being obviously environmentally friendly is by producing a range of stationary using recycled paper, and MUJI is no exception. Their original range of stationary includes 100% recycled paper pads, as well as various types of notebooks and file paper made with 20% recycled paper (see Fig. 17). Customers in Britain have recently been introduced to a range of off-white paper stationary made from 10% recycled denim fibre and 70% recycled paper, which is an even bigger improvement, being a step towards using materials other than wood pulp for paper. It has to be noted however, that this apparent concern with recycled

Fig. 15 - Unpackaged display in MUJI shop in Covent Garden, 1994.

Fig. 16 - MUJI food packaged in clear plastic.

Fig. 17 - MUJI range of recycled stationary, 1994.

materials is not followed up to anything like the same degree in any of the other product ranges.

The design of the shops also demonstrates MUJI's attitude towards environmental concerns. The British flagship store in Greater Marlborough Street was designed using a wide variety of recycled materials (see Fig. 18). Many of the shop fittings were apparently salvaged from scrap yards, with the walls covered in rusted steel panels, clothes hanging from aged timber beams, and plinth display units made also of rusted steel. The floor is mainly old oak planks set into untreated concrete, and the manufactured display units of steel provide a rough background to the immaculately finished goods. However some doubt has been thrown over the authenticity of these "recycled" materials.

> While the managers insist, for example, that Muji UK's rusty steel wall panels were found in scrapyards, the shopfitters seem to think that these "non-designed", "found" materials were soaked in acid baths to get the right effect ...
> (Furness, 1991, p. 33)

This doubt, added to the fact that the Japanese interiors are admittedly artificially "aged", makes the depth of commitment to environmental issues debatable. It seems that it has occurred as a side effect to the basic philosophy, rather than a conscious effort. However, a little environmental awareness is preferable to none at all.

Post-Fordist Production and Consumption.

Despite the fact that MUJI's philosophy is strikingly similar to modern principles, it is at heart a consumer-led enterprise, diametrically opposed to the Modern concern with production. It has moved on from the linear, deterministic view of economics, to a non-linear self-organising system. Instead of a paternalistic "education" of the taste of the masses, the company is concerned with finding out what the consumer wants, and the quantities in which they want them. This is apparent from the company's inception, as it was set up as part of a response to the increasingly speeded-up turnover of goods on the Japanese market.

MUJI's parent company Ryohin Keikaku Ltd. uses its own sophisticated post-

Fordist manufacturing and distribution networks. The Ryohin System employs a method of product appraisal, where each product has a unique bar code, which is read into point-of-sale terminals in the shops (see Fig. 18). This information is sent daily to a master computer, where it is compiled and sent overnight to the server at the head office (see Fig. 19).

Fig. 18 - Shop assistant in Japanese MUJI store using point-of-sale system to register purchase.

The next morning this information can be accessed by MUJI staff in both offices and individual shops allowing management to be immediately aware of sales trends, and to make fast decisions about product viability. The system allows them to order supplies to coincide with demand, thereby reducing back-ups of surplus slow-selling goods, or shops running out of popular lines.

Manufacturing is completely decentralised, spread over Asia, Europe and Northern America, while still being connected to the central information system. The factories and workshops are usually sited in areas of expertise in a particular type of product, as part of the emphasis on quality products. This can be seen as a logical expansion of the existing organisation of many Japanese companies, where large-scale corporations contract out some manufacturing to small workshop-based concerns. It is an important factor in allowing room within mass production for the adjustment of product lines needed for such a flexible system to work.

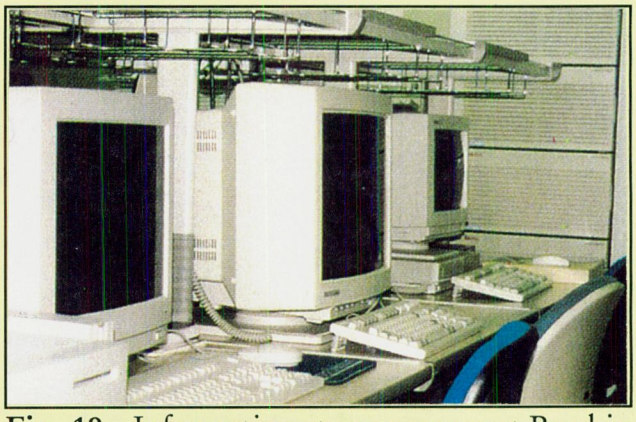

Fig. 19 - Information storage server at Ryohin Keikaku's Head Office, Japan.

The MUJI Shop Interiors.

The interior design of the British MUJI stores exemplifies all the concerns previously described. After the flagship store in Greater Marlborough Street, the two shops in London (Covent Garden and Kensington), and one in Glasgow came under the aegis of the British firm of architects Harper Mackay. The interiors, designed by Richard Woolf, have proved to be highly successful in attracting customers to the MUJI philosophy, winning several awards. The Shelton Street site in Covent Garden has been hailed by the management committee as "the most successful Muji interior yet". (Evamy, 1992, p. 27) The reason for this admiration is the successful integration of the perceived Japanese image of the shop, with current practices in British architecture, while successfully expressing all the concerns of the MUJI philosophy.

The 1980s in Britain saw the rise of conservationism, in opposition to governmental and architectural policy of complete demolition and rebuilding of city areas. This resulted in a new awareness in the architectural profession of the value of working within the existing fabric of the city. This emphasis on urbanism and the restoration and sensitive infill of city buildings is evident in the choice of existing city centre sites for the MUJI stores. The Greater Marlborough Street shop occupies part of the nineteenth century Tudor Revival Liberty building, Shelton Street in Covent Garden is a renovated Victorian warehouse site, in Glasgow it occupies part of the historic Guildhall complex, and the shop in Kensington is part of a row of Victorian red-brick shops (see Fig. 20).

Taking the Covent Garden shop as an example, the architect Richard Woolf was set the brief "to create an interior in harmony with the building in which it was housed, and the city beyond". (Woolf, 1993, p.12) On the stripping out of the old warehouse, he discovered that the exterior walls had a mosaic of red and yellow London brick instead of the expected uniform yellow (see Fig. 21). This formed a focal point for the design, being rich in context to both the building and to the area, as the warehouses of the nearby Covent Garden markets were built from this local brick. The original large sash windows have been left intact, enhancing the display spotlights with natural light (see Fig. 22). It demonstrates a holistic approach to urban interior design, as well as being completely in line with MUJI's desire to make a

Fig. 20 - British shop interiors: (clockwise from top left) Greater Marlborough Street, London; Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London; Kensington High Street, London; Princes Street, Glasgow.

Fig. 21 - Interior of Shelton Street, Covent Garden shop - view from inside the door.

feature of unadorned basics. The concentration on natural finishes is carried through the whole shop, with the floor partly being an exposed high-aggregate concrete screed, and the shelving units made from a standard metal system, and custom units of both solid and veneered elm and stripped steel.

The mixing of Eastern and Western traditions is further evident in the use of stackbond blockwork for interior walls (see Fig. 23). This is a building material used widely in Japan, though not common in Europe, as it needs structural re-enforcement. The regular patterns that it creates are reminiscent of the recurrent grid motif in traditional Japanese architecture.

> As with the traditional Japanese timber and paper screen, stackbond provides a rational, visual way of ordering a pure building component: the cast masonry block.
> (Woolf, 1993, p. 13)

It forms a suitable background for a range of goods that themselves blend Japanese and Western traditions in an effortless way. This decision to use of elements from both national traditions in the shop interior has resulted in a cross-cultural

Fig. 22 - Interior of Shelton Street shop - view from back of shop, showing concrete floor and brick exterior wall with sash windows.

design:

> Harper Mackay ... has come up with a convincing concrete and recycled-timber look that seems Japanese to the British; the Muji directors from head office, however, thought it looked British. (Glancey, 1992, p. 38)

Not only the use of existing brick walls, but the use of reclaimed and polished elm plank for part of the flooring, and a huge Victorian warehouse beam as a clothes rack shows an honest desire to integrate environmental awareness into the overall design policy (see Fig. 24). This is a feature of some of the goods, but it is done here in an unobtrusive and understated way that is not achieved in the Greater Marlborough Street shop, which was designed by Japanese architectural firm Superpotato.

The unaggressive stance taken by MUJI is one eminently suited to the retail climate in 1990s Britain. The mix of warm and neutral colours obvious in the goods is carried through into the shop, with the warm beige of the stackbond working with grey concrete and accents of brown elm. This along with the naturally finished

Fig. 23 - Interior of Shelton Street shop - view showing blockwork interior walls and cash desk.

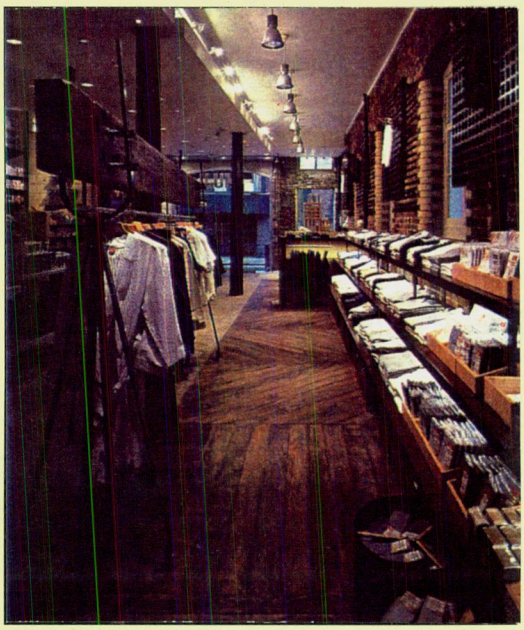

Fig. 24 - Interior of Shelton Street shop - view showing recycled elm flooring and Victorian elm warehouse beam used as clothes rack.

surfaces, creates a welcoming atmosphere, which is much more attractive to customers than the cool, clinical Bladerunner shops so common in the 1980s. This is part of an overall reaction to the world-wide recession of the 1990s. As widespread insecurity tightens consumers pockets, the retail trade has had to give up aggressive strategies and shop designs in favour of more gentle ones. This is done by making their interiors more comfortable and homely, using natural materials and "dependable" browns and earth colours, to lull the customer into a sense of security, where they will part with their cash. The MUJI shop also uses wide, unaggressive entrances, without large shop signs to bolster this effect.

> There's no big stress-inducing entrance to be made, you just flow in and out as if by osmosis ... There's no ostentatious shop sign, just a Muji logo at the back, which you unconsciously gravitate towards ... You float back out feeling that no-one's been messing with you, that design is something to forget about, even if it isn't. (Smith, 1994, p. 63)

Chapter 3 - MUJI's Corporate Identity.

This chapter outlines the way in which conventional corporate identities are constructed, and are intended to express the corporate personality of a company. It examines the unusual structure of the company behind the MUJI brand, Ryohin Keikaku Ltd., and the central role that design and designers play in creating an integrated, comprehensive identity for both brand and company.

Corporate Identity.

Humans behave in a naturally gregarious way, and will always come together to form groups, which always have their own distinct personalities, determined by the combination of personalities involved. Every group worries about how the rest of the world views them, and a visual identity is a valuable tool in presenting a cohesive whole with integrated aims and attitudes to the world.

Until the growth of design as a profession in the America of the 1930s, this generally happened in an unconscious organic way. As graphic design was second only to architecture in prominence among the design professions in the first half of the century, it was the graphic designers who were first brought in to give companies an easily recognisable corporate identity. The problem with this is that as graphic design is purely concerned with two-dimensional images, graphic designers tended to give two-dimensional solutions to what has since been recognised as a two-and-three dimensional problem. There is much more opportunity for expressing the philosophy of a company in an integrated manner through its outlets, its products, the uniforms of its staff, as well as its logo, its letterhead and the packaging of its goods. It seems to be only in the last twenty years that a corporate identity programme has become more than just an applied package, which can be pasted on, removed and changed at will. It shows signs of becoming a more multi-disciplinary task, which encompasses all aspects of a company's operations, and if it is to be done properly, from as early on as possible within a company's life.

MUJI's Corporate Personality.

The corporate identity of any company has one basic function - to express what can be called the corporate personality of a company. The principles behind the running of a company are what makes up the corporate personality of a company, in much the same way that a person's attitudes and ideas will shape their own personality. The corporate identity is the physical means through which these core principles are transformed from ideas into reality. It is made up of all the tangible things that are associated with a particular company, that we attribute qualities of personality to. The MUJI brand is no exception, but it is more forthcoming than some about its aims and ideals, quoting them as follows:

1. Simple and effective design with no unnecessary decoration.
2. Quality raw materials selected and used only for appropriate products.
3. Thorough manufacturing processes employed to produce high quality products at reasonable prices.

(MUJI, 1995, p. 8)

These principles form a set of criteria against which company designers can judge each new product or shop interior. By keeping every product, package or interior true to these principles, they should give off one message to the consumer. It is the professed aim of the MUJI range to sell straightforward, dependable, and uncomplicated goods, and to do so its overall image must consonant with this ideal.

Design in the MUJI Company Structure.

The corporate identity of the MUJI chain of shops is a particularly strong one - almost everything involved with the company seems to exude MUJI-ness. This integrated approach can be traced back to the very origins of the company. It was set up in 1980 as an in-store brand in the Seiyu supermarket chain, by a group of designers who had previously worked as consultants for Seiyu's parent body, the giant Seibu-Saison conglomerate. The graphic designer Ikko Tanaka, marketing genius Kazuko Koike and architect Takashi Sugimoto were responsible for the design of the original range of MUJI goods, and continue to serve on the company's Advisory Board, vetting every product, advertisement and shop interior before it goes into

Fig. 25 - MUJI Advisory Board discussing new products: (left to right) Ikko Tanaka, Kazuko Koike, Takashi Sugimoto, Hiroshi Kojitani and Masaru Amano.

production. In this way they have kept a tight rein on the design of every object associated with the MUJI brand, and hence its overall corporate identity.

Marketing, as well as the design of products, furniture and clothing is carried out in house, but the shop interiors are designed by Sugimoto's Superpotato studio, and the graphics and packaging are handled by Tanaka Design Studio. Both Tanaka and Sugimoto are individual consultant designers with international reputations, but it is against the MUJI ethos of "non-brand" goods, to use their personal fame to promote the goods.

No project however, escapes the eagle eye of the Advisory Board, which consists of five experts in different fields - graphics and packaging (Tanaka), marketing (Koike), architecture and interior design (Sugimoto), fashion design (Masuro Amano, an ex-stylist with Issey Miyake), and product design (Hiroshi Kojitani) - and which is charged with the overall steering of the company's design activities (see Fig. 25). This structure is a modern day version of the traditional Japanese five-man council or *go-nin gumi*. This dates from the pre-Meiji period where, if a joint decision that would affect several households was needed, a group of five heads of families would meet to discuss the problem, and to develop a consensus. If the five-man council cannot come to a decision, then the most senior member gives his considered opinion, and the others bow to his superior judgement. This is the position held by Ikko Tanaka as the Chief Advisor to MUJI's Advisory Board, which he holds, not only because of his great talent and expertise in his field, but because of his greater age and experience. This Confucian respect for seniority is coupled with an expectation of responsibility from those seniors, and the Advisory Board are expected to use their experience and knowledge to steer the company clear of any problems:

> Prototypes are produced and further reviewed, before being presented at evaluation meetings. During such meetings, all products that do not meet the Company's standards are discarded, and the remaining products are examined again.
> (Ryohin Keikaku Ltd., 1995, p. 10)

While the Advisory Board does have the final decision about a product's viability, it only makes its decision after it has heard from every level throughout the hierarchy, including the staff on the shop floor, who will be selling the product.

Buddhist philosophy is non-confrontational and puts the welfare of the group above the selfish desires of the individual. This has become a social conditioning in Japanese society - to be co-operative, to contribute to the group, and to rely on the senior members to use their experience and wisdom to make decisions.

It is noteworthy that this system of a panel of designers involved in every aspect of a company's operation is very similar to the evolving profession of the design manager. This Western concept involves designers working at a management level, overseeing all activities involved in the corporate identity of the company, whether they be product design, services, or the internal organisation of the company itself.

> The corporate or management designer is involved at all stages from product concept research to advertising. A firm must ensure that its design activities are conjoint (product design, graphic design, architectural design, etc.).
> (Solomon, 1992, p. 148)

This oversight over internal activities and the ultimate responsibility for how the customer views the company means that the MUJI Advisory Group are taking up the role of design managers, whether they are given the title or not.

> From the new product planning stages to the design of our stores and window displays, the frank and honest opinions of our advisory group breath life into the Muji brand.
> (Ryohin Keikaku Ltd., 1995, p. 10)

MUJI's Graphic Identity.

The most obvious manifestations of a corporate identity are the graphic elements associated that both customers and business partners encounter. The logo, signage, packaging and bags are the first things we associate with a company, and that they show a united feel is very important. The MUJI logo consists of two parts - the Japanese characters for "No Brand Quality Goods" and the word "MUJI", which is shortened from the phonetic name in Japanese. These are used, occasionally with a strip of small type reading "No Brand Goods", in various combinations and colours on shopfronts, letterheads, carrier bags and various other advertising media (see Fig. 26). The word "MUJI" features prominently in all these combinations, in a tight

Fig. 26 - Letterhead of Mujirushi Ryohin Europe company notepaper.

Fig. 27 - Unified logo appearing on the cover of MUJI brochure, 1991.

block of sans-serif capital letters that has the authority of an official stamp. Like the goods it is promoting, there is no fuss or frills here, just a statement of the name. It is occasionally accompanied by the explanatory "No Brand Goods", as to most British eyes MUJI is a meaningless word (see Fig. 27). Though this phrase is in the same definite font, it is much smaller and finer and has very little impact of its own, being only ever used as a qualifier to "MUJI". The set of Japanese characters is in a similar strong, heavy script to the English name, and is usually found somewhere near it, emphasising the importance of the Japanese origin of the company. It is always written horizontally when in conjunction with the English name, creating a unified bilingual logo, which is important to symbolically unify the operations of the company in both Great Britain and Asia. This logo is of a square shape and appears mostly where there is no other visual means of communication, such as the shop bags, which are carried around by customers, and letterheads, which arrive on company correspondence in envelopes separated from the strong visual message given off by the shops. In both these instances it appears in earthy tones - the company reddish-brown on a brown background, giving a strong sense of reliability and directness.

It is only in the environment of the shops themselves that the different elements of the logo can be broken up and used separately, as the whole surroundings are designed to reinforce the MUJI identity. The placing of parts of the logo in new combinations in the shops also serves to differentiate the shops from each other. The colour of both logo and background also varies from shop to shop, but keeping within the same range of colours - white or gold letters on a background of solid black, white or the company reddish-brown (see Fig. 20). These colours give each shopfront its own

Fig. 28 - MUJI detachable clothes labels.

personality while still keeping the MUJI feel of solidity and dependability. The labels in Japanese on the goods all follow the same pattern - with the Japanese logo in white on a reddish-brown background, and a product description in black on a white background (see Fig. 28). Again the simplicity of both type and the regular horizontal layout adds to the feeling of "what you see is what you get". In Britain these labels have a simple brown sticker added to them, with just the company name and the price on them (see Fig. 29). The minimal amount of text on this price tag in keeping with the company's philosophy of no unnecessary fuss.

Fig. 29 - MUJI notebook with stick-on label in English.

The use of a limited number of materials and colours in each range has a strong unifying effect - predominantly cotton is used for the clothing and upholstery, unpainted wood for the furniture, brushed aluminium for household goods and brown paper and clear acrylic for the stationary. The lack of paint means that colours are mainly natural - the browns of wood, card and recycled paper, shiny white metals such like aluminium, zinc and tin, white and clear acrylics, cream or white china, and cottons dyed in shades of black, brown, grey, white and the odd piece in indigo. Not only are the signage, the shop design, the window displays and all the other advertising paraphernalia consistent from shop to shop, and with each other, but the ranges of goods are also remarkably coherent.

Fig. 30 - Fabrics and colours used in MUJI's clothes range.

Chapter 4 - Non-Branded Goods.

This chapter investigates the history behind, and reasons for, the particular marketing techniques used to promote the MUJI brand. It is concerned with its sophisticated interpretation of the no-brand image, and its attraction to the British consumer of the 1990s.

Individualism and "Lifestyle" Marketing.

Since the opening of Japan's borders to the West in the nineteenth century there has been a constant interchange of products, customs and ideas between both sides. The influence of unfamiliar theories and practice in a multitude of areas in the West was balanced by a similar influx of radically foreign concepts into Japanese life.

This exchange of ideas continues to this day, resulting in a society influenced both by traditional Japanese practices as well as Western thought. A change in social patterns has resulted, with pop culture and the consumer society earning a greater acceptance among the Japanese. There is an increasing emphasis on the comfort of the individual rather than the best interest of the group, and manufacturers have adjusted their products to suit. There has been a widespread move in the last ten years from saturating the market with wide appeal goods in the hope that a proportion of them would be sold, to aiming products at more specific niches in the market.

In turn, this has produced the concept of "lifestyle" goods, where extensive marketing programmes are carried out to determine the wants and needs of a particular type and age-group of customer. The result is products which appeal to a small sector of the market, but which enhance the buyer's sense of personal image and identity.

The MUJI brand of goods exemplifies this strategy, as it is aimed at the well-off, well-informed, well-educated consumer who has tired of the transient fads and fashions of the postmodern marketplace. However, it cannot avoid competing within this marketplace, and it strategies for aiming its goods are the same as nearly all of its competitors, if slightly more sophisticated. The creation of a wide range of goods

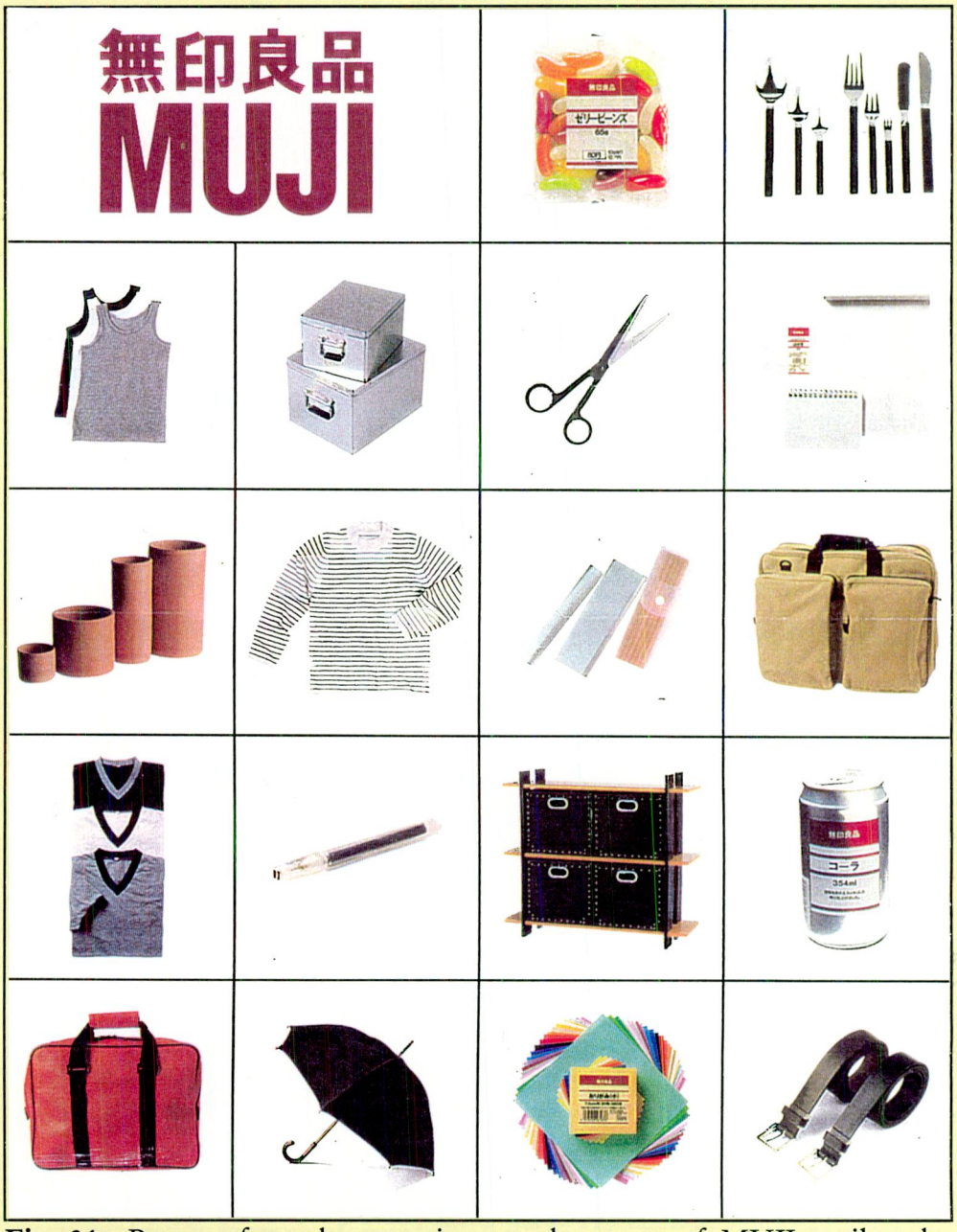

Fig. 31 - Range of goods appearing on the cover of MUJI mail order catalogue, 1996.

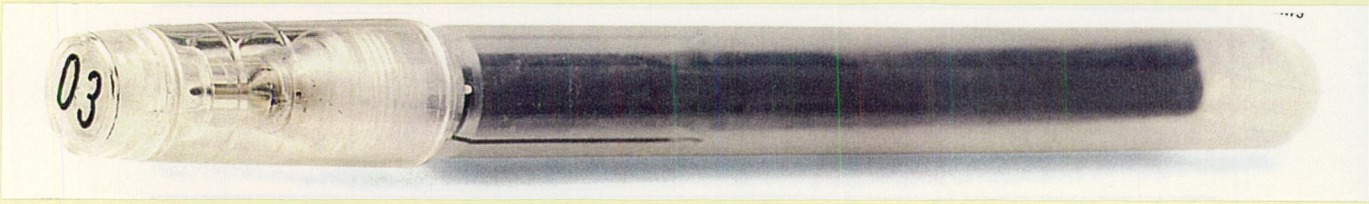

Fig. 32 - MUJI screw-top black ink pen.

aimed at the one "lifestyle" means that the information value of the brand must take precedence over the individual products themselves (see Fig. 31).

> The design of the objects is less important than the creation of relations whereby a set of objects function as a whole, i.e. the creation of connections and networks among objects.
> (Solomon, 1992, p. 147)

This explains the strong identity of the MUJI brand, even though most of its products are not that spectacular on their own. Some do not live up to the much vaunted philosophy of comfort and ease of use - tin containers that require enormous amounts of effort to open, pens with screw threads where they are meant to be held, for example (see Fig. 32). But when considered as a whole range, the products reinforce each other, giving off a convincing feel of dependability. And it is always as a range that they are promoted, in brochures or in the shops - it is rare to see attention given to one particular item. It is creating a way of life that their customers can subscribe to. By buying from MUJI shops, the customer makes an individual choice to be seen as a MUJI person.

> Consumers are motivated to purchase products because the corporate umbrella brand is appealing. "If I buy a Honda", thinks the Japanese consumer, "I will be cool".
> (Nakanshi, 1995, pp. 22-23)

MUJI - The Non-Brand Brand.

Supermarkets and department stores marketing a range of own-brand goods began in Europe in the 1970s as an alternative to the over-priced, over-packaged goods that were perceived as flooding the market. This was done using bland "generic" packaging - austere white or yellow packs, with no overt graphics, only deadpan descriptions in a solid black font (see Fig. 33). Because of their cheaper image and prices, they found it hard to shake the perception of inherent inferiority. This

was not much of a problem in the 1970s as prices were more important than aesthetics at the time, but with the economic boom of the 1980s, sales began to fall. The multiple stores began to expand their own-brand ranges to compete with those of manufacturers, backing them with design resources and shelf space.

Fig. 33 - Own brand packaging - the yellow pack.

Unlike their established position in Europe, own-brand goods rarely do well in Japanese stores. This is because the more image-conscious Japanese consumer would rather be associated with a national brand than one from a particular shop. The MUJI brand began life as an own-brand in Seiyu supermarkets, but from the start it has been packaged and merchandised as if it were a separate national brand. Its success within Seiyu resulted in rapid expansion into a concession in sister company Seibu's department stores. It has since grown to a company in its own right, Ryohin Keikaku Ltd., finally becoming the national brand that it has always been marketed as.

This development of the own-brand strategy remains a paradox - a brand of goods marketing itself as "No Brand Goods" in a ploy to apparently avoid involvement in the branding strategies of the marketplace. Behind the front, however, it is recognised that these strategies cannot be discarded, as no range of consumer goods can survive today without a strong brand identity. Instead, it makes its protestations that it has no branding into a brand of its own, instantly differentiating itself from the competition. In the same way, descriptions of MUJI as being anti-design are inaccurate - designers are intimately involved in the company, but in a self-effacing way. So, the goods are designed along simple spare lines, and none of them carry permanent labels.

Fig. 34 - Standard MUJI logo.

In Japan the name of the brand (Mujirushi) means simply "No Brand Quality Goods", and has the connotations of a range of anonymous unbranded goods, as well as the identity of that particular chain of shops. It can simultaneously mean "no brand" and "*that* brand". However with the expansion into British markets, a further complication occurs. The name is shortened to MUJI, which is otherwise meaningless in English, so it refers to the shop and the shop only. The inclusion of the words "No Brand Goods" in the logo is an attempt to regain the perceived anonymity of the brand independent of promotional backup (see Fig. 34). The inclusion of the four Japanese characters of the original name is meant to retain the link with the Japanese stores. But they are unreadable to most Western eyes, symbols of mysterious meaning reinforcing the place of the shops in the British cult of Japan. It is also inferred by the casual observer that those who shop in MUJI do so because they understand the range of goods, and by inference, must also understand these mysterious symbols, adding to their image as those in the know.

The Mystique of Anonymity.

The image of the British MUJI customer as generally enlightened concerning things cultural has been inherited directly from the original cult of Japan. But in MUJI's case, the "anonymous" brand that is anything but, has added another layer of sophistication to the image. It has only recently been understood that the subjective values and attributes coded into a product by its designer may not necessarily be the same as the ones perceived by the customer. In this case, the simplicity, basicness and honesty of the products are not the only things that British consumers perceive. They become status symbols, outward signs of their owner's enlightened taste, but MUJI goods are not immediately recognisable as such, lacking labels, or the loud distinctive quirks of other ranges. That is, unless the person looking on is also familiar with the shop, for despite the lack of labels, MUJI products are distinctive enough in a subtle way. There is a subtle form of snobbery at play here - almost saying "if you buy, and can recognise MUJI goods, then you are even cooler than those who need to broadcast their taste through flashing labels everywhere". It is similar to the mechanism by which secret societies work - a number of overt signs and symbols meaningless to the general public, understood only by other initiated members of the society.

Certain items, especially within the stationary range, play a large role in this. As they are much cheaper than many of the larger products, they can be afforded by every MUJI customer, down to the most penniless student. Also, they are small, portable and are often used in situations where they are seen by large numbers of people, not just those invited into a home. The message of exclusive taste is quite often reinforced in these situations by leaving the enigmatic Japanese paper labels stuck on where possible. This is a signal to those not immediately familiar with the brand of the owners connection with, and inferred understanding of, things mysterious and Oriental.

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